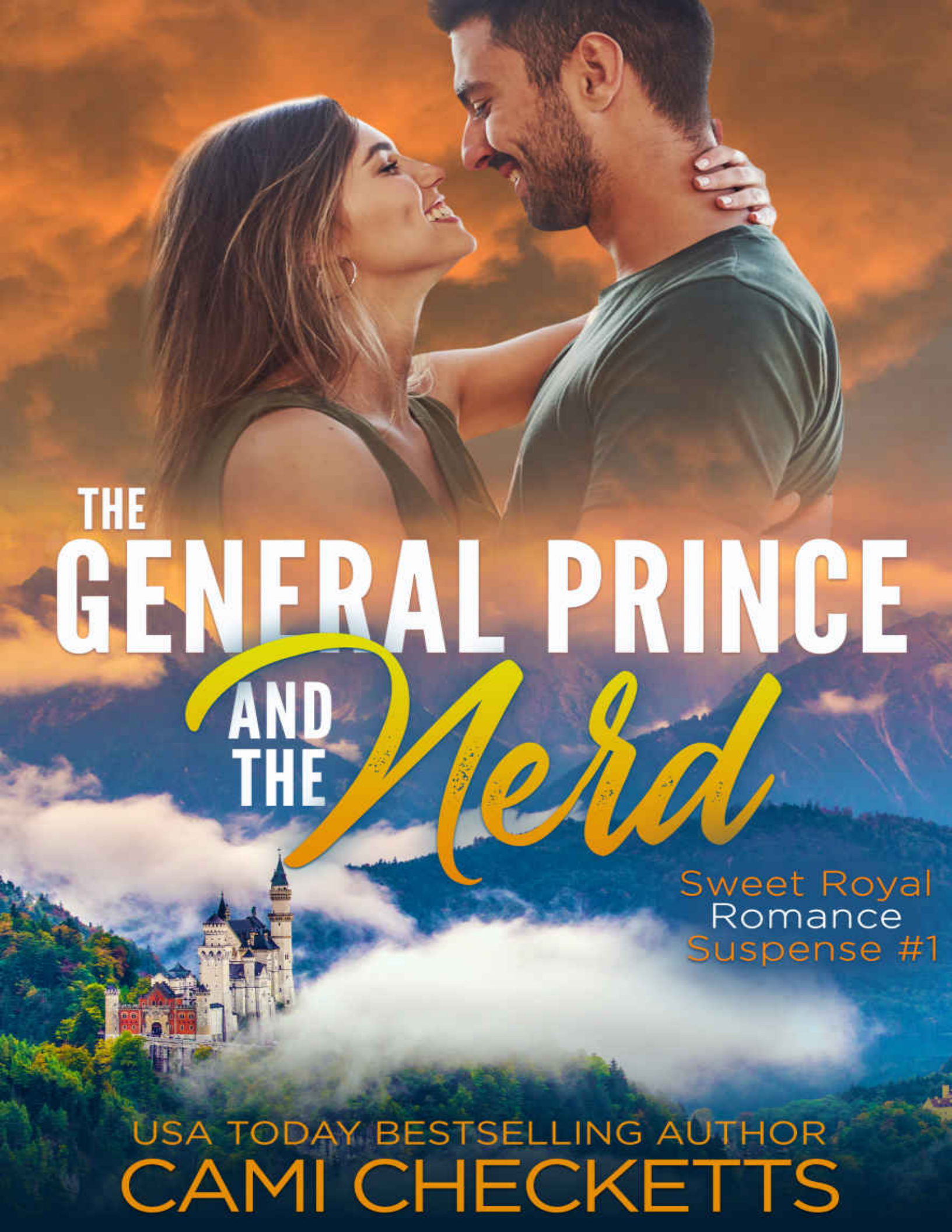
THE
GENERAL PRINCE
AND
THE
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Sweet Royal
Romance
Suspense #1
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CAMI CHECKETTS

THE GENERAL PRINCE AND THE NERD

SWEET ROYAL ROMANCE SUSPENSE #1

CAMI CHECKETTS

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The General Prince and the Nerd: Sweet Royal Romance Suspense #1

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CONTENTS

Free Book

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15

The Brave Prince and the Teacher - Three Chapters
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CHAPTER ONE

Macey Clifton gaped out the window of the silver Audi A8. Her boss, Sutton Smith, drove smoothly through the narrow country road of a picturesque mountain valley, past lakes and fields and the most perfect stone homes with flower baskets on each window.

Sutton slowed as he reached the far end of the valley and entered the quaint village of Greenville. The row of shops and restaurants, each two stories with balconies and flowers spilling over the wrought-iron railings, and a perfect stone church with a steeple reaching to heaven, butted up against a peaceful mountain lake. Above the lake, perched on a green knoll and watching over its valley below, was a castle.

A castle! She, Macey Clifton, reclusive nerd who hid from the world in Sutton Smith's basement command center and made sure every computer program, security protocol, and all the various surveillance equipment worked correctly for the hundreds of security details Sutton and his people were undertaking at any given moment, was going to live in a castle with the royal family of Augustine and pretend to be engaged to the crown prince.

There were many problems with this op, the first one being she was a reclusive nerd.

No, the first problem was that Macey had seen a picture of the crown prince.

"Hyperventilating again," she muttered.

“Deep breaths,” Sutton counseled, unruffled as ever.

Macey tried. In … and out …

Prince Tristan and each of his five brothers, one of whom was his identical twin, had been blessed with startling blue eyes, welcoming smiles, and insanely handsome faces. They were all sought after by gorgeous, influential, accomplished, and powerful women throughout the world.

None of the princes had married yet, even though Prince Tristan and his twin were thirty years old. Macey wasn’t worried about some jealous female trying to take her out, though that was a possibility. She was concerned how anybody would believe the ultra-good-looking, wealthy, apparently charming prince would choose her. Somehow she had to play the part of confident future princess … future queen … oh boy.

Sutton pulled up to a barrier. A guard holding a Beretta ARX 160 greeted them. It was Augustine’s southern neighbor, the Italians’ choice for a military rifle—versatile, effective, and lightweight—but she knew many other military and police forces had adopted the weapon. Apparently the kingdom of Augustine was one of them.

The soldier was dressed in all-black and looked tough and impressive holding the rifle, but she’d seen many tough and impressive soldiers in her day. Well, retired soldiers. Sutton’s San Diego mansion was a revolving door of tough security men and occasionally women, most of them former military and skilled in the fields of security, protection, weaponry, and fighting. She was friends with all of them, but she had a strict no-dating policy since Steve …

She scowled. Not going there.

The soldier marched up to them, and Sutton rolled down the window. “Pardon, sir, but no private vehicles are allowed access to this road. If you’d like to return to the tourist center, you can book a ticket to view the castle in the enclosed gondola lift that will take you to the top of the mountain.” Even though he looked bored and annoyed, his accent was exotic.

Macey could only imagine how many tourists visiting Europe had tried to access the castle on the hill. It was more majestic than anything she’d seen

in real life. Not that she was some expert, as she rarely left her security control center to view much of the outside world, but this was definitely an awe-inspiring sight. From what her research showed, the royals of Augustine used to allow tours in select rooms in the castle and host parties and foreign dignitaries, but their security had increased and their welcome to the outside world had become almost nonexistent after the queen was killed six months ago.

The white marble towering edifice looked to be ten stories tall, with towers and ramparts and spires and balconies and patios. It overlooked the lush green valley below, where several glistening blue lakes dotted the landscape and verdant mountain peaks surrounded the entire scene, framing the back side of the castle. The country of Augustine was in the Swiss Alps, sandwiched between Switzerland and Austria with mountainous peaks as border guards except on the northern tip, which they shared with Germany and where their larger cities were located. She'd never known such beauty truly existed and wasn't simply a photo-shopped version of an impressive photographer's still shot.

"Sutton Smith," Sutton greeted the man with a friendly smile. "I believe King Nolan is expecting me."

"Oh, yes, sir." The guard lowered his gun. His hazel eyes filled with interest and respect. He gestured to the gatehouse. When the gate didn't move, he gritted his teeth. "Pardon me, sir. One moment." Striding back to the small structure, the man seemed to have barely said two words when the iron gates were swinging inward and out of their way.

"Cheers." Sutton waved to the guard.

The man bowed slightly, stiff but definitely respectful. "A pleasure, sir."

"Is there a person on earth who doesn't move out of the way for Sutton Smith?" Macey teased him. Sutton was her surrogate father, trusted friend, and respected boss all rolled into one. He'd helped her and her brother Gage. She would do anything for him. As evidenced by the fact that she was sitting in this car without hurling herself out the passenger door and running for the safety of those mountains.

"Liz." He gave her a confident grin.

Macey laughed. “Your wife is far too in love with you.” The sweet angel and former Duchess had been proclaimed the most beautiful woman in the world and now was lauded as the most benevolent. Macey adored Liz, loved seeing Sutton so happy with her, and appreciated their example of a happy marriage. She’d never seen one up close and personal before being around Sutton and Liz. She had seen Liz get after him a time or two, and Sutton had immediately changed course when that happened.

“And I with her.” Sutton was always classy, always kind. Underneath his polished and successful veneer, he was tougher, smarter, more battle-savvy and resilient than anyone she knew. Yet he truly cared for everyone who crossed his path. Liz was at the top of that list. Somehow Sutton made time for everyone, even Macey. She wondered when he slept.

“Yep, you’re a big old softie for Liz,” she teased.

He smiled patiently but didn’t refute her comment. The Audi snaked up the hill, driving through a tunnel of trees and thick undergrowth, leaving the guard station and the little village behind. The ground dropped away to her right, and she sucked in a breath. The view wasn’t the gorgeous valley they’d driven through, but of a deep-blue mountain lake fed by a towering waterfall. The back side of the castle was just visible through the trees.

“Stunning,” Sutton said.

“You know I don’t get out of your basement much,” Macey said as the trees closed in around them again and they wove through them toward the castle. “But this is the most stunning place I’ve ever seen.”

“There are so many impressive spots in this world, but I would agree this is one of the most picturesque. It also feels as if we’ve stepped back in time, which is a novelty I appreciate.”

Macey appreciated that Sutton agreed. In his vast travels, there weren’t many corners of the world he hadn’t seen.

The trees thinned and the rear of the castle became front and center in their view. Macey sucked in a breath again, not just because of the insanely beautiful towering edifice with flower gardens and vegetable gardens tiered below the lowest level from this angle, but because the nerves hit her again

—she would be living in that castle and pretending to be engaged to the crown prince.

If only she'd had the time to create an artificial intelligence model and dig for every bit of information about Prince Tristan, the royal family, the country of Augustine's past, present, and future. From the moment she agreed to the job, Liz and Agatha had kept her so busy with shopping, beauty appointments, makeup and hair and manners training, she'd barely been able to get her work done and make sure her assistant Trent was ready for all the responsibility now heaped on him.

She groaned. "I can't believe I agreed to this."

"You'll be ace for this job." Sutton circled the castle on a road that had far too steep of a drop-off into a crevice with a river running through it. It had to be fed by that lake and waterfall they'd seen.

He drove around to the front of the castle and slowed at the imposing gates. Someone must've radioed ahead because the guard simply saluted and the gates swung wide. In front of them was a huge slab of concrete and then a long staircase that arched up to massive wooden double doors. The staircase was bordered by water fountains and statues and landscaped flower beds.

Macey had walked into a fairy tale. She leaned back against the leather seat. "I can't believe I agreed to this," she repeated.

A guard gestured to a spot off to the side of the concrete drive where several other vehicles were parked. There was a road that led to eight massive garage doors underneath the castle. That must be where the family and maybe the staff parked. The entire nearby village could probably park their vehicles in there.

"Macey, listen to me," Sutton instructed, putting the vehicle into park and turning to her.

She looked at him, the man she respected above all others besides her brother Gage. She'd never known a dad and her mom flitted through men so quickly even the ones she'd liked hadn't stuck around long enough to form a relationship with her. The ones she hadn't liked, who Gage hadn't been around to protect her from, were the reason she'd had a secret hiding

spot at the top of her closet as a girl, and the reason she'd begged Gage to teach her how to fight. Luckily, she'd been good at evading and hiding and none of them had taken advantage of her. They were the reason she wore thick, Coke-bottle glasses when she had twenty-twenty vision, kept her long brown hair in a severe bun, never wore makeup, and dressed in baggy T-shirts and thick tights that didn't show her shape. The only time as an adult that she'd dressed in feminine clothing and made an effort with her appearance was when she thought she'd fallen in love with Steve, and look how that had turned out.

Today, at Agatha and Liz's insistence, she was wearing a classy white silk shirt and a red patterned skirt with heels. Her hair was loose and hung down her back in smooth waves. Too much hair, too fitted clothing … she might as well have worn a sign that said, 'Attempting to look like a female.' She'd put on the makeup Liz and Agatha had taught her to use in the Gulfstream's bathroom before they disembarked at the Traverse airport, the largest Augustine city, half an hour north of this scenic valley. Then she'd put her glasses back on. They made it easier to hide in plain sight.

"You are ace for this job," Sutton started with. "You're brilliant, you can fight better than most trained security guards, and you're poised and confident."

She didn't know about the last two. "And you, Gage, Liz, and Agatha don't want me 'wasting away my life' in your basement," she said before he could.

His bright blue eyes studied her. "You're invaluable to me, Macey, to all of us, but I was chuffed you were willing to be a field op on this one. You deserve a chance to live a little too."

He paused. Was this the moment she begged him not to make her walk into that castle? There were other options to 'live a little.' She could go skydiving. She could create an appealing profile on dating websites and actually respond to messages this time. She could try sushi. Heck, she'd eat a slab of raw fish rather than pretend she was the right woman to be engaged to a crown prince.

"I know Steve did a number on you …"

Macey's eyes widened. One of the guys had told Sutton, after that disastrous op, that she'd fancied herself in love with Steve. Sutton had made certain she knew he didn't blame her for Steve manipulating her for information. Thankfully, he'd never pried into her joke of a relationship with the backstabber. Joke for Steve. Heartbreak for her. Steve had betrayed all of them, almost killing Sutton, Liz, their son-in-law River, and their daughter Ally. The monster had tased and beaten River while his hands were zip tied and had propositioned and threatened Liz and Ally as River fought heroically against several men.

Macey had assured her boss that she was fine. Her silly romance should be the least of anyone's concern. And she *was* fine, but she had scars deeper than anyone except Gage could understand. She'd rarely dated before Steve and since then had made it a rule to not date Sutton's ops, no matter how kind, handsome, or accomplished they were. No matter how persistently they asked. Since she rarely left the mansion, she didn't date at all.

And now she was going to pretend to be engaged to the most handsome man on the planet, in her inexperienced opinion? Insanity. She wanted to pull her laptop out and deep-dive search until she was armed with all the information she could find to protect herself. She knew a bit about each of the royal family and the kingdom, but not enough. Knowledge was power, and she felt lacking in both at the moment.

She focused on Sutton, and forced a smile. "It's fine. I'm fine."

"It's not fine, but you are going to be fine." He nodded. "I know about your medieval romance obsession."

Macey's face flared red. She devoured medieval romance novels on her Kindle.

"Go have an adventure, Macey. You are brave, bold, and beautiful. You've trained Trent well; you don't need to worry about anything at the command center. Gage is ecstatically happy with Cassie; you don't need to worry about your brother. Have fun. Try new things. It'll all be aces." He smiled gently at her.

"I'm not brave, bold, or beautiful," she said, worrying her lip. Gage and his adorable girlfriend Cassie kept trying to tell her that. Had they shared it

with Sutton? Sadly, she didn't know how to believe any of them.

"Yes, you are. I've seen you boldly turn down tough, intimidating men for date requests. Most people would never dream of standing up to them. And they wouldn't ask repeatedly if you weren't as impressive and beautiful as you are."

"Thanks, Sutton." Emotion clogged her throat. She needed to go face the handsome prince before she started crying all over her well-respected boss. She flung her door open. "Let's do this."

"Very brave," Sutton said. "Now can you please hand over the glasses?"

Macey drew in a breath, praying for strength and bravery. She was putting herself in a dangerous situation; her future fake fiancé was being threatened from an anonymous source and apparently the women who married into this family all died eventually from some curse. The queen had drowned in the lake six months ago. Macey didn't believe in curses, but luckily the engagement was as far as she'd have to go. No dying for this job.

She studied her boss. Did he understand she wanted to live, wanted to have her own medieval romance, and this castle and this prince might be her chance? But … how could she hand over the glasses? What if she needed them? Would Sutton ask Linus to give up his blanket? Frodo to give up his ring?

"It's time to show everyone, most especially yourself, how brave, bold, and beautiful you are, Macey. You can't do that if you're hiding behind those glasses." He held out his hand. "Please."

Macey took in a steadying breath, said a prayer for bravery and strength, and wrapped her fingertips around the glasses.

"You've got this," Sutton encouraged.

Before she could second-guess any further, she yanked the glasses off and handed them over.

"Thank you." Sutton set them in the vehicle's console and opened his own door.

“Don’t leave those in this rental,” Macey warned, her gaze darting to her glasses.

“We’d hate to lose such a flattering accessory,” Sutton teased, but then his blue eyes grew serious. “I won’t forget them. I know they make you more comfortable, but now is your chance to live in a medieval romance, and they didn’t have stylish glasses in that time period.”

Macey attempted a smile, gave him a thumbs up, and stood shakily on her heels. A couple of guards approached; obviously, they’d been waiting for their cue.

“Welcome,” the more approachable and older of the two said. “I’m Lieutenant General Philippe Cordon, second in command to His Royal Highness Prince Raymond, the general of our armed forces.”

“Sutton Smith.” Sutton shook his hand.

“I know who you are, sir, and it’s an honor. And Miss Clifton, the future bride of our beloved Crown Prince Tristan.” He bowed slightly to her but didn’t offer his hand. She felt like she should curtsy, but she settled for a smile. “Please allow me to escort you to King Nolan. Jacob will get your luggage, miss.” He tilted his head to the young man.

Sutton clicked a button on the remote to pop the trunk open for Jacob.

“Good thing it’s a rental and that button doesn’t activate fifty calibers or turn the car into a helicopter like your Aston Martin,” Macey said.

Sutton chuckled, and the lieutenant general actually smiled at her.

The three of them fell into step across the cement and up the sweeping staircase. Macey admired the water features and flowers adorning the staircase.

“This castle and valley are some of the most picturesque spots I’ve ever viewed,” Sutton said.

“Thank you, sir. I’m a native and very proud of Augustine, devoted to my people and the royal family.”

Macey was grateful they spoke English here, though it was definitely more formal than the American English she was used to. Their accent was rich and smooth, more Italian and French and less German.

“That is the reason I’m forever indebted to you, miss,” the lieutenant general continued. “I’ve known Prince Tristan since he was a babe. You being willing to marry him, in spite of the threats, the queen’s murder, and the curse…” He raised his eyebrows.

Macey’s own brows lifted, and she and Sutton exchanged a look. She’d love to hear more about this fabled curse.

“I’m grateful you will help the general and myself protect the crown prince and distract our people from the threats. It means the world to me, to all of us.”

“Thank you,” she said, she hoped graciously. Only the king, Prince Tristan, and his twin brother, General Raymond, were supposed to know the engagement wasn’t real. This guy knew she could protect Tristan. Interesting, or suspicious? She glanced at Sutton. He gave her a nod. He was intrigued by this lieutenant general as well.

They finally reached the huge wooden double doors. Lieutenant General Cordon swung one inward, and it moved surprisingly easily. They walked into a foyer the likes of which she’d never seen in her life. The ceilings had to be thirty feet high, and she gaped up at gorgeous, sparkling chandeliers and the ceiling itself, which was made of stained glass panes. The space was light-filled and airy, with two levels of windows on either side of the double doors showcasing the gorgeous green valley below and mountains beyond that. A grand staircase that looked like any young princess’s dream to walk down was on the other side of the foyer. It arched gracefully up two stories then continued in a circular pattern, the walls around it narrowing as it went up and up and up—seven stories, eight? She had to explore that staircase and this entire castle.

“Oh, my,” she whispered. “This is incredible.”

“Oh, miss.” The lieutenant general looked to be fighting a smile. “You’ve only just begun.”

She and Sutton exchanged a look. Even Sutton seemed to be impressed. “I’d better bring Liz with me when I come back,” he said. Liz had already committed to babysit their granddaughter this week while River and Ally were in Kauai. Everybody had agreed that the long flight and a castle were no place for rambunctious little Emerald.

“For sure. And don’t take any pictures or she’ll be jealous.”

“No photography allowed in the castle,” Cordon informed them as he walked to the left down a wide hallway lined with mosaics on the walls, gorgeous floral arrangements on tables, and doors on each side. Some were wide double doors leading into huge rooms like a ballroom, a formal dining room, and a library. Each room was bright, with massive windows either showcasing the mountains at the rear of the castle or the valley at the front.

Macey wanted to gawk and explore every room, but Cordon kept them moving. They saw two armed guards, who stiffly saluted as they walked by, but no one else. The castle was suspiciously quiet. Had they all withdrawn into a shell since the queen’s death?

He reached a door on the left side of the hallway and gave a short rap.

“Permission to enter,” a male voice said regally.

Lieutenant General Cordon smiled at both of them and gave a quick bow. “It’s been a pleasure.” He swung the double doors wide and announced, “King Nolan and Princess Kiera, ruling monarch and daughter of the Kingdom of Augustine …” He paused and looked at them expectantly.

Sutton bowed his head in respect and Macey curtsied, she hoped not too awkwardly.

The lieutenant general seemed to think that was enough as he continued, “May I present Sutton Smith and Macey Clifton, of Great Britain and the United States of America, respectively.”

Macey had to hide a smile at his formal introduction, but her nerves ramped up and her stomach twisted. She tried to press her glasses up on her nose, then remembered they weren’t there. Dang. She was thrilled to explore this castle, but how in the world would she live in such a formal way? She had her own suite in Sutton’s mansion and she split her time between the

computer command center downstairs, training or fighting with Gage or one of the other men in the gym, or running on the beach. She came and went as she pleased, and nobody was formal with her. Ever.

Sutton took her elbow and escorted her in. She appreciated his solid, confident presence more than ever. Cordon stepped back and pulled the doors closed behind them. She and Sutton walked to the king and princess, both of whom had stood at the introduction and also stepped forward.

King Nolan was dressed in a black suit, tall and distinguished with salt and pepper hair, a trimmed beard, and a handsome face. He had summer blue eyes that she remembered from the family portrait, and which all the children had inherited. His eyes had a sadness in them that tugged at Macey. Queen Anne had died six months ago, murder or the 'suicide curse' depending on which source you referred to. Macey didn't believe in curses, and from what Sutton had explained, the king didn't either. Part of the reason Macey was here was to see if she could help find the queen's killer with her computer and research expertise.

Princess Kiera was a beautiful pre-teen with long, dark curly hair, her father's blue eyes, and a bright smile. She darted from her father's side and grabbed both of Macey's hands with hers. "I've always wanted a sister!" she cried out.

Macey froze between relief that the girl was impetuous and genuine, and guilt that she wasn't a real fiancée. She towered over the child in her heels. A sister? She'd longed for a sister all her life. The girl didn't know about the fake-fiancée ploy, so Macey needed to act accordingly.

"I'm so excited!" Kiera continued. "And you are so hot! T told me you were 'stunningly beautiful,' but he didn't have any pictures of you even though you spent a whole weekend together. Do you think he's hot? When did you know that it was true love?"

"Um, I …" Macey was in trouble if she couldn't think of the right words to convince a twelve-year-old she thought her fiancé was 'hot' and how she knew she loved him. She looked at Sutton for help.

The king and Sutton were shaking hands and conferring. The king turned to her, taking her hand in his. The ache in his eyes was momentarily replaced

with warmth and welcome. “We are in your debt, Miss Clifton. I know it’s a lengthy list we’re asking of you.”

“Be engaged to the most handsome crown prince on earth, disprove a fake curse, keep the prince safe from whoever is leaving death threats, and reassure your people that none of you believe in said fake curse, which Prince Tristan is proving by getting engaged to me. Easy.” She smiled at him, not mentioning he hoped she’d find his wife’s murderer when no one else had been able to.

“Easy, eh?” He chuckled and Sutton joined him. “I appreciate the optimism and hope you’ll feel at home here.”

“Thank you, sir. I mean, King … I didn’t think I should go straight for Dad.” Macey trailed off and clasped her hands together.

The king still looked amused. “Nolan is fine.”

Nolan? She couldn’t call a king ‘Nolan.’ She tried to push her glasses on tighter but touched her nose instead, remembering they weren’t there. She needed something to hide behind.

“I was looking forward to meeting with both of you and my boys about the situation, but they’re off checking on Curtis, taking him supplies, and trying to …” He trailed off, and Macey’s interest spiked. What were ‘the boys’ off trying to do and why didn’t he want her to know about it? Apparently there were secrets here that she wouldn’t be privy to. She would find them on her own if needed.

“Trying to …?” she prompted. “Please, King … Nolan,” she corrected. “I need all the information.”

“It’s just more nonsense about the curse.” He waved a hand dismissively.

“Can I show Macey some of the castle while we wait? Before Nanny Lisa finds me?” Princess Kiera begged. “Please.”

“Of course, love.” Her father smiled indulgently, but then his gaze got more serious. “Be safe.”

“Always, Pops.” Princess Kiera darted to his side to kiss his cheek, then returned to Macey’s side quicker than most people could blink. Was her father simply overanxious after losing his wife or did he have to remind the girl to ‘be safe’ for other reasons? Was this adorable princess in danger as well, and in her own home?

“We’ll all chat after your tour,” he said to Macey. He lowered his voice and muttered, “They’d better be back soon.” He turned to Sutton. “I’d love a word about your time with the Queen’s Navy. Landlocked as we are, we’ve never had a Navy, but I’m fascinated by the idea.”

Sutton waved to Macey as Kiera tugged her out of the room. Her boss would still be here for the ‘meeting,’ right? Her anxiety spiked, and she reached for her glasses … Dang, she should run down to the car and grab them. No. she took a deep breath and repeated in her head, ‘brave, bold, beautiful.’

Kiera walked her back down the main hall, waving a hand haphazardly as she labeled room after room—ballroom, dining room, receiving room, etc. She didn’t stop to let Macey admire any of them. She tugged her toward the grand staircase.

“You have to start at the very top,” Kiera declared, “and work your way down. That’s what Mum always said.” Her guileless eyes darkened momentarily, but she brightened again. “You’re going to flip out at the view! That’s what all the adults like.”

They kept winding up staircase after staircase and finally made it to the top.

“Eight levels to the castle, then?” Macey asked, a little out of breath as Kiera hurried her along a hallway.

“No, ten. Two below-stories are kitchen, laundry, a bunch of rooms that workers can stay in if they like, and a huge garage. There’s even a cold cellar that used to be a dungeon, but Mum doesn’t like me going in there.” She pulled a face. “I mean, she used to not like it … Here we are.” She pulled open a door, and they walked into a breathtaking room. “The solarium.” Kiera spread her hands wide and gestured around.

The room was light-filled with windows and glass patio doors. Even the ceiling was made of glass. Most of the windows and the patio doors were open wide to let in the glorious late-May weather. The room was spacious, with flowers, plants, even trees growing in it. Patio furniture was placed throughout the room and a large stone water feature stood at the center.

“Do you love it?” Kiera clapped her hands together.

“I do, Princess Kiera. I absolutely do.” Macey was certain this was the spot she’d seen in her dreams when she’d been a child, stuck in a dingy apartment and hiding from her mom’s latest boyfriend on the top shelf of her closet behind musty clothes.

She walked slowly around, breathing in the fresh air, the scents of flowers and soil, the beauty of nature inside and out. As she got closer to the windows and the exterior patios, she gasped. The view of mountains, lakes, the valley, the church, the little town, it had been awe-inspiring to drive through, but seeing it from this lofty perch was insane. Kiera was quiet and let her savor the view.

“Breathtaking,” Macey murmured, every detail a feast for the eyes.

“Right?” Kiera grinned. “And now, since you’re my sister, you can’t rat me out.”

“Rat you out?”

Before Macey could figure out what she was ratting Kiera out for, the child scrambled out onto the far edge of a wide balcony, flipped herself over the ledge and disappeared with a cry of, “Whee!”

“Kiera!” Macey shrieked. Fifteen minutes into this op, and she’d let the princess drop to her death? She rushed to the edge of the balcony, not wanting to see the little girl free-falling, but hopeful she could somehow rescue her.

Kiera had her arms and legs wrapped around a brass pole and was sliding down it. The pole ran along the exterior wall to a small grass ledge far below, one of the gardens Macey had seen earlier.

One detail Macey had seen in her research now made sense. A former girlfriend of Tristan's had said the princes called the princess 'wild child.'

The girl released the pole ten feet before it ended and did an impressive backflip. She landed easily on the grass, then leaned her head back and gestured for Macey to come down.

Macey shook her head, her eyes wide and her stomach doing backflips. 'Be safe?' Had the king known about this trick? This almost-teen was crazy, and thankfully talented.

"Come on," Kiera hollered up to her.

"Brave, bold, beautiful," Macey muttered. A child had done this. She could do it.

She climbed up onto the ledge, teetering on her heels and trying to figure out how to wrap herself around the pole in the too-tight skirt. If she didn't get a good grip with her arms and legs, she'd fall to her death. The child had been wearing a flowing summer dress.

"You'll love it," Kiera called.

Macey made the mistake of glancing down. She'd never been afraid of heights, but it wasn't just the eight stories—the earth fell away from the castle beyond that miniscule grass spot. If she slipped, they'd never find her body. She swayed on her heels. This was not a good idea.

Hands wrapped around her waist—large, manly, beautiful hands—and she was lifted back onto the patio and spun into a very solid, very well-built chest. She gasped at the exhilarating sensation of this man holding her close. It was as thrilling as standing on that patio ledge and almost dying. Safer yet more exciting.

She glanced up into her rescuer's face. Oh, my.

It was him. The crown prince. The man she was supposed to be engaged to.

He was even more handsome than the online photos. His eyes were the most glorious blue, bluer than the sky above or the mountain lakes below. She was lost in those eyes.

His generous mouth quirked in a smile. “We generally don’t encourage our guests to follow Kiera down one of her tubes of death.” His accent was cultured, smooth, and swoon-worthy. He was a prince all the way through.

Macey couldn’t resist smiling in return. “I was trying to be brave, bold, and beautiful.”

He chuckled at that. “I can see you are easily all three.”

Macey’s insides melted like the gooey warmth of brownies fresh out of the oven. Gage and Sutton had tried to encourage her to be brave, bold, and beautiful, but this gorgeous prince could ‘easily see’ she was all three. She’d been afraid she’d be awkward and he’d be stuffy. Amazingly, the opposite was true—she felt safe in his arms, comfortable and more attracted to and excited about a man than she’d ever been. He smelled like the most delicious combination of musk and bergamot with a hint of apples.

She decided to act exactly as a brave, bold, and beautiful woman would—a woman who’d just met the most delectable man in the world, a prince at that, and the prince she would be engaged to. Might as well greet him boldly, as if they truly were engaged.

Arching up on her heels, she slid her hands around his neck and pressed her lips to his.

Prince Tristan startled for a brief second, a very brief second, and then he wasted no time returning the kiss. He returned it with gusto. His lips produced a tingling sensation that seemed to encompass her entire body.

Her prince slid his arms around her back, pulled her flush against him, and took command of her entire world as he kissed her. He kissed her so thoroughly Macey had no clue which way was up, and she was pretty sure she was floating. She would’ve floated right over the balcony if his strength hadn’t anchored her to him.

