

Chapter One

“Are we about done here?” OPAQUE Agent Josh Slater shot to his feet, knocking his chair over backward. He’d had enough of this beat-around-the-bush, quasi interrogation for one day. Loud and to the point, the chair hit the floor with a resounding thud.

The past two hours of debriefing had made him wonder what the hell he’d done wrong on his last assignment. There’d been nothing out of the ordinary, just a simple tourist kidnapping case. Go in, rescue the hostage, get home. Everything had gone as planned. In fact, except for the knife-in-his-back fiasco, he could have done it blindfolded.

Sure as hell hadn’t come close to the hard-liner assignments Operation Protector Agent Quantum Elite (OPAQUE) was known to fight against Coercion Ten. Those jobs were adrenaline-pumping, hazardous-to-your-health rides all the way to the final bullet. That was one of the reasons he’d joined OPAQUE. The other reason was still at large.

Agent Mitch Granger shuffled papers around. “I’ve got only a few—”

“No. You’ve asked me the same damn questions one too many times.” Josh loosely rolled his fingers in and out of a fist. The two of them might be friends most days, but right now Mitch was an obstacle. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you doubted my credibility.” Josh fisted his hand tight. “That would be a mistake.”

“Calm down, okay?” Rising to his feet, Mitch braced his hands on the table between the two of them. “I’m just following the boss’s orders.”

“Which are?”

“To keep you in this room.”

“You and what army?” Josh knew he hadn’t done anything to get fired, reprimanded, or a thousand other unpleasant procedures. Yet, everything about this scenario screamed trouble.

“Listen, Slater. I’m not in the mood for any of your macho-dude attitude.” Mitch’s eyes narrowed. “Now, stay in the damn room.”

They both stood six-foot-one. Both worked out at least once a day. Both could settle an argument with their fists, gun, or knife. Hard to know which one would come out the winner if they ever pushed each other past the edge of restraint. So far, they both knew better than to cross that line.

Josh leaned across the table, invading Mitch’s space. “Just why the hell do I need to stay in this room?”

“Why not?” Drake Lawrence’s words cut through the tension as he approached the table.

“Son of a—” Josh winced. He’d missed the opening of the door as his boss, the director of OPAQUE, had walked in. Drake had come from a law enforcement background, and he still moved with the quiet stealth of an agent on the prowl. A technique Josh had mastered for his own use.

His boss quirked the side of his mouth with the cockiness that came from one-upping someone. “That is, unless you’ve got a hot date.”

Josh straightened, figuring Drake's hot date question didn't need an answer. "How've you been, sir?"

"Never better." The boss casually stepped farther into the room, seeming to fill every inch with his six feet, still in shape, pushing fifty frame.

Faster than a kid released for recess, Mitch grabbed his paperwork and fled the room. Evidently, he wanted no part in Josh's chewing out. Or whatever the hell this turned out to be. Josh couldn't say he blamed him.

"Good to have you back, Josh. I missed your in-my-face attitude gracing the hallways." Drake reached out for a brothers-in-arms forearm grasp. "By the way, the hostage's family sent word to thank you for bringing their father home alive."

Josh clasped the offered arm. "Just doing my job."

A scowl grabbed Drake's expression. "I meant to be down sooner. Got tied up with our decoders. They intercepted a message from Coercion Ten last night."

"Good intel?"

"Yeah, I got the message."

Josh zeroed in on his boss's use of the word *I* instead of *OPAQUE*. But the most telling sign that something was off was the harsh snarl—angry, personal, and real. What the hell had Josh walked back into? Drake pushed a button on his phone and listened, then shook his head.

"Something wrong, sir?" Josh asked.

Ignoring the question, Drake pushed speed dial again.

"Looks like you're kind of busy. Think I'll head on home," Josh said, righting the chair he'd toppled earlier.

All he'd wanted when he stepped off the plane this morning was to check into some fancy St. Louis hotel and sleep twenty-four hours straight. Then head down to Captiva, Florida, where OPAQUE had a luxurious safe house fronting the Gulf, and spend a few days unwinding.

