

CHAPTER 1

“Don’t you think it would be great fun for both girls?”

Bren Haddock stared at the mother of her daughter’s best friend. “Um, no. I pretty much think you’re crazy.”

“What’s crazy about it?” Kristen O’Brien’s brown eyes lit up with excitement. “It’s not competitive like the Miss Snowflake is for adult women. It’s just for fun.”

Bren spun her pottery mug on the table in Helena’s Fire Tower Coffee Shop and raised her eyebrows. “Have you never heard of Crowns for Kids?”

“Of course I have.” Kristen giggled. “Wasn’t that *reality*—” she air-quoted the word “—show nuts? There was nothing real about it. And this won’t be anything like it.”

Bren had watched several episodes, aghast at what some people would do for fortune and fame. She shook her head. “I can’t believe you want to put Lila and Charlotte through that. No way.”

“Todd and I will gladly pay Lila’s entrance fee and buy her dress—”

“No. I’m not a charity case.”

Kristen’s eyes softened. “I know that, Bren. I know how hard you’ve worked to get on your feet and make a solid home for your kids all on your own. How hard you work every single day. This is something Todd and I want to do. Call it our Christmas gift to Lila. She’ll have a couple of adorable outfits and some happy memories of a perfect Christmas week spent with her bestest friend in the whole world.” Kristen’s voice mimicked Lila’s.

“I don’t see how it can lead to anything good.” Bren met her friend’s eyes across the wooden table. Around them, the lunch crowd drifted out. “I really don’t. I appreciate that you guys have money and run in different circles than we do, but I don’t want to get dragged into this. I don’t want Lila thinking she can have

whatever Charlotte has. She needs to learn to be satisfied with what I can provide, not want what other people have.”

“I—”

“Being a single mom is hard, Kristen. I didn’t even graduate from high school, thanks to being pregnant with Davy.”

Kristen’s hand touched Bren’s arm. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that. I really am. I know you don’t regret Davy and Lila, though.”

“You’re right. I love my kids, but look at me. I’m twenty-six with a nine-year-old and a seven-year-old. I finally got my GED and am taking college courses via correspondence. I’ll be fifty before I get my degree at this rate. I want better for my kids.”

“The pageant can help.”

Bren shook her head. “Back to that, are we?”

“I’m serious. It will help teach both girls poise. Remind them there are hopes and dreams to reach for. And there are scholarships.” Kristen leaned closer. “Besides, Marisa will coach them. You know how much they both adore her.”

Who would ever have guessed that being one of the former model’s projects would lead to all this? On a couple of underused acres and in her spare time — hard to believe her friend had any of that — Marisa and her mother had invited several single moms to grow food for their families.

Bren chose her words carefully. “Marisa is amazing. I can’t thank her and Wendy enough for teaching me to cook and preserve food. I’m not the only person whose life she changed in more ways than one. She introduced me to Jesus.” She chuckled. “But her year as Miss Snowflake isn’t over until Christmas Eve, plus she’s marrying your brother in January. How could she possibly have time to coach the girls?”

Also, why on earth were they still having this discussion? Did that mean Bren’s resolve was weakening? Surely not.

“How about if their pageant dresses were their flower girl dresses?” Kristen’s eyes sparkled. “How about if their talent was a song they could perform at the wedding?”

Bren sipped her now-cold coffee. One more try. She tilted her cup toward her friend. “Kristen. Look. I’m a black coffee kind of girl. No frills. I can’t even remember what yours is called. I appreciate your friendship. I really do. But we’re not in the same league.”

“It’s a sugar-free, white-chocolate mocha with a shot of peppermint and no whip.” Kristen laughed. “And our taste in caffeine has nothing to do with life.” Her gaze went past Bren’s head. “Oooh. There’s someone I want you to meet.” She waved frantically then beckoned.

Bren turned slightly in her chair.

A tall guy with dark curly hair lifted his hand in response as he walked toward the front counter.

She swiveled back and glared at her friend. “Kristen. Don’t even start.”

“Start what?” Kristen winked. “He works for Todd at the ad agency. A Christian and new to Helena. What’s not to like?”

The man placed his order at the counter, giving Bren the chance to look him over. Those curls brushed the collar of a tailored suede jacket that ended at narrow hips. He glanced over his shoulder and met her gaze. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth.

Bren snapped her gaze back to Kristen.

“Cute, isn’t he?” whispered her friend. Her traitorous friend.

“Looks that way.” Bren kept her voice even. “I really should get going. I have to—”

“School isn’t out for another hour. You don’t have to be anywhere.”

“Kristen.”

“Hmm?”

“Stop trying to set me up. I’m not looking for a man, okay?” Even good-looking guys could be jerks. She should know.

“It’s not like tha—” Kristen glanced over her shoulder. “Oh, hi, Rob. Care to join us?”

He towered over the table, a mug in his hand. “Hello, Kristen. Nice to see you. I don’t believe I’ve met your friend.” His dark eyes looked Bren over.

Bren’s lips tightened into a hard line.

“Rob, this is Bren Haddock. She’s the single mom of Charlotte’s best friend, Lila.”

Way to slide in the single part.

“Bren, this is Rob Santoro. He recently moved here from... Spokane, wasn’t it, Rob?”

He nodded as he flipped a chair around and straddled it. “Via Billings. But yes, I’m Spokane born and bred. Most of my extended family still lives there, all within about six blocks of each other.”

“But you escaped to Montana.” Kristen giggled.

Rob’s grin was lopsided. “Someone had to. Big families have their place, but I got tired of everyone being in my business all the time.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Kristen sighed. “When my parents bought Grizzly Gulch Resort a few years ago and my little brother moved here to open his photography studio, it didn’t take Todd and me long to decide Helena trumped Salt Lake City. We love being near family.”