Pretending an engagement to this man didn’t feel like a job at all. It felt like the most incredible sensation of her entire life. Was it possible to fall in love at first kiss?

Forgive me, Gage and Sutton … I’ve found my new home.

CHAPTER TWO

Prince Raymond August, the 'General Prince,' had been searching for his rambunctious little sister and their guest, the woman who'd arrived with Sutton Smith to help him keep Tristan safe, help him figure out who had killed his mother and who was targeting his twin brother currently.

Kiera was constantly scampering around the castle, climbing, sliding, barely surviving, thinking she was a 'parkour expert' like their brother Derek. The twelve-year-old was adorable and always doing something she shouldn't.

When he and Tristan had gotten back, only minutes late, from using a side by side Polaris Razor to take some supplies to and visit their brother Curtis in his beautiful mountain cabin—they'd only searched the new caves Curtis had found for a few hours to find the mysterious 'cure' that would ensure no woman marrying into their family suffered from the 'curse' again—his father had demanded Ray and his men find Kiera and Macey and bring them back so they could meet with Sutton before he had to leave. Ray had suggested a cell phone for his sister, multiple times, and had been told to 'just find her.'

So here he was, the esteemed general of the army, protector of the royal family and the entire kingdom, playing hide-and-seek with the 'wild child' who could be anywhere in the over hundred-thousand-square-foot castle. Ray had dispatched four men to help him search, but he'd taken a bet on the solarium, jogged straight here, and he'd been right. He'd walked in just in time to see Kiera gone, apparently sliding down one of the decorative brass

poles like she loved to do when nobody was watching, and his brother's fiancée climbing onto the ledge, in heels and a tight skirt, to follow the girl. What kind of woman did that?

When he saw her teeter, obviously realizing how high she was and how dangerous the feat, he'd wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her back against him.

He had been completely unprepared for how this American, Macey Clifton, would feel in his arms.

Right. She felt perfect and just right in his arms. He'd stupidly turned her into his chest, stared into her deep-brown eyes, and she'd made him laugh with her 'brave, bold, and beautiful' comment. She was all three, and then some. Appealing, fit, gorgeous, intriguing …

He could've gone on listing positive descriptors of her all day, but she had arched up and kissed him.

If Macey Clifton in his arms had felt right, Macey Clifton kissing him blew his busy, sane, scheduled, demanding world apart.

Ray had found the woman he'd been searching for before he'd even known he was looking.

He hauled her tighter to him and kissed her thoroughly. He was completely lost in this woman and this kiss, wondering if love at first sight was possible and certain kissing the rest of the afternoon away was the best idea he'd ever had. What did all of his heavy responsibilities matter? Macey was the only responsibility that should matter.

She pulled back first, gasping for air and smiling up at him. Her smile was perfect—sweet, alluring, a little shy. Ray needed to kiss her again. Needed her more than he needed oxygen.

"I thought it would be awkward to fake being engaged to a crown prince and a stranger, but …" She trailed off and her smile grew radiant, enticing, like sunshine.

Fake engaged.

Reality smacked him upside the head. It was a harder hit than even his close friend and trusted head of their police department Jensen could deliver, and one he desperately needed but didn't want.

Ray released her and stepped back so quick she teetered on her heels and leaned against the stone wall. He felt empty without her in his arms. He had to focus on reality and not his newfound craving for the dark-haired, dark-eyed sweetheart staring longingly at him.

What had he been thinking? What had he allowed himself to do? Temporary insanity? Could he claim that to assuage the guilt? Ray's top responsibility was protecting his country and family, most importantly his twin, the crown prince, flesh of his flesh, his other half.

He couldn't be kissing the woman Tristan was engaged to. No matter if the engagement wasn't real and T wasn't thrilled about the interruption to his dating life, this woman was supposed to be their answer. Not only reassuring the kingdom that there was no internal, hidden threat to T as the notes indicated, but that the kingdom could have happy news they hadn't had since his mum's death, and that the princes weren't afraid to take brides of their own. Which was somewhat true. None of them were 'afraid,' but none of them wanted to love and lose that love like their father and dozens of royals in the past had. The curse hadn't manifested itself in hundreds of years. Everybody had been asking 'why now' since his mum's death.

Ray knew it wasn't the curse—it was a murderer trying to tear his family and beloved kingdom apart.

He focused back on the beauty standing in front of him. Now that they weren't kissing, she looked less confident, more vulnerable, and every bit as appealing. Shelving those thoughts was tough. Macey had been touted by the highly esteemed Sutton Smith to be brilliant and trained in security and fighting. They were supposed to work together to find his mum's killer, keep Tristan safe, and find who was leaving the notes and threatening Tristan.

Ray had shelved his pride and tried not to be insulted his dad had hired outside help for the problems he was certain he and Jensen could fix … given more time and at least a clue or two. This perfect-looking, perfect-

kissing, perfect-smelling 'help' could distract him if he wasn't careful. He couldn't work with her if all he could think about was kissing her. Which shouldn't be an issue at all, as she was supposed to be kissing Tristan. Ray *had* to keep his hands and thoughts off of her.

"It's a pleasure …" Ray cleared his throat and tried again. The pleasure had been kissing her. "An honor to meet you, Miss Clifton," he corrected. Her dark eyes narrowed at his formality. "I'm Prince Raymond August, military leader of the kingdom of Augustine."

"Not Prince Tristan?" She shrank back against the balcony wall and touched her lips. Ray's stomach pitched at the reminder of those enticing, all-encompassing kisses.

"No. I'm Tristan's twin brother."

"Oh, my." She ran the tip of her forefinger along her lower lip. Ray was pretty certain it was an unconscious move, but it made him think she was remembering their kisses as well, and his entire body became far too hot.

"I am so terribly sorry," she began. Stepping forward, she put a hand on his arm. If Ray hadn't been wearing a T-shirt maybe it wouldn't have affected him so much. As it was … he had to step back and let her arm fall away. She looked injured by the move, but it couldn't be helped. He had to somehow re-screw his head on straight.

"I should be the one to apologize," he rushed to say. "T and I are identical. It's not the first time a beautiful woman has kissed me, thinking I was him." He winked and hoped he looked unaffected and as if he spent his free time kissing mesmerizing women like her.

He'd kissed women, even had a few serious girlfriends, but today was the first time a kiss had shot lightning clear through his body and made him certain this was the woman he needed in his arms day and night.

He mentally shook his head. That was purely physical, and he did not live his life subject to physical whims.

"Oh." She touched her mouth again. She *had* to stop doing that. "Oh, I see." Her dark eyes looked … rejected. Ray hated that. He wanted to show her she didn't 'see' at all, that her kiss had flipped his focused world upside

down, and that she wasn't just another 'beautiful woman.' She was beautiful, but she was unique and special and should be his.

"I knew Prince Tristan had an identical twin," she admitted. "But you pulling me to safety and then your arms around me …" She broke off, and it was a good thing she did. If she was feeling any of the feelings he was experiencing, and she admitted that to him … he'd be in more trouble than he already was.

"I'm to escort you back to my father, Sutton, and T. Sorry the little scamp pulled one of her tricks on you." He absolutely adored Kiera, cautioned her to be careful constantly, and prayed she wouldn't kill herself in one of her many 'death-defying' stunts. They hadn't emotionally survived his mum's loss, but each member of the family was dealing with it—or not dealing with it, as the case may be. Kiera dying would take the kingdom down. The only reassurance he had was his sister had been doing such tricks since she could walk, she was more adept at stunts than his twenty-six-year-old brother Derek, and Derek was a champion of the *American Ninja Warrior* show.

"I was horrified. I thought she'd dropped to her death." She peered over the railing.

"We've all feared that many times." He looked over the railing as well, but Kiera was gone, probably headed to the kitchens where their cook, Grace, would spoil her with treats until her nanny found her. Nobody could resist her.

Ray turned, gestured, and started walking. Thankfully, she fell in step so he didn't need to take her elbow, her hand, or wrap his arm around that trim waist of hers and haul her close, maybe take one more sample of her lips before he turned her over to Tristan.

He had never been jealous of his twin's future as king and all the attention Tristan received. Ray loved his own role and place in life … until now. Instead of being the one with Macey on his arm, sharing kisses for the fake engagement role, Ray would have the privilege of watching the façade, working with her, and using every ounce of self-control to keep his hands off of her.

“King Nolan cautioned her to be safe,” Macey said. “I thought it was simply an overprotective, fatherly comment, especially after losing his wife … Sorry.” She glanced sidelong at him and pushed her fingers against the bridge of her nose before pulling them away quickly. It was an odd move, as if she had glasses on.

They exited the solarium and walked down the hall.

“Please don’t apologize.” He tried to smile, but it was tight. “We’ll be working together; we’ll have to tackle the hard issues.” Fighting his attraction to his twin’s fiancée felt like a ‘hard issue’ currently. “I appreciate any insight you can provide with your brilliance and computer skills to help me find Mum’s murderer.”

Ray’s brain cleared slightly. This was familiar. He could focus on his job and finding the murderer who’d taken his beloved mother from them. If this beauty could truly help him, he would be grateful she was here, no matter the struggle to not touch her again.

You would do anything to protect this family, protect this kingdom. I know we’re safe with you around.

His mum had said those words to him days before she’d died, and he’d failed to protect her. He couldn’t fail his family again. His instant attraction to his brother’s fake fiancé needed to be reined in.

“From the information you sent to Sutton and me, there was no sign of poison, drugs, medications that could cause confusion or depression, or alcohol in her blood tests?”

“Nothing,” Ray confirmed as they started down the winding staircase, her heels tapping on each granite step. She was average height, but the heels brought her within four or five inches of his six-two—perfect for kissing. *Focus*, he demanded himself. “Jensen, our head of police, sent the samples to Eurofins Scientific for a more comprehensive scan than our labs could perform. Everything checked out.”

Her arm brushed his, and Ray felt warmth from the simple movement. He was going insane and making far too much of a connection simply because of one impulsive kiss. It was a lot more than that—best kiss of his life.

Stop, he commanded his wayward thoughts.

“Your mom never showed suicidal tendencies?” she asked.

The question pierced right to the core. No way was it suicide. No possible way. His bright light of a mother, charity and selflessness personified. But what if she’d been so busy doing for everyone else in her family, her castle, her country, that she’d forgotten to take care of herself and imploded? What if she’d hidden an emotional disorder because the queen was expected to be perfect in all ways?

“No,” he snarled, his spine prickling and his fists clenching. He tried to soften his response. “Even if she’d wanted to hurt herself, she couldn’t have broken a hole in the ice and drowned herself without a drill.”

Ray would be forever grateful to Jensen for responding to the call from a frantic ice fisherman. If he had seen his mum’s body…. He blew out a breath and tried to shake off the images his mind created on its own.

Macey said nothing, but it wasn’t a judgmental silence, simply a contemplative one. “No notes, cell phone conversations, no way to trace who might have lured her out there?”

“Nothing.” Ray had sent all of this to her and Sutton, but he understood the need to review and brainstorm.

“Anybody who had threatened her or had reason to hurt her?”

“The only person more well-loved than my mum in this kingdom is Kiera.”

“Outside enemies? Other countries?”

“We haven’t been at war since the end of World War II. Our army and my guards are the best-trained fighters in the world.” He said this with pride and certainty. Each of his men and women were hand-picked and hand-trained. “But we’re smart enough to realize we don’t have the manpower or weaponry to go against most militaries, so we work very hard at diplomacy and international relations.” His army trained, protected the royal family and their borders, and helped the police when needed.

“That is smart … Raymond?”

“Please, call me Ray.” He shouldn’t have requested that. Too personal. Most people called him General except his close friends and family.

They were only a few steps from the main-level entry. She glanced at him. The lure of those dark-brown eyes made him forget the seriousness of the subject.

And she tripped on something and flew forward.

Ray leaped off the last step, caught her, and hauled her in close. Their ragged breathing was the only sound for a few beats. He closed his eyes as her arms wrapped around his lower back. She settled in against his chest, and he rested his cheek against the silky softness of her hair. His breathing didn’t slow, and his pulse was racing like mad. Holding her was thrilling and comforting at the same time. He felt it almost as strongly as when he’d kissed her—this woman was meant to be in his arms.

She slowly lifted her head and met his gaze. His stomach pitched like he’d just jumped off the cliffs at the waterfall.

He was in so much trouble.

Off limits. Off limits. She belongs to T. Don’t kiss her again.

Why, then, was he bowing his head toward hers?

A door opened and closed down the hall. Ray jerked away from her, and she reached out for the banister to steady herself. He forced a smile he didn’t feel, listening as footsteps went the other direction. The castle was at about ten percent of their normal staff since Mum died and they had stopped entertaining and allowing tours or dignitaries in.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her voice was shaky. “I’m not used to these blasted high heels.”

His smile became genuine. “What do you usually wear?”

“Baggy T-shirts, tights, and running shoes.”

He’d only meant her choice for shoes, but the image of her in a comfortable T-shirt slipping off her shoulder and tights that showcased her beautiful

shape made his palms clammy. “You look fabulous, but I imagine you’d look fabulous in anything.”

He could’ve shot himself as soon as the words were out. He couldn’t be flirting with her. How was he going to stop these feelings before they became a problem?

“Thank you,” she said sweetly, her long eyelashes fluttering at him.

These feelings were already a problem. Should he say something, clear the air, apologize for kissing her and promise to be professional, before they walked into a meeting with her boss, his dad, and his brother—her fiancé?

“We’d better …” He tilted his head toward the hall, wimping out.

“Yeah.”

She hurried down the hall, and Ray prayed for strength as he caught up to her. He had to get himself under control. Control had never been a problem for him … until Macey Clifton almost fell off the balcony ledge. What man could resist those lips? He glanced at her lips and knew that man wasn’t him, though it needed to be.

Ray opened the door and escorted her into the formal sitting room they were meeting in. He watched far too closely as she curtsied when she met T. Of course T waved that off and took her hand in both of his. His charming brother thanked her for coming and ‘pretending to be in love with him.’ She laughed—everybody did—and it was all cordial and fine and his stomach was twisting with jealousy. T had hundreds of women lining up to date him. Why did the one woman meant for Ray have to be engaged to his twin?

T glanced his direction and lifted an eyebrow, questioning what was wrong. Ray shook his head slightly. This was the one time he would not share everything with his twin. T didn’t need any more stress. The threats to his life and the unsolved murder of their mum were heavy enough for the two of them. Add to that the fact that the only woman T had ever fallen deeply for had disappeared the night of Mum’s death. T had more than enough stress in his life.

Macey didn’t look at Ray at all, which was probably for the best. But why wouldn’t she look at him?

When T put his hand on her lower back to escort her to a chair, Ray's right hand clenched into a fist. He'd knocked his brother down plenty of times over the years, but he couldn't remember ever throwing a punch in a fit of jealous rage.

Please help me, he begged heaven above. He needed to focus on keeping his brother safe, not pummeling him for touching Macey.

He had absolutely no idea how he would stand by and watch them be engaged. If his brother kissed her … his stomach turned over. He'd level the brother he'd sworn allegiance to. Nobody could blame him for that—except himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Macey tried to keep her gaze from wandering to Raymond … Ray. She liked his name. She liked him. She should be horrified that she'd kissed him—the wrong brother—but she couldn't believe how incredible being in his arms and especially kissing him had felt. For her, Ray seemed to be the right brother. Tristan was friendly, warm, princely, but there was no arching connection between them, and he instantly treated her as a friend and revered work associate—definitely not a love interest.

She focused on the briefing meeting.

Somebody wanted them to believe in a centuries-old curse. Throughout the seventeen hundreds, any woman who married into the royal family had eventually drowned herself in the lake. Never in the wintertime, though. Macey agreed it was too convenient that this curse could easily be a murder every time. Until the current time period, it would be impossible to prove the women hadn't drowned themselves because of the 'suicide curse.' Ray had been adamant his mom hadn't killed herself and couldn't have gotten through the thick ice.

Ray was a bit thicker through the chest than Tristan. That chest had felt incredible against her own.

They desperately wanted to find the queen's murderer. Macey didn't blame them and would do everything in her power to help. She asked about the queen's cell phone. It hadn't been found yet, and they'd had divers search

the bottom of the lake. She needed to deep dive research on anyone and everyone associated with the queen or the castle.

Ray had a dimple in his right cheek. Tristan didn't. She remembered how that dimple deepened when he'd smiled at her. His smile was irresistible.

They had no evidence pointing at anyone inside or outside of Augustine as the murderer, but the men adamantly refused to believe it was suicide. She wanted to agree with them, but had to keep an open mind, especially with no suspects presenting themselves.

Ray clenched his hands into fists when he was thinking. Tristan steepled his fingers against his lips. Ray's hands had produced tingles and warmth when they'd touched her waist, her back, her arm. Tristan touching her had felt like any of her buddies from Sutton's.

Prince Tristan was being threatened as well. Two weeks ago, notes printed on cardstock had started being found daily in different places in Greenville —on a bench, under a restaurant's door, stuck to a light post, pinned on a message board, etc.

THE CROWN PRINCE WILL DIE
MURDERED IN HIS OWN BED
BY A FORCE WITHIN THE CASTLE WALLS
--THE ENFORCER

The threats were another reason they wanted her here, another layer of protection with a good excuse to stay close to the crown prince. No one believed one of their staff could threaten the beloved crown prince, but the queen's sudden, unexplained death made them wonder.

They also wanted to show their people that Tristan was not cowed by the threats, or the risk of his young bride dying by an archaic curse, and was moving forward with his life, giving the royal family and the entire kingdom some happy news. They would claim Macey and Tristan had met

at a party of Sutton's, mostly courted through FaceTime and texting, only spending one weekend together. Only the five people in this meeting knew that wasn't true. So the pressure was on to put up a good show and definitely not be making eyes at her fiancé's twin.

Ray seemed to care very deeply for his twin. Did he feel guilty for kissing her because of the fake fiancé thing? She put her fingers to her lips, and Ray's gaze darted to her. She sucked in a breath as the true blue of those eyes lit a fire deep inside her.

"Thank you for trusting us to help," Sutton said, closing his laptop, storing it in the bag, and standing. Everyone else stood as well. "I'll see what research we can do from our computer center and with my connections, but you have my most brilliant researcher right here." He smiled at Macey.

Macey smiled back, not letting herself look at Ray. Was it her fault she could still see him out of the corner of her eye? Had there ever been a man as intriguing as him? Maybe getting out of Sutton's basement was a brilliant idea. If only she hadn't kissed him. It might not have mattered. Simply being in the same room as him made her skin tingle. She was mesmerized by the wrong brother.

Sutton shook each of their hands and then gave her a brief hug while the men all seemed to stare at them. "Brave, bold, and beautiful," he whispered to her.

She wanted to tell him she'd tried that—she'd kissed Ray, and now she was losing her mind. But she simply hugged him back and said, "I'm all over it, boss."

"I know you are." He looked her over and lowered his voice even more. "Everyone else could be blinded in their own way. See everyone with a suspicious eye. Our very own Hercule Poirot."

Macey grimaced. No pressure. She wasn't naturally suspicious like Agatha Christie's character, but Sutton clearly saw what she was beginning to suspect. This kingdom was very tight-knit, trusted each other, and didn't want to suspect those they knew and loved.

"Got it," she whispered back.

He released her and raised a hand to the royals. “It was an honor to meet each of you.”

“I’ll walk you out,” King Nolan said.

“Brilliant.”

The king and Sutton walked out. Ray glanced at Macey but looked away quickly when his brother grinned at him. “Usually everyone’s enamored with the king, but I think Dad has a man crush on Sutton.”

“Can you blame him?” Macey asked. “Sutton’s like Daniel Craig as James Bond, only tougher, wealthier, more charming, and with the most beautiful and benevolent woman in the world as his wife.”

Both men chuckled.

“You’re right,” Ray said. “Sutton’s impressive.”

Macey was impressed with herself for being bold and speaking up. She was impressed with Ray for far too many reasons, and his kissing ability was high on the list.

“So, Macey,” Tristan said, looking her over, but not in a checking her out kind of way. It felt more brotherly, a look Gage would give her. “Tell us more about yourself.”

Macey snuck a glance at Ray. “Um … what do you want to know?” Bold, brave … she wasn’t.

Think of them as two of Sutton’s ops. You talk to those men every day.

“You seem to know all about us.”

Unfortunately, Macey only had two days to prepare for this mission. Time she would have preferred to spend setting up an advanced AI model to track the comings and goings and backgrounds of everyone who had been in the castle in the last six months. Instead those precious minutes had been spent learning which fork to use and how to wear makeup. She had snuck in some time doing digital digging on the plane ride over and learned the basics, and a few gems.

“You’re identical twins. Thirty years old. Tristan’s five minutes older. Tristan is focused on his duties as crown prince. Ray … mond,” she amended, hoping Tristan wouldn’t realize how comfortable she and his brother had gotten, “is the leader of the military, accomplished in hand-to-hand combat, archery, target shooting, and he’s decent with a sniper rifle.”

Ray gave her an appealing smirk that she wanted to kiss right off his lips.

“Steffan is twenty-eight and a doctor,” she continued. “He lives in Traverse, about thirty miles north of here and the largest city in Augustine. Steffan is focused on the hospital, the emergency room and intensive care are his favorite spots to work insane hours, he’s well-respected in the hospital and the community, and is currently dating an accomplished violinist for the Austrian Symphony.”

They exchanged a look. “That is impressive. I didn’t even know that,” Tristan said.

“Give yourself a break. You’re a little busy running a kingdom and trying not to get murdered,” Ray said.

Tristan grinned at his brother as if his own murder was a great joke. She liked the rapport these brothers had and hoped her kissing Ray wouldn’t come between them.

“Curtis is twenty-six. Previously a firefighter and EMT, he built a gorgeous cabin five miles east of here two years ago. He spends most of his time in the mountains, monitoring the most accessible routes from Austria to Augustine, sending any suspicious tourists packing, and hosting any lucky tourists at his home.” She paused, not sure if she should share the rest. Maybe they’d share with her. There had been some articles about a Swiss climbing instructor dying and Curtis being to blame. She hadn’t been able to look into it … yet.

Tristan and Ray exchanged a look, and she got that feeling again. There were some well-hidden secrets they didn’t care for her to find out about. She’d get to the bottom of the secrets, but maybe not on day one.

“Pretty much sums up Curt,” Ray said. “He loves the mountains and his cabin is incredible. Who’s next?”

“Derek and Malik are twins, but unlike you two, they are not identical.”

“Come on,” Tristan protested. “I’m a million times more handsome than this guy.”

Macey smiled but did not tell the crown prince exactly how handsome his twin was in her eyes. Her cheeks heated as she thought of the mistake them being identical had made her make. She didn’t like to think of that all-encompassing kiss as a mistake. She shouldn’t be thinking of that incredible kiss at all.

“Derek is a superstar in the *American Ninja Warrior* circuit,” she continued, “a darling with the American media, and hasn’t been home since your mom’s funeral.”

There was an awkward pause.

“Malik is the charmer. He has a condo in Traverse, but …” She bit at her lip. “I didn’t have time to figure out what he does, besides accumulating degrees he doesn’t use. I suspect he and the word ‘job’ aren’t on close speaking terms.” She tried to act like she had less information than she did. Would they share that their brother had beaten a man in a posh Prague hotel?

“Only if you consider dating beautiful women and traveling a job,” Tristan added.

“T …” Ray gave him a look of mock outrage. “Those are very important jobs.”

“Apparently.” Tristan chuckled. Macey wanted to laugh, but she found herself wondering how many beautiful women Ray was dating currently.

“And then there’s Kiera,” Macey said. “I couldn’t find much on her …” She really hadn’t. She would. If she wanted to.

“Good.” Ray looked as fierce as she’d seen him look. “We don’t need any internet trolls or creeps finding her.”

Tristan nodded his agreement.

“I can understand wanting to protect your sister,” she said. “After ten seconds with her in the solarium, I can see why you call her Wild Child.”

Tristan’s eyebrows rose. “How in the world did you know that?”

Casually, she glanced at Ray and was happy to see that he was impressed as well.

“I can understand you wanting to keep her out of the spotlight,” Macey said nonchalantly. “To be honest, I got this assignment on short notice, and I had to … there were more pressing subjects to study up on. Give me a day and I’ll know more about your siblings than you do. And everyone else in the castle, for that matter.”

They both looked a little stunned, but Macey’s thoughts were on Kiera. What would it have been like to grow up protected and loved as the rambunctious, happy Kiera was? Gage had tried. He’d fought for her and taught her to fight, but he hadn’t been by her side every minute. Maybe if she’d had six older brothers. She couldn’t fathom how different Kiera’s life was from what Macey’s growing-up years had been. Royalty was a huge part of the difference, but Macey wasn’t envious of that. She was envious of a loving family, and safety.

“You’re good at research.” Ray studied her intensely. Her cheeks warmed. If she was so ‘good at research,’ she probably should’ve figured out she was kissing the wrong twin before throwing her life into upheaval. Was Ray as affected by those kisses as she was? He’d said women had kissed him before thinking he was Tristan. How many women? Had their kisses been better than Macey’s? The heat was in her neck now. Of course they would’ve been. Macey’s only kissing experience was Steve and a handful of boys in high school and college, nothing compared to the exquisite prince grinning at her right now.

“We’ve heard from Sutton how impressive you are.” Tristan’s smile was kind. “Are you originally from San Diego?”

“Columbus, Ohio. Opposite side of the country.”

“Is your family still there?”

Her gut twisted at that question, and both brothers looked at her expectantly. Was this really necessary? “My brother is retired CIA and currently in Texas with his girlfriend. My mom’s still in Ohio.” She thought so, at least. Her latest texts and emails had gone unanswered. She hadn’t dredged up the energy yet to track her mom down and see if she’d stopped paying the cell phone and internet bills or if something worse had happened to her.

Please let them leave it at that. Please don’t ask more about her mom or where her dad was.

She had no idea who her dad was. She doubted her mom did, either.

“Did you focus on … computers in school?” Tristan asked.

Ray leaned back and crossed his ankle over his knee. He seemed content to let Tristan grill her. Not that this was some grilling. She could sense they were both genuinely interested, and they seemed like nice men. It was easy to assume that handsome princes would be pompous and self-centered. These two didn’t appear to be either. Macey would’ve been comfortable around them, similar to all of her buddies who rotated through Sutton’s command center, if she wasn’t drawn to Ray and trying to hide it.

She tried to push her glasses on tighter. Dang, they weren’t there.

The door opened, and the king leaned in. “Tristan. We’ve got a Zoom meeting with transportation.”

Tristan stood, and Macey and Ray followed suit.

The king waved to Macey and Ray. “You two can get Macey set up in Ray’s office. It’s next door to mine, and Philippe is monitoring the castle.”

“The lieutenant general?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ray told her.

“No prison guards or police?”

“Ray’s military took over the protection of the castle and the royal family after Mum’s death.” Tristan was as serious as he’d been. “He doesn’t sleep,

but we're safe." He pushed at his brother's shoulder and finally smiled. "The wheels of Augustine don't rotate without Ray's permission."

Macey had no response for that. They were serious about keeping Tristan safe. The lieutenant general on guard duty? Ray's military and Ray's permission … what if she had blinders on because of how attractive this man was to her? She glanced at him. No way could Ray hurt his brother or his mother. He was solid and good to the core.

"Don't tease your brother," the king said mildly.

Tristan only smiled.

They all walked to the door and followed the king down the hall back toward the stairs. Tristan explained as they climbed to the third floor, "The two lower levels are kitchens, utility, laundry, garage, and rooms for any of the workers who need or want to stay. The two main levels are gathering areas, dining, ballroom, entertaining, etc. Each room is two stories high, so they take up the two levels. Third level is offices. Fourth level is suites for guests. Fifth and sixth levels are also two stories high and are suites for the family. Seventh and eighth levels are superfluous rooms—an art studio, a ballet and yoga studio, a spa, gym, solarium and such."

They stopped outside a door, and Macey couldn't resist glancing at Ray. Solarium. That kiss. She swallowed and managed, "Superfluous?"

"Yeah. The only practical room is the gym." Ray grinned at his brother.

"A spa sounds very practical to me." She was teasing. She'd never been to a spa in her life. "What exactly does a spa entail?"

Tristan smirked. "Nothing too crazy. A steam room, cold plunge, a hot bath with massage jets, heated Olympic pool, massage chairs, and tile beds."

"Nothing too crazy?" She quirked an eyebrow at Ray.

"Forgive him. He's a spoiled crown prince," Ray teased.

Tristan jabbed his elbow into his brother's gut. Ray barely flinched.

"Boys," the king warned, but he was smiling too. He opened the door and lifted a hand to Macey. "Wonderful to have you here, Miss Clifton."

“If I’m going to call you Nolan, call me Macey.” As soon as the words were out, her face flamed red. Bold and brave for sure, but the right words for a king?

All three men grinned broadly at that. “You’re going to do just fine here, Macey,” the king said, then walked into the room, a large office with huge windows showcasing the valley below.

“Yes, you will.” Tristan grinned, took her hand, lifted it to his lips, and kissed the back of it.

She snuck a glance at Ray. She shouldn’t have. His jaw looked like it’d been carved from granite, his blue eyes colder than she’d ever seen them.

“I’ll see you at dinner tonight,” Tristan continued. “We can start pretending to be in love, practice around Kiera so we’re ready for the press release in the morning.” His smile was gentle and understanding. “I don’t expect you to act when other people aren’t around, and you don’t need to worry about me taking any liberties. I would feel weird, since we are paying you to be here.” His smile became more genuine and teasing as he glanced at his brother. “Unfortunately, you’ll have to spend a lot of time with this guy, since he won’t relinquish the investigation and protection detail to anyone.”

“Sounds great.” Macey didn’t mind more time with Ray. If she could keep herself from admitting how much she liked him. Her stomach rolled at the thought of a press conference in the morning. She tried to push her glasses tighter onto her face and realized, once again, they weren’t there. Why had she let Sutton make off with them?

She’d imagined the research and protection detail would be much easier than pretending to love the crown prince. She thought she’d be awkward and uncomfortable with Tristan and all the royals. Thankfully, they were great and made her feel comfortable. The problem was she didn’t want to hold hands, hug, and especially kiss Tristan. She wanted his brother. These two men looked like carbon copies, but she was insanely attracted to one and the other felt like a friend.

What if the press could tell she and Tristan had no chemistry or romantic interest in each other? Him holding her hand and kissing it stirred nothing in her. Absolutely nothing.

Now that she'd kissed Ray, she was ruined for kissing anyone else. She let her gaze flick to him. His fists were clenched, the muscles in his arms flexed.

Tristan followed her gaze and gave his brother a questioning glance. "Ray will take good care of you."

Macey pulled in a quick breath. Did Tristan realize she was interested in his twin? She had to stop staring at Ray. Once again, she stressed that she wasn't the right person for this job. She had no clue how to act correctly in any of these situations, and she had nothing or no one to hide behind.

"Tristan?" the king called. "They're on."

"See you tonight." Tristan stepped into the office and closed the door behind him.

"Thank you," she managed.

Macey felt Ray's presence overwhelm her. Had he moved closer? Without the buffer of Tristan, she could smell him, feel him. She wanted to taste him again. Oh, my, she was in trouble.

She glanced up at him, and his blue gaze conveyed he was struggling as much as she was. Could that kiss have affected him? It couldn't possibly have affected him as deeply as it had her. She was a simple girl who hardly dated, and he was an impressive, handsome general and prince. Could he be interested in her, despite their differences? How could she go about asking such questions?