Instead, Mitch had picked him up at Lambert International Airport and brought him straight to OPAQUE headquarters, about an hour southwest of St. Louis. There'd barely been time for a quick shower and change of clothes before the question-answer routine began. Sleep still sounded good.

"Wait." Drake ended the call and took a seat, motioning Josh to the adjacent chair.

Sitting was not top priority on his agenda. Standing and moving and getting some answers were. Brain-tired and body-tired, he figured the faster his boss made his point, the faster he could get some rest.

He leaned against the windowsill.

"What's going on?" Josh asked.

"OPAQUE intercepted Coercion Ten's Target List again last night. My name's still there. So's yours."

"Sounds about right." Almost every OPAQUE agent had their name on the enemy's list. If not, you needed to work a little harder at pissing them off.

"They've added a new column. Titled it Leverage."

"I guess intimidating a target by threatening to harm someone near to them could be called leverage." Josh shrugged. "They can call it whatever they want. Won't stop me from knocking them down every chance I get."

Drake shook his head. "CT's come a long way in a little over twelve years. Hell, the original group of thugs and bad apples in law enforcement look like small potatoes now. We should have known once they started to branch out into surrounding states, they'd morph into something bigger than money, drugs, and prostitution."

"They sure seem to be one of the world leaders of blackmail and control." The current CT organization had also conquered some aspects of social media and hacking. With that had come high-powered hacking and bribery, and anything else that gave them power.

Sighing, he rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyes. The little sleep he'd gotten on the plane hadn't helped much, but he needed to focus on the implications of the revised CT form. "How did OPAQUE come across the new list?"

“You might say CT handed it to us.” Drake stared into the corner. Stared and stared and stared. Suddenly, he slammed his fist on the table. “They’re gonna wish they hadn’t.”

Josh felt the vein in his neck jump with the deafening sound. All thoughts of being tired catapulted out of his mind. He rolled into a full back lean against the wall, crossed one leg over the other, and crossed his arms over his chest. One of the people in the room needed to stay calm, and from the looks of it, he’d been designated.

“Cut the bull, Drake. What’s going on?”

“There’s nothing next to your name in the Leverage column. Next to mine is one name.” His boss straightened back into his usual tough-as-nails stance. “Mackenzie Baudin.”

Josh’s chest tightened as if his belt had been notched three sizes too small. Not only was Macki an ex-cop, a wealthy hotel owner, and the boss’s niece, she was also the only woman he’d never shook from his system. The idea she was a target in the underbelly game of life and death hit him like a brick.

The two men shared a glance then looked away. Josh had controlled his expression, but he’d felt the flare of his nostrils. Coercion Ten had gone too far this time. There’d already been too many deaths in Macki’s family.

“Do you think it’s real?” He’d spent years blocking the vision of Macki’s lips, the feel of her skin, the touch of her hands. Suddenly, just the mention of her name flashed them all back to the front of his mind.

“All the signs point in that direction. I’ve been trying to reach Mackenzie all day.” The corner of Drake’s right eye twitched. “All I get is her damn voicemail.”

“She’s probably just busy. You know, running a high-class hotel isn’t all glamour and glitz.” Hearing the words come out of his own mouth didn’t make him feel any better.

Drake shot him an evil look. “Don’t give me that bull. You and I both know this is damn serious.”

When someone was targeted by Coercion Ten, every hour, every minute, every second counted. He nodded.

“They’ll try to break me and OPAQUE by targeting her.” Drake paused. “We can’t let that happen.”

“You can count on me. What’s my assignment?”

His boss’s expression blanked, the look he always got when he was torn on which way to turn. Torn between going with his gut or overthinking the situation.

Squaring his shoulders, Drake rose to his feet. “Bottom line, I need you to go to Riverfalls, Illinois and protect Mackenzie.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Get this straight. There’s no way in hell I’m going back to my hometown.” Josh had devoted his life to the organization, but the old man had stepped over the line with this request. “You’re asking too much.”