“My father has four brothers. I have fifteen cousins. They all live in Spokane. Every last one of them except for a couple who escaped for college. They’ll be back.”

Bren could only imagine. Much as she craved a sense of family, Rob’s did sound a bit overwhelming.

“How about you?” Rob turned to Bren. “Do you come from a big family?”

“No.” No need to tell a guy she just met that her parents’ bitter divorce had estranged her from both of them. “It’s just me and my kids.”

Kristen placed her hand on Bren’s arm. “My parents have all but adopted them, though. And the church has, too. Everyone needs family.”

It was hard to let down her guard. Bren had been on her own for so long it still seemed hard to believe she’d found any sort of security. One of these days the rug would get pulled from under her, and she’d be on her own again. Granted, she had more skills than before and a bit of savings now, but where could a high school dropout whose job experience was farm operation find another job? Marisa and her mom both said Bren could keep managing and living on Hiller Farm, but someday that would change.

“Todd says your specialty is marketing for events. Bren and I were just talking about the Miss Snowflake pageant for the little girls. Todd says you’ll be the one handling that?”

Rob glanced at Bren, questions in his eyes.

She raised her chin. So she didn’t look the part of a pageant mom. What did it matter? She’d turned Kristen down. What this guy thought of her didn’t make a speck of difference.

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Why did that seem like a loaded question? Kristen looked innocent enough, but Rob had been to the O’Brien house for dinner a couple of times, and he knew she had a quick wit with complex thought processes. He’d bet anything she was matchmaking, but what man wanted a ready-made family? Not him. Still, he wouldn’t be rude. Couldn’t be.

“Yes, Todd asked me to handle that portfolio.” He smiled at Bren. She was pretty in an earthy way, with wavy blond hair

pulled into a long ponytail. He turned back to Kristen. “If you have any ideas for the marketing campaign, I’m all ears. I’ll admit I’ve never done a promo for a pageant before, and I’m still debating what angle to take with it.”

“There are two stages. I think. The first is awareness and getting people to sign their daughters up for it. And then, once we have a full complement, marketing to get viewers interested. That part will be easier because the events will be in tandem with this year’s Miss Snowflake events.”

Bren shifted in her seat and glanced at her watch.

Kristen touched Bren’s arm. “Don’t rush off. You still have plenty of time before Lila and Davy’s bus.”

Bren pushed back her chair and glared at her friend. “I’m not sure why I’m in this discussion, as we won’t be taking part. I can catch up with you later.”

“Bren. Please.”

“Kristen. No.”

Rob looked from one to the other. Interesting. Todd had laughed, saying his wife was a force to be reckoned with. The evidence was in front of him as she stared down her friend, not giving an inch.

Bren sighed. “This conversation is over, Kristen. I don’t see any need to parade Lila around in makeup, slinky clothes, and overdone hair, pretending to be on a manhunt. She’s seven. Just a little kid who should be allowed to be one.”

“What part of *this is not Crowns for Kids* did you miss? It’s a no-glitz pageant. I don’t want Charlotte acting seventeen either.”

“It’s the gateway drug. Don’t you see?”

Rob checked his own watch. Did he really need to listen to them hash it out?

Kristen turned to him. “This is where the first stage of marketing comes in. Many of the parents will be just like Bren:

concerned about pressuring their little girls to grow up too quickly.”

Bren crossed her arms. “This is a bad thing how?”

“Of course,” Kristen went on, “there will also be little divas signed up who already demand their wishes on a silver platter. That can’t be helped, but we will stand firm and create a family-friendly atmosphere.”

Rob was beginning to see the challenge. Bren had fire in her eyes. No pushover, this one. She likely had to be strong to raise her kids alone. “Bren, I’m interested in what your objections are. You mentioned not wanting your daughter to grow up too quickly. Can you fill me in on some of the other issues you see?”

Kristen hid her smirk behind her coffee cup.

Bren glared at her friend before turning to Rob. “That’s the big one, but money is another.” She held up a hand as Kristen opened her mouth to speak. “I don’t know how much it costs, but just the fact that Kristen offered to pay for it tells me it’s outside my budget. There’s clothes she’d need, coaching, hair and makeup—”

“I told you. No glitz.”

Rob pulled out a notebook and began scribbling.

“—driving her to practices and events. Keeping family life balanced with Davy. And most of all, raising her hopes that she’ll win and then her being crushed. Fairy tale meets crash ending right at Christmas. Talk about timing.”

He finished his shorthand notes and glanced up. “Anything else?”

She leveled him a stare. “I think that about covers it.”

Rob chewed on the end of his pen. “Maybe her dad would be willing to help with expenses.” Although what if Bren were widowed, not divorced? Had he put his foot in it?

Her chair scraped on the wooden floor as she surged to her feet. She set both hands on the table and leaned in on him. “Maybe

he's in jail for dealing drugs. Maybe he's out again. I've lost track. He's never been interested in Lila, and I'm certainly not going to remind him. I'd prefer he kept on forgetting."

Bren's brown eyes glittered in her almost elfin face. Rob felt himself staring, caught up in her firestorm.

"I *am* leaving now. Nice to meet you, Rob. I'll deal with you later, Kristen." She grabbed a bright green oversized purse held together with buckles and strode toward the door, skinny jeans tucked into calf-length boots.

Kristen giggled. "Well, I think that went over rather well."

The door jingled shut. Bren's brown jacket crossed the window then disappeared.

Rob forced his gaze back to his boss's still chuckling wife. Kristen might not be wrong.

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