He took a step closer, resting his hand on the doorframe above her head. Macey's pulse quickened and liquid fire filled her veins. His blue eyes consumed her. "Macey, I …"

Quick steps approached, and Ray stepped back and let his arm drop.

Lieutenant General Cordon strode up. "Forgive me, General. I got caught on a call from Captain Sullivan."

"Nothing to forgive. I appreciate all you're doing, and I know you're stretched thin."

“Thank you, sir.” Cordon inclined his head.

“Anything to report?” Although Ray was at least twenty years younger than Cordon, he was every inch the general—confident, accomplished, and in charge. He reminded her of Sutton. A man who was a natural-born leader and a highly trained weapon, but who also cared deeply for others. Could Ray love Macey deeply like Sutton did Liz?

Oh, my. She could not go there. Sutton and Liz had loved each other for thirty years and they were the perfect match for each other.

“Nothing unusual. A few tourists who weren’t happy with the thorough searches of their vehicle and luggage.” He shrugged and looked at Macey. “Most European countries have very lax border patrol, only random checks. We’ve always been vigilant, but since the Queen’s death, the terms we hear most are ‘over the top’ and ‘extreme’.”

“I can imagine.” She looked at Ray. A muscle was working in his jaw. She couldn’t imagine how hard it would be to lose a beloved parent and then have the job of trying to find their murderer and keep everyone safe. She didn’t have much of any kind of parent, so she’d never understand. “Do you think it was a tourist?”

“Not necessarily.” Ray shook his head and clenched his fists. “We’re just turning every stone.”

“Okay.” Macey didn’t want to say it, but in her opinion there were three options—whoever killed the queen was brilliant and had hidden their tracks so well they may never find him or her; Ray and his people weren’t skilled in crime solving and mistakes had been made that would muddy the investigation; or it truly had been suicide.

She didn’t mention any of this to Ray, though she’d have to eventually.

“Excuse us.” Ray nodded to Cordon, put his hand on Macey’s lower back, and directed her to the next door. When Tristan had put his hand on her lower back, Macey had felt a hand. When Ray replicated the exact move, she felt warmth, tingles, anticipation …

She was a mess.

Ray removed his hand to open the door, and she felt an immediate let down. He gestured for her to walk inside. She did, and she fell in love with this space.

The wall of windows overlooked the lush valley. They were high enough that the lakes she'd spotted driving in and the picturesque village looked smaller. Everything was green and gorgeous. The mountains surrounding them arched so high the tops were rocky and bluish-gray, even had some spots of snow on this May day.

The desk was a deep brown, almost black wood and took up a third of the space. The flooring was alternating light and brown grains of wood. She loved the contrast. The wall behind her was covered with screens showing camera angles of the castle's hallways, exterior, and rotating through different rooms.

It was the weapons that secured her attention.

"You have a Spanish Toledo Fencing Epee and Foil Sword pair," she whispered, rushing to the wall to inspect them. They were beautiful. "What year?"

"Nobody knows, but they've always been in the castle and the castle was completed in 1880."

"How was this castle built in 1880 and you have such massive windows?" Spending most of her days in a basement command center, she adored these windows and light-filled spaces.

He smiled. "That was my mum's doing. Almost twenty years ago now. Nobody was thrilled with the construction project, and she got some grief about ruining the original structure, but she said, 'Tell the preservation junkies this is my home and I need light! I don't tell them what to do in their home'." His smile grew. "They knocked out a lot of walls to put in all these windows."

She nodded. She savored his lyrical accent as he spoke. His affection for his mom was evident in his voice as well. It made her like him more and realize how lacking her family life and past were. She turned her attention back to the weapons display. Her gaze left the stamped designs on the handles of

the fencing swords and rose to the absolutely gorgeous relic above. A French rifle she'd only seen online.. You have a Fusil model 1866?"

"You know your weapons."

"Oh, you have no idea. The Fusil, otherwise known as the Chassepot, is a bolt-action military breechloading rifle that became famous during the Franco-Prussian war." She blushed. She sounded like an encyclopedia. "I love weapons. It's kind of an obsession."

His gaze was even more appreciative than it had been moments ago, and it had been pretty sweet moments ago. This gaze made her weak in the knees and in even more danger of falling for this man.

"That's impressive," he said softly, staring at her as if she were the priceless relic.

Macey had never had any man look at her like that, but especially not a devastatingly handsome man, a prince, who felt like he could be her soul's other half. She wanted to ease in and kiss him again.

They stood facing each other, gazes locked, for a long time. Macey hardly dared blink, not wanting to break this spell.

Then his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Spell broken.

It was for the best. They each had their duties here, and falling for each other wasn't anywhere on the list.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ray spent the afternoon with Macey. They went over every bit of information he had compiled about his mum's murder and the notes threatening T. Macey asked questions about the curse as it related to the case.

He didn't share that he and his brothers, especially Curtis, had been searching the mountains near their family cabin for what the storybooks claimed was the cure to the curse. None of them believed in it, but just in case … Finding the fabled cure might save one of their future wives, and Curtis spent most days riding a dirt bike or hiking anyway. The caves they'd met him at this afternoon had turned out to be another dead end. The past six months had felt like everything in his life was a dead end … until Macey.

No. She was a dead end for him too.

He focused as he and Macey delved into files on every member of the palace staff, his mum's friends and extended family, anybody who might have had the access or opportunity to take her—or lure her—down to the icy lake in the middle of a freezing January night. She spent some time creating some sort of computer program that would analyze data from all angles and feed her reports based on artificial intelligence. By morning, she was confident she'd know things about everybody that she 'shouldn't know.'

The subject matter was serious and of the utmost importance to him, but he'd gone over it so many times in the past six months—with Jensen, with his dad, with T, with Curtis, with Cordon, with outside investigators he'd hired—that had to be why he was completely distracted by Macey's clean scent, by any little brush of her hand or her arm against his, by her deep-brown eyes framed with a curtain of wispy lashes, her appetizingly pink lips, the way her laughter lit up the already sunlit room.

It was her laughter that really tugged at him. He and his brothers liked to tease and laugh, and Kiera made everything brighter, but his mum had been the one who was always laughing. He missed his mum's laughter, and he absolutely loved Macey's sweet, unassuming laugh generated by any remotely funny thing he said.

Her stomach growled, and he said, "Is there a bear behind me?"

She burst out a laugh, and he felt his chest expand. He'd heard how handsome, tough, and brave he was from many women, but to make Macey laugh made him feel like he was ten feet tall.

"In all the travel and the excitement, I haven't eaten since Sutton's jet this morning." She smiled beautifully, as if nothing was amiss.

Ray startled. He and T had eaten trail mix and granola bars for a quick lunch as they'd driven the side by side down the mountain paths back to the castle around one this afternoon. He and Macey had downed water and juice from his mini-fridge as they had talked and went over information, but he didn't realize she hadn't had lunch. He should've asked. What a fail on his part. His mum had taught him better.

"Macey, please forgive me," he said. "You're my guest; I have to take better care of you than that. Please let me know if you need anything and don't go hungry needlessly. We can go to the family's living area and search through the fridge and cupboards or down to the kitchens. Our head cook, Grace, would love a chance to meet you and feed you."

"I'll be just fine until dinner." She waved a hand and smiled. "This afternoon has been so …" She met his gaze and breathed out, "Exhilarating. The last thing on my mind was food."

Ray's heart raced. They both knew searching through information and combing through files was not 'exhilarating.' Her cheeks turned pink.

They were seated side by side, and Ray found himself leaning closer. A door opening and closing had interrupted them from kissing on the staircase. Cordon had interrupted them from kissing in the hallway. His phone had interrupted them from kissing earlier. Would something interrupt them now? Besides his own conscience?

She and T weren't technically engaged, but that hardly mattered. She was supposed to be with his brother, helping protect his brother. If Ray acted the way he wanted to around her, this fake engagement would be a waste or turn into a scandal almost as bad as his mum's death. He could see the headlines now: *The General Prince Steals His Twin's Bride*. Their family and country needed good publicity, not bad.

His door burst open, and they both startled. She had the presence of mind to focus on her laptop. Ray just stared dumbly as T rushed in. "Hey, you two. How was the afternoon? I wish I would've been with you rather than meetings about transportation, road construction, tariffs, and employee benefit disputes."

"You missed the excitement over here—murder, threats, and curses." Ray smiled at Macey, and she returned it. The subject matter hadn't been exciting, despite the labels, because he'd gone over it so many times. Spending time with Macey, though—thrilling excitement.

"See?" T threw his hands in the air. "You get all the fun. Why wasn't I born second?"

"Sorry, bro." Ray knew T was just teasing. They each fit their roles well. T was a brilliant negotiator, charming, and had a head for business. Ray had always loved to fight, shoot guns, strategize, and was overly protective.

"There are some benefits to being me. I have the honor of being engaged to the exquisitely gorgeous foreigner." He winked at Macey and Ray thought he was laying the accent and compliments on a little thick.

"Thank you." Macey smiled sweetly at him.

Ray's gut turned over. His brother had hundreds of women pursuing him—thousands—and hadn't dated anyone seriously since Jennifer had disappeared and Mum had died. Maybe he'd been waiting for a genuine and brilliant sweetheart like Macey.

T couldn't have Macey.

In lieu of knocking his twin down with one well-executed punch, Ray clenched his fist and watched Macey's reaction. Instead of blushing like she did when he complimented her, she simply smiled at T. Did Ray dare hope he was special to her? Why hadn't he gotten brave enough to address the kiss sometime in their hours together? Or better yet, gone for another round?

"Let's go get fancied up for dinner, Macey. After dinner Ray and I will take you on the VIP tour of the castle."

"I would love that." She gave them each her radiant smile. T received it first. Did that matter?

At least he wasn't having to give her over to T completely, as they would both be by his brother's side or working together to find solutions like they'd done this afternoon. How was he going to handle it when she had to pretend to be in love and kiss his brother? What if they really fell in love?

T was charming, fun, smart, and the crown prince—women went insane over him. His twin had said he wouldn't take any liberties with Macey with the fake engagement, but he was probably interested in her. Who wouldn't be? She was gorgeous, brilliant, easy to talk to, loved weapons, Sutton had said she could fight and shoot, and she was lit up with a sweet innocence and an obvious faith in God. She was perfect … for him. Not for T. Was he being selfish? He always wanted what was best for his brother. Not this time.

They all walked out of his office and toward the east staircase. T explained there were staircases on each end of the castle as well as the famous grand staircase. There were also elevators on each end, but they were slow and they only bothered with them if they had a load to carry. They climbed to the fifth level and walked toward their suites, T telling her some more

history of the palace and how each of the family's suites had a similar two-story design and each suite was almost two-thousand square feet.

"That's bigger than some people's homes," Macey exclaimed.

Ray's gut churned as he realized where Macey would be sleeping. Each of the family's spacious suites was made up of an open two-story sitting room and main bedroom, a large bathroom, a walk-in closet, a couple adjoining rooms, and an open loft above the main bedroom. The smaller adjoining rooms were originally used for a servant, nanny, a very young child's nursery, or even a mistress or two, depending on the current monarch's moral compass.

Ray and T had discussed the situation before Macey got here and determined that they'd put a queen-sized bed in one of T's adjoining rooms and move the clothes he used often to the other room. He'd give Macey his main bedroom with the king-sized bed and massive closet. They'd have to share a bathroom, but neither of the brothers thought that would be an issue if they were supposed to be engaged.

The arrangement could encourage gossip within the castle and without about one of the straight-laced Augustine princes sharing living quarters with his fiancée. T hadn't liked that, but at this point any gossip that got their people talking about something besides T's death threats, their mum's death, and the possible resurrection of the curse was a win.

The other advantage they'd talked about, before Ray had met Macey, was if somebody somehow got past his security guards, cameras, and sensors, and came to kill T in his sleep, they'd encounter Macey instead. Sutton had bragged about how highly trained she was, so defending herself shouldn't be an issue. They honestly didn't expect someone to attempt something in the night, as the castle was highly guarded and all the staff screened and trusted. Though they often left doors and windows open in the summertime, who could scale the castle walls beside Kiera? Somebody had gotten their mum up in the night and to the icy lake, so it wasn't outside the realm of possibility, but Ray had upgraded his patrols and his security systems since that night.

They reached T's suite door. He reached for the handle, and Ray rushed out, "I'm not okay with Macey sleeping in your bed."

"Excuse me?" Macey and T said at the same time. They were both eyeing him, Macey in wide-eyed confusion and T in narrow-eyed suspicion.

"Macey." Ray clenched and unclenched his fist. "We planned to have you sleep in T's bed and him sleep in one of the adjoining rooms in case an assassin came in the night."

Her eyes got even bigger.

"I know you're highly-trained, but I'm not willing to risk your life if someone slits your throat while you sleep."

She touched her throat, and then she pushed her fingers against her nose before quickly removing them. Ray had never seen such innocent beauty. He would protect her. Even if she didn't need protecting.

"I'll sleep in T's bed." He used his firm 'general' voice that nobody argued with, not even his father or twin. "T will sleep in the spare room. We'll move you to my suite. It's just next door."

His brother was eyeing him, and Ray didn't know that he'd be able to escape the barrage of questions that would be coming after they got Macey settled. T loved to tease him that he was in control of everything. He'd just play this off as another time he needed to know everyone was safe. That was what he did. Make sure everyone was safe, even if he hardly slept, even if he'd failed his own mother.

"I'll be fine," Macey said. "You had your reasons for wanting me in Tristan's … bed." She studied the floral arrangement in the hall. Ray did not want her uncomfortable. Ever again.

"We had our reasons, but I know T will agree this is smarter. Plus, his reputation as a morally-upright Christian is important to him, and he didn't like the idea of one of the maids spreading rumors about you sharing a suite with him." He gave his brother a challenging look.

"Hey." T put up his hands. "I trust you, Ray. Whatever you think is best."

Ray's stance and heart softened. His brother. They'd been inseparable since birth and, though they butted heads and fought sometimes, they were fiercely loyal to each other and their family. T was a natural leader and would be a fabulous king someday, but he was always willing to listen to and trust Ray and his ideas, especially regarding military, protection, or police matters.

"Thanks, T."

His brother nodded, but there was something in his blue eyes. Ray was still in for a grilling.

"Let's get Macey set up in my room and move some of my clothes and things to your room before dinner."

"Sounds good."

Macey was watching Ray closely, but she got distracted when they walked into T's open bedroom and living quarters. Ray and T's rooms both faced the mountainside with the river, falls, and a view of the lake their mum had died in. It was beautiful, but sometimes a hard reminder of what they'd lost.

They got Macey's suitcases and the fancy, formal dresses, wraps, jewelry, and shoes that Ariana, the family's royal stylist, had brought in, moved into Ray's closet. She pitched in to help move his clothes, which for some reason felt really intimate to Ray. The thought of her sleeping in his bed … he rubbed at his suddenly burning neck.

"We're going to be late for dinner," T said, glancing at his Panerai watch. "Sorry to not give you much time to primp, Macey."

"Oh, no, you're fine." She shrugged. She looked absolutely irresistible. "I'm not much of a primper."

Could she get more perfect? He loved how unassuming and naturally beautiful she was.

"Of course you aren't," T said smoothly, his gaze far too appreciative. "Naturally beautiful."

Ray's elbow nailed his brother's gut of its own volition.

T gasped out and rocked forward slightly, giving Ray a look that said they were duking it out very soon or Ray was explaining. He'd prefer the fight. Elbowing T had been a natural reaction to his brother complimenting Macey. Ray wanted to be saying those words.

Macey's eyes widened, and she pushed at her nose. The odd move she did often reminded Ray of someone pushing their glasses up on their nose. Did she normally wear glasses?

"Is five minutes enough time?" Ray asked, pushing his brother out of his suite.

"Sure, but … wait."

Ray and T both stopped and turned. T rubbing at his gut.

"Do I need to wear one of the formal dresses?"

"Not tonight. Just family and maybe Philippe, if his wife isn't begging him to come home," Ray told her. "What you have on would be great, or if you have a summery dress or shorts that are more comfortable than the tight skirt, you're welcome to change."

"Okay, thanks." She looked unsure. Ray wanted to stay and help her choose her outfit for tonight. That was ludicrous. He'd never paid much attention to women's clothing, besides noticing that a woman looked attractive in a certain outfit.

T and Ray walked out of Ray's suite, shutting the door behind them. They had barely entered T's suite when he whirled and shoved Ray.

Ray stood his ground. Barely.

"What was that?"

Ray clenched his fist and tried to think of a good explanation. Nothing came. "Macey is already fake engaged to you," he said slowly, scrambling. "You don't need to give her empty compliments and try to charm her unless cameras are rolling."

"Empty compliments?" T's eyes narrowed. "Macey *is* naturally beautiful, and from what I've seen, unassuming and sweet. You don't agree?"

“I do agree.” Ray had never really tried to mask his feelings from his twin, but he was an expert at masking them in military and diplomatic situations. “I just felt you were putting it on a little thick.” It was a lame excuse, and they both knew it.

Rushing ahead of his brother, he hurried to use the bathroom and freshen up a little. He had to control himself better. If T figured out how gone he was over Macey, his brother would scheme a way to let Ray date her. Sadly, Macey wasn’t here to date either one of them. They needed to stay the course, reassure their people, keep T safe, and find their mum’s murderer.

Then Macey would go back to America.

Ray’s gut churned. The only thing worse than fighting his feelings for her and being jealous of his brother being able to fake an engagement to her was thinking about her leaving.

CHAPTER FIVE

Macey was living in some kind of fairy tale in this picturesque castle with a handsome prince seemingly interested in her while having to fake an engagement to his identical twin. Okay, the fairy tale was a bit flawed as she was falling for the wrong prince. Maybe she had walked into a forbidden medieval romance, except with all the modern conveniences and a dream prince who smelled like a crisp, fresh slice of heaven. Nobody ever mentioned it in a medieval romance, but she assumed the men didn't smell like musk and bergamot with a hint of apples and fall air.

There was a rap on the bedroom door. Macey pressed a hand to the cinched waistline of her floral sun dress. It had cap sleeves and was knee length. She'd traded out the heels she'd been sick of wearing hours ago for some strappy sandals. Hopefully she looked all right.

Hurrying across the spacious suite, she flung the door open and her heart slammed against her rib cage. Identical twins. Insanely handsome princes. Wearing tailored suits—black for Tristan with a yellow tie, gray on Ray with a teal blue tie. Both waiting to escort her, reclusive Macey Clifton, to dinner. She knew instantly Ray was on her right.

"You look incredible," she gushed out before reason could stop her, trying to speak to both of them.

Ray's alluring smile deepened his dimple, crinkled the smooth skin around his mouth and eyes, and made his blue gaze sparkle.

“You stole my line,” Tristan said, giving her a smoldering look and a pump of his eyebrows.

She laughed to hide her embarrassment. A smoldering look from Tristan felt off to her. “I thought you said I didn’t need a formal dress.”

“You don’t. You’re absolutely gorgeous.” He took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles.

“Thank you.” Macey smiled, and shouldn’t have looked at Ray. His blue eyes said he agreed with his brother’s compliment, but his clenched fists said he was annoyed by it.

Tristan offered his elbow. She had to play her role tonight. It was scary. What if she said something out of line, used the wrong fork, or spent all of dinner staring at the fiancé’s twin?

They fell into step down the wide hallway. Her hand was threaded through T’s elbow, cupping his nicely formed bicep muscle, but it did absolutely nothing for her. Ray was close by on her other side. Every time his arm so much as brushed hers, tingles erupted. Which was ridiculous, as he had a suit coat on.

“Did you and Ray solve any mysteries this afternoon?” T asked as they walked to the grand staircase and down the four flights of stairs.

“Sadly no, but he gave me a lengthy list of names to investigate and I’ve got my custom AI models digging into backgrounds and dirt on everybody. Tomorrow Ray said you’ll be in meetings all day and we’ll be able to sort through who was at the castle that night or had access to it. My modeling never fails to bring up leads—some big, some small—but in-person interpretation is always needed, so Ray’s take on everything will be invaluable.”

“You two get all the fun.” He raised his voice slightly. “While I sit through meetings with the stuffy, boring, dry, loves-to-hear-himself-talk prime minister …”

They were halfway down the grand staircase that descended from the third to first floor, and Macey realized why T had broken off. Four people were standing in the entryway—the king, Kiera, a handsome younger man

wearing a black military uniform, and a distinguished man probably in his late fifties in a deep blue suit. She'd seen the older man in pictures with the royal family. The prime minister? Definitely. But what did she know about him? Curse her lack of prep time!

"You were saying, Prince Tristan?" The older of the two looked up at the three of them with a glint of humor in his dark eyes.

"Henry!" Tristan's voice pitched up as if this man was the person he'd been looking forward to seeing all day. "I saw you there, my friend." He winked as if it was all in good fun.

"Prime Minister Shule," King Nolan corrected, giving Tristan a grimace, but it looked put-on. This was a recurring inside joke.

"Of course you did." The prime minister chuckled.

Macey's neck muscles tightened. A family dinner and the prime minister and some military dude were here? She might need to go visit their spa tonight. This was stressful.

"Hi, Macey!" Kiera darted up the stairs faster than should've been humanly possible. She gave Macey a quick hug. "You look so pretty!"

"Thank you. So do you."

The child looked like the picture of a sweet, beautiful princess—until she threw herself off a life-ending ledge.

Kiera beamed at her brothers. "Watch," she commanded them. Then she leaped at the side of the grand staircase, planted both feet into the solid wood railing, did a flip in the air, and landed easily next to her father.

"Impressive," Tristan said.

"Don't encourage her." King Nolan beamed at his daughter and patted her on the head, negating his words. You'd think the king would caution the child a little more after losing his wife tragically, but maybe the loss had taught him to relax and enjoy his children more.

Ray and Tristan exchanged a glance. Then Tristan escorted her down the rest of the stairs. "Macey Clifton, my fiancée."

It sounded like he was proud, which helped her nerves somewhat. Maybe she was playing the role all right. Maybe she wouldn't embarrass Sutton, Tristan, and the entire royal family on this job. If she could keep herself from gawking at Ray in that suit.

"Allow me to introduce Prime Minister Henry Shule," Tristan said.

"It's a pleasure, Miss Clifton." The prime minister took her hand and bowed over it, but then his piercing almost-black eyes met hers and he seemed to be searching her soul.

"Nice to meet you," she murmured. She missed her glasses horribly right now. She could hide behind those things and nobody could look into her eyes and read all her fears and desires. Fears of messing up. Desires for Prince Raymond.

"And my closest friend, Major Chad Presley. Chad is in charge of our military training center," Tristan added.

"Hi," she managed. She knew Chad by name. What would Poirot think of these two? Could the prime minister be shady and wanting to undermine the royal family? Could Major Presley want a promotion? Their names were on the list and being researched. She'd rather rely on that information than her lack of in-person detective skills.

"Pleased to meet you, Macey." Chad had a suave look and accent. He held onto her hand and gave her a welcoming smile, a mischievous look in his green eyes. "Please forgive the prime minister and myself for imposing on your first evening in Augustine, but you must understand. T bragged incessantly about your beauty, wit, and brains on our Zoom calls today." He winked at her. "So we had to come meet the woman who could take this charming welp off the market."

"Welp?" Tristan exclaimed, dodging at Chad and grabbing him in a headlock.

Chad released Macey's hand to give Tristan an uppercut to the gut.

"Boys," the king exclaimed. "Can you please wait until after dinner to wrestle like monkeys?"

“Ah, Pops, what would be the fun in that?” Tristan asked. “A good wrestle works up the appetite after sitting on my rear, listening to you two chatter all day.” He grinned at the prime minister.

“We appreciate your ability to keep things light.” The prime minister lifted his eyebrows in a teasing way.

Macey relaxed a little. They all seemed to have a good rapport. Maybe the prime minister was simply searching her gaze to make sure she wasn’t an interloper. She kind of was, but the king and crown prince had asked her to be.

King Nolan offered Macey his arm. “If they’re going to act like hooligans, I’ll escort my future daughter-in-law to dinner.”

Macey stepped up next to the king, catching Ray’s gaze on her. A warm flush prickled her skin. The king directed her down the hall. Kiera bounced at his side and the prime minister walked on Macey’s other side. Macey felt like this was her first test and hoped she wouldn’t mess it all up. She’d gotten extremely comfortable with Ray and Tristan today. Especially Ray. The king and Kiera seemed to like and accept her. She wasn’t sure where the prime minister stood. All of her intelligence showed that the country of Augustine’s monarchs and elected rulers worked well together. The fact that the prime minister felt welcome to show up for a family dinner must mean it was a comfortable relationship.

If only she felt comfortable.

Ray, Tristan, and Chad were a few steps behind them, talking in hushed tones. Macey’s ears burned, and she feared they were talking about her.

A couple of guards walked past, saluting. The king nodded to them and she lifted a hand, not sure what the proper protocol was.

The king led her into a dining room with views of the mountains. It was fancier than the other rooms she’d been in, with murals on the walls trimmed with gold leafing and gold inlaid in the two-story high ceiling trimmed with thick and elaborate wood crown moldings. The table was an oval-shaped monstrosity made of warm reddish-brown wood and had seats for twenty-four.

“This is the smaller dining room,” the king explained. “For large parties, the room next door has seating for a hundred and twenty-two.”

“Smaller?” she very eloquently replied, swallowing down a wise crack about these poor, impoverished royals. She appreciated that none of these men and Kiera were snotty or acted like privileged royals, but her upbringing was so removed from this it was hard not to compare and feel she was coming up far short.

“You’re doing great,” the king whispered to her as he pulled out a chair and helped her into it.

“Thanks.” Macey referred to the reassurance and the gentlemanly gesture. It was impossible not to like the king, Tristan, Kiera, and especially Ray. She caught his gaze on her and offered a smile. He nodded, then focused back on Chad.

They all sat at the end of the table closest to the windows. She wanted to get outside and explore the gardens, the town, the valley, and the mountains, but with windows like this, it felt like she was part of the scenery.

Tristan sat on her right with the prime minister on her left between her and the king, who was at the end of the table. Kiera sat to her father’s left, with Ray across from Macey and Chad next to Ray. The table had covered warming platters with heat underneath them, as well as salad, bread, salad dressings, and a platter of fruit.

“We like to eat family style,” the king explained to Macey. “That way nobody has to serve us, and if you know anything about boys, they can consume a lot of food. It’s usually in everyone’s best interests to have them serve themselves.”

“I like that,” Macey said. She did. She didn’t want to be some royal who people waited on hand and foot.

“Raymond,” the king requested. “Would you offer the prayer?”

“Of course.”

Everyone bowed their heads and Macey folded her arms and listened to Ray express gratitude for their family, friends, Macey’s safe arrival, and the food

and then ask a blessing on the food, their people, and their family. She liked hearing him pray and liked that he didn't posture but genuinely beseeched his Heavenly Father and thanked him.

As they said amen, her gaze zeroed right in on Ray. He was looking at her too. Their eyes met and held, and the rest of the room melted away. Those blue eyes were the most fascinating of any eyes she'd ever beheld.

"Macey?" Tristan questioned at her elbow. "Would you like some bread?" He held a basket of sliced breads and rolls out to her.

"Oh, yes, thank you." She could see everyone else at the table was sneaking glances at her. Interested in who she was, or already realizing she was a mess and couldn't keep her gaze off of Ray? If only she could fuse her lips with his again.

Oh, my. She needed to get out and date more when she got home. Sneaking a glance at Ray, she somehow didn't think that would help. She'd never met his equal.

She focused on filling her plate with roasted chicken, a variety of vegetables, and salad. She ate and tried to take part in the conversation, which was centered on the rule changes to baseball and who they wanted to make it to the World Series. She'd heard similar conversations at Sutton's mansion with his security ops and imagined these men got sick of discussing issues regarding their kingdom and wanted to talk sports like most other men.

Macey tried to avoid staring at Ray. She had no idea that would be the hardest part of her job—not making a fool of herself because she was besotted with her fiancé's twin.

Kiera surprised Macey as she quietly ate, only answering questions when she was directly asked them. At times she was a 'wild child', and then she'd act the part of a demure princess. They had done an excellent job of keeping her out of the media's eye; Macey knew little about the girl besides that old girlfriend revealing her nickname and what she'd observed today.

The prime minister was comfortable with the family. Apparently, his wife and Queen Anne had been dear friends. That helped Macey relax a bit, but

she wondered if the close family connections just complicated things. She could hardly wait for her program to shell out information so her mind wasn't scrambling with so many questions.

As everyone was finishing eating and passing the plate of fruit around, Chad leaned back in his chair. "So Macey, we're dying to know how Prince T talked you into leaving your home and moving thousands of miles away from everything you know and love to marry this joker."

"Have you looked at him?" she joked, smiling at T, but she could see Ray out of the corner of her eye.

Everyone laughed at that. Ray's gaze was conflicted. She felt the same.

"Honestly, have you ever met anyone who could resist his charm?" she asked Chad and forced herself to focus completely on Tristan.

He winked and spread his hands. "I'm just that appealing."

"Oh, boy." Ray groaned and exchanged a look with Chad. "Next we'll get to hear how the 'woman magnet' never has to make an effort because the women 'come to him'."

Was it her imagination or was the prime minister stiff and his smile faker than it had been all night? Hmm. Why would he care if Tristan was a 'woman magnet'?

"Yep." Chad rolled his eyes but then he grinned wolfishly. "I, for one, am thrilled he found you, Macey. The perfect Prince T off the market means more women for me. We'll have to comfort all those distraught beauties who thought they had a chance with Prince Charming. Right, Ray?"

Ray studied Macey and murmured, "Right." Macey's stomach churned. She didn't want Ray comforting any beauty.

"Can we take Macey on the tour now?" Kiera piped up.

"Of course." Ray gave her a quick side hug. "You've been very well behaved and patient the entire meal."

"I have!" Kiera exclaimed. "Somebody tell Nanny Lisa. She loves me but 'despairs of me acting like a princess'." She pushed back from the table and

sprung to her feet. “Bye, Uncle Henry. Bye, Chad.” She grabbed Ray’s hand and gestured to Tristan and Macey. “Let’s go!”

Everyone laughed and stood. “I’ll walk you out,” the king said to the prime minister.

The prime minister shook everyone’s hands, hugging Kiera. “It was such a pleasure, Macey. Leslie will be sad she missed out. When she returns from Spain, I’ll bring her by.”

“I’ll look forward to that,” Macey said, she hoped graciously. She had landed herself in the midst of a high-society social situation. It was interesting how gracious and kind these people were. The reminded her of Sutton, Liz, and Gage’s girlfriend Cassie—wealthy and well-known but kind and down-to-earth. Maybe she’d labeled high society and social situations as terrifying and out of her realm before she had given either a chance.

“Good luck at the press conference in the morning.” He squeezed her hand and then turned and walked away with the king.

“Press conference,” she muttered. Her head started to throb. Press conference. She’d known it was coming, but she’d been so focused on riddling out the mysteries here, uploading all the people into her system, and fighting her attraction to Ray that she hadn’t worried about the unsavory aspects of her job such as … press conferences. Press releases? Sure, all day long. Press conferences? She needed a place to hide.

“You all right?” Ray was right in front of her with Kiera clinging to his hand.

Tristan and Chad were chatting off to the side.

“Press conference.” She shrugged and swallowed down the acrid taste in her throat. “I’ll survive … somehow.”

“I know you will.” He smiled. “You’re brave, bold, and beautiful. Remember?”

Warmth and remembrance flashed through Macey. Ray’s blue gaze held her captive as she remembered far too well. Her bold words. Her kissing him.

Him kissing her back.

“Let’s go.” Kiera tugged on Ray’s hand. “Come on, T!”

“All right, sweet princess.”