For years, he’d accepted every assignment. Every duty. Every dirty job out there. All to pay back the debt he owed. All for OPAQUE, a standalone organization, which had been formed by Mackenzie’s father and a few other upstanding lawmen to combat Coercion Ten.

OPAQUE was the first line of surveillance sometimes. The means to stop power grabs. The agents who rescued the targets and their loved ones.

“Did you happen to forget I’m the one who got you out of Riverfalls that day? And I’ve sure as hell been there every step of the way as you’ve dealt with the past. Even before I took over OPAQUE leadership, I kept an eye on you. On your assignments.” Drake pressed the point. “I’m not asking for anything you don’t already do as a protector on every job. Mackenzie needs you.”

“The hell she does. I’m the last person Macki needs.”

“Think of it this way, Slater. She needs your gun and your muscles. Or would you rather she face CT by herself? Maybe they’ll let her live. After all, they’re always on the lookout for a beautiful woman and—”

“Shut the hell up. I’ll take the job.” Josh raked his fingers through his hair. He should have stayed in South America, where all he had to worry about were drug lords and mosquitos.

Drake answered his ringing phone and pushed the speaker button. “Mackenzie, where have you been?”

“I’m tied up in some very important negotiations for the hotel, including a multimillion-dollar conference. But you’ve been calling every ten minutes for over an hour, so I called a recess.” She sounded stressed, like a woman trying to handle five things at once and hoping this call wasn’t going to add one more thing to her plate. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s been a threat made against you.”

“Another one? Being rich isn’t all it’s cracked up to be sometimes.”

Josh knew she wasn’t blind to danger, because he’d kept track of her. Ten years ago, she’d inherited her parents’ estate when they’d died in a plane crash. Hotel MacKenzie, money, and grown-up responsibilities had landed on her in one fell swoop, and so had risks she’d had no idea existed.

Drake shot him a glance. “Trouble is, this threat’s not like the others. Those were just crackpots. This one is dead serious.”

“Dead serious?” Her tone barely changed with the half question.

The boss didn’t use that statement lightly. The word “dead” meant your life was on the line. Right now, she was probably letting the implication tumble through her mind till it found its place in her fear mode. From what he’d heard, when she’d worked undercover vice on D Street in Riverfalls, she’d been fearless.

“So how do we handle this?” Mackenzie asked.

“I’m sending someone from OPAQUE to protect you.”

“OPAQUE?”

“Yes. They’re a first-class security firm.”

Drake’s intense expression revealed more than he’d want anyone to know, but Josh had read him plenty of times. This was his niece. This was important.

She cleared her throat in a *gotcha*. “I thought your security firm only installed burglar alarms in the St. Louis area. This makes it sound like you do more than that.”

Drake cleared his throat. “I never said OPAQUE was my company.”

“Okay. Why not use one of the Riverfalls security firms like you usually do?” she asked.

OPAQUE had never been sure who had connections to Coercion Ten, but the Riverfalls Police Department had always been the top guess for the original breeding grounds.

“They aren’t reliable for this threat. My protector agent will be in Riverfalls in less than four hours.”

“Your protector agent?” She laughed. “I do believe I just gotcha again.”

Josh lifted the corner of his mouth. He’d need to watch his words on this assignment.

She didn’t sound like the half-naive girl he’d left behind. Her quick responses sounded like a woman with a mind of her own. Even her laugh still held that sexy as hell undertone. The one that used to twist his gut in knots and slam-dunk his young male hormones.

Hell, he was almost thirty-one and her laugh still got inside his head. Both of them.

Drake set his jaw. “This isn’t a game, Mackenzie. And don’t give my agent any of your smartass attitude, either.”

She sighed. “Okay. Shoot me his photo and stats, so I’ll know to trust him when he arrives.”

Josh raised his eyebrows at Drake then turned to look out the window. This should be good. Even Drake was taking longer than usual to answer a question. Maybe he’d change his mind and make it easy for all of them.

“You’ll know him when you see him,” Drake said. “I’m sending Josh Slater.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Drake sounded annoyed. “I’d appreciate it if both of you stopped saying no to this arrangement.”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about the two of us. Things I never planned to tell you, but let’s just say that when a woman gives—”

Josh spun around. “Macki, I’m in the room. Don’t do this.”

