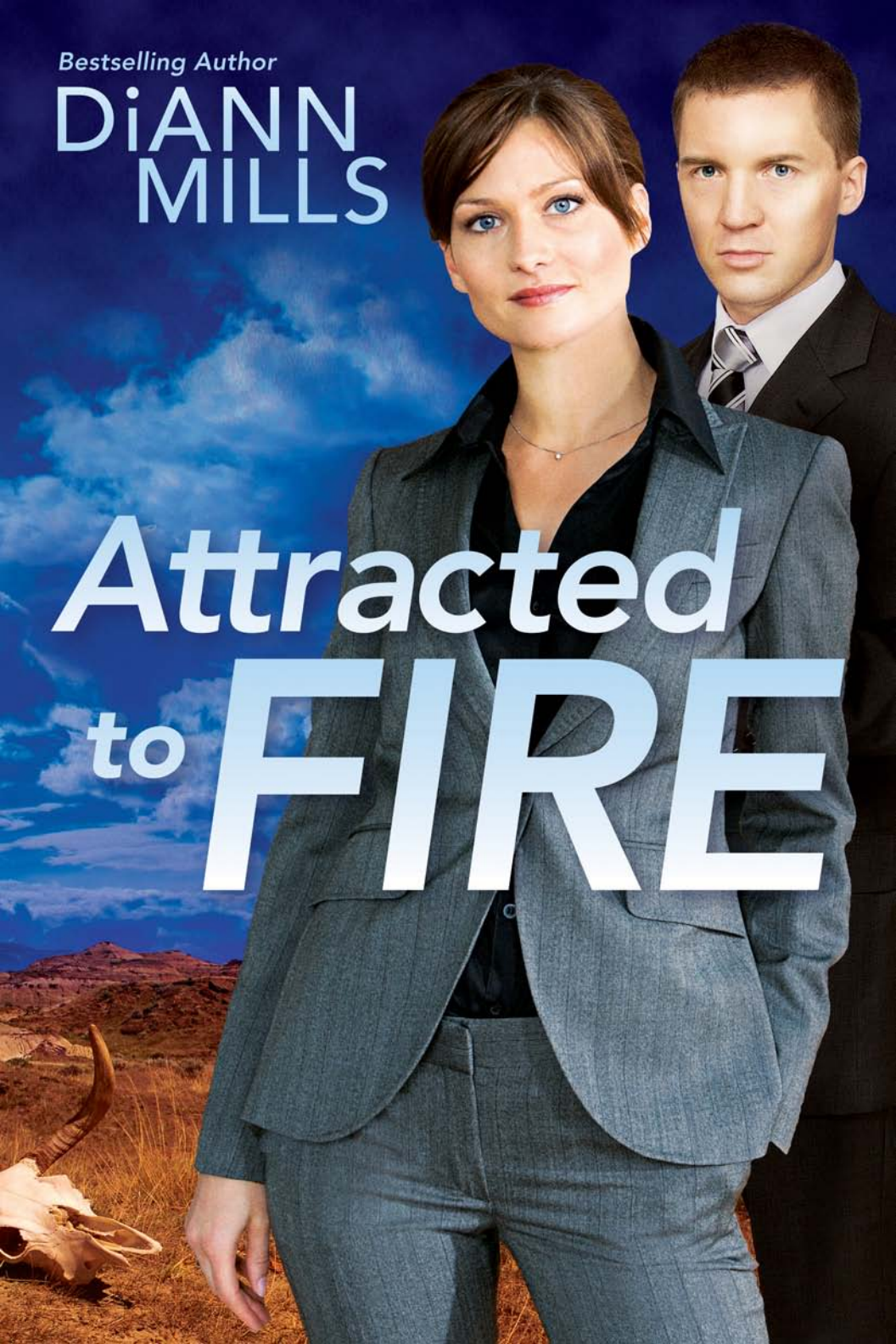


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*Dedicated to the courageous men and women of the Secret Service*



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# CHAPTER 1

“IF HE DOESN’T MUZZLE his daughter, he’s going to lose the presidential nomination.”

Special Agent Meghan Connors cringed at the TV anchor’s analysis of Vice President Hall’s campaign, even though the statement rang with validity.

“Although early popularity polls indicated Hall to be a strong contender for the presidential race, his ratings are dropping daily.” The blonde reporting the news gave the camera a tilt of her head. “We are currently waiting for a statement from his office regarding Lindsay Hall’s appearance on *The Barry Knight Show* last evening, where she stated, ‘My father is a poor excuse for the office of president of the United States.’”

The screen flashed a clip of Lindsay Hall sporting cleavage and lots of leg.

“And she’s our new assignment?” Special Agent Bob Lawson eased back in his chair and stuck his thumbs in his pants pockets. “I’ve heard she swears like a convict. Smacked a couple of agents in the face.”

Meghan kept her opinions in check. She focused on the TV mounted in the corner of the coffee shop, not far from the White House. Thank goodness the shop was empty except for the barista moving to whatever was playing on his iPod.

The news anchor continued her report. “Take a look at Lindsay



Hall's escapade three nights ago." The screen reverted to footage taken in a local nightclub. Lindsay toasted the camera with a bottle of beer. Clearly inebriated, she sat in a booth enjoying media attention. The news anchor shook her head with a smile, an obvious display of her political preference. "Many are asking, 'If Vice President Hall cannot control his daughter, how can he effectively run our country?'"

Ouch. That nailed the situation. Meghan wrapped her fingers around the loop of her coffee cup and walked out onto a patio filled with umbrella tables and chairs. A steady mist filled the afternoon heat with humidity. She needed to focus on her new assignment—and the challenges ahead. Protecting the VP's daughter was supposed to be a promotion. If she failed, this could mean a permanent stall in her career.

Sensing Bob standing beside her, she turned to give him her views about their situation. "We're made of better stuff than the agents dismissed from Lindsay's protection team."

"I keep telling myself that."

"They let her manipulate them. Plain and simple."

"But we're not babysitters. We're special agents for the Secret Service."

Meghan didn't know the agents who'd been reassigned as a result of Lindsay's latest antics, but Bob had called them friends. She took a sip of her strong coffee, ignoring the raindrops gaining momentum. "Escorting her to the TV station and not informing the vice president was poor judgment. Her statements severely damaged the VP's image. Maybe even his chances of securing the party's nomination."

"Everything she says and does chips at his ability to lead the country. *The Barry Knight Show* and that entire TV network are out to crucify him and the party."

"So we're back to our assignment." Meghan stepped under the coffee shop's canopy to avoid the rain. "I'm committed to protecting her, and I know you are too."

"I have to be." Bob set his cup on an empty table. "Taking a bullet for her would qualify as above and beyond." He pressed his lips. "But that's what we do, right? Can't let personal opinions get in the way of duty."

"Absolutely, and I'm sure there are plans to curb her actions. In fact—" Her phone rang, and she reached inside her shoulder bag. A quick glimpse told her it was her supervisor, Tom Warrington, from the Secret Service office.

"Bob there with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I need both of you in my office at 1400. Ash Zinders, the SAIC for this assignment, needs to brief you and the other agents assigned to the protectee."

Meghan slipped her phone back into her shoulder bag and relayed the information.

Bob whistled. "Good old A2Z isn't wasting any time."

The nickname for the special agent in charge assigned to Lindsay Hall's protection detail wasn't a title any agent would say to his face. He was known for his obsession with detail and his domineering personality. Meghan hadn't met the agent, and she didn't look forward to his browbeating.

"It really bothers me that she now has six agents protecting her when any other VP family member has three." Bob pulled a dollar from his wallet and anchored it beneath his cup. "Did I say I regret accepting this assignment? Hasn't been two hours since the call."

"There's a reason, Bob. We were chosen because the VP needed agents who can get the job done. But I question the number of us too, and what it means."

The potential to fulfill her dreams, the circumstances surrounding Lindsay Hall's unpredictable behavior, and the nightmare of working under Ash Zinders had Meghan wondering if the challenges ahead would be worth it.



Ash believed in Vice President Hall, known as the Shield by the Secret Service. He respected his commitment to his country and his devotion to his family. Books had been written about his political views, and one had been on the bestseller list for six months. How could a man of such integrity have a daughter who was a source of embarrassment for the whole country? International media laughed at her irresponsibility, and critics used her for comic relief in their opening monologues. Four years of protecting Lindsay Hall, and the situation had grown worse. Why couldn't the VP and his wife control their daughter's behavior? Ship her off to the Peace Corps, Siberia . . . anywhere but in the media's playground.

Across the desk sat his supervisor, Tom Warrington.

"Ash, I need to brief you on a few changes in protocol prior to meeting with your team." Warrington shuffled papers in front of him. "They'll be here in thirty minutes."

"Changes, sir?"

Warrington drummed his fingers. Not good. "You'll continue your role as SAIC for Lindsay's protection team, but the vice president has made a request. After last night's unfortunate incident on *The Barry Knight Show*, we've decided to bring in a woman agent."

*A woman agent?* "Why?"

"Special Agent Meghan Connors has an excellent reputation for getting the job done. And we think she'll be able to help keep Lindsay out of trouble. Possibly provide some direction with her medical issues."

"In what way? Our job is to protect her, not help her buy lipstick."

Warrington lifted a brow. "Connors will be a part of the six-agent team."

The addition of more agents, including a woman, ground at him. "Why six agents for a VP's daughter?"

"That will be explained in depth when the VP arrives."

"Sir, I don't understand the changes."

He cleared his throat. "Note that Agent Connors will be assigned to Lindsay seven days a week, 0800 to 1700."

A woman agent wouldn't work with the way Ash managed his team. Why was she being assigned his hours?

Warrington handed him three files. "These are the new agents. You've worked with Bob Lawson and Rick Norris before."

"With all due respect, sir, I prefer to work with men."

Warrington frowned. "The VP is desperate. We need to give her a chance for Lindsay's sake. For the VP's sake."

"I understand, but—"

"You and I go back a long way, and I know why you feel this way. I'd like to think you could get beyond judging every woman agent because of one bad experience. Agent Connors has a stellar record. She's tough, and she's dedicated to her job. Do this for the vice president, Ash. She might be the one person who could turn Lindsay around. And that would help the VP and this country."

"I'll do my best. However, I'd—"

"Deal with it, and do your job."

Resentment seeped into Ash's bones. He had a spotless record, and he'd been reduced to taking care of two women? She might be a dynamic personality, a fine person, but women had no place in the Secret Service.

"The Vice President has located a working ranch in Texas for Lindsay." He turned his computer to show a satellite image of a large ranch house, a barn, horse stables, and a couple of outbuildings.

"She can't run there."

"I agree. It's about a hundred miles west of Austin. She won't have access to a phone or computer. Just fresh country air."

"I'm assuming the VP needs her out of sight."

"There's more to the problem. A call was made to the VP about 0300 this morning. A man said he had a bullet with Lindsay's name on it if she didn't pay up. He claimed she owed him for meds."



The situation grieved him. Lindsay had so many opportunities to better herself. Maybe another woman *would* help. “She’s in deep this time.”

Warrington handed him another file. “Here are the details of the ranch, photos, list of employees. The VP and his wife are deciding on a doctor to treat Lindsay at the ranch.”

“I knew they’d been investigating an alternative method of treatment. I saw the short list of the psychologists and psychiatrists.” Ash studied Warrington’s face—obviously he’d been awake since the threatening call. “So this is crisis intervention in a big way.”

“And the media have to stay out of it.”

“Any leads on the caller?”

“Not yet. Working on it. The transfer will be made in the next couple of days.”

Lindsay did need to be out of the public’s eye.

“One more thing here. President Claredon is back in the hospital. Looks like VP Hall will be taking on more responsibilities.”

Ash had heard rumors that the cancer had spread. “I’ll do what needs to be done, sir.”