Kiera stuck out her tongue at him. Tristan chuckled.

They all walked with Chad to the front entry. He shook Ray and Tristan’s hands and gave Kiera a quick hug, then pressed Macey’s hand. “Ray tells me you love weapons.”

“I do.” She smiled. Finally, something familiar.

He released her hand and nodded to Ray and Tristan. “Have these boys bring you to the facility when you get a break from your important duties. We’re just a ten-minute drive south. You can get some target practice in and ooh and ahh over my vast collection of pistols.”

“I would love that. Thank you.”

“Least I can do for the irresistible woman who took out my sole competition. Now I’m the most appealing man in this kingdom and can have my pick of dates with the single beauties.”

Ray and Tristan both laughed.

“Sorry, Ray. I didn’t see you standing there,” Chad teased.

“No worries,” Ray said. “I’m sure you’re already the ‘most appealing man in the kingdom’.”

Macey prayed Ray wasn’t competing for the kingdom’s ‘most exquisite single beauties.’ She liked Chad, but he seemed a little too smooth at times. She imagined most women would find him irresistible. Hopefully the women chased Chad and left Ray alone. Not that it should matter to her.

“Ah, thank you, friend.” Chad grinned, but then got serious. “I didn’t know what to think of my best friend falling in love with some American who he hadn’t told me about and he’d only spent one weekend of ‘real time’ with but …” Chad looked her over and Macey’s heart was racing with whatever he would say. It seemed like Chad was her first real test. He was Prince

Tristan's best friend and knew him well. Even he didn't know the truth of why she was here, and he had to be wondering why his friend hadn't shared that he was dating someone seriously enough to get engaged.

"She's a keeper, T," Chad said. "Well done, my friend."

"I think so." Tristan smiled smoothly at her. She wanted to see Ray's reaction but was terrified somebody was going to call her out soon for ogling him nonstop.

Chad said his goodbyes and slipped out the tall front doors. Immediately Kiera grabbed her hand and started tugging her down the hall. "Okay, this is the plan," the little girl informed her as Ray and Tristan followed them. "I'll show you everything from this floor up. You can check out the kitchens, laundry, and garage later if you want. When we get to our floor, we put swimsuits on, and when we get to the top, you have to promise to swim with me."

"Sure. I love swimming."

"Yay! Let's go!"

When Kiera said go, she meant it. She raced Macey through the castle tour. Macey could've spent an hour looking at the murals on the walls of the ballroom that romantically depicted Cleopatra and Mark Antony's love story. She could've spent many hours in the unreal library. She'd always loved Beauty and the Beast, and this library was more impressive than the Beast's had been. The view from every window was spectacular, but Kiera wasn't stopping to admire any of it. Macey kept up, promising herself she'd come back.

The sun was touching the mountain tops to the west as they finished their tour of the incredible fitness center and walked up the last set of steps and into the greenery and flower-filled solarium for the second time today. She and Kiera wore swimsuits, coverups, and flip-flops and Tristan and Ray were in T-shirts, swim trunks, and flip-flops.

"No going over that balcony ledge," Macey begged Kiera.

Ray and Tristan both laughed as Kiera said, "I do that all the time. It's fun, and you should hear Nanny Lisa scream when I do it." She grinned. "I was

trying to show you how impressive I am."

"I'm impressed." Macey hugged the girl. "Please don't do it again. I was terrified for you."

"I like you, Macey." The girl hugged her back so tightly Macey could hardly breathe.

Ray and Tristan were both watching them. Ray's gaze was warm and made her feel like she could do no wrong. When had anybody looked at her like that? She got approving glances from Gage, Sutton, and Sutton's ops quite often, but nobody had looked at her as if she'd hung the moon.

Kiera pulled back. "All right. Let's go. Time to swim!" She yanked on Macey's hand.

"I'd tell her to slow down," Tristan said. "But it wouldn't work."

"We should at least watch the sunset," Ray said.

"This is the most beautiful view I have ever seen in my life," Macey admitted.

"Oh, boring. Come on, T, let's go!" Kiera released Macey and launched onto her oldest brother.

Tristan laughed, swept her off her feet, and turned her upside down. "Cool your jets, wild child. We'll get there."

Kiera squealed.

"Dunk her head in the fountain if she wants to swim so badly," Ray said.

"No!" Kiera screamed.

Tristan carried her around the greenery and toward the bubbling center fountain. They couldn't see her any longer but could easily hear as she protested and yelled that he was 'the meanest brother' and begged Ray to save her.

Ray smiled at Macey. "He won't do it, but that'll give you half a minute to watch the sunset."

“Thank you.” Macey could not peel her eyes from his. Her breath shortened, and nothing mattered at this moment but this prince.

“Macey,” He breathed out her name so beautifully she had to put out a hand to steady herself on something. That something was Ray’s arm. His warm, firm arm.

She could see his pulse quickening in his neck. He eased a bit closer. Neither of them said anything, simply staring at each other, her hand on his arm. Somehow they inched closer, until she could feel his breath on her lips. She ached for his kiss like she’d never wanted anything.

Macey had learned young to work hard and keep herself as small and hidden as possible. Nobody but Gage had appreciated her being smart until college and Sutton and his guys. She’d learned not to hope for too much, keeping herself from hurt and disappointment. The only time she’d let down her guard as an adult was when she’d fallen for Steve. Right now she was hoping for far too much, and with a prince to boot.

Ray’s hand raised toward her face and her heart threatened to beat out of her chest.

The sounds of Kiera’s protests suddenly disappeared and just as quickly, Ray was standing a foot away from her, pointedly looking out at the view. Macey tried to still her racing heart as she turned as well. The sun was already gone. They’d missed the actual setting, but the wispy clouds were still pink and orange and it was beautiful.

“Beautiful,” Ray murmured.

She blushed, feeling as if he were talking about her. She wanted him to be.

“Time to swim,” Kiera yelled from behind them.

They both turned to see Kiera perched on Tristan’s shoulders. Kiera was beaming happily. Tristan was watching them both … carefully.

He knew. His blue eyes said he knew exactly what was transpiring between them. Had he seen them almost kiss? Oh, crap. Macey had to get this attraction under control. She was here on an important job and that job was *not* to fall in love with her fiancé’s brother.

“Let’s do it,” Ray agreed.

Tristan turned and walked in front of them, holding Kiera. Ray put his hand on Macey’s lower back and escorted her. Just like that, all resolve to not fall for Ray disappeared.

She was in so much trouble.

CHAPTER SIX

Ray was in so much trouble.

His eyes and his body seemed to naturally gravitate to Macey. How could he keep the reasons she was here at the forefront of his mind? Research and hopefully help solve his mum's murder, keep his twin safe, show the kingdom all was well with the royals.

But all wasn't well in his mind. And he was certain T knew.

They showed Macey the state-of-the-art spa and talked Kiera into doing a circuit before swimming. They started with the steam room, ten minutes at a hundred and fifteen degrees and almost a hundred percent humidity scented with eucalyptus and spearmint. Ray had never found it so hard to breathe in the steam room, but suspected the problem today was because Macey was seated between him and T and her smooth arm kept brushing his.

They burst out of the steam room at the five-minute mark because Kiera was 'cooked' and jumped in the cold plunge pool. Ray got to watch Macey adorably leap out of the pool screaming, "Cold!" and admire how incredibly fit she was and how fabulous she looked in a one-piece pale blue swimsuit.

They hurried to the massage pool and sank into the perfect warmth of a hundred degrees. Kiera took Macey through the pool's jets, pushing each button so Macey could feel how the different overhead sprays and underwater jets targeted each muscle group. Kiera wouldn't let them lie on

the tile beds, and they were too wet to get into the massage chairs, so they made it to the Olympic pool within twenty minutes and their sister was thrilled.

Ray loved this pool. The cement patio was lined with retractable walls made of glass and a glass ceiling covered the pool section of the spa. This time of year, the walls were tucked out of the way and the perfect summer night air surrounded them.

Kiera, being the wild child she was, couldn't just swim. They played 'sharks and minnows', 'colors', and 'Marco Polo.' Kiera showed off her impressive flips and seven-twenties off the diving board while they all cheered.

All the brothers tried to spend time with Kiera and especially play games with her any time they could. The boys had each other as playmates growing up, but Kiera was twelve years younger than Derek and Malik. She also hadn't been allowed back to public school since their mum died. She had to be lonely. Her nanny, Lisa, was a sweet girl who worked with her in the morning on schoolwork, even in the summer, played with her in the afternoon, and read with her at night before their dad prayed with her and tucked her into bed. Their mum used to be the one to spend afternoons with Kiera and read with her before prayers and bedtime.

The games and horsing around was a lot of fun. Ray got a lot of opportunities to get close to and even touch Macey. Unfortunately, so did T. Jealousy kicked up so fast Ray could hardly see straight. He didn't like being jealous of T. No matter how Chad, Ray, and all the brothers teased T about being the 'woman magnet,' Ray wasn't jealous. He got plenty of attention from beautiful women and didn't have to wonder like T did if the women were only interested in him as future monarch.

The only woman T had ever fallen for and felt loved him for him had left right as Mum died. To Ray's knowledge Jennifer Shule, T's love and the prime minister's daughter, hadn't come home even to visit her parents for over six months. In the wake of Mum's death T and Jennifer's relationship implosion had been swept under the rug. The prime minister had never acted like it was any big deal and T didn't say much. Ray had felt sorry for

T losing Jennifer, and impressed T could move on and date and tease. He had never been jealous of his twin.

He didn't feel sorry for T, and he was sorely jealous now.

He brushed water off his face and watched Macey do 'motorboat' with Kiera. It was silly because Kiera was probably too big for such a game.

Macey and Kiera spinning, singing, dunking under water, and laughing together wasn't silly at all. It was the prettiest view he'd seen in a long time. Miles prettier than their exquisite castle, mountains, and valley. He was fascinated by Macey's laughter and loved seeing her with their little sister.

"Bedtime, beautiful princess," T said as they finished a round. "Your nanny will be ready for stories."

"No!" Kiera protested.

"I know. But Macey and I have a press conference in the morning, and she needs her beauty sleep."

"She couldn't possibly be more beautiful," Ray said, then his eyes widened to match Macey's. He should not have let that slip out.

"True," T agreed, not skipping a beat or even giving Ray a look. He definitely knew. "But I need my beauty sleep." He winked at Kiera.

"Okay, okay. Nanny Lisa will be waking me up at the butt crack of dawn too."

Macey's tinkling laughter washed over Ray. It was the soothing balm that eased the agony from his mum's death. He'd hardly dealt with the pain and definitely hadn't healed, too busy trying to find her murderer and keep everyone safe.

"Probably not the best expression, wild child," Ray told his sister. All the brothers also felt duty-bound to parent Kiera. Their father had always been indulgent with her, and it had gotten worse since their mum died. Ray had never heard his dad give her any sort of correction firmer than a simple, 'Be careful.'

“You taught it to me,” Kiera said, blinking innocently at him with her wide blue eyes.

Macey and T both laughed. Ray let out a roar and sprung at his sister. She shrieked and ducked behind Macey. Ray could’ve just gone around her, but he wrapped his arms around Macey’s waist and lifted her out of the way instead. It felt so good to hold her trim waist in his hands he almost forgot his purpose. Luckily Kiera was splashing water at him and trying to push through the water to get to Tristan for protection.

He forced himself to release Macey, leap at and grab Kiera, and lift his sister above his head. She alternated giggling with begging for help until he dunked her in the water. She came up sputtering.

Ray hated to end the fun, especially as Macey was staring at him like he was the ‘best man in the kingdom.’ He needed to get Kiera into bed at a decent hour, but more importantly, get some space from Macey and pray hard for heavenly help to get his head on straight.

He carried Kiera out of the pool as if she were a toddler, set her on her feet, and wrapped her up in a huge, soft towel. Her blue eyes sparkled at him. “I love you, Ray,” she said.

“I love you too, wild child.” His heart softened. Military leader or not, he was almost as soft for Kiera as his dad was.

Tristan and Macey walked over and wrapped up in towels as well. They all grabbed their clothes, slipped into flip-flops, and walked slowly down the stairs. They met Lisa at the door to Kiera’s suite. The twenty-year-old nanny always seemed shy around Ray, but she had an obvious crush on T. Unfortunately, she’d told T she loved him when T had taken Kiera and Lisa on a hike through the mountains a couple years ago. He’d had to gently explain she was far too young for him. It should be awkward, but Lisa didn’t seem ready to give up. She currently had an annoying boyfriend who’d tried to climb the hill to the castle a few times to ‘prove his love.’ At least it kept her from bugging T.

After multiple hugs from her brothers and Macey, Kiera finally let Lisa lead her into the suite for stories. He and Ray walked Macey to his suite. It was

odd, this threesome. Ray longed to shove his brother out of the way, but he couldn't. He needed to shove himself out of the way.

Macey grabbed the door handle and peered up at them. Her gaze flickered between them. "Thank you for making my first day comfortable and fun. I thought I'd feel like an imposter, but you both have welcomed me and put me at ease."

Her cheeks went red, and Ray's mind spun back to their initial meeting and that beautiful kiss. It seemed like longer than half a day had passed, yet he could feel and remember every touch of her lips and hands.

"Of course," Tristan answered because Ray couldn't find his tongue. "We're grateful to you for being here. I know it's your job, but you're putting yourself in a dangerous situation for our family and we really appreciate it."

"I think you would fit in well anywhere," Ray rushed to add. "You're warm and brilliant and people are naturally attracted to you." Attracted wasn't the right word—shoot. "Drawn to you," he corrected, but from the look on his twin's face, he'd made the situation even worse.

The look on Macey's face was what he wanted to concentrate on—sweet, grateful, and a little shy.

"Thank you both," she murmured. "Goodnight." She pressed down the door handle and was gone.

Ray should face his brother, but one glance told him T was reading him like a book. He hurried to T's suite and pushed inside, rushing for the bathroom. "I'll shower quick," he called over his shoulder.

T closed the suite door behind him and sprinted to cut Ray off. He grabbed Ray by the arm. Ray punched him in the shoulder, and he let go. But T darted in front of him and blocked the bathroom door. He looked determined, but sadly he didn't look like he wanted a physical fight. Ray could really have gone for a brotherly brawl about now. If he kept throwing punches, would T comply? Ray had more training and twenty pounds on T. His brother hadn't won a fight with him in years, but T was strong and put up impressive resistance every time.

“What is going on?” T demanded. “She’s been here all of nine hours and you’re acting like a hormonal teenager swooning over my fake fiancée.”

Ray clenched his fist. How to play this? Throwing punches would just reinforce the ‘hormonal teenager’ and ‘swooning’ assessment. He didn’t swoon. He’d never heard his brother use that word.

“Macey is a very impressive lady,” he muttered.

“She is, but my *very impressive* twin doesn’t get sappy and throw compliments and longing glances at the thousands of ‘impressive ladies’ we’ve met over the years.” T folded his arms across his chest. “I know you, Ray, and this is not normal. It’s so far from normal I almost checked if Malik had traded you spots while I was in meetings, but then I realized even Malik doesn’t sneak glances at some lady like he’s yearned for her his entire life.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Ray folded his own arms across his chest and tried to look unfazed. ‘Yearned’? For sure. What would T say if he admitted he’d thought of the word ‘craved’ in relation to Macey as well?

How was he going to deal with this crazy pull to her? The first step was refusing to admit it—to T, to Macey, and somehow even to himself. He was stronger than he’d acted today. Macey had simply … taken him by surprise. That was it. The initial surprising and mind-bending kiss, the connection arcing between them, her weapons’ obsession, her laughter … He hadn’t been prepared for any of it.

Preparation was key in his life and work. He couldn’t let anyone catch him unaware, and he had today. That was all it was. Blindsided by a unique and brilliant beauty. He’d pray hard tonight, get a good night’s sleep, and show the strength inherent in him as an Augustine prince, the leader of his military, and a follower of Christ. He knew his Savior could strengthen him as He had throughout his life, but especially in the last six months as their family had been thrown into a vicious tailspin and they’d all longed to have their mum back. Heaven had to help him resist a temptation as enticing as Macey Clifton.

You would do anything to protect this family, protect this kingdom. I know we’re safe with you around.

His mum. She knew how important it was for him to protect everyone, be everywhere, do it all. She'd help him from heaven.

"Am I?" T taunted. "Come on, Ray. It's me. Flesh of your flesh. I know you. I can read your mind. Admit it. Tell me you are dying over Macey. It's all right. We can work through this together like we always do."

Ray was tempted. More than tempted. It sounded fabulous to give this to T. He could unload this burden on his brother, and they'd figure out a solution together. How many times throughout their lives had they done that? They were a team. T had his back, and he had his.

But …

His twin liked to joke and act like he wasn't taking life seriously, a defense mechanism to not show stress about his heavy responsibilities. Ray knew how deeply intense T was, how he cared for their family and their country. He would give anything for all of them.

Ray wouldn't add to his brother's burden. His purpose had always been to shoulder and relieve as much of his dad and twin's burdens as he could. This plan with Macey was in place. It was a good one, and at the moment their best chance to draw out the 'Enforcer' and hopefully their mum's killer. Macey's computer skills and brilliance could help them as well. He couldn't mess this up because of some … attraction.

"T …" Ray stepped up, put his hand on his brother's arm, and put on the best acting face he'd ever tried to use. "I'm sorry if I've been acting off. Yes, I find Macey extremely attractive, but that's all. I'm not 'yearning' for her." He was such a liar. It hurt to lie to his twin. He'd never done it before. He steeled his spine and continued, "We've both been overloaded and stressed, mourning mum, worried about Dad, Kiera, our brothers, the kingdom, the weird notes, a murderer on the loose, and no clues or leads to solve anything."

He drew in a breath. "I let my guard down today because …" Why? What excuse could he give when inside he thought it was because Macey was the woman his soul had quietly longed for? Sheesh, that was sappy. "Macey is comfortable and fun to be around. It won't happen again. I'm not messing up this plan."

T studied him, his blue eyes poking for holes. Ray used the training drilled into him as a youth by grizzled, veteran soldiers who'd been trained by the men who fought the Nazis, spent time in concentration camps and Nazi prisons, and knew how not to let someone into your mind, even if they were torturing you. His brother wasn't torturing him, but giving up any chance with Macey felt like the worst form of torture. He had to figure out how to shield himself around her and not let her into his heart.

"I don't believe you," T said slowly.

Ray's heart thumped faster. His neck tightened, and he forced himself not to clench his fists.

"When you're ready to admit you're falling for Macey … I'll be here for you."

Ray blinked. He couldn't seem to get enough oxygen into his lungs.

Stay stiff, stay impervious, he begged himself.

"We can change the plan, Ray. If she's the right woman for you, we'll change it right now. Dad will support us. People are more important. Love is more important. *You* are more important."

Ray held up a hand, cutting him off, praying he'd stop. He appreciated his brother's dedication to him, but … Love? He didn't even know Macey. Sure, he felt an insane draw to her. Sure, her kiss had rocked him to the core. Sure, she was gorgeous, brilliant, fun, refreshingly sweet, and her laugh intoxicated him.

T watched him with a knowing glint in his blue eyes, and Ray shook his head. Where had he been going with this train of thought? Oh yeah …

"T, thank you for caring about me so deeply, but it's good." It was awful. "I hardly know Macey. I shouldn't have let my guard down today." Two sentences that were true. That was good. Honesty felt so much better than the lies he'd been spouting. "I'll be more disciplined from here on out."

"No," T growled. "No, Ray. You've been 'disciplined' your whole stinking life, especially the last six months. The safety of the royal family and the entire kingdom is not on your head."

Ray only stared at him, disagreeing vehemently inside.

“Fall in love, bro. You deserve a beautiful sweetheart like Macey.”

“It would never work.” He shook his head at his brother’s protests. “Don’t get this in your head, T. I’m not pursuing Macey. She’s your fiancée right now. We have a plan in place, and I’m not messing any of that up.”

His brother’s gaze was intense, begging him for a concession, so he gave one. “*If* my feelings get too strong to fight…” Sadly, he was afraid he was already there. He had to keep his eyes off her from here on out. The angels above would help him, especially his mum. “I will let you know, and we’ll figure out how to proceed from there.”

T relaxed slightly. “I’ll keep checking in and watching you around her.”

“Noted.” T was on to him, so he’d have to exercise more diligence when his brother was around. Could he let down his guard when he was alone with Macey? No! That would only lead to stronger feelings.

“Okay.” T looked him over. “I don’t like it, but I’ll give you some time on this. Hopefully we catch the stupid Enforcer, and mum’s killer, and then you can be free to explore Macey.”

Explore Macey? Ray’s body went hot all over.

“I mean a relationship with her, not explore her lips.” T winked as if that were a joke. “I’m showering first.” He slipped in and slammed and locked the door.

Ray didn’t protest. All he could think about was exploring Macey’s lips. Unfortunately for him, it was no joke, and the thrilling experience would never be replicated.

He leaned against the wall, listening to the shower spray, and closed his eyes. He allowed himself to relive the kiss. If he couldn’t get there again, at least he had the memories.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Macey struggled to sleep. Especially as she was sleeping in *his* bed, and it smelled like musk, bergamot, and Ray.

Her mind was consumed with all things Ray. Prince Raymond August. He was the most perfect man—perfect person—she'd ever been blessed to meet. He was honorable, smart, tough, handsome, a Christian, a man focused on his family and his mission as the leader of their military, and he made her warm clear through with one look or touch …

Had she met the man she'd never dreamed could exist for her, or was it like everything in her life beside her brother, Sutton, and her computers and a huge implosion was coming?

She woke early, dressed in a simple T-shirt and shorts and laced up her running shoes, then slipped out of her suite. Ray's suite. She paused next to Tristan's bedroom but couldn't hear any movement inside. They hadn't discussed when to meet this morning. She knew Tristan would be safe with Ray, but she should've asked if she could help relieve Ray's duties. The press conference was at ten. Maybe she was on her own until then?

The AI model had finished an analysis on everybody who had access to the castle the night the queen died, and quite a few other people she or Ray wanted to rule out or know more about. She was anxious to study the information, but she wanted to go through it with Ray, and she always thought better after a hard workout and some food.

Hurrying down the wide hallway, she ran up the four flights of stairs. Catching her breath, she walked toward the gym. As she got near, she could hear clanking weights. Oh, shoot. She'd hoped to have it all to herself. Which was silly, but this enormous castle was empty. She'd seen guards in the halls yesterday, and that was about it. From what she understood, the staff only lived in the castle if they needed a spot and, as affluent as this country was, nobody seemed to be in much need. Her preliminary research had shown hugely-successful iron mining and wise use and investment of the country's resources were to thank for the Augustine's prosperity.

Ray had explained why the castle was so quiet and that they used to have tours and guests staying all the time. Since their mum's death, they hadn't hosted friends, extended family, or visiting dignitaries, and had cut back their staff to only their most trusted employees. None of them but the pretty blonde nanny and assigned security guards would stay the night.

That meant it could be Kiera's nanny, the king, Tristan, or … Ray working out. Her heartbeat picked up again, and she was more out of breath than she had been from running the stairs. She eased toward the fitness center and stopped when she saw him through the open doors. Luckily, his back was to her so she could stare. She'd tried not to stare last night when he had no shirt on as they swam. She'd seen a lot of impressive musculature in her time with Sutton, but nobody's shape had appealed to her like Ray's did.

He was doing a reverse fly with the cable machine, the cables crossed as he pulled them out wide and back, his hands level with his shoulders. The muscles in his upper back contracted and were easily visible through his T-shirt. Macey sighed and put a hand to her heart. He was beautiful. Could this man truly be interested in her? Macey Clifton, who hid behind her glasses and her big brain and her brother when Gage was around? Her doubts surfaced and she pushed at her nonexistent glasses, remembering for the hundredth time that she'd let Sutton take them with him.

"Good morning, Macey." Tristan stepped into view, right next to the door. How had he gotten there without her noticing? That wasn't actually a hard question. Her mind was consumed with his brother.

"Morning," Macey managed, her voice breathless.

Ray released the cable handles and whirled around at her brother's greeting. When he saw her, his face lit in an irresistible smile. The sun wasn't up yet, but the world didn't need sunlight with a smile like that. The warmth in his blue eyes reassured her.

She grinned back. Yesterday hadn't been a dream. Ray was real and as consumed by her as she was by him.

Then his face tightened and his blue eyes cooled. He lifted a hand and called, "Morning, Macey," as casually as his brother had. Then he turned back to his workout.

Macey's heart froze in her chest. What had just happened? She yanked her gaze from Ray and saw Tristan was still close to her in the doorway and watching her steadily. She blinked and tried to school her reaction. Tristan was supposed to be her fiancé. She shouldn't be gone over his brother. Was Ray trying to school his reaction too or had yesterday been a dream of the handsome prince being interested in her and now reality would slap her in the face? Somehow, Ray not being gone over her like she was over him would be a thousand times worse than Steve betraying her and everyone she cared about five years ago.

"Do you want a better tour of the gym than Kiera gave you last night?" Tristan's gaze was teasing but also … concerned. Was he worried about her liking his twin too much, or worried Ray would break her heart?

"I actually know my way around a gym." She grinned to show she was teasing too, though her heart was in danger of breaking. Ray was executing controlled reverse flies without even seeming to notice she was in the same room.

"I can see that. You're very fit."

"Thank you. As are you." To the outsider, maybe it would seem like she and Tristan were flirting. Not to her.

"Well, don't let us keep you from your workout." Tristan winked, but it was friendly, not smoldering like the one Ray had given her yesterday.

Had they lost yesterday's connection? They couldn't have. She was worrying over nothing. Ray was probably just focused on getting his

workout in.

Her insecurities screamed that it was much more than that. Ray wasn't interested in her and had just been toying with the new girl yesterday. Even if he was interested, he couldn't act on it because it would mess up the plan of her being engaged to his twin.

"I won't." She forced a sassy tone she'd never felt, trying to play the role of a confident future princess, even if she was only an imposter. She hurried to an elliptical machine. She'd get warm and plan out her workout and pretend Ray and Tristan weren't there.

Ten minutes later, she was warm and ready to start lifting on lower body, but she couldn't stop her gaze from following Ray wherever he went in the gym. He was pairing back with lats, biceps, and abdominals. She loved watching his muscles work and was more drawn to him by the minute. The few times he glanced her direction, he gave her a quick smile and looked away. Tristan kept saying funny things to Ray or to her. Ray grunted back responses, which seemed off from yesterday. Tristan was very funny and a great guy. She tried to respond with humor and laughter, but Ray's silence made it difficult.

Ray and Tristan were still lifting when she finished.

"I'll see you both … at the press conference?" She was uncertain. Yesterday she'd assumed she and Ray would be inseparable, not just because of their connection but as they worked together to protect Tristan. Now she wasn't sure of anything. That frustrated her. It was an hour-long workout. Maybe Ray was quieter when he worked out. Maybe he wasn't a morning person.

Or maybe she'd built the interactions from yesterday too high in her head and they meant nothing.

"Or do you need help watching Tristan?" she asked Ray.

"Like you need to babysit me." Tristan chuckled. "Ray's all over it. The wheels of Augustine don't rotate without the general's permission."

Ray only rolled his eyes. Tristan was obviously teasing but there was a lot of truth to his statement. Ray seemed determined to protect everybody, most especially his family.

“The general is impressive.” Her voice was far too breathless.

Tristan pumped his eyebrows and Ray gave her a tight smile.

“You don’t need to worry about anything until the press conference,” Ray said. His beautiful accent made her stomach dance.

“Thank you.”

“There will be a breakfast spread in the small dining room from seven to nine,” Tristan told her. “Or you can grab fruit or make yourself something in the family living area any time. We’ll meet in the entry a little before ten and walk out to greet the press together. They’ll be gathered at the bottom of the exterior steps.”

“Okay. Do you know what I should wear?” She blushed. “Sorry, dumb question to ask boys, but I’m more prepared for the protection detail and researching suspects than pretending to be a future princess. The press conference is terrifying to me.”

Both men smiled at her, Ray with a genuine but concerned smile on his face. That smile made her heart soften and the knot of worries in her gut loosen an inch.

“You’ll do great,” Ray said softly. “You impressed Henry and Chad last night.”

“Are those two a hard sell?”

They both laughed.

“Henry actually is,” Tristan admitted. “He didn’t get to the position of prime minister by being a softy.”

She nodded. Though Ray seemed more welcoming than he had all morning, her stomach still tumbled at the thought of the position she was pretending to be in. She was no Meghan Markle. Rubbing shoulders with prime ministers and royalty. Kissing princes. She felt her face heat again.

“Just wear a dress or a skirt and button-down, not formal but something you feel comfortable and confident in,” Tristan told her.

“Thanks. See you both soon.” She turned and hurried away, catching Ray’s gaze on her but feeling like it was conflicted. That made sense if he liked her and didn’t think he should. Had Tristan said something to him last night? Would Tristan keep them apart?

She rolled her eyes at herself as she pumped down the stairs. This wasn’t some tragic medieval romance novel.

She was here for a job. She was a professional. She was in no way the right match for a prince.

But she still wanted Ray.

The morning went quickly as she showered and wasted far too much time primping her hair and using makeup to ‘flatter her features, not override them’ as Liz had taught her. The hardest part was trying to decide on the right outfit. She would’ve done a video chat with Liz or Gage’s fiancé Cassie, but it was middle of the night in America.

She finally went with a flattering summery dress, pink floral with fluttery short sleeves, a V-neck, and a mid-calf hemline. Thankfully, Liz had taken her to ritzy shops to purchase her clothes. They were of the highest quality, so she knew she wouldn’t look out of place with Tristan in his tailored suit. It was still strange to see herself with her hair down, makeup on, and no glasses covering her face. She felt pretty. Would Ray notice?

It was almost nine. She should run down and get some breakfast, but her stomach was in knots. She pulled out her laptop, sat at the small table, and started organizing the AI reports that had come in last night, and chatting in further detail with the bot to make sure it didn’t miss any details.

A soft rap on her door brought her head up. Standing, she hurried to open it. Ray stood there in a deep blue suit and red tie. His eyes swept over her and got warm—smoky, truthfully.

“Macey … you will win everyone’s hearts looking so beautiful.” His lyrical accent and husky voice were as appealing as his handsome face.

She only wanted to win his heart.

He held up a plate covered with foil. “I noticed you never made it down to breakfast.”

“My stomach’s a little squeamish.”

He smiled. “I bet. Eating something will help.”

“I’ll try.” She took the plate. Their hands brushed, and she longed to hold his hand. She’d kissed him yesterday and he’d escorted her with his hand on her back, but they hadn’t held hands. No—she couldn’t hold his hand, and she had to learn how to deal with that. “Thank you.”

“Can I come talk to you while you eat?”

“Sure.” She felt all lit up at the thought. He wanted to talk to her. It was probably only about work, but she couldn’t tamp down the excitement.

She stepped back into the suite and to the small table, setting the plate down. Ray pulled out her chair and helped her into it. Her skin seemed to tingle from even the simplest touch from him. “Thank you,” she said again.

She bowed her head and said a brief, silent prayer, *Thank you, Father in Heaven. Please help me get through this press conference and know how to help this family and to be with Ray if there is any way that miracle is possible. In the name of my Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Opening her eyes, she focused on Ray. He was seated across the small table and watching her steadily.

“Can you eat?”

“I’ll try.” She pulled off the foil. He’d loaded the plate with an omelet, a cinnamon roll that smelled divine, a small bowl of fruit and cottage cheese, and a small bowl of oatmeal with nuts and cinnamon sprinkling it. A napkin and silverware rested on top of the omelet. “Wow. Thank you.”

“I hope there’s something there you’ll like.”

“It all looks delicious. Maybe I am hungry.” She dug into a bite of omelet. It had veggies, cheese, and ham in it. “It is delicious.” It was a little awkward to have him watch her eat, especially because he’d seemed off this morning at the gym. “How did you know I didn’t have breakfast?”

“You saw my office.” He tilted his head. “I have camera angles of the entire castle, except for the bedrooms and bathrooms.”

“True. And you’ve been studying this hallway or the dining room watching for me?” She took another bite of omelet, her stomach settling a little bit with him here and some food in it, but her nerves were on edge waiting for his answer.

“Yes,” he admitted, holding her gaze.

“Why?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“About?” *Yes*, she silently cheered.

“T had an idea that I wanted to run by you.”

“Oh.” She deflated. This talk apparently wasn’t about their kiss yesterday or their attraction or their almost kisses or how they were going to navigate a relationship while she was pretend-engaged to his brother. They could wait and develop a relationship after the engagement was over. Any kind of hope would be great.

“For the press conference, T and I are going to switch places,” he said the words evenly, as if he were reading a report.

She had a spoonful of oatmeal almost to her mouth. She set it back in the bowl. The thought of standing next to Ray, holding his hand, pretending to be engaged to him, lit a fire inside her chest. It sounded comfortable and exciting. With Ray, she wouldn’t have to pretend she was drawn to him. She wondered if other people could see the sparks between them. Was that why Tristan had suggested it?

“Why?”

“If whoever is threatening him got their hands on a press pass, it could be a vulnerable time and he could be in danger. This way T will stand safely to the side looking like the general, and I’ll be in danger.” He smiled at that, revealing the dimple in his left cheek and a bit of emotion.

“Tristan came up with the idea?”

He nodded.

“Your brother wants you in danger?”

“No. Very few people outside of our family and a few close friends can tell us apart, especially when we’re in business suits that hide my extra twenty pounds of muscle.” He smiled a bit cockily. She liked it.

“I can tell you apart.” She took a drink of her water and leaned back in her chair.

“I know.” Ray’s eyes flashed with something tender and raw and appealing.

Silence fell for a few beats, and then she tried to prod an answer out of him. “I still don’t understand why Tristan would suggest you trade places.”

Ray clenched his right fist and drummed it softly against the table. He studied it as he said, “T feels that you’re more comfortable and confident with me. He feels you and I have … better sparks and chemistry, and that the press will eat that up.”

Macey’s heart raced out of control. Tristan had noticed the sparks and chemistry between her and Ray. Had Ray told his brother that he liked her? Ray still wasn’t looking at her, studying his fist and the grains of wood in the table.

“Do you think we have sparks and chemistry?” she asked quietly.

Ray’s gaze darted to hers. His blue eyes sizzled with warmth and desire for her. Macey couldn’t catch a full breath. It was a good thing she was sitting down because liquid heat rushed through her bloodstream and her legs felt like noodles. Ray moistened his lips, and her mind flew back to their kiss. Would they kiss again during the press conference? Would he kiss her right now to confirm their sparks and chemistry were glowing strong?

Leaping to his feet, Ray rushed out the words, “Enjoy your breakfast. I’ll be back a little before ten to escort you down.”

He hurried to the door.

“Ray,” Macey gasped out. She stood.

“See you soon.” Ray didn’t stop, didn’t look at her. He pushed the door open and was gone.

Macey stared at the closed door, confused and aching. Was Ray interested in her? She needed to focus on the job like he seemed to be trying to do, but she didn’t want to miss out on Ray.

Brave, bold, and beautiful. Could she be all three at the press conference, but more importantly, once she got Ray alone again?

She was still gun shy from the debacle with Steve and so many other disappointments throughout her life. If she put her feelings out there now, how would she handle it if Ray couldn’t or wouldn’t reciprocate?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ray could not believe he'd let T talk him into switching spots for the press conference. Actually, he could believe it. He'd tortured himself through the night, dreaming of T and Macey standing on the steps of the castle, looking like the most gorgeous couple of the century and beaming with love for each other. Then T had turned Macey toward him and kissed her deeply. Ray had thrown up in his dream and ran away, with the press laughing and taking pictures of him. In real life, he woke up in cold sweats and couldn't fall back asleep.

Their workout was another form of torture as he watched Macey on the elliptical and then using free weights and body weight to exercise the toned muscles in her legs. He only wanted to run across the gym and talk to her, lift weights with her, touch her hand, make her laugh, nothing crazy, but just be close to her shining light. He'd held himself strictly aloof and was half-proud and half-disappointed about it.

After Macey left, T had given him a knowing look, waited about twenty minutes, and then casually suggested they switch places for the press conference. Ray had argued with him, intent on not falling deeper for Macey. He'd only conceded because T would be safer. That was what he told himself and his brother, at least. T hadn't cajoled Ray into admitting how drawn he was to Macey, but his twin had that look in his eyes, the one that said he was getting his way and was smugly thrilled about it. Ray had pretended he hadn't seen it.

Rapping on his own bedroom door, Ray shifted his weight and smoothed his tie. He could easily pull this off with the press. He and T had switched places all the time growing up. As adults, they did it occasionally to lighten the load of future king and military leader of their country. They usually placed bets on whether they could pull the farce off.

Macey pulled the door open. Even though he'd seen her an hour ago when he brought her breakfast, he was struck dumb by her beauty in the flirty yet classy floral dress. Those deep-brown eyes framed with long lashes made him wish he'd studied poetry more diligently in school.

Could he make her laugh today? Yesterday felt like a surreal dream already. Today he wasn't letting his guard down and admitting to anybody how stirred up he was. Yet he got to pretend to be engaged to Macey in front of a lot of people with cameras rolling.

Ray had never been overly bothered by the press, except the ones who'd become obnoxious when his mum had died, claiming loudly that she'd committed suicide. Today the press were his best friends. They were making it possible for him to take part in the fake engagement.

"*Bonjour, ma chérie, vous êtes resplendissante aujourd'hui*." He bowed to her and extended his hand like he was some medieval prince.

Macey giggled softly and squeezed his hand. "I'm not even sure what that means, but I like it."

He lit up and kissed the back of her hand, savoring the warm, soft skin and wishing he dared go for her lips again. She pulled in a quick breath, and he straightened and stared at her. Her lips parted. Unable to resist, he framed her waist with his palm, stepping in and brushing against her. He'd promised himself he'd stay in control around her. Right now, he was playing T's role, which meant he had the privilege of pretending to be smitten with her. He wasn't pretending at all.

Without stopping to think, he bent down to claim her lips with his.

T burst out of his suite, wearing Ray's black dress military uniform. "You two practicing already?"

"I'll practice using him as a punching back," Ray muttered under his breath.

Macey laughed. Ray softened immediately and savored her laughter. He wrapped his hand around her waist and escorted her down the hall.

T stopped them and held up a ring. *The* ring. Mum's ring.

Ray's stomach turned over. Of course she needed to wear it. But did she?

He couldn't peel his gaze from the four-karat diamond. It was a round, brilliant-cut diamond with a pink hue, set in a classic gold band. Every queen in the past two centuries had worn this relic. It had been blessed by a priest and was thought to have ended the 'suicide curse.'

It was one of the many mysteries surrounding his mum's murder. Why hadn't the murderer taken the antique ring valued at well over a hundred thousand dollars? Ray's argument was that it would condemn the murderer if he or she were caught with it.

He swallowed, remembering right before they closed his mum's casket when his dad had slid the ring off her finger and handed it to T, saying in a choked whisper, 'For your future bride.'

T had pocketed it, more serious than Ray had ever seen him. Now he held it up and said, "This is just on loan, Macey-girl, so don't go falling in love with it. The press will pounce if it's not on your finger."

"Oh? I didn't think of a ring."

Ray's stomach did violent flips as Macey held up her hand and T slid the ring on. Her fingers were long, slender, tanned. The ring looked brilliant on her. It fit well. Ray selfishly wanted to pull it off and tell T to find his own fiancée.

He closed his eyes and prayed for strength. For now, Macey was T's fiancée. Ray had to somehow deal with that.

"Looks smashing, darling," T teased. "Let's do this."

"Thank you."

They turned, and Ray kept his arm around Macey as they walked.

“You look good, bro. Almost as handsome as I would,” T said. “This is going to be awesome. Here’s the deal—if anybody calls us on the switch, you owe me two days of pretending to be me and sitting through Zoom meetings while Macey protects me, and we’ll have Chad take us on a helicopter ride to show Macey the country for a day and maybe go hiking with Curt. Do you think he’d take us climbing?”

“Curt hasn’t climbed in over eight months.” Ray did not want Macey spending two fun days with his twin, but he said confidently, “Yes on the bet. I’ll just dial back my IQ thirty points and use small words.”

Macey laughed, and Ray’s chest swelled. Nobody would figure out the switch. As long as he turned slightly toward Macey to hide his dimple and their dad didn’t say anything. The king was too press-savvy to say anything, though, and Kiera would be doing morning lessons with Lisa.

“Perfect,” T said. “And I’ll make sure to belch loudly and pick my nose so no one wonders why the general isn’t acting like himself.”

Macey pulled a face. “I’ve never seen Ray do either.”

Ray grinned.

“What do I get once I pull it off?” he asked so he wouldn’t steal a quick kiss.

“Name it. The sky’s the limit, since I’ll probably win.” Tristan winked. “What do you want?”

Macey, he wanted to say. He scrambled for another idea. He couldn’t have her, and he knew it. “You find a way to get out of meetings for a day and we take Macey to the military base and training center.”

“Sweet!” T crowed. “I win either way. I love getting out of meetings, and spending the day with you two and Chad sounds ideal.”

Macey was the one looking ‘sweet.’ She gazed at Ray with gratitude. “I’d love that. Thank you.”

“Are you feeling comfortable with this, Macey?” T asked as they reached the main staircase.

“You two betting?”

“No!” T laughed. “The brother switch.”

“It’s a brilliant idea.” She smiled sweetly up at Ray.

“Of course it is. I thought of it.” T bounced down the stairs. He was in good spirits today. Ray could only imagine what was stirring in his brother’s brain. He clearly thought he was smart, pushing the two of them together. Ray wouldn’t complain, not for a second, but he still couldn’t mess up the fake engagement with his strong feelings for Macey. He’d act the part this morning, and enjoy every second, then he’d get back to working with Macey to protect T and find the murderer. Macey here was a fresh breath of air—not just for him, but for the case. He’d hit wall after wall; hopefully she could see what he couldn’t and they’d finally bring his mum’s murderer to justice.

They made it to the foyer where their dad was waiting. The king smiled at Macey. “Good morning, Macey. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Macey beamed as if she were rarely complimented. Ray wished he knew more about her, about her family and her past and her friends. He’d tried not to get too personal yesterday, fighting his feelings. He should continue that, but he was burning with curiosity.

The king’s gaze transferred to Ray and then quickly darted to T and back again. “Boys.” He shook his head. “Today? Really? We haven’t had good news for a press conference since before …” He broke off, and he didn’t look like the confident, reigning monarch. He was exhausted and every bit the mourning husband.

“Sorry, Pops. It was my idea.” T clapped his hand on their dad’s shoulder. “Ray needed a challenge today.”

Ray found himself holding Macey tighter to his side, not wanting to let her go—ever. This beautiful woman was a challenge—one for him to resist falling for, not a fun challenge like T was passing the switch off to their father as.

“Are you all right with these hooligans’ tricks?” the king asked Macey.

“I can hardly tell them apart; it shouldn’t affect me at all,” Macey teased, giving Ray a flirtatious smile.

Ray sputtered a laugh at that, and T joined him.

“What?” their dad asked.

“We’d better get moving,” T said.

Ray loved his arm around Macey’s waist, but he wanted her to walk out those doors not leaning on him, but standing side by side. Macey should show the world she was confident and every inch the future princess he wished she could be. Not T’s princess, but his.

He slid his hand from her waist to her arm, then down her arm to clasp her right hand with his left. She visibly trembled and met his gaze. Holding hands was … perfect.

“Brave, bold, and beautiful,” he whispered to her. “You’ve got this.”

“With you holding my hand, I do,” she whispered back.

Ray’s pulse quickened. His dad and Tristan stepped in front of them, and each pushed one of the doors open.

Immediately cameras flashed, videos recorded, and questions flew at them. The sun was bright and the expectancy in the air swirled around them. He blinked and felt Macey stutter a step. He squeezed her hand and bent his head close to her ear.

“Brave, bold, and beautiful,” he said again.

She smiled up at him.

They descended the steps behind Tristan and his dad. Tristan played his role well, looking serious and eyeing each of the press members from their country and from around the world as if suspicious of their motives and making certain they didn’t harm his father, brother, or Macey. Ray smiled.

His brother could shoot well, so Ray’s Glock on his hip wasn’t a complete waste. Ray felt off without his sidearm in public, but his trusted guards and Cordon were stationed throughout the courtyard. They’d be safe.

His dad and Tristan stopped three-quarters of the way down; his dad stepped to Macey's side and Tristan stood next to Ray as they descended to the same step.

His dad held up a hand and the indistinguishable clamor of questions halted.

"Thank you for gracing us with your presence on this magnificent day. I am very pleased to announce the engagement of my eldest son, Crown Prince Tristan August, to the lovely, brilliant, and accomplished Macey Clifton of the United States of America."

Someone whooped in the back and there was some cheering and clapping, but most of the people held a camera or mic in their hands and couldn't really clap.

"Now please," the king continued. "Those from Augustine know the drill. Every media outlet is given one question." He grinned and winked, looking relaxed and kingly. "So choose wisely."

Everyone tittered a laugh.

His dad pointed at a woman on the far left and the questions began. Ray prayed Macey was feeling brave, bold, and beautiful. He'd done several press conferences for T before and a few as himself, answering military questions. He'd be fine. For most people, however, it was unnerving being put on the spot.

"Miss Clifton, how does a computer specialist from Ohio meet a crown prince?"

They'd done their research. Not surprising.

"I was at a party hosted by my well-known boss Sutton Smith, and this beautiful man with captivating blue eyes walked up to me and told me I was 'brave, bold, and beautiful'." She smiled radiantly up at Ray. He absolutely loved that she'd worked their line into the pre-arranged story. "I was immediately smitten."

"I was the smitten one," Ray said, raising their clasped hands and kissing her knuckles.

The press all seemed to love that one.

“Rumor has it Sutton Smith brought you to Augustine,” a male reporter said next. “Are you part of a protection detail?”

Ray had worried this would come up. Sutton Smith was well known around the world. Since he’d taken part in rescuing Eva Canterbury, a famous American model, and Hayden the Beast Warren, an NBA superstar, and killing a huge crime lord, he and his organization had gotten more attention than ever.

“I’m not,” Macey said smoothly. “Sutton brought me because he’s like a surrogate father to me, and I was a bit nervous to meet my prince’s family.” Her radiant smile was irresistible. “I can go anywhere in the world digitally, but actual travel and real people are a bit out of my wheelhouse. Self-proclaimed geek here.”

Everyone laughed at that. Macey was the furthest thing from a ‘geek,’ but Ray could already sense everyone was going to love her. She was down-to-earth and real.

“The two of you fell in love online?”

“For the most part,” Ray answered this time. “We spent one glorious weekend in Lake Como together. That’s when I knew I’d never met Macey’s equal and that I couldn’t let her out of my life. I unexpectedly proposed. Thankfully, she was willing to take a chance on a humble crown prince.” He winked confidently like T would, and the crowd laughed. “She said yes, opening my future to a lifetime of love and laughter with my angelic Macey.”

He had no problem slapping the sass on thick, looking into Macey’s dark eyes, and pretending to be in love. The sparks and connection leaping between them should convince and soften even the most hardened reporter.

“Is that *the* ring?” a nervous-looking younger lady asked when the king gestured to her next.

“Yes, it is.” Macey had done her research on their family. Did she have any idea the significance of the ring on her finger? She held it up, and it glinted in the morning sun. Ray did not like her wearing T’s ring.

“How did he pop the question?”

“He took me up to the castle’s solarium at sunset.” Macey stared into his eyes, and he found his heart racing at the memory of her balancing on the ledge of the solarium, pulling her off and her falling into his arms, and then the kiss … “I won’t share everything he said.” She gave the crowd a teasing glance and everybody smiled or laughed. “But he did remind me that I was ‘brave, bold, and beautiful’ as I’d pretended to be the evening we met, and he begged me to be his.” She shared her tinkling laughter with them, and Ray was lost.

“’Begged?’” He tried to scoff like T would. Then he pumped his eyebrows at the crowd and admitted, “I did. And every day I’m begging her to love me like I love her.” The words were said in a teasing manner, but as he looked into her eyes, he thought he meant them. He wanted to scoff at that, but all he could do was lock gazes with her.

“Then he kissed me, and it’s a miracle I didn’t float right off the solarium balcony.” She waved her free hand in front of her face as if fanning the heat and then gave a delightful, almost-nervous sounding laugh. It was perfect. The cameras and reporters were eating up her genuine warmth.

“Kiss, kiss, kiss,” someone said, and the crowd of normally tough and direct and sometimes cutthroat media took up the chant. Macey had brought light and joy to their day just like she was doing to his. His mum had hoped he’d find a sweetheart to soften his toughness and military obsession. Macey did more than soften him. She made him want to be the best man he could be, a man worthy of her. The man who made her laugh multiple times a day for the rest of their lives.

Ray’s throat felt tight, and his mouth watered with the anticipation of kissing her again. When he thought T would hold her hand during this press conference and possibly kiss her, he’d had to shove the image from his mind. Now it was him who’d be blessed with the opportunity.

She fluttered her eyelashes at him and moistened her lips. Ray would show these people the kiss that had made her ‘float.’

He released her hand, wrapped his arm around her waist, and turned her into him. Macey ran her hands along his shoulders and his muscles

tightened in response. She arched up as he bent down, and their lips fused together. They were two pieces of a puzzle who'd been designed to fit together.

Macey melted into him, and Ray didn't worry about anything but the pressure of her lips caressing his and the warmth she stirred in his soul. Somehow this woman made everything disappear, everything but what mattered most—her.

"Tristan." His dad reached around Ray and jostled his arm. "We should … move on with the questioning."

Ray released Macey's mouth but held her close to his side. She was trembling slightly against him, and he wondered if he wasn't trembling as well. T had given him the gift of having this moment with Macey in the name of keeping the crown prince safe, or a challenge like they'd sold to their father. Ray appreciated T for these stolen moments, but coming down off this high would be worse than he'd feared. Another taste and deep connection with Macey would make it even harder to keep his eyes and his hands off her.

For the moment, he clung to her and she clung to him and they answered the questions, most of which were directed at one of them. Only a few were directed toward his father, asking how he felt about a daughter-in-law and to T as the 'general,' wondering if they'd discovered who the 'Enforcer' was and why they were leaving the notes about T dying all over the village. His father raved about how much everyone loved Macey and T did a great job of answering, but there were no answers regarding the stupid notes, so there was that.

Finally the last reporter asked a question, his father thanked everyone for coming, they said their goodbyes, and Ray escorted Macey up the steps. As soon as they closed the doors, T held out his hand for a high five. Ray didn't want to release Macey to slap his brother's hand, but he forced himself to. The charade was over. He experienced a letdown like he imagined a cocaine user in a rehab center might feel. Luckily, he kept the shaking to a minimum and didn't let himself stare at Macey.

“You rocked it,” T crowed. “That was brilliant. The military center, tomorrow. Pops will help me make it happen and everyone will understand I need a day off to spend with my irresistible fiancée. You’ll love it, Macey.”

“I’m sure I will.” Her voice was shaky, and Ray had to look at her. She looked as let down as he felt.

“You boys.” Their father was shaking his head at the two of them. He pointed at Macey and then at each of them. “Macey, I’m sorry. You must be so confused.”

“I’m fine.” She smiled, but it looked forced. If she cared for Ray like he did her, she was probably much worse than confused.

“I have never …” His dad studied Ray much too deeply, then seemed to realize he shouldn’t say whatever he was thinking. “Never mind. Come on, Tristan. We’ve got budgets to review and funds to allocate.”

“Let me go change out of this getup. Being a highly decorated general is sweaty.”

“You sweated in my uniform?” Ray would’ve punched him, but T had just given him the gift of holding and kissing Macey, staring into her eyes and not feeling tortured about it. For twenty minutes. Even knowing cameras were rolling and the videos and shots would be seen throughout the world hadn’t taken away from those perfect moments.

“Yep.” T inhaled. “Smells like a high school locker room in here. Yummy.” He darted up the stairs before Ray could grab him.

“Get it to Malory. She’ll have it dry cleaned before the next ceremony or ball …” his dad trailed off. They hadn’t had a ceremony or ball since Mum died. They’d have to have both if they got to September twentieth, the fictitious wedding date, before they found the ‘Enforcer’ or the murderer. Ray’s insides chilled with the thought. If they did, could he beg T to let him step into his place for the vows? Who would that make her married to? Ray couldn’t let his brain go there. Too much angst and confusion.

“Sorry my boys are such teases,” the king said to Macey. “They’re brilliant, focused, and mature at times too.”

“You don’t have to explain to me,” Macey said. “I’ve worked for over five years with some of the most impressive security and protection ops in the world, most of whom were with the U.S. Special forces previously, and believe me, those tough guys tease, play pranks, and throw around black humor that make Tristan and Ray look like boring sticks in the mud.”

The king laughed at that. Ray didn’t like it. For a lot of reasons. He and T were definitely not ‘boring sticks in the mud,’ but more importantly a picture was revealed to him he hadn’t thought about previously. Macey, surrounded by ‘the most impressive security and protection operatives in the world,’ buff, talented, smart, brave warriors … hitting on her and taking her out and … kissing her?

“I need to follow T,” he murmured, hurrying up the stairs.

Ray should be the only man kissing Macey, but he had no idea how to proceed with this beautiful woman. He was stirred up, confused, and longed to break his promise to himself to not pursue her. With his mum’s murder and the threats to T hanging over his head, he couldn’t be a mess himself, or he’d mess everything up worse than it was already.

CHAPTER NINE

Macey and Ray changed their clothes, escorted T to the king's office, and she took her laptop to his office to share the information her AI models had generated on all the people they'd discussed yesterday. It was a long, long list.

They worked quietly through the names and files, taking a break to eat lunch with the king, Kiera, and Tristan and take Kiera on a walk around the gardens below the castle before getting back to work.

Macey was all stirred up with Ray right here and the memory of another incredible kiss on her lips and mind. She loved that he and Tristan had switched places for the press conference and looked forward to going to the military training center tomorrow. Since they'd come to his office, Ray was being really cautious around her. He seemed to avoid touching her and for the most part even looking at her.

Ray had to focus on some emails and border control issues, so she mostly worked alone on her laptop. By midafternoon, she'd gone through almost all the names and had found nothing out of the ordinary except a few red flags or points of interest. She tried to think like Hercule Poirot.

Standing, Ray stretched. He caught her staring and asked, "Do you want to talk through any of the names?"

"Yes." She stood and stretched as well, and now he was the one staring. "Lieutenant General Cordon."

“You found something on Philippe?” His brow squiggled.

“No, but you have to admit he gets a large promotion if you’re promoted to crown prince.”

“True, and he’s inside the castle. But he’d have no reason to hurt my mum and I really don’t think …”

“I don’t either.” She paced to the window and then spun to face him. “Lisa.”

“Nanny Lisa?”

“Have you seen the way she looks at Tristan?”

He raised his shoulders. “I think she wants him to date her, not to kill him. But he did reject her a couple years ago. Told her she was too young.”

“A woman scorned.”

“I guess she could be behind the notes, but her background is squeaky clean. She adores Kiera, and she’s usually at the castle, not in the village.”

Macey paced a bit, enjoying moving and talking to him. “Her boyfriend … the kid who keeps trying to climb up to the castle.”

“Jobe. Kind of an idiot, but I think he’s just a hormonal teenager. I’ll have my men keep an eye on him though.”

“Okay. Chad.”

He reared back and then folded his arms across his chest. “You found something on Chad?”

“No, but he’s so … smooth, too-charming, with almost a villain accent.”

He laughed at that and then passed a hand over his face. “I won’t tell him that.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, then sighed. “There really isn’t much to go on.” She needed to ask about a couple of his brothers, but she was putting it off, had been since she’d come. So she went with the other interesting tidbit. “Did you know your mom and Prime Minister Shule dated in college?”

“How did your analysis find that?” he asked, looking more amused than impressed.

“It finds everything.” She shrugged.

“I’ve heard that story before. That’s how Henry met Leslie. She and my mum were roommates. Do you think it means anything?”

“Do you?” she asked. She had no idea, but it was a point of interest, at least.

“My parents and Henry and Leslie all have—or had,” his mouth twisted, “happy marriages. I don’t think a few dates at university could affect the case.”

He was probably right. “What happened to the prime minister’s daughter—Jennifer? My info shows she left to teach English in the Dominican Republic the day your mom died.”

“Is that all it shows?” His gaze was intense.

“She dated Tristan?”

He nodded and shrugged. “I think they had a fight or something.” He rubbed at his jaw and then clenched his fist and thrummed it against his leg. “It’s one of the few times T hasn’t shared with me. He kept insisting they just ‘needed a break’ and with mum dying, I didn’t dig into it.”

“Nobody found her and questioned her about your mom’s death?”

“Jensen did a phone interview. I can find it for you.” He sank into his chair. “I can’t see any motivation or evil intent from Jennifer. She’s a sunshine and serve others type of girl. I really wish she and T …” He trailed off and studied the computer.

Macey waited a few beats, studying his tense shoulders and the way his fists were clenched. He simply stared at the laptop, not typing anything. “Ray …”

“Yeah?” He looked up. His blue eyes were intense and stressed.

“… Are you okay?”

He shook his head, blew out a breath and stood, pacing in front of the windows. Instead of staring at the gorgeous view, he studied the array of monitors covering the perpendicular wall, each with a different camera angle of the castle. The exterior entrances, hallways, and large gathering areas were always on display, but the other areas rotated through or flashed up on designated screens if there was movement in that location. The security offices on the main floor had a similar setup.

Macey stood still, not sure if his pacing and angst were about her or about the case. The case was frustrating. There was no information to go on. Literally nothing. She could see why Ray had agreed to let her come and help. What if she wasn't any help? That made her feel cold and try to push her glasses back onto her nose.

She was beginning to rule out her theory of Ray and his people not being good investigators. His mom had either died by suicide, or her murderer was brilliant and/or somebody nobody would suspect. Which was why the red flags she'd found, but hadn't revealed to him yet, were disturbing. What if she had found something and it pointed straight at one of Ray's brothers?

Ray's eyes narrowed in on her. His blue gaze was suddenly very warm and very determined. He strode up to her, and Macey was pinned between him and the desk. She didn't mind. Not at all. Would he kiss her again?

"How many of Sutton's operatives did you date?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" Macey was befuddled. What did that have to do with anything?

He drew in and then pushed out a breath, his gaze boring into her. "You were telling my dad about all the men you'd worked with for Sutton. I'm sure they badgered you for dates constantly. Did you, or are you currently, dating any of them seriously?"

"Oh." Well, this was awkward. She wondered how to explain. Would he find her less attractive when he realized her confidence around him and putting on makeup and pretty clothes was the act? He'd realize her saying she was a geek at the press conference wasn't a joke. Truthfully, she was confident with Ray by her side—unless she was trying to explain why she didn't date. "Um …"

He backed away suddenly, and she could breathe easier, but she'd enjoyed the pressure of his body against hers, his delicious musk and bergamot scent. Thumping his closed fist against his leg, he muttered, "I'm sorry. I know we need to focus, and I appreciate the different points you're bringing up. I'll keep a closer eye on each of the people you've asked about. The problem is … My mind keeps stirring up all these images of you with these impressive American special ops guys in full combat gear." He shook his head and concentrated on the wall of monitors.

Macey's heart thumped out of control. She loved that he was stirred up over her. She wanted him to open up and say he was falling for her, but that was too much to dream of. Macey Clifton with the most incredible prince of the century? Talk about unattainable dreams.

"Brave, bold, and beautiful," she muttered. *Please help me, Lord.*

His gaze darted to her.

She drew in a breath and stepped up to him, not touching him but wanting to be close. She looked up into his eyes and admitted, "I dated one of Sutton's ops five years ago when I was just out of college. His name was Steve. It ended … badly. Horribly. As in Sutton, Liz, Liz's daughter, and their future son-in-law almost being killed and Sutton's beautiful mansion being blown up. Steve was a traitor, a double-agent working for Liz's vile ex-husband, the Duke of Gunthry. He used me for information."

It was so humiliating to admit all of that ugliness to Ray.

"I'm sorry." His gaze was compassionate.

"Thank you. After that, I swore to myself I wouldn't date any of Sutton's guys."

He nodded his understanding; his blue gaze seemed relieved. "I bet they go insane asking you out."

She stepped back and tried to push her glasses up onto her nose. Of course they weren't there. Her stomach churned.

Ray caught her hand. The warm pressure of his fingers and palm calmed her. With her hand in his, she'd faced the press as if she were a confident

future princess. What else could she conquer with him by her side? Sadly it couldn't happen, so she needed to stop fantasizing about it.

"Why do you do that?"

"I'm used to wearing glasses," she admitted.

"Are you wearing contacts now?"

"I have good vision." She bravely met his gaze. "I wear the glasses to hide my face. And that's not all. I always have my hair in a bun or ponytail."

He stared at her, the pieces clearly clicking together. "And you wear baggy T-shirts and tights to hide as well?"

She nodded.

"Because Steve broke your heart?"

"I wore the glasses and hid before Steve. That's who I am. All this future-princess stuff … it's just a mission."

He cocked his head and studied her, obviously confused. Macey did not want to talk about this. She'd shared about Steve and that she was a geek; that was more than enough. She did not need to paint the picture of her childhood and teenage years. He didn't need to know about the men her mom had brought around who had said inappropriate things to and about Macey, who were always looking at her and trying to touch her. Thankfully, none of them had taken advantage of her, but she'd lived in constant fear.

Ray was a prince. He'd grown up loved, with a beautiful family, money, privilege, in a castle for crying out loud. Besides all that, he was a tough alpha male. No way would he understand a scared little girl climbing into the top of her closet and hiding behind clothes, trembling and praying until the men stopped looking for her or Gage got home. Her older brother had been—and still was—her hero.

She pulled her hand free from his, turned away from his penetrating gaze, and sank into her chair. Clicking on the computer that had gone to sleep, she stared at the screen, trying to make sense of it. Ray didn't move.

Maybe it was because she was terrified she'd spill about her awful childhood and have him realize how beneath him she was, maybe it was to hide her embarrassment about Steve, or maybe it was simply said in spite because his family seemed so ideal, despite losing his mom, but she burst out with, "The only people who had access to, or were at the castle the night of your mom's death who have red flags in their background are Curtis and Malik."

"Excuse me?" He sounded offended, but maybe a little guilty? Did he know about his brothers' infractions?

She looked up at him. He towered over her as she sat. Macey hadn't seen him in 'general' mode yet. She imagined he could be very intimidating. She knew what a nice guy he was, but right now there was a tiny part of her that wanted to climb into the top of a closet and hide. She eyed the nearby drawers, wondering if there was any chance someone had left a pair of cosmetic glasses inside any of them.

Steeling her spine, she reminded herself she wasn't a scared little girl. This man would never hurt her. She pointed at her screen and said, "Curtis was suspected of being responsible for a fellow rock climber's eight months ago. Malik was involved in a battery case in Czech Republic shortly after your mother's funeral, and it was swept under the rug." She glanced up at Ray. His jaw worked, but he didn't respond immediately.

"Before I explain each of these situations, I feel I should remind you that I have turned over every stone, including hiring an outside team of investigators from Germany with no affiliation or loyalties to my family to investigate each of my family members, including myself, and determine if there was anything suspicious or that could link any of us to my mum's death. Each of my siblings, my father, and our extended family allowed their backgrounds, electronic devices, and any personal property or spaces to be combed through. Nothing was found to implicate any of us."

The words were all said calmly, controlled, but he was obviously upset. She understood. If anybody had accused Gage of something horrific like this, she'd be livid.

She remembered the investigative report he was talking about. They'd looked at it yesterday and she'd actually thought it was a little extreme to investigate the family so in depth but here she was questioning his family.

"I apologize. I remember that report. I'm only trying to cover every angle, and my models always pull up information others don't find. I can't imagine how frustrating it's been trying to figure out how your mom died when there's so little to go on."

Was it suicide and Macey would have to be the one to help this family accept that?

He sank into the chair next to her and tapped his clenched fist against his leg. "I've been going out of my mind," he admitted. He focused on her, his blue eyes sincere. "I apologize that I got frustrated. We brought you here hoping to find answers. If you feel …" He took a deep, steadying breath. "If you feel we need to investigate me and my family members again. I will do it."

She did not want to put any of them through that, but maybe she would have to. "I'll go through the information the team you hired compiled again and we'll reevaluate after that."

He nodded.

"Can you tell me what you know about the accusations against Curtis and Malik?" Macey knew enough to put the story together, but Ray might have insight that she hadn't uncovered. She'd also like to see if he could tell her the story without biasing it to his family's side.

"Yes. Curtis was climbing with a close friend and an accomplished climbing instructor."

"A woman, right? Suzanne?"

"The woman we all thought he was in love with."

Macey sucked in a breath.

"Curtis thought the anchor Suzanne had put in thirty meters up the cliff face was secure. He started to climb, but their combined weight ripped the

anchor out and Suzanne fell. She would've probably just been banged up and bruised, but her head slammed into the wall first and she was unconscious and bleeding profusely." His clenched fist kept thumping his leg, his obvious tell that he was upset. "Lowering her down wasn't an option. A hundred and twenty meters of a sheer cliff face and no cell service at the bottom."

Macey's eyes widened. Almost four hundred feet. Yikes. Her stomach pitched just imagining being that high up, hanging by a rope. These were the kind of details her computer programs couldn't uncover.

"My brother somehow secured her to his back and climbed almost sixty meters to the top of the cliff."

"That's insane."

"Insane and superhuman. Curtis is incredibly strong, but the adrenaline and miracles from above had to play into it. Unfortunately, he's buried himself underneath the pain, wandering aimlessly, not completing projects or climbing ..."

He focused on her face, and Macey was terrified to hear more. She knew the other climber had died. Her heart ached for Curtis. A man who would go to such lengths to save someone and then hurt his own mother? It didn't fit.

"He had cell coverage at the top, so he called Chad for a military helicopter. Curtis tried to administer first aid and CPR when her heart stopped beating. By the time Chad got there, she was gone." He paused to let the awful ending sink in and then said, "Curtis blamed himself, and Suzanne's family blamed him as well. It's been … horrible for him. Then to lose Mum two months later …"

Macey wished she could hug Ray. She wished she could hug Curtis. Instead, she sat there awkwardly and mumbled, "I am so sorry."

Ray didn't speak for a few beats, then cleared his throat and said, "Malik escaped to Prague after Mum's funeral. He was staying in the Grand Mark, a luxury hotel. Early in the morning, he woke to the sound of a woman crying out in pain from the room next door. It was muffled, and he

wondered if he wasn't making it up because he was so upset about losing Mum. Then the sound stopped."

Macey's heart thumped faster, sick to her stomach.

"Late that night, Malik couldn't sleep and heard the cries, some thumps, and sobbing. He couldn't sit by, so he knocked on the door. When the man opened it, he told him to stop beating his wife or he'd show him how it felt to get thrashed."

Macey stared at him, imagining how that woman felt—scared, hurting, wanting to find the top shelf in a closet to hide. These details made her regret asking for the whole story. Her hands trembled, and she clasped them together.

"Malik said he might've just left it at a warning, but the woman stepped into view. She was naked and had bruises all over her body and her deep blue eyes were pleading for his help and …" He cleared his throat again. "They were the exact shade of Mum's eyes. He told me he was already close to losing it, and then the man yelled at the woman, 'You tramp! I'll kill you for letting him see you.' Then he turned to Malik and told him, 'My wife is none of your business. Walk away now, or I'll slit your throat'."

Ray clenched his fist, even as a half-smile played at his lips. "If you knew my brother … You don't threaten or hurt women, and you don't threaten him. He thrashed the guy and tied him up with the bedsheets. Then he told the woman to get dressed and took her straight to the police." His fist tightened, and he thumped it on his leg. "The Czech people are very honorable, but the man was a visiting Russian dignitary. They had to let him go and arrest Malik. They dropped the charges quickly but revoked his visa. Thankfully, the woman *somehow* disappeared and she might be safely living in Switzerland."

"I'm glad he could help that woman," she said, her voice trembling. "It's awful to be afraid."

His gaze sharpened on her.

"Thank you for sharing with me," she hurried to say. "I think I'd better … get ready for dinner. If you're okay walking Tristan from his office to his

room to dinner," she tried to tease but she did want to be part of Tristan's security detail and ease Ray's burden.

"Of course," he said, but his eyebrows dipped together in concern. It was only four in the afternoon, and he probably realized it wouldn't take her two hours to primp. "I'll walk you to your room."

Thankfully, he didn't ask her to explain how she knew what it felt like to be afraid.

Macey stood, closing her laptop and picking it up. They walked silently out of his office and along the hall, up the stairs, and to her suite, not even seeing Ray's guards that they sometimes ran into. It was crazy how huge this place was, and how empty.

"Thanks for the information. I'll keep researching." She held the laptop up.

"We'll go to the military center tomorrow with T, but then we can start interviewing people if you like."

"Okay." She smiled and pushed on the door handle.

"Macey." Ray's hand on her arm stopped her.

Her stomach pitched. "Yes?"

"You've been through … something hard that you don't want to talk about."

Her eyes widened, but she nodded. She might not be ready to tell him all her sordid background, but she could admit she'd been through something hard.

"I want to be here for …" His voice trailed off. His blue eyes filled with conflicting emotions, and he released her arm.

Macey wished he'd said 'you.' He seemed to be interested in her like she was him, but he kept closing himself off. He was probably keeping his distance for the fake engagement—or was that just the excuse she was making up for him? What did she know about relationships? Maybe it was just her that wasn't the right fit.

"I'd love to listen if you ever need someone to talk to," he said.

“Thank you,” she said almost automatically. He was a great guy who wanted to help, but he didn’t want to be with her. She wasn’t surprised, and she didn’t blame him. She’d only been in this fairytale castle with the handsome prince—or rather princes—for two days now. It was incredible. Ray was incredible, and being with him made her think this was her spot, her home.

But that was a delusion. She wasn’t meant to be here. She needed to figure out who had murdered his mom or prove it was suicide, figure out who was threatening Tristan, and then she could get out of here. Back to her cave. Back to the command center. Normal life. Work. Hiding behind her glasses. Not seeing Ray.

Tears stung her eyes. She pushed the handle and hurried into the room, shutting it on his next words.

“T and I will come walk you to dinner.”

T. Prince Tristan. That was who she was supposed to be faking an engagement to. Faking was much smarter than falling. She was so dumb to think a man like Ray could ever be interested in her for anything more than some teasing, a couple kisses that probably meant nothing to him, and her help with this case.

How would she get through this mission without making a bigger fool of herself than she’d made with Steve? Without her heart exploding like Sutton’s house had?

CHAPTER TEN

Ray had no idea what to think or how to act. He felt as off and confused when Macey wasn't close by his side, talking to him, sometimes touching him, as he had when his mum died.

He made it through dinner that night, mostly because they had no guests so Kiera felt free to be her adorable and exuberant self. It was almost eerie how the little girl could flip a switch and be the demure princess, but it was one of the things Mum had trained her to do, so she seemed to hang on to it.

They all watched some new animated movie with Kiera in the family area after dinner. Ray didn't pay one bit of attention to the movie. He heard Macey's tinkling laugh occasionally and wondered if his brother or Kiera were making her laugh or if the movie was funny. He didn't know. He stewed the entire time about why Macey was sandwiched between Kiera and T on a loveseat and he was sitting by his dad on a huge wraparound sofa.

After the movie, they all walked back to their suites together, with T keeping the conversation going as Ray didn't know what to say.

When he and his brother were alone in T's suite, his twin once again tried to get Ray to admit he was falling for Macey. He had to stay very strong to keep the farce up and not beg T to change places with him until Macey fell in love with him.

The next morning, he worked out by himself at four a.m. T called for him to work out together at six, but Ray was already showered and dealing with

emails and issues he had to deal with before taking the day off. He had two of the guards follow T up to the gym with instructions to shadow the crown prince until Ray spelled them off.

By ten minutes after ten, he was halfway caught up, hadn't eaten breakfast, and T was calling him again, saying he and Macey were waiting in the garage for him. Oh, they were waiting together, were they? That was what was supposed to happen. Them together. Macey protecting T when Ray couldn't. He had no idea why it made him so upset. Okay, he did, but he couldn't let this draw to Macey consume him.

Macey was an incredible lady, but she was here for T. Ray's country and family needed him to focus right now. He also had a niggling worry that Macey wasn't ready for a relationship. She'd obviously been through something hard—had been damaged, maybe? The way she'd said, 'it's awful to be afraid,' in that trembling voice had wrenched at his heart.

He'd known hard work learning and preparing for his career, and he'd felt fear of his commanding officers or when he'd been lost in the mountains as a child, but not real fear—the fear that had made Macey's voice tremble and her eyes fill with it. Why? What wasn't she sharing with him? She'd shared about Steve—he hated that guy—and she'd shared that she usually hid behind large glasses and frumpy clothes. At first that revelation had been a relief because she wasn't dating all those men, but knowing she was hiding from pain and fear had hurt deep inside.

He stood swiftly, clenching his fists. It shouldn't matter, couldn't matter, not to him. He wasn't the one who had the privilege of being engaged to her. He wasn't the one she should share secrets with, the man who could shelter her from pain and help her heal. His responsibilities had to take priority over his need to help Macey, be there for Macey, hold Macey, kiss Macey. He growled deep in his throat.

Today he'd have to watch her and T pull off the act around a whole lot of people who would probably know if they tried to switch again. His troops knew him. He'd trained them and evaluated them, and they might have a hard time guessing between him and T, but they'd figure it out. Besides, T hadn't offered to switch again. Why not? Did he want his own shot at

Macey? Was he becoming enamored with her too? Since Ray wouldn't admit he was falling for her maybe T thought her heart was fair game?

Ray hurried down the stairs and past the kitchens, waving to Malory, their head of housekeeping, and Grace, their head cook, but not stopping to say hello like he usually would. The kitchens and Malory's office were bright and state-of-the-art with large windows as they weren't underground at all. Mum had updated the below levels with the rest of the castle and the family liked their sparse staff.

He burst through the doors into the massive garage filled with luxury cars, trucks, sport utilities, side-by-sides, four-wheelers, road bikes, and dirt bikes. T was pressed close to Macey, and they were talking animatedly. Ray's stomach twisted and his heart felt like it had fissures in it.

They turned to him. Macey's dark eyes were all lit up. They weren't playing for any crowd down here. T didn't even have the grace to look guilty for being so close to her.

Ray's fist clenched. His brother didn't need to feel guilty. Macey was supposed to be in his arms and Ray kept claiming he wasn't interested in her. Bile rose in his throat.

"T says I can pick any car, and I can drive," she announced happily. Oh, it was 'T' now? Ray had rather liked how she called his twin his full name but shortened his own.

"Oh?" He forced a smile. "So beautiful American computer specialists know weapons, how to fight, and they can drive?"

"Can they drive?" She puffed herself up and gave him a challenging look, still smiling. The effect was adorable. "That clinches the decision. We'll take the Bugatti Chiron. Unfortunately we'll have to take the four-door, not the Super Sport, so I'll have to top out at two-hundred and thirty-six miles per hour, not break the three-hundred mile per hour like I could in the sport."

T laughed, but Ray just stared at her in wonder. She really did know weapons and cars. Her laugh was like angels' bells. Her dark eyes captivated him. She was a mix of sweetness and confidence that had never

been matched. His perfect woman stood in front of him. With his brother's arm brushing hers, wearing his mum's ring, and engaged to his perfect twin.

He was going to be sick.

"Impressive," he muttered.

"I haven't impressed you yet." She flipped her hair over her shoulder and gave him a sassy look. He knew she was only playing. Macey wasn't really sassy. He felt like he knew her so well, and he wanted to tell her she'd impressed him over and over again the past two days. Had he impressed her? With his lips?

He hurried toward the sleek silver four-door luxury car and opened the driver's door for her. She walked away from T and Ray breathed a little easier without his twin too close to her.

Her sweet scent tantalized him as she smiled and slid into the car. She was wearing a blousy short-sleeved white shirt and stretchy black pants with red high heels. Beautiful, but that was only part of her appeal.

He stepped back to the rear door. T met his gaze over the top of the car. "Impressive," he mouthed, winking obnoxiously before sliding into the passenger seat. Next to Macey.

Ray loved his brother, but he desperately needed to knock him on his butt. He slid into the car and tried to go into military mode, focus on their surroundings, his men tailing them in a Range Rover, any other dangers.

Everything was too quiet outside the vehicle. Inside the vehicle, it was impossible to shut out Macey's lilting voice, tinkling laugh, her fresh scent, her dark hair sliding over her toned arm, her beautiful fingers on the steering wheel, the smooth way she handled the car, and the thrill of acceleration around tight corners, made even more thrilling as it was Macey's expertise creating it, her gaze meeting Ray's in the rearview mirror.

The military base was in a mountain valley only ten minutes south of the castle. They were admitted through the gates, a couple of the men doing double takes at Macey driving the car and their general sitting in the back.

Ray didn't care, but he wished he could be sitting up front with her, holding her hand. Luckily, T didn't take the liberty of doing so.

They parked the car and greeted Chad, who was waiting for them with a grin and immediately started teasing Macey. Ray remembered her saying Chad was 'smooth, too-charming, with almost a villain accent'. He smiled, relieved she wasn't interested in Chad.

Ray and Chad followed T and Macey through the facility, and T did hold her hand this time. Ray kept telling himself it was part of the farce, but it made his stomach churn and his fists clench.

T showed her the vehicle bay with tanks and armored vehicles, the hangar with planes and helicopters, the outdoor training grounds, shooting range, and obstacle course, the indoor training facility, the dining hall, the bunk rooms, and introduced her to people along the way. Everyone was friendly with her, and Ray could bet they were pulled in by her appeal just like he was.

They made it to the armory and then to Chad's weapons room. Macey adorably rattled off not only the names of each gun but some fact about it. She looked so lit up and incredible, Ray knew he was sunk. He caught T watching him and had to hide his fascination with Macey. What was he going to do? He had to find who was leaving those stupid notes and who had killed his mum so they could be done with this fake engagement garbage and he could beg Macey to date him. Could he? It would cause a mess and his family didn't need that. But oh, how he needed Macey.

After they left the weapons room and armory, they had lunch in the mess hall and more and more men gathered around their table as Chad teased Macey about guns or knives or swords and tested her knowledge. Every man there was drawn in by how smart and sweet and appealing she was. Ray had to constantly remind himself not to glower at her flock of admirers. These were his men. It would be bad form to knock their heads together for staring at his girl.

And she wasn't his girl. He focused on his brother, laughing and teasing with Macey along with everybody else. T's eyes shone with pride at how incredible his fiancée was. His brother must have decided if Ray wasn't

going to admit to his interest in Macey, he might as well enjoy his perfect fake fiancée. Jerk twin anyway.

Lunch finally ended, and they walked out to the training grounds. Chad wanted to take Macey on a helicopter ride, but T teased his friend mercilessly about how crazy he flew and convinced Macey she should let her lunch settle before she went up with him.

There were men shooting at the ranges, training on the obstacle course, and working on hand-to-hand combat in the outdoor fighting arena. It was really just a dirt circle. Inside they had a nicer area with a full gym, mats for fighting, and a ring for boxing, but when it was beautiful summer weather, everybody preferred to stay outside.

T had taken Macey's hand in his again, and Ray needed to fight somebody. Right now.

"Anybody up for a challenge?" he asked, stepping forward.

The men started cheering. Ray loved to come to the facility and help train and improve his troops.

Macey's gaze zeroed in on him, and he grew hot and cold all over. Suddenly it wasn't just about blowing off some steam. He wanted to show her exactly how well he could fight.

Chad was grinning at him. "I'd fight you, but Tiny beat me this week. He might be a challenge for you."

Was Chad being serious? He was a challenge for anybody, but Ray consistently beat him. Tiny was six-six, two-eighty, and none of it was fat. Last time Ray had worked with him, the kid had shown promise but didn't have the confidence, skill, or speed to come close to beating Chad.

"I'd love a challenge," Ray said.

The men whooped and somebody went to find Tiny. Ray slid off his shirt, grabbed some sparring gloves, then bounced and punched a bit to get warm while he waited. He caught Macey's dark gaze on him. It was appreciative, warm, and made his stomach hop happily. Ray wished he could claim her

lips after he won this fight, but he'd have to settle for impressing her like she'd impressed everyone here.

T was still by her side, but luckily had released her hand as he chatted with Chad.

A roar went up as Tiny strode toward the fighting arena.

"That's Tiny?" he heard Macey gasp.

Tiny was bigger and more built than Ray remembered. He hadn't been here near enough since his mum died and he'd focused on finding the murderer, and then the threats to T started and he'd focused on keeping his brother safe.

Had time slid by that quick? Had it been over six months since he'd seen the kid? He was probably six-seven and three hundred pounds now and he'd obviously been training diligently. In America, they'd have him playing their version of football. In Augustine, this man was destined for a military career.

Ray strutted out to meet him in the circle—shoulders back, head tilted confidently, muscles slightly flexed. So the kid had four inches and fifty pounds on him. Didn't matter. Ray not only excelled at fighting and had the experience and the skills to win, but he would impress his girl, or rather T's girl, or kill himself trying.

"General … Prince … Sir." Tiny gave him a lopsided smile and lifted a gloved hand in an awkward salute. He couldn't have been more than nineteen. "They said I'm supposed to thump you, but my papa taught me to be respectful of my elders, especially my general prince."

Ray laughed. Tiny was a good kid. Ray expected a lot of his men and since his mum's death he'd pushed them harder and been more formal around them. It was nice to relax a little bit.

"You can be respectful of my position and my experience," he said, "but I'm giving you permission to give it everything you've got to 'thump' me."

"Okay." Tiny's dark eyes lit up and he sprang at him.

Ray dodged, spun, and delivered a jab to Tiny's upper back as he flew past. Tiny thumped onto his knees in the dirt. The cheers and taunting began. Ray knew his men wouldn't dare taunt him, but they might cheer against him if Tiny got the upper hand.

Tiny leapt to his feet and roared. He didn't attempt to leap at Ray this time, but he came in fists a-flying. The kid got in some decent upper cuts to his abdomen that took his breath away and a few roundhouses to his head that had Ray seeing black for a few beats. He was strong and knew how to place a punch. Ray stayed on his feet, dodging and deflecting eighty percent of the vicious hits Tiny hurled at him.

Ray delivered more than his fair share of solid hits and kicks. Finally Tiny, seemed to be tiring and getting frustrated. Ray only checked Macey's position and expression every few seconds. She looked impressed and it fueled his confidence and knowledge that he'd win any battle if it impressed her. Ray used a flurry of jabs and kicks that drove Tiny back and then a semi-final upper cut to his chin followed by a kick to his head that took the kid to his rear.

"General, General!" his men cheered.

Ray straightened, only flexing slightly, and gave Macey a confident smirk. She arched her eyebrows at him, folded her arms across her chest, and then gifted him with her radiant smile. Ray was instantly out of breath and disoriented.

Tiny was suddenly in his space and slammed his fist into Ray's abdomen. Ray gasped out a breath. His body wanted to fold forward, but he stayed as straight as humanly possible.

It was time to stop messing around.

He came at Tiny with uppercuts, jabs, roundhouse kicks, and knees to the man's obliques and ribs. Tiny was flung one way and then another, trying to deflect or dodge, but Ray was on fire. He was proving himself to the woman who had captured him, despite being unable to act on his desire for her.

He knocked Tiny to the ground. Some would go after him and keep hitting to finish him off, but that wasn't Ray's style. He watched Tiny. The guy tried to rise, but he swayed and sank back down.

"Do you yield?" he asked quietly, not wanting to embarrass the kid.

"Yes, sir," Tiny said just as quietly.

Ray stuck out his hand. Tiny grasped it and he pulled him to his feet and clasped his thick shoulder with his palm. The men cheered.

"Incredible fight, Tiny." Ray leaned close to his ear so he could hear over the raucous cheers for their general. "You did great. Another six months of working as hard as you have, and you might have me."

"I'll pray for that, sir." Tiny wiped at a trickle of blood on his nose with the back of his glove. The crowd settled somewhat around them.

"Prayer and hard work will take you wherever you want to go."

"Thank you, General."

Ray lifted his chin to the kid and released him. He heard murmuring, oohing, and a few low whistles. Sensing someone approaching from behind, he spun.

Macey was walking toward him, sliding gloves on. Her fancy shirt and high heels were gone. She was in a fitted white tank top with the black pants, pink-painted toenails peeking out at him. The womanly shape and lean muscles revealed in her shoulders, arms, and legs because of the fitted clothing made his pulse quicken. She looked absolutely irresistible.

"Macey?"

"Do you only fight men, General, or will you give me a chance to best you?"

The men hooted and cheered at that. Ray knew she could fight, but what was she doing? He gave her a questioning look, even as fire raced through him at the idea of touching her and how insanely appealing she was. There was no way he'd hit a woman, no matter how well-trained she was, and

especially not Macey, but he could and would gently restrain her if she kept pushing him.

She shrugged her trim shoulders and eased closer. “T bribed me to show off my skills,” she whispered.

He glanced at his brother. T grinned happily as if his fiancée and his brother fighting was the best entertainment he could imagine. What was T playing at? What had he bribed her with? Ray didn’t want everybody to know that Macey was a well-trained weapon, and he didn’t want anybody to know that he was falling for her. Both would be revealed if they sparred.

“Not a good idea,” he whispered back.

Macey gave him a challenging look. Then she threw a right hook at his cheek. He barely dodged it. She smiled sweetly and brought her knee up quick, delivering a nice blow to his ribs. He flinched and grunted. That made her grin bigger, and the men let out sounds of surprise and more hoots and hollers.

Ray was going to cuss out his brother. What did he think they’d gain from this display? Every man at this compound was already going insane over Macey. This would have most of Ray’s army issuing death threats to the crown prince to try to have a chance with her.

She tried to jab at his jaw, but he deflected it and grabbed her wrist. He then grasped her other wrist, crossed her arms at her chest, and pulled her against him. The feel of her arms brushing his bare chest made every cell in his body tingle.

Calls of, “Ooh,” and “You got her, General” came from the men. Ray gritted his teeth. He had no idea how to stay in control. He was on fire for Macey. Her trying to fight him and looking so tough and alluring secured her as his dream woman.

T knew exactly what he was doing to him. Why would he try to force Ray to reveal how deeply gone he was over her in front of Ray’s men? What an idiot. There was much more at stake here than Ray’s crush on Macey. He couldn’t let it show. T might be trying to make this into a joke or a ploy to force Ray’s hand, but Ray had to keep him safe and find their mum’s

murderer. He wasn't losing another family member. No matter how ticked he was at T right now.

"What is T playing at?" he whispered against Macey's cheek.

"He's not the one playing," she said, smiling beautifully.

Using her secured hands as an anchor, she jumped and hooked both of her legs behind his and buckled his knees. Ray flew forward with their combined weight. He barely had time to release her wrists, wrap her up in his arms, and roll slightly so he took the hit on his shoulder and side instead of taking her out. His weight on top of her could've done some serious damage.

Macey used their momentum to keep them rolling to his back. She lay on top of him and said in a breathy, husky, enticing voice, "Pinned. I think I won this round."

Ray could've physically moved, but emotionally he was flattened to the dust. The pressure of her on top of him, her gorgeous smile, her dark eyes flashing enticingly. If she'd planned her takedown, it was effective. This woman could win any battle with him.

"That's my girl," T crowed.

His brother lifted Macey off of Ray and up into the air as the men cheered.

Ray sprung to his feet, but only because he had to keep his pride and his leadership with his men intact. He was out of breath, angry at his brother, enthralled with Macey, and needing to play it cool so word didn't spread from his men and throughout the country that General Raymond August was a pouty loser enthralled with his brother's fiancée.

He smiled and laughed with everyone about Macey taking him down as he took off his gloves, tugged his shirt back on, and caught her sneaking a look at him. T helped Macey remove her gloves and slip into her shirt. Ray's neck muscles and fists clenched.

The crowd dispersed at Chad's command to get back to their duties. Macey and T walked arm in arm to the helicopter as Ray tried not to stare at them

and be jealous, his eyes darting around at his army instead. That gave him a great view to see many of his men unable to keep their eyes off of her.

If T wanted to put a bigger target on his own back, he'd done it. These men were honorable, but most of them were single and knew perfection when they saw it. Placing a woman like Macey in front of them was not smart. If any of them were the ones threatening their crown prince, this would push them to the next level. Maybe that was T's plan. Draw the 'Enforcer' out? Ray had no idea and was chafing to get his brother alone.

They went on a long helicopter ride with Chad at the controls. He was an experienced pilot and despite T's teasing about his friend's piloting skills it was a smooth ride. T pointed out half the country from the aerial view, leaning over Macey as she was next to the window. Ray tried not to flinch every time his brother brushed against her.

T bragged to Macey about their natural protection from the Alps framing their country on every side except the northern border with Germany that was patrolled heavily by Ray's border control division. They showed her the castle and their beautiful valley, the lake, and the mountains from above. T even pointed out Curtis's cabin high in the mountains. Macey was surprised how big and nice it was. Chad flew back south and showed her the iron mines that had made Augustine wealthy. With wise management and a variety of investments that had been initially funded by mine money they could easily provide for the royal family, the military, governmental jobs, and cover most of the expenses other countries taxed their people for.

Macey oohed and ahhed and was delightful as always. Ray wasn't upset at her. He was livid with his brother.

They finally got back to the military base and then into the car. Macey let T drive home. Ray wanted to demand answers as soon as the three of them were alone, but Macey preempted him with, "Thank you for letting me pin you, Ray. T promised me cookie dough ice cream with homemade hot fudge and the entire spa to myself tonight."

That explained why she'd gone for the fight. Maybe she needed some alone time and some ice cream?

“You let her win?” T raised his eyebrows at him in the rearview mirror. His look wasn’t surprised; it was smug, as if he was winning. Ray would take his brother by surprise and show him smug and what winning meant. When they were alone.

“No, I didn’t,” Ray admitted. “She took me by surprise.” He could’ve easily gotten out of her ‘pin,’ but he’d had no desire to.

“You’re an amazing fighter and incredibly strong,” Macey said, not looking at him but studying the winding road.

“Thank you,” Ray managed, suddenly breathless and not caring about anything except Macey thinking he was amazing and incredible. He was soaring, on top of the world. He caught another smirk from T and the feeling settled.

The rest of the drive home was quiet. They parked and walked Macey to her room.

“Thank you for an unbelievable day,” she said to both of them. If only Ray could take her in his arms and make it an even more unbelievable day.

“You’re welcome,” they both said at the same time.

Ray shot his brother an annoyed look.

“Are you skipping dinner for your spa time?” T asked.

“Yes.” She smiled brightly. “Who needs healthy food when you’ve got ice cream, automated massage beds, a hot bath with massagers, and an entire pool to yourself?”

Ray wondered if she was looking forward to some alone time. From what she’d told him, she was more of a recluse. This job was asking a lot of her. He didn’t think anybody but him knew it was a challenge and that she truly thought of herself as a ‘nerd’ and hadn’t just been teasing at the press conference. She seemed to be a natural around everyone from the prime minister to a new army recruit.

“If you get hungry, there’s ‘real’ food in the family area, or the kitchen always has food,” T told her. “I’ll make sure your ice cream is delivered.”

“Thank you.” She lifted a hand and slipped into her room.

When the door closed, Ray glanced at his twin. T was watching him with a sneaky grin.

Ray was about done with his antics. He shoved his brother toward his suite.

“What?” T asked, all innocence, as if that could get him out of a cussing—or a thumping. Ray hadn’t decided which. Probably both.

Ray gestured and strode into the room. As soon as the door was shut, he whirled on T. “You idiot. What were you thinking? We don’t want anybody knowing Macey is a skilled fighter.” Or knowing that Ray couldn’t stay away from her. “You put a target on your back today. Most of our military is probably gunning to take you out so they can have a chance with your fiancée.” That was over the top, but Ray didn’t like all those men knowing how incredible she was.

T laughed. “I’m the idiot? You’re the only man my fiancée wants.”

Ray sucked in a breath, his stomach lifted happily, but he glared harder.

“The rest of the men can drool all they want. Macey is a hundred percent gone over you. You should’ve seen the way she stared at you as you fought Tiny. That girl is head over heels for you, bro.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now, I set this all up perfectly. Go shower and get in a swimsuit. I’ll grab you some food to wolf down. You’ve got hours alone with Macey in the romance of the spa. Who’s the best brother in the world?”

“T.” Ray groaned and leaned against the nearby wall, banging his head back for good measure as he tried to tamp down the heat T’s plan and vision stirred in him. Hours alone with Macey in the spa. Longing filled him. “She wants to be alone in the spa.”

“No, she doesn’t. And if you’re too slow to see how much she wants you, don’t worry. I’ve got your back, as always. I will make this happen with your dream woman. Macey’s the best.”

Ray closed his eyes, but all he could envision was Macey pinning him to the ground, that enticing smile on her face. T really thought she was waiting for him in the spa?

“T.” He opened his eyes and shook his head. “You’ve got to stop playing matchmaker and face reality. Macey is here to protect you, to find Mum’s murderer, and to distract our people from the threats to you and the sadness from losing Mum. Please stop being an idiot and focus on our family, our kingdom, and your responsibilities. And I will focus on mine—keeping you safe and bringing Mum’s murderer to justice.” He pushed away from the wall and headed for the bathroom.

T grabbed his arm and spun him to face him. “If you miss out on Macey, you will never forgive yourself. Mum would want you to follow your heart.”

Ray’s heart thumped erratically. His brother was probably right about Mum, except she’d told him he could protect everyone. If he fell for Macey he couldn’t … The timing was all wrong. “If I let you get hurt, I’ll never forgive myself. Let’s catch the note writer and the murderer. Then maybe …” He didn’t dare let himself hope or look that far into the future.

“Are you serious?”

Ray nodded. “We’ve set this all up with Macey as your fake fiancée to protect you and to help me find the ‘Enforcer’ and the killer. We can’t mess it up just because I’m … drawn to her.” He was much more than drawn to her, but he wouldn’t admit it to his brother.

T studied him, eyes narrowed. “You want me to act the part of Macey’s fiancé?”

“Yes, I do,” Ray got out through a tightly clenched jaw. Even watching T hold her hand had made his gut churn.

“Great. I’m headed to the spa with my fiancée. I’ll let you imagine the cuddling and kissing that’s going to take place, or you can watch it on all the screens in your office. Keep living in the shadows, protecting everyone else, thinking you can protect everyone in the kingdom by yourself, while I make out with your beautiful and incredible and perfect woman.”

Ray slammed his fist into T’s jaw. T hit the wall and bounced back to jab him in the gut harder than Tiny had. Compounded with all the future bruises

he had forming, Ray grunted in pain. It was exactly what he needed to snap himself out of the Macey-induced confusion.

He went for a solid uppercut to his brother's abdomen. Turnabout was fair play.

The door swung open as T grunted and launched a jab at Ray's jaw, which he dodged.

"Boys!" Their father rushed into the room and slammed the door shut behind him. "Stop with the constant fighting. We've got more important issues at the moment."

Ray and T both turned to him. Ray didn't want any other issues. Had word of him rolling around in the dirt with T's fiancée somehow gotten out? None of the men were allowed personal phones during training, so he'd hoped they were safe from pictures or videos, but it didn't mean they wouldn't text or Snap friends or family about it after their shifts.

"What's wrong, Pops?" T looked relaxed and comfortable, despite the red mark on his jaw.

"Our own news channels apparently started the rumors, and now it's spreading throughout the world. They're comparing pictures of the two of you and showing angle after angle of Ray with Macey, claiming, truthfully I might add, that the 'General Prince' is the one kissing Macey Clifton and wondering what 'the hot royal twins' are trying to pull." He shook his head. "This was supposed to be good publicity."

"Crap," T said, summing it up pretty well. Ray gave him a look. T raised his hands and admitted, "All right. You're right. I'll focus."

"There were three notes found today. Jensen said he sent them to your emails, but apparently you two have been busy." He gave them a look that made Ray feel like he was twelve and had put a smoke bomb in the ballroom during a party with the British royals. Prince Harry had thought it would be funny too.

He was letting himself get distracted by Macey. He was stronger than that. T wasn't the only one who needed to focus. In fact, Ray needed to focus more than anyone else.

“Were the notes all the same?”

“No. They all said, ‘Let’s kill Prince Tristan and his American fiancée’.”

Ray’s muscles tightened. Nobody was hurting T or Macey. He couldn’t act on his feelings for her, but he would keep her safe.

“You’ve got a slot on the American talk show *Jessie*. It’s live. Noon pacific, so it’ll be tonight at nine. You’ll do it over Zoom.”

“I will?” T asked.

“Both of you. And Macey. You’re going to convince the world that T and Macey are head over heels in love and Ray has never touched her, kissed her, made googly eyes at her, or has any kind of attraction to his brother’s fiancée. Understood?”

It was as serious as their dad ever got. They needed good publicity, and their dad didn’t need any more stress. Bringing Macey into their lives was supposed to take their people’s minds off the queen’s death, the rumors of the ‘suicide curse,’ and the daily death threats T had received the past couple of weeks. Ray’s crush on Macey, and T’s refusal to let it go, was messing everything up.

Ray had to let her go. His stomach fell as darkness cloaked him.

“Understood,” he said.

“Understood,” T echoed.

“Ray.” His dad’s demeanor softened. “I’ve noticed the way you look at Macey. If you’ve fallen in love with her, we can start fresh with a new plan and deal with the consequences and …” He pushed out a breath. “Somehow, we’ll make it work.”

If you’ve fallen in love with her. Had he? Macey was amazing and seemed perfect for him, but love? No. It was too quick.

His dad left the offer dangling, and T was giving him a pleading look. Ray was tempted. More than tempted. He appreciated his dad putting his needs first. But … it wasn’t right for him to act on his selfish desires. Protecting

his family, keeping the kingdom safe. That was what he did. Not sappily fall in love.

“Thank you for caring enough to offer that,” he said to his dad. Then he straightened his shoulders and shook his head. “I don’t love Macey. I’m impressed by her and attracted to her, but that doesn’t factor in. I’ll be in better control of myself around her.”

T let out an annoyed huff but said nothing. His dad studied him, then nodded. “Okay. We’ll keep going like we’ve planned. Macey can hold her own with that talk show host. You two get serious and do your part so we can keep everybody happy and oblivious while Ray and Macey find this annoying ‘Enforcer’ and Anne’s murderer.”

There was nothing to say to that. It had to happen. Macey was a gift. For their country and their family. Not for Ray.

Please help me push this obsession away and focus, he begged heaven above.

Their dad nodded to each of them. “See you at dinner.”

“See you,” T echoed. Ray managed a tilt of his chin. He’d added to his dad’s pain and stress with his lack of self control. He had to be done with this obsession for Macey. He had to prove he was as strong as he’d trained to be his entire life.

No Macey.

Their dad strode out the door. Ray leaned heavily against the wall. He’d never felt so drained. The press knew about their switch. Everyone had seen Ray was head over heels for Macey. Now they had to try to salvage the situation on an American talk show. In three and a half hours. He had to pray hard to keep his feelings from showing for even the briefest of moments. The cameras would be watching him as closely as T and Macey. What if they made T and Macey kiss? His stomach churned and he didn’t know that he’d be able to eat dinner tonight.

“Do you know what this means?” T asked.

Ray’s dreams were over?

“What?”

“You lost the bet.” T grinned. “You owe me two days of sitting in meetings while I play with Macey.”

Ray growled. He was going to pummel his insensitive jerk of a brother.

Before his fist could connect with T’s eye and give him a shiner that might distract the talk show host, T said, “I’m sorry, bro, but you’re doing this to yourself. We’ll find a way if you will just admit you love Macey.”

Ray forced himself to straighten away from the wall, stare into his twin brother’s blue eyes, and say, “I don’t love Macey.” It was true. He couldn’t possibly love someone he’d met days earlier. He loved a lot of things about Macey, but that was different than loving her.

His heart thudded dully in his chest, as if him not loving Macey hurt it.

He didn’t love her. He really didn’t.

“Denial.” T shook his head morosely.

Ray probably should hit him.

“Well, I’m done listening to your lies. I’m heading to dinner. And you need to get your butt up to the spa and tell Macey what’s happening. Tell her why you can’t act on your *love* … yet.”

Ray deflated. He should force T to tell her. Was he strong enough to be alone with her and not tell her everything he was feeling, why he couldn’t act on it, and how stirred up he was inside?

He glared at his brother. T couldn’t stop smiling. Maybe just one more solid punch to that handsome face. It would ruin Ray’s chances of switching his brother places again, but their last fail had already ensured that. Might as well get the satisfaction of getting the last hit in.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Macey chatted for a few minutes with the delightful head cook Grace who brought the promised ice cream. Grace reminded her of Agatha and made her temporarily miss all of her friends at Sutton's home.

She ate a few bites after Grace bustled away, listening to the waterfall feature in the nearby solarium and birds twittering, as she relaxed in a heated tile bed. The bed was surprisingly comfortable and the ice cream was delicious. She wanted to do the entire spa experience like they had her first night here but much slower, enjoying every part and hopefully doing it with Ray.

Would he really come? Usually Macey valued her alone time, but right now all she wanted was Ray. She would never forget how tough and appealing he'd looked as he fought today or how it had felt to have him pin her hands to his chest and then when she took his knees out how he'd rolled to keep her from being hurt.

He was the perfect combination of protective, tough, warm, and thoughtful. She felt the anticipation of a heroine waiting for her forbidden love. T seemed to approve of them being together. Could they not be forbidden any longer?

She heard footsteps and quickly set her ice cream to the side. Maybe she shouldn't have eaten it. Would she have milk breath when Ray kissed her? Her stomach hopped in anticipation. Would he kiss her? She put a hand to her stomach. Yep, she shouldn't have eaten the ice cream.

Ray slowly walked into the spa. Macey stood and hurried over to greet him. He was in a t-shirt and joggers. Was he not planning to swim? Fine. They could go back to the solarium and watch the sunset.

His gaze swept over her in only her swimming suit, and heat filled her. Something about this man made her feel she was 'brave, bold, and beautiful.'

"You came." She grinned. "T said you would."

It was time to throw caution to the wind. They were finally alone; she must act on all the feelings building within her. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled herself onto her tiptoes.

"Macey." Ray pushed out a heavy breath. "Ah, Macey." He gently removed her arms and stepped away. What was he doing? "You have to stop being so … irresistible."

"I do?" At least he thought she was irresistible.

Ray glanced around at the pool, the view of the mountains, everything but her. "Macey, I …" His gaze met hers, full of torment, and Macey's stomach pitched for an entirely different reason. "The media are claiming T and I switched places for the press conference."

"Dang." Not really 'claiming' because it was true, but … dang.

"Yeah. All three of us are on an American talk show at nine tonight, noon their time. We have to prove you're in love with T."

That was the last thing she wanted to do. She tried to push her glasses on tighter. They weren't there. Why had she let Sutton take them? She folded her arms across her chest instead. Ray's gaze flitted to her and quickly away. His fists clenched.

"That's why you're here, after all," he reminded her quietly. Gently. Ray wasn't reprimanding her, but she felt it all the same. "And to help me find who's threatening T, who killed our mum, and to keep T safe."

Macey swallowed but couldn't form words. He was right. She was failing at her job. She'd found nothing that really helped, no leads, and all she

selfishly wanted was for Ray to hold her close.

“I’m sorry,” she managed.

“No.” Ray shook his head and his blue gaze warmed as he studied her face. “This isn’t on you, Macey. I lost focus. I apologize. It won’t happen again.”

Macey drew in a sharp breath and fought the emotion making her throat feel raw and her eyes sting. She blinked quickly and looked away. She wasn’t a crier. She would not cry. *It won’t happen again.* Ray wouldn’t let his guard down and flirt with her, grow closer to her, touch her, kiss her, and make her feel comfortable, confident, appreciated, loved.

She should say something. If only she could give him a final kiss before he walked away and her heart ripped out. If she threw her arms around him again and he gently removed her arms and stepped away … she’d fall apart. She didn’t want him to see her cry.

“Do you need me to protect T before the show?” she asked in a mostly level voice. Focus on the job. Not on losing the man of her dreams.

“No. I’ll stay with him. You enjoy your spa time. You earned it.” He flashed his incredible smile at her.

She’d earned her spa time by surprising him and sort-of pinning him to the ground in front of his men. That had felt … insanely incredible. Right now, it felt … insanely awful.

“Where are we meeting for the interview?” she asked.

“We hadn’t talked about it. T and I will figure it out and come get you about ten minutes before nine. Does that work?”

“Perfect.” Nothing was perfect.

She couldn’t focus on his blue eyes any longer and not beg him to admit that he cared deeply for her, beg him to kiss her and love her behind closed doors. Couldn’t they only pretend she loved his twin in public? Ray was too honorable to sneak around, and he would stay in control from here on out. He’d probably soon realize that Macey wasn’t right for him anyway. Saying this general prince was out of her league was a laughable understatement.

She spun away from him, hurried to the edge of the Olympic pool, and did a shallow dive into the water. Liz was an incredible swimmer and had taught her how to be proficient in a few strokes. Macey would swim until she was exhausted and the tears stopped mixing with the pool water. Then she'd get ready for that interview, pray for divine help, and focus on being 'brave, bold, and beautiful.' Without Ray's hand holding hers.

Surfacing for a breath, she was surprised to see Ray hadn't moved. He was studying her with piercing intensity in those blue eyes she loved.

She had to reach for the side so she wouldn't sink. Their gazes held, and all the longing she felt for him was reflected in his eyes.

He tilted his chin up, whirled, and strode away. Macey watched until he disappeared. Then she blinked against the tears racing down her face. Ray was shutting her out.

She'd succeeded at the press conference yesterday because of his steady, comforting warmth. How was she going to get through tonight's interview? How would she get through the rest of her life without him?

Macey was waiting at ten minutes to nine, dressed in a beautiful fitted floral dress, her hair and makeup looking as good as she knew how to make it look, and praying desperately for help. She had to pretend to be in love with Tristan. Was it wrong to pretend he was Ray in her mind? That was the best idea she'd come up with at this point.

She was a professional. This was just a job. Heaven above would strengthen her and give her the right words and help her not to let her gaze stray to Ray.

A knock came at the door, and all her pretty speeches seemed trite.

Please help, was all she could get out.

"Brave, bold, and beautiful," she muttered as she walked to the door.

Pulling it open, she knew this was her first test. She almost faltered when her gaze met Ray's. He was devastatingly handsome in a gray suit and blue plaid tie. His eyes were full, full of her, but he quickly looked away when she met his gaze. That actually helped her not to throw herself at him. Prayer helped too.

She forced herself to focus on Tristan and smile radiantly. He was in a navy-blue suit and yellow floral tie. He was probably just as handsome as Ray. They were identical twins, after all.

"Is your cheek swollen?" she asked Tristan.

"You should see the other guy." He laughed and exchanged a look with Ray. His blue eyes looked more serious and troubled than she'd ever seen them. "Are you ready to wow the media again?"

"Of course. Interviews. Pshaw. Easy for a computer geek from Ohio." She winked and laughed. Her laugh was unsteady, her voice was unsteady, her hands were unsteady.

"A brave, bold, and beautiful computer genius from Ohio," Ray corrected her.

Her hands stopped trembling as she met his gaze. Even if he couldn't hold her hand, Ray could steady her. "Thank you."

His gaze was still tortured, but knowing that he cared meant the world to her. The fact that he was so honorable and wouldn't act on his yearning for her made her fall even harder for him.

"Let's do this," Tristan said, offering his arm. She tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and the three of them walked down the hall, Ray on Tristan's other side. That was probably for the best, but she liked him close. She prayed harder.

"We thought we'd wow them with the library," Tristan said. "Take their minds off some of their intrusive questions with an incredible setting. Hopefully."

"Sounds great."

They hurried down the steps and then down the hallway to the spacious, gorgeous library. Macey hadn't had any free time besides her spa time earlier tonight, and that hadn't been relaxing or fun like she'd hoped. She'd swam until her lungs hurt and her arms trembled.

Maybe after the interview she'd explore the library and find herself a book to escape into. She had numerous medieval romances loaded on her kindle, but they would probably remind her of the handsome prince she couldn't have. A print book on seventeenth century politics or farming tools used in ancient Egypt might be a better fit.

Unfortunately, the sun had set outside so they couldn't take advantage of the view. A man stood by an obviously high-dollar camera pointed at a leather sofa. The lighting was cozy and the background was a towering display of antique books and a gorgeous wood and granite fireplace.

"This is James. He's our videography and photography expert," Tristan said.

"Nice to meet you," Macey said.

"You as well." He smiled kindly and gestured. "Sixty seconds to showtime."

Tristan guided Macey to the couch. They cuddled onto one cushion while Ray sat next to Tristan and relaxed back with his leg crossed over his knee. He looked like a male model and a military tough guy combined. Like heaven. And Macey needed to stop looking at him.

"I'm so sorry about all of this, but we have to play the part," Tristan whispered against her cheek, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and clasping her other hand in his.

"I know." She did know, and she'd get through this. She snuggled into Tristan. It wasn't awkward just no sparks or thrills like when she was close to Ray.

James counted down and then pointed at them on 'one.' A screen went live next to James's cameras and Macey could see the talk show host Jessie and a live studio audience. Macey, Tristan, and Ray were displayed on a huge screen behind Jessie. Dang, Ray looked irresistible. She hoped this show

didn’t backfire and have women the world over rushing to Augustine to fight over General Raymond August. Hot jealousy churned inside her at the thought.

The host was giving an intro and quick background on her first guests. Macey liked Jessie’s show. The lady was classy, real, and not snarky or overly sensational.

This would be good. She had this. As long as she didn’t look at Ray. But she might have to look at him when he spoke, or that would be an obvious tell. Dang, she didn’t know. She’d never been trained in diplomacy while falling in love with the wrong brother.

“Oh, my.” Jessie beamed at them as she finished her intro. “If you two aren’t the most gorgeous couple of the century. Welcome, welcome. I’m ecstatic to have you on my show.”

“Thank you, Jessie.” Tristan was all confidence and charm. “We’re honored to be here.”

“Yes we are,” Macey inserted. She smiled at the camera, then looked at Tristan and pretended he was Ray. It kind of worked.

“Ooh, you two are … sparky.”

Oh good. Maybe it was working.

“And the twin, General Raymond, is here with us as well. Hello, handsome. Are you truly unattached?” Jessie winked at Ray, and Macey’s stomach tightened. She clung to Tristan’s hand.

“It’s all right.” Tristan leaned in close and whispered against her ear as Ray grinned and flirted with Jessie. “Put the claws away.”

Macey laughed. Too loud. Interrupting Ray and Jessie’s flirtations.

“What are you two whispering and laughing about?” Jessie raised an eyebrow. “Never mind. Keep your secrets, but we need to hear this incredible royal romance firsthand—how you met, fell in love, the proposal. Spill it all.”

Tristan, luckily, started talking. Macey pitched in a few details. She prayed nonstop in her head, and that helped.

She could feel Ray. His presence distracted her, but it also strengthened her. As did heaven above. She and Tristan talked, laughed, and showed off the gorgeous ring she'd put back on her finger after swimming. The ring was beautiful. An heirloom with a lot of significance and meaning for this royal family. It fit her finger, but it didn't fit her personality.

She forced herself to look at Tristan as if he was her soul mate and cuddle as close to him as she could without actually climbing onto his lap. Somehow the time passed, and she thought she might make it through.

"Now, Prince Raymond," Jessie redirected when Macey was certain their fifteen-minute slot was up. "You handsome hunk, you. It's rumored that you and your brother switched places for the press conference and you're *also* head over heels for your future sister-in-law."

Macey's body got far too warm. If only she could be with Ray. Handsome hunk? He was, but he was so much more. She let herself look at him but tried to hide the longing.

Ray smiled easily for the camera. "Obviously Macey is an incredible lady and T is a lucky, lucky man."

Fire raced through her as Ray gifted her with his incredible smile. Her lips trembled as she tried to return the smile without revealing Ray's smile made her body turn to liquid heat.

"But I would *never* make a play for my brother's fiancée. My family and responsibilities always come first, and you can easily see how gone Macey is over T and vice versa. They're perfect together." Ray said all of this with a confident grin at Jessie, and no obvious feelings for Macey. The fire and warmth cooled to freezing, and Macey shivered. Ray would never make a play for her. *Never*.

Tristan rubbed her arm with his hand and whispered, "Almost there. You're doing amazing."

"Thank you," she whispered back into his neck.

“You see?” Ray said. “They can’t even get through this interview without getting lost in their own world.”

“I can see that.” Jessie grinned and winked. “We’re over our time slot, but I think the producers will forgive us. We are going to make time for a kiss for the lovebirds.”

Macey’s gut twisted uncomfortably as the studio audience cheered.

“Yes!” Tristan crowed as if kissing her was the only thing he wanted in this world. He turned her toward him, releasing his hold on her hand and cupping her jawline.

She looked into his eyes as if she loved him, and tried to imagine he was Ray. Tristan flashed a cocky grin and then bowed his head closer, and their lips met. She felt … lips. No sparks. No warmth. No tingles. No joy and love.

Tristan increased the pressure of the kiss and she forced herself to act like it was amazing. She wrapped both hands around his neck and kissed him back with a gusto she hoped didn’t look as fake as it felt.

“Okay, okay, you two. Wow! We are tragically out of time. You can kiss more in private.”

Tristan pulled back and grinned. “Don’t worry, we will.”

Everyone laughed, they said their goodbyes, and finally the cameraman signaled it was over.

Tristan lifted Macey to her feet and stood next to her. “You did amazing.”

She couldn’t resist looking at Ray. He looked like … a storm cloud.

“Amazing,” he repeated, quickly schooling his features. “Jensen had some information about … an issue at the university that I need to deal with. Can you get T safely back to his room?” he asked Macey, smiling as if he were teasing her.

“For sure. I can best the general in a fight. I’m sure there isn’t a threat out there as tough as you.”

His smile became genuine. “You can best me,” he said in a soft, husky voice that pulsed warmth through her.

“Ray …” Tristan’s voice was almost pleading.

Ray looked at his brother, and something passed between them. Then he shook his head sharply and murmured, “Good night,” before striding off.

She and Tristan both watched him go. They thanked James and then walked out of the library. Macey didn’t even want to explore the shelves or find a book. She wanted to chase Ray.

She’d go back to her room and study her scriptures, pray for guidance, and also in gratitude that she had gotten through the talk show. Hopefully she could sleep. Getting a good night’s rest was the best thing she could do.

“Do you care if we take the elevator?” Tristan asked. “I’m … drained.”

He looked it. Gone was the charming, handsome, self-assured crown prince of a few moments ago.

“Sure.”

They walked slowly to the far end of the hall, Tristan’s footsteps and Macey’s heels tapping on the granite floor the only sounds.

The elevator was waiting. He gestured her inside. The doors closed, and he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes.

Macey studied her fake fiancé. “You all right?”

His eyes opened, and their blue was piercing. “Can you do something for me, Macey?”

“Sure.” Her mission was to protect and help this man, but nervousness spread through her. She hoped his request wasn’t anything too personal.

“Don’t give up on Ray.”

Her heart thudded out of control. She didn’t see how she and Ray would ever be together. He’d told the world tonight he’d never make a play for her. Those words felt like a vow, a promise to keep Ray out of her reach. Forever.

“I …”

“I was in love.” T’s eyes got a faraway look in them. “I lost her and stupidly didn’t chase after her. Don’t make my same mistake.”

Jennifer Shule? It had to be.

“You don’t have to admit you love him,” T continued.

Love?

“But this too shall pass. Right? Someday, you and Ray will have caught Mum’s murderer, I won’t be getting death threats, and then you and Ray will be free. Free to love each other.”

The elevator stopped, and the doors opened. Macey started to step out, not sure how to respond, but Tristan caught her arm. “Please. Ray is the best man, and he gives so much, thinks he has to work himself into the ground and do it all, be everything for everybody. He deserves a beautiful angel like you. Please give him a chance when the time is right.”

She met Tristan’s blue eyes, so like his brother’s but not his brother’s.

“I don’t know, T,” she whispered, then gestured around. “This isn’t my life. I don’t know that I’d fit here.” She was lying and hoped Tristan couldn’t see that. She’d imagined she’d never fit here, but she truly loved this light-filled castle and this family, especially Ray.

Tristan gave her a perceptive stare, and she started making up better excuses in her head. She couldn’t commit to giving Ray a chance when all that was in store for her was heartache.

“Do you want to come read scriptures and pray with Kiera before bed?”

Macey’s pulse settled. “I would love that. Thank you.”

He gave her a smile, but it was filled with regret. They walked side by side to Kiera’s room. Macey’s heart felt like it was already breaking. Seeing Kiera would help a lot. She saw no way for her and Ray to get past his declaration to never make a play for her, his determination to do the right thing.

She had to focus on finding the note writer and the murderer and keeping up the ploy with Tristan. It stunk, but as Ray had reminded her, this was her job. Macey had never planned on more for herself than working hard, being smart, and doing a good job.

Burying her dreams of loving Ray shouldn’t be so excruciating.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ray stormed to T's suite, cussing himself for being such a baby about watching T and Macey kiss for the talk show as he ripped off his tie and changed out of his suit. He paced the room, staring out the dark windows. He'd never felt such ugly jealousy in his life. He thought he'd kept a stupid smile on his face throughout the show. He'd somehow survived T holding, giggling with, and even kissing Macey with his heart still beating and without hitting his brother. He could be grateful for something.

T burst into the suite after ten-thirty. What had T and Macey been doing for the last hour? That kiss played through his mind, and Ray's fists tightened. T met his gaze and just shook his head, his blue eyes full of remorse. Ray knew his brother wanted to make things better for him, wanted him to be with Macey, but they both had to play their roles right now. T said nothing, just lifted a hand to him and walked into his closet. Ray appreciated the self-restraint. He probably shouldn't have hit him earlier.

He kneeled and prayed a lengthy, desperate prayer. His Father above and his mum had to help him. They both wanted him to find the murderer, find who was threatening T, and heaven didn't want Ray killing his twin brother for kissing Macey instead of keeping T safe like he'd pledged to do … all important things.

T was such a great man, and a great brother. It wasn't his fault they were caught in this awful threesome. He would take the media's hailstorm and pave the way for Ray to be with Macey if Ray said the word.

Sadly, Ray couldn't let him.

He lay down and finally slept from the mental exhaustion.

The next morning, he admired the bruises Tiny had given him as he slipped into gym clothes and as he and T picked up Macey and climbed the stairs to the gym. He didn't even stare at her. He recommitted, for the hundredth time, to keep his hands and eyes off her, concentrate on his job, and somehow get through this blasted fake engagement.

He worked himself into exhaustion, mostly keeping his gaze from straying to Macey. All three of them were quiet, somber, focused on what needed to be done. Even T was subdued, not joking around like he usually would.

After their workout, they focused on work. T didn't even try to get Ray to fulfill his end of the bet for the media figuring out the truth and sit through two days of meetings while T played with Macey. His brother knew how on edge he was.

Ray spent the day with Macey in his office. She had headphones in most of the day and watched the many interviews he, Jensen, and the agency from Germany had done with anyone associated with his mum, any possible suspect.

He tried to work. Somehow, he got through the day.

Most days started following a pattern over the next two weeks. Ray, T, and Macey worked out together in the morning, then he and Macey accompanied T to lunches, functions, or visits throughout the country. Everybody she met was impressed by her and they heard often how lucky T was. Ray tried not to think about that.

When T had online meetings or work at the castle with their father, Ray and Macey brainstormed in his office or she helped him with his load of responsibilities that were stacking up after taking so much time as T's personal bodyguard. Those days were his favorites. They weren't finding any answers or new information on the murder case, but he loved being with her.

On Sundays, they went to the village church with guards trailing them. They intermingled with people Ray and T had known their entire lives. Ray

kept a sharp eye out, but he couldn't see any of these people hurting his brother or his mum.

In the evenings, they had dinner, usually with just the family. Almost every night, they were able to spend time with Kiera. His little sister was such a light and a delight. They swam often, messed around in the solarium and the spa, and went on walks through the gardens or short hikes around the lake or to the nearby waterfall.

Sometimes Kiera's nanny, Lisa, would join them. Ray didn't like the way the young lady looked at T as if his brother was a pastry she wanted to consume, but he knew a lot of women went nuts over the handsome crown prince. Lisa was great with Kiera, and she gradually warmed up to Macey. How anyone could resist Macey was beyond him.

Ray was falling so hard for her. No. He'd already fallen. He was just falling deeper and deeper. He prayed diligently and felt like he displayed superhuman self-control by keeping his hands off her. Not looking at her was impossible, but he tried. She and T acted their part in public, but at home they treated each other like friends, which helped Ray not slit his innocent brother's throat while he slept.

Sadly, they were making no progress in finding the murderer or the 'Enforcer.' More notes were found daily, and now they threatened both T and Macey. Nobody ever saw who left them. There were never fingerprints. They were printed on an HP OfficeJet Pro 6978, not that knowing that helped anything. The castle had none of that model. They searched purchases of the printer, but with online purchases it was impossible to find them all. Ray couldn't storm into everybody's homes and see who was using their printer far too often.

Late one night, Jobe made it up the hill and to the castle walls before Jacob caught him. Philippe put him in jail for a night. Lisa promised she'd broken up with him over a month ago, seeming embarrassed about the whole thing. Stupid twenty-year-old heartbroken and hormonal kid anyway.

On a Wednesday night, almost three weeks since Macey had arrived, they'd just prayed over dinner when Malik strutted into the dining room.

“Malik!” Kiera screamed out first, jumping out of her chair and running to him.

“Hey, wild child.” Malik picked her up and hugged her, then tossed her in the air as if she were a four-year-old. Kiera screamed in delight.

Ray, T, Macey, and their dad all stood. Malik and their dad shook hands and did a manly embrace. Ray greeted his brother with a hug.

“You’re looking thick and fine,” Malik told him.

“You’re looking thicker and finer,” Ray said back.

They both grinned. Ray was happy his brother was here. The rest of them were too somber. Except for Kiera. Malik would make the evening light and fun.

He moved on to backslapping hugs and teases with T about how in the world he had gotten this ‘gorgeous creature’ to agree to marry him.

Ray didn’t like the way Malik was eyeing Macey. He didn’t appreciate how tight and for how long Malik hugged his new ‘exquisitely beautiful future sis.’ He let it go, only because it was T’s place to say something, not his.

Dinner was fun with lots of teasing from Malik and for Malik. Kiera was happy and more rambunctious than ever. After dinner, she talked the king into swimming with them. Everyone was in good spirits, and Ray hadn’t even stared with an open mouth at Macey in her swimming suit.

Kiera decided after an hour of swimming and her showing them some incredible flips and tricks off the diving board that they had to do chicken wars. “I’m on Pop’s shoulders ‘cause you’ll all be nice to me and the old man.”

They all laughed at that.

“Malik is on T and Macey on Ray.”

Ray’s body flushed with warmth. Nobody could claim he’d acted out of line if Kiera was setting it up.

“Why doesn’t Macey go on T’s shoulders?” Malik asked.

Ray clenched his fist at that stupid question.

“Well, duh. Ray’s is the toughest, but you and T are a close second. It would be totally unfair to you have you on Ray’s shoulders.”

Ray flexed slightly. Kiera winked at him. Macey looked him over, and everyone else disappeared. He found himself easing closer to her in the warm water.

“Ray’s tougher than me?” Malik growled. He grabbed Kiera and tossed her into the deep end.

Kiera shrieked but quickly swam back and commanded, “Chicken war time! Go under water, Pops.”

The king smiled and complied.

Ray was glad they had this time to relax and play around as a family. If only Steffan, Derek, and Curt could come home. If only Mum wasn’t gone.

Macey pushed through the water to him, and his pulse sped up. “I guess we’re partners.” She gave him her sweet, almost shy smile. He spent every day with her, was impressed with her hard work, smart brain, and computer skills, but no matter how he tried, he could never be immune to that smile. If only he could make her laugh. Her laugh could soothe all the angst building up and forming scar tissue inside his heart.

“We’ll destroy them,” he promised, winking at her.

She licked her lips and his own mouth went dry. “No pressure for me,” she teased.

“Your base is the toughest man in the kingdom, and I’ve seen how strong you are in the weight room and when you pinned me.” He grinned at her. “We’re unbeatable together.”

“Together,” she repeated, staring at him with those big, brown eyes.

Could they ever be together? He wasn’t any closer to solving any of the issues facing his family and kingdom. Everybody was buying that she and T were engaged. At the rate they were going, they’d hit the wedding date and

he'd have to watch her marry his twin. Together for him and Macey didn't look promising.

"Come on," Kiera called. "We're all ready."

Ray glanced over. Kiera was on his dad's shoulders and Malik on T's. His dad and Malik were giving him and Macey interested looks. T's gaze seemed … determined. Ray didn't like that.

"Let's do this," he called out. He ducked under water close to Macey. She climbed easily onto his shoulders. He wrapped his hands around her legs and rose out of the water. The feel of her smooth, firm, warm legs against his neck and his shoulders sent liquid fire through him. His palms and fingers were wrapped around her knees. He loved touching her.

He drew in a steadying breath, but it didn't help. He had never loved the feel of a woman like he did this one. Macey. Ah, Macey.

She leaned into him with her torso, and the heat filling his body quadrupled. He was going to combust during a chicken war.

The other two pairs came at them at the same time. It was a three-way battle with each person on top pulling or pushing and the girls squealing and everybody laughing. Ray shoved with his body and occasionally a hand, but he didn't like releasing his grip on Macey for any reason. He didn't care if they won.

Malik tugged Kiera right off of their dad's shoulders. She plopped into the water and cried out, "No fair. You're supposed to be nicer to me!"

Malik laughed and he and T turned to fight them one-on-one. Malik and Macey's hands locked onto each other's forearms. They pushed and shoved, tugged and pulled. Ray and T remained steady, and the battle continued. Kiera cheered for all of them while his dad watched with a bemused smile.

Ray and T pushed at each other underwater. Ray got a leg wrapped around T's knee and he released Macey's right leg to grab at Malik's leg.

"Hang on to me and pull with your right hand," he told Macey.

Macey's legs became a vice grip around his neck, and she held on with her left arm to his forehead and yanked at Malik with her right.

Malik and T flopped forward into the water as Kiera cheered.

Ray clasped Macey's hands with his own and did a victory dance, spinning around as she cheered. He didn't want to let her go.

Malik and T surfaced. Malik looked at Ray and Macey with a conniving glint in his eyes. "Let's change partners."

"No way," Ray teased back. "You're just mad you lost."

"I just want a chance to hold Macey myself. I didn't know T was up for sharing his fiancée."

"Malik," Ray warned in a growl and heard it echoed by his dad and T.

Malik looked unrepentant, his blue eyes taunting. "Oh, excuse me. I didn't believe the rumors, but apparently you are both in love with her."

Ray's stomach churned, and every muscle tightened. He'd worked and prayed and exercised self-control beyond what any man was capable of, and he'd kept his hands and his usually his eyes off of Macey, but not his thoughts. One innocent game, that he'd enjoyed thoroughly, and Malik was calling him out. Apparently the rumors were still going strong too.

He slid Macey off his shoulders and gave her an apologetic smile. She looked so irresistible and beautiful it was another exercise in self-control to turn away from her. His dad and T were talking in low whispers. Kiera looked confused. Ray pushed through the water to Malik, grabbed his brother's arm, and muttered, "Come on."

Malik didn't even try to pull away or fight him. They pushed out of the water and walked side by side to the men's bathroom. Ray shut the door behind them and turned to his brother.

"Knock it off, Malik. We need your support right now, not you trying to stir up rumors about T and Macey."

Malik's eyebrows arched. "This has nothing to do with T and Macey and you know it."

“Excuse me?” His fists clenched.

Malik got right in his face. He was brave for a little brother. Malik was strong, but Ray had him by twenty pounds of muscle and years of training and experience. “You’re in love with Macey. Any idiot can see that. Do you even realize how many times you stare at her with that tortured look in your eyes? What are you thinking?”

Ray didn’t hit him. He stepped back and shook his head, his jaw clenching so hard it hurt. “I wish I could think my way out of this one,” he admitted.

Malik blinked at him. “You all like to tease me that I’m some player, but at least I’m not making a play for my brother’s fiancée.”

Ray didn’t say anything. Misery filled him. Malik was right. His little brother didn’t know the engagement wasn’t real. He shouldn’t tell him and try to justify that he wasn’t truly trying to steal his twin’s girl. No matter how he looked at it, Ray was in the wrong. He’d been doing so well. Or so he thought. Could everybody see right through him?

“The crazy thing is …” Malik blinked at him and rubbed at his jaw. “T doesn’t seem enthralled with her like you are. Maybe it’s the whole dating online thing. The two of them just don’t have the sparks you and Macey have. T would do anything for you. Can’t you talk this through with him? Maybe he won’t care about letting her go.”

“Ah, Malik.” Ray shook his head. “I’d care. The whole country, the entire world, everybody would care. I … I can’t be with her.” He couldn’t spell it all out to Malik. He trusted his brother, but the fewer people who knew the farce, the better. “Pray for me that this will pass.”

Malik stared at him. “You know I’m not someone who turns to God. Not anymore.”

“I know.” Ray nodded. Malik used to be the one who’d quote them scripture or suggest they pray when things got hard, but not since Mum died. Were they all just a mess and destined to struggle without her bright light?

If he could have Macey in his life, he thought he might be all right.

But he couldn't have Macey in his life.

He clapped Malik on the shoulder and forced a smile. "It's all right. I'm praying enough for the entire family right now." Yet he could use their prayers. If only he could tell his brothers what was really going on.

"You're a singularly impressive man, Ray." Malik stared into his eyes, and he felt … exposed. "The general. The man who watches over the entire country, the family. You take care of everybody."

"Thanks," he said, though he wasn't certain it was a compliment.

The kingdom of Augustine doesn't turn unless Ray is at the crank. The wheels of Augustine don't rotate without the general's permission. He could hear the teases from T's lips.

You would do anything to protect this family, protect this kingdom. I know we're safe with you around.

His mum. He hadn't protected her. He had to protect T and everyone else. He had to. He couldn't be distracted by loving Macey.

"When are you going to look out for yourself?" Malik asked.

Ray's defenses flared. Being unselfish and looking out for others wasn't wrong. It had always been his purpose, strengthened by losing his mum.

"I'm not telling you to be a selfish jerk." Malik rolled his eyes. "You could never be that. I'm telling you that Pops was a better man with Mum around. I'm telling you that if Macey is the right woman for you, T will support you and the rest of the garbage will work out."

Ray only stared at him. He wasn't sure he processed any of what Malik said because only a few things made sense. Their dad *was* a better man because of their mum.

What did Malik know of politics, though? He was a prince, but he didn't carry the weight of the kingdom. He wasn't forced to live by a set of unwritten rules that governed everything he did and said. He could earn degree after degree and never work in hi field. He could date any woman he chose and never worry about the repercussions. He could haul off and

thump some guy who was beating his wife and only get a wrist slap for it. Ray admired his brother's impetuousness, lack of convention, and bravery, but that wasn't Ray. Everything Ray did had purpose.

But … *if Macey is the right woman for you*.

Ray thought she was.

"I'm going to go help Pops read with Kiera. Her nanny is super hot." Malik winked.

"Lisa can't be over twenty and she has a boyfriend." *Had* a boyfriend, but Malik needed to be dissuaded. Lisa having a fling with their brother wouldn't be good for Kiera or any of them.

"Who cares? That's only four years younger than me, and just because there's a goalie doesn't mean you can't score a kiss."

Ray rolled his eyes, but he laughed. His brother. What woman would finally settle him down? If Malik found the right one, would it help him heal from losing Mum?

Was Macey Ray's right woman?

They walked out of the bathroom. The pool was quiet, no ripples. Macey had a tank top over her swimsuit and was standing by the spa entrance. She lifted a hand to them and walked over. Ray tried not to stare at her gorgeous legs, but looking into her gorgeous eyes wasn't any easier on him.

"Your dad took Kiera down to get ready for bed. T dried off and got in one of the massage chairs."

"You didn't want a massage?" Ray asked.

"I wanted to keep an eye out."

"Thank you."

She was focused on T's safety. He appreciated that. They should be safe in the castle, but the notes had claimed it was someone from within the castle who would kill T.

“Forgive me for being a punk,” Malik spoke up, giving her a brotherly side hug.

“No offense taken,” she said, sweet as ever.

“Thank you.” Malik looked her over, but he wasn’t checking her out. He was evaluating. “I’m excited to have you in the family, Macey.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Catch you both later.” Malik jabbed Ray in the shoulder, then darted away.

He jogged out the wide-open door and was gone.

Ray stayed facing Macey. T was only fifty feet away, but he’d have his eyes closed, and Ray could hear the soft sounds of a summer storm playing. Were T and Malik scheming to give them time alone? T understood why Ray couldn’t pursue Macey, but he’d try to change it all if Ray would let him.

“Thanks for watching out for T,” he said.

“Of course. It’s my job.” Her smile became a little forced. She was only here for a job. He had to remember that. “Malik’s a lot of fun.”

“Most of the time.” He thumped his closed fist against his leg. “I’m sorry he made it awkward.” Ray was making it awkward right now. Why was he bringing it up?

“It’s okay.” She studied him. “It is interesting, what he sees …”

Ray’s body flushed. Malik had said he and T were both in love with her. Did Macey know Ray had fallen in love with her? Being around her so much, her sweetness and all of their shared interests had just yanked him in. T didn’t love her. Malik didn’t know the engagement was fake, but he could see she and T shared no sparks.

“If you want to head down and shower, I’ll wait for T,” he offered. If she didn’t leave soon, he’d forget his resolve and kiss her until she knew exactly how he felt about her.

Her dark eyes flashed with frustration. “Sounds good. See you soon.”

She whirled and strode off. Ray watched her go. Even when she was gone, he could still see her. He passed a hand over his face. Why couldn't he find any answers to the murder, the notes, and how to not let the world know he wanted to steal his brother's fiancée?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Macey showered, put moisturizer on her face and body, and slid into a tank top and some soft cotton shorts. She brushed out her hair, brushed and flossed her teeth, kneeled to pray, then lay on the huge bed and read from the Bible, looking for answers and solace.

She felt … dejected. T said this would pass and someday she might have a chance with Ray. At the moment that day felt very far away. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for faith and the ability to trust in God's timing and plan not her own.

"Macey!" Tristan was banging on the bedroom door.

She rushed to open it. He stood in the doorframe, towering over her and looking … angry. She hadn't seen Tristan angry.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Ray's been pacing, but then that stupid Jobe is trying to climb the wall again. Of course he had to go talk to the kid himself. Has to take care of everything himself." He shook his head, not moving from the door frame. "This might be the only chance I have to talk to you."

What would T want to talk about?

"Have you and Ray found anything in all your time spent researching and interviewing and inventing computer programs?"

“No,” she admitted. It was frustrating and embarrassing that she’d found nothing, had been no help to Ray. Would they give up on her? Send her back home? Even with the angst of wanting Ray while being fake engaged to Tristan, she loved it here. She loved being part of this family. She missed Sutton, Liz, Agatha, Gage, and Cassie, but she felt like this was where she belonged. If only Ray could love her and she could be with him.

“I’m fed up with all of it,” Tristan admitted, folding his arms tight across his chest and leaning against the doorframe. “I’m fed up with my brother. Ray is so in love with you. Malik saw it tonight, and the whole world saw it weeks ago when you did the press conference together.”

Macey’s heart raced out of control.

“Why won’t Ray admit it? He’s too honorable, so determined to save the kingdom by himself. I’m sick of it.”

Macey wished Ray would admit he loved her, but maybe he didn’t. Maybe his sense of honor was too strong. Who knew? She was glad Tristan was being so open about it, but if Ray wouldn’t let down his guard, what would it matter?

“Macey.” He straightened away from the door frame and wrapped his hands around her upper arms. “Can you at least admit it? Forget everything else, forget the threats, forget the murder investigation, forget you’re on a job. Do you or do you not love my brother?”

Macey stared into Tristan’s blue eyes, so like Ray’s but different. She wanted to scream that yes she loved Ray, she loved him and couldn’t deny it, but not if he would never admit it, would never act on it because he was too honorable. Or because maybe he liked her, but not enough to make a mess with the press and upset his dad, who was grieving so deeply and trying to hold everything together.

It wasn’t as bad as Steve because Ray would never betray all of them, but the humiliation of falling for a man who couldn’t reciprocate pried that wound back open. Add that to the humiliation that she wasn’t helping Ray solve the murder case or the death threats. What was she even doing here if she couldn’t find any answers?

“I respect your brother, but I don’t know him well enough to love him,” she lied.

Tristan let out a disbelieving guffaw, and then he bent down and kissed her.

Macey jolted in surprise. Tristan had kissed her on that talk show, but he’d never done it in private. She yanked away from him. “What are you doing?”

“Did you like that?” he demanded. “Do you feel anything when I kiss you?”

“No.”

“What do you feel when my brother kisses you?”

Macey could only stare at him, misery and longing for Ray battering her from within. She hadn’t kissed him since the press conference. It felt like longer than three weeks ago, yet she could remember every detail, every sensation, his scent, his strong body against her, his warm lips lighting her up all the way through.

“Excuse me,” she murmured, then darted around Tristan and out into the hallway. She didn’t know where she was going. Just away from Ray’s twin demanding answers out of her that she couldn’t give. She was almost to the main staircase when she saw a man storming up the stairs. She stopped and stared. It wasn’t just any man.

“Ray,” she said.

He stopped at the top of the stairs. Five feet away, but it felt like a mile. His gaze was stormy, angry.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, referring to why he’d been in his office.

“I saw you kiss T.” His chest was rising and falling quickly, his fist clenched. “I was coming to pummel him.”

Hope filled her chest. She stepped closer. Tristan wanted her with Ray, and this might be her chance. “T kissed me to prove a point.”

“What point is that?” His blue eyes searched her face.

She prayed for help and repeated in her mind, *Brave, bold, and beautiful*.

“That I feel nothing for him. That you’re the only man I want to kiss, want to be with.”

Ray’s eyes widened. He stepped in closer, so close she could feel his warmth. She wanted to be in his arms, wanted *him*, but more than that, she loved him.

He studied her and admitted in a soft, husky voice, “I’ve worked so hard to stay away from you. You have no idea how hard.”

“I have a little idea.” She smiled weakly. “It’s been all I could do to not touch you, stare at you, love you …” She swallowed hard. Was she really admitting to this? *Brave, bold, and beautiful*. She wasn’t, except with him.

“Macey … I can’t stop myself from falling for you, craving you, being consumed by you.”

He wrapped his hands around her shoulders, pulled her against him, and took her mouth with his.

The kiss was demanding, all-consuming, absolutely beautiful. Macey had never been so happy, never felt so loved. Could they truly be together, or was this only a stolen moment? Right now she didn’t care. She clung to Ray and kissed him with all the love she had stored inside her. He had to hold her up as her body was weak with longing for him.

He didn’t seem to mind. He pulled back slightly and grinned at her.

“Macey,” he groaned against her mouth and then he kissed her again. His strength, honor, and devotion to her filled her with conviction. They could make it all work. Together.

Their lips were definitely working together and Macey gave her heart and future to Ray in that moment.

A loud thump and then a roar sounded. The castle seemed to shake.

Macey and Ray yanked apart and raced toward the source of the sound. Black smoke billowed out from under T’s door.

“T!” Ray flung T’s door open. Fire was consuming the quilt, bed, and mattress, licking up the wood frame.

T was on the floor, lying on his side. Behind him, a shadow darted over the balcony.

“Tristan!” the king’s voice hollered from behind them.

“Get a medic,” Ray yelled at his dad.

The king pulled his phone out.

Ray reached T first. The skin on the left side of his face and neck was bubbling, and his shirt was burning. Ray put the flames out with his hands.

Macey felt for a pulse on the right side of his throat. It was strong, and she could feel his breath on her hand. “He’s breathing and has a pulse. I’m going after the perp.”

Ray’s gaze was frantic, shocked.

Macey didn’t waste any time. She leaped to her feet and ran for the balcony. A man was working his way down the castle wall like Spiderman. He wore a ski mask, so even if it was someone she knew, she didn’t recognize him. How could she intercept him?

She looked to the side and saw one of the copper poles like the one Kiera had slid down. If a child could do it …

Not stopping to think, she climbed onto the balcony ledge, wrapped her hands and legs around the pole, and slid. Fast. Really fast. She clung tighter to slow her descent, thumping onto the grass so hard she thought she’d broken her legs. Standing on wobbly but thankfully unbroken limbs, she saw the man fling himself to the ground ten feet away.

Macey sprinted at him, knocking him to the ground. He squealed in protest. She flipped him over and wrapped her elbow around his throat, securing her arm with her other hand and pulling tight. She’d rather pummel this scum, but she couldn’t risk him getting away if he knew how to fight.

“Don’t move or I’ll break your neck,” she threatened. She was dying to see who was under the mask, but she didn’t dare loosen her grip until backup arrived.

“Help,” he squeaked out.

Footsteps pounded toward them, followed by the appearance of four castle guards. Macey released the guy from the chokehold, jumped to her feet, and ripped him up. Sirens wailed through the night air. She hoped Tristan got the medical help he needed.

“Miss Macey?” Jacob, a guard she recognized, said. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. This is the man who tried to kill Prince Tristan.”

“Tried?” The guy scoffed. “He’s dead!”

The guards surrounded him and ripped his black mask off. He couldn’t have been more than twenty and he looked far too familiar, though she’d only seen him on surveillance tapes.

“Jobe?” she guessed.

“I killed that cocky, pompous jerk so Lisa will finally know I’m better than him and agree to marry me.”

“Luckily for you,” she told him, “the crown prince is alive.”

“No!” He started sobbing. “Lisa thinks she loves him.”

Jacob and the other guards looked at Macey. The guy was insane. He’d probably started the notes when Lisa had dumped him. She must’ve told him then that she loved Tristan. All of this over a romance. That thought stung. Had she messed things up over the romance she felt with Ray? Neither of them had been with Tristan to protect them because they’d been too busy kissing.

“Throw him in a cell. Tell him to get comfortable there.” Macey tried to sound like a confident royal should. Was Tristan okay? Was Ray?

Jacob nodded.

“Wait.” Macey held up a hand. “You wrote the notes threatening the crown prince after Lisa dumped you, right?”

“Yes. I hate him, so I started threatening him and setting up my plan to murder him.” He spat on the ground.

The kid was too young and dumb to realize he was digging his own grave. She doubted he was smart enough to pull off the queen's murder but she'd let Jensen interrogate him about it.

She nodded to Jacob. They hauled him off.

"Macey," Ray's voice called down to her.

She looked up. Ray was on the balcony. She couldn't make out his expression in the dark.

"You're okay?" he asked.

"Fine. I caught the guy. It was Jobe. He wrote the notes and tried to kill T because he was jealous. Is T okay?"

"He's burned. Badly. The medics are getting ready to transfer him."

"I'll meet you out front."

He nodded and turned away.

Macey's gut churned with worry over Tristan. She hurried around the castle, running into more guards. One of them walked with her and explained that another boy had climbed the castle hill as a distraction. They'd caught him. Jobe had made it past their cameras using a gecko glove to climb, sneaking in the open window, and shoving a bomb under Tristan's bed, probably thinking he was asleep. They'd seen from their cameras that luckily Tristan hadn't been in bed but in the hallway, watching her and Ray. He'd walked back just in time to have the bomb hurt him but not kill him.

She made it to the front entry in time to see medics loading Tristan into a Blackhawk medevac chopper, Ray and his dad at his side.

"Macey." King Nolan hurried back toward them and called to be heard over the chopper, "Will you bring Kiera?"

Kiera was on the steps, clinging to Lisa and sobbing uncontrollably.

"Yes. I've got her. Go."

Ray didn't even look at her. They closed the doors to the helicopter, and it lifted into the night air.

Macey jogged up the stairs to Kiera. The little girl released her nanny and hugged Macey so fiercely it was hard to catch a breath.

"Is T going to die? He can't die!" she wailed.

"No, sweetie. No. They've got him stabilized. He'll be okay." She held the little girl, praying she was telling the truth. If Tristan's airway had been burned, or if the burns covered enough of his body, he could die.

Kiera didn't respond, just cried and cried. The princess had been so strong and brave, never showing fear and doing her crazy stunts. Faced with a second family member dying she was falling apart. Nobody could blame her.

Macey held her and looked at Lisa. Was the nanny involved? She pivoted, shielding Kiera with her body.

"I promise I didn't know," Lisa cried out, tears streaming down her face. "I promise."

A couple guards were nearby.

"I love Prince Tristan. I love Kiera and this whole family," Lisa sobbed.

Macey swallowed. The nanny's obsession with Tristan was out of control. Could she have helped her ex-boyfriend try to kill him because Tristan was engaged to Macey?

She met one of the guard's eyes and tilted her head to Lisa. He nodded. He must know enough of the story to have arrived at the same conclusion she had.

"Lisa," Macey said calmly as two guards approached. "These men are going to take you with them and ask you some questions. You need to answer honestly and share everything you know about Jobe and why he would try to kill Prince Tristan. Okay?"

The guards reached them. Lisa cried harder, but she met Macey's gaze. "I will. I promise. I'll do anything to make this right. I broke up with Jobe

weeks and weeks ago. I promise. I had no idea he would hurt Prince Tristan because he was so jealous and crazy."

"Okay. Go with them and it will work out." Macey hoped the girl was innocent. She liked her, and she knew Kiera complained about the homework but was very attached to her nanny.

"I'll be back soon, Kiera," Lisa promised. "Stay with Macey. It'll all be okay, sweetheart."

It warmed Macey's heart that Lisa was worried about Kiera as the guard took her arm and led her away. She held on to Kiera as the young princess sobbed until Macey wondered how she had any tears left. It had to all be hitting her in this moment. Her mom's death. Thinking her brother had been killed.

Macey held her until she calmed down. Then she said, "Okay, love. We're going to get some shoes on, say a prayer, and then go see Tristan at the hospital. You can see for yourself that he's all right."

"He really is?" Kiera blinked up at her, her blue eyes ringed with red, her face mottled from crying.

"He really is." Macey prayed she was telling the truth, and she prayed desperately for Tristan, for Kiera, for Ray and the entire family.

She'd fallen in love with all of them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ray paced the main waiting room of the hospital in Traverse. His dad was sitting outside the trauma bay waiting for them to move T into the ICU after the emergency physicians treated his burns, intubated and sedated him. To his knowledge, T hadn't woken and the burns were third degree on his shoulder and upper back where his shirt had been on fire and second degree on his neck and face. Steffan was with his dad. Malik was on his way, and he'd left messages for Curtis and Derek. Curtis usually had his satellite phone on. He would find his way here soon. Derek must be training and have his phone off, but he'd respond soon too.

Ray could not believe this had happened. He'd let down his guard, given into his all-consuming desires, kissed Macey, and his brother was now burned and would be dead if he'd been any closer to that bed. He swallowed but couldn't swallow down the guilt. This was all his fault. He'd never been out of control in his life, but he had no control where Macey was concerned.

The exterior door opened and Macey rushed in, holding Kiera's hand. Everything seemed to settle as he looked into Macey's dark eyes. He wanted to rush to her and hold her and his sister.

No! His mum's words played through his mind. *You would do anything to protect this family, protect this kingdom. I know we're safe with you around.* He'd failed his mum and now he'd failed T. He couldn't forgive himself for T being hurt. Now he associated his fatal attraction to Macey with his failure to protect his twin.

“Ray!” Kiera ran to him.

He picked her up and held her. She quivered against him. “Is T dead?”

“No, sweetie. No. He’s going to have some cool scars, but he’ll be okay.”

“I’ve been praying so hard,” she whispered.

“Me too, sweetheart. Me too.” He smiled at her, he hoped it didn’t look as put on as it felt. “Good job praying. I bet Mum is watching over him.”

Tears streaked down her pretty face. “That’s good. Mum always did think he was the ‘golden child’.”

Ray actually laughed at the tease Malik and Derek used to throw at T. Kiera grinned, as if pleased she could make him laugh.

“You’re right.” He set her on her feet but held her close.

Macey had stopped a couple feet away. She worried her lip and looked at him with those deep-brown eyes. “I am so sorry.”

He didn’t know if she was sorry T had been burned, sorry they’d both let their guard down, or a combination of both. He swallowed and tried to respond in a level tone, “You did great catching him.”

“I couldn’t have done it without pretending I was Kiera and sliding down the pole.”

Kiera smiled. “I taught you that.”

“You did.” She looked like she wanted to tell him more, but she cut her eyes to Kiera and then back to his face.

He nodded.

Malik strode in. Oh, thank heavens. After hugs and reassurances that T would be all right and the perp had been caught, Malik looked between Macey and Ray. He took Kiera’s hand. “Hey, kiddo. Let’s go see what treats and drinks we can find in this joint.”

“I don’t want treats,” she said. “But my throat is dry and hurts from crying.”

“I bet. Come on.” He tilted his chin up to Ray and then lifted a hand to Macey. The two of them strode through a door and were gone.

The waiting room was too quiet. A lady had been at the reception desk but wasn’t there now. This late at night on a Wednesday must be a slow time for the hospital.

Macey eased closer, her gaze begging him to talk to her, to work everything out between them, but it was too big of a mess.

He clenched his fists so he wouldn’t reach out for her. He could smell her clean, fresh scent, and it was messing with his mind.

“Jobe said he started the notes when Lisa broke up with him. He admitted he wanted to kill Tristan so Lisa would love him.” She shook her head. “I had the guards take Lisa for questioning too.”

“That was smart. I hope she’s not involved.”

“Me too. Kiera loves her, and she’s a constant in Kiera’s life.” Her pretty lips twisted. “Poor Kiera. She just clung to me and sobbed and sobbed.”

Ray could imagine it. It both wrenched his heart and made him love Macey even more.

“Thank you for being there for her.” His words were too stiff, but he didn’t know how to let down his guard without pulling her close and begging her to love him. Pulling her close was why his brother had almost died and would be sedated for days and have to go through painful treatments and surgeries for months, not to mention being scarred the rest of his life.

His twin wouldn’t look the same as him anymore. That was a dagger to his heart.

“Of course.” She folded her arms across her chest and then burst out, “Ray, I’m so sorry. If we wouldn’t have been … I’m sorry for Tristan, for you, for your family.”

Ray forced himself to meet her gaze and to breathe evenly. “It’s not your fault. This is all on me.” He steeled himself from the inside out and kept his

expression as blank as he could. He was responsible. He had to keep everyone safe. How had he failed again?

She swallowed and searched his gaze, but said nothing.

“We’re in your debt for catching Jobe. Thank you.”

She nodded tightly.

Ray couldn’t stand here much longer, close to her, looking at her, and not lose all control. He wanted her to hold him while he cried like Kiera had, but he wasn’t a child. He was the general of Augustine. A prince. A man who was strong and tasked with keeping the kingdom safe.

“Now that T is no longer being threatened …” He paused, not sure where he was going with this or if he should even go there. “And since we’ve found nothing that gets us any closer to finding Mum’s murderer …”

Her eyes widened and then got bright.

Please don’t let her cry.

“That makes sense,” she rushed to say, blinking quickly. “You don’t need me posing as Tristan’s fiancée any longer. I’m grateful the threat is gone. I’ll keep researching from San Diego and let you know if I find anything helpful with the murder.”

He stared at her. Was she saying … she wouldn’t really just go back to America. That hadn’t been what he meant. Had it? If she wasn’t here, at least he wouldn’t have to battle within himself every second. The torture of seeing her with T and knowing he’d never be with her would be gone. But that was selfish. Kiera needed her. His family needed her. *He* needed her.

“I appreciate that,” he heard himself say in a stiff, horrible voice.

She searched his face for a few heart-wrenching moments, then she spun and hurried out the exterior doors.

Ray watched her go. He should chase after her.

He clenched his fists.

What would that accomplish, besides more pain for both of them?

Ray sank into a chair. And he felt tears trail down his face.

He was strong. He had to protect his family and his kingdom.

But he was an absolute mess without Macey.

Ray made it through the next ninety-eight hours. Somehow. If one more person asked, 'Where's Macey?' he'd implode. Poor Kiera. Malik had held her in the waiting room like a small child when she heard Macey was gone and started sobbing all over again. She wanted Macey, Lisa, and her mum. She cried so hard she threw up the red cream soda Malik had bought her.

Ray's gut churned at the memory. He'd let Macey go and hurt all of them. Had he sent her away? Was it all his fault? Why had he been too weak to beg her to stay? Not for him, but for Kiera, for their family, for T.

Luckily, the media didn't know she was gone yet. From what Ray had seen, they were consumed with T's near-death bombing and assuming his fiancée hadn't left his side at the hospital. Impressively, none of the nurses or doctors had leaked the truth.

He'd spoken with Sutton. Macey was 'home safe' in Sutton's words. The man had been very stiff with him. Probably blamed him for hurting Macey. Ray blamed himself, hated himself. It was for the best that she was gone, but it hurt. Would T's burns hurt as bad as the pain inside Ray's chest?

He sat next to T's bed late Sunday night, listening to the monitors beep and whoosh, when quiet footsteps sounded outside. Curtis had left his mountain, come late the first night, and Derek had made it the next day. They'd all been in and out of the room, hoping and praying for T.

Tonight, everyone else was at Steffan's large home that was luckily close to the hospital. They were all resting. Malik was planning to come at two a.m. and send Ray to the house to rest. Ray didn't want to leave T's side. They weren't sedating T any longer, hadn't been for almost eight hours. Ideally, he could wake any time.

Looking over his brother's face, he hated the red, angry, puckered skin. T's face was swollen—raw and oozy and fleshy. He didn't look like Ray's handsome, charismatic, accomplished, teasing, princely brother.

They'd flown in burn specialists from the United States, and the man and woman were doing everything they could for T. There would be scarring, and it would take time, but they promised he'd return to full activity.

The heart rate machine picked up, and Ray straightened.

"T? Hey, bro. Can you wake up for me?" Ray paused, throat thick. T didn't move. "Please, T. We're all a mess and we need you. I need you."

Ray rested his forehead against T's uninjured shoulder. Like that first night in the waiting room when Macey had walked away, he let the tears come. He'd cried when his mum had died, but before that day, not since he was eleven. T had beaten him in a wrestling match, and he'd cried in embarrassment and swore it wouldn't happen again. It didn't. The crying or T winning at any physical match.

"Ray?" T croaked out.

"T?" Ray shot up and stared at his brother. "You okay?"

"No," he moaned. "Water."

Ray jumped up and ran out the door, calling to the nurse. "Water! T's awake and he wants water."

"Okay." The nurse nodded and stood.

Ray rushed back into the room. T's eyes were closed again. Shoot. He stopped next to the bed, wanting to rouse him but also wanting him to heal more.

The nurse came in with a cup of ice. "Let's start with this."

T's eyes fluttered open. "Water?"

She pushed the button to incline his bed slightly and spooned some ice chips into his mouth. He sucked on the spoonful and murmured, "Thanks."

“Of course.” She looked over his monitors. “Everything looks good. What’s your pain level?”

“Nonexistent,” he said drily.

She eyed him. “I know you’re tough, but it’s going to hurt, so we’re going to stay on top of the pain. I’ll contact your doctors and see how they want to proceed but right now we’ll put some morphine through your I.V.”

“Please wait until I talk to my brother,” T murmured. Did it hurt to talk? Ray didn’t want to cause him any unnecessary pain.

“I’ll give you ten minutes.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you need anything else right now?”

“More ice. Answers.” He looked at Ray.

The nurse spooned in some more ice, then handed the cup to Ray. “I’ll be right outside if either of you need anything.”

Ray thanked her.

The door closed, and T blinked at him. “What happened?”

“What do you remember?”

“In the hall. Watching you and Macey kiss. It was a good one.”

Heat and guilt filled Ray.

“Then I walked back into my suite, and the world exploded.” He lifted his left hand and winced.

“Your left side took the brunt of a homemade pipe bomb,” Ray told him. “Try not to move. Just let it heal. Dad’s got burn specialists here from the Grossman Burn Center. They’re the best in the world.”

T grunted as if to say, *Of course he did.* “Am I going to be ugly and scarred?”

“Most likely.” Ray gave him another scoop of ice. “I’m so sorry, bro.” The words didn’t come close to expressing how he felt.

“Why’re you sorry? I’m the ugly one.” He smiled, but it must’ve tugged at the burned flesh because he stopped. “I won’t be the ‘chick magnet’ and have to worry about women loving me for my pretty face any longer.”

Ray couldn’t help but chuckle at that. “You’re crazy.”

“I know. They caught the guy?”

“Macey did. Slid down the copper pipe like Kiera would.” He shook his head. She was incredible, and she was gone.

“Sweet. Who was it?”

“Lisa’s ex-boyfriend, Jobe.”

“Kid who kept climbing up to the castle?”

“Yeah. He had a friend climb it with him that night—a distraction. The friend claims it was just a dare, promises he didn’t know what Jobe was planning. Jobe has done it enough times that he knew where the cameras were and the guard’s rotation, knew you left your window open at night. He scaled the side