“Josh?” She spoke his name the same way she had the last time he’d seen her. The day he’d said goodbye.

He turned back to the window before his expression could be read by his boss. “Yes.”

“You should have told me he was there, Uncle Drake.” She sounded controlled and calm.

“Couldn’t. You’d have hung up.”

“Still might.”

“I’ll just call back.”

She sighed in capitulation. “Okay, I’ve listened to your suggestion. Here’s mine. You can tell Josh Slater to take his hard body elsewhere. I don’t need his kind of protection.”

Josh continued to stare out the window. What could he say? To her, he was nothing but a no-account guy she’d given herself to—and then he’d left town. Didn’t matter he’d left to save her even more pain than the loss of her parents. He couldn’t tell her that. He could never tell her that. Even if his life depended on it.

He jerked his mind back to the present. Since he’d agreed to be her protector, he needed to clear his mind of the past. This was just another assignment. Another person to keep alive. He could keep Macki at arm’s length. And he could damn well keep his dick in his pants.

“No changes, Mackenzie. Not this time. Josh will be in Riverfalls by ten tonight. Don’t make his job any more difficult than it already is.”

With her disconnect, the room went quiet.

“All things considered, I think that went fairly well.” Drake shook his head. “Appears there are things I don’t know about you two. Care to enlighten me?”

“Nope.” Some things were between Macki and him, no one else. *Ever*. “You heard her reaction. Just the idea I’m being sent to protect her has already put her on defense. Think what happens when she discovers why I left in the first place.”

“She doesn’t have to find out.”

He swallowed down a lump of guilt the size of the ten years he’d been gone from Riverfalls. “But what if she does? She’ll be devastated.”

Drake fingered the edge of the table. “Sounds to me you’ve got your facts a little mixed up. Don’t you mean *you’ll* be devastated?”

Josh flinched. The son of a bitch had always known how to motivate his agents. Or goad them into doing what he wanted. Wasn’t going to work this time. He wouldn’t let the words get to him. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? Okay. Have it your way. I thought since you have the most firsthand knowledge of Riverfalls, it might give us a leg up. Never mind. I’ll give the job to Mitch Granger. He’s always looking for assignments involving pretty women.”

No denying, Mitch liked to spend his free time with blondes, brunettes, and redheads. But, Mr. Responsibility, as Agent Granger’s nickname implied, played by all the rules when on assignment.

Still, Josh balked at the idea of another man doing his job. Especially where Macki was involved. How tough could going back be? “Some days I hate you, old man.”

The sides of Drake’s mouth lifted and he grunted. “Some days I hate myself.” He laid the key to an OPAQUE chopper and a stack of money on the table then held out his hand. “You’ve got more experience working CT cases than most OPAQUE agents. If anybody can figure this out, it’s you.”

“The past is about to come roaring back on us, old man. If Macki figures out why I left, the fallout will make hell look like a run in the park. In that scenario, none of us will walk away unscathed. None of us.”

Drake nodded. “A risk I’m willing to take. What are you willing to risk?”

“Guess I’ll have that answer by the time I get back.” If he made it back. “Text me a file on Macki.”

“A file? Why?”

“She’s a client. Clients always have a file for an agent to study.” He needed to approach this assignment just like any other. “Photos, too. I’m sure she’s changed.” Not that he hadn’t seen a few pictures through the years.

“You’ve both changed.” Drake replied, already pushing keys on his phone. “I’ll send you pictures and a baseline of her current life. Think I’ll let the two of you fill each other in on the past ten years.”

Josh shot his boss a go-to-hell look. His boss stared right back.

Heading down the hall, he ignored the ping of an incoming text. There’d be plenty of time on the chopper to take a look. And Drake needed to get his head examined if he thought Macki and Josh were going to talk over old times.

Protecting Macki, and the OPAQUE organization, was his one and only focus. That would be hard enough. This kind of assignment killed an agent faster than a bullet to the brain. Personal and close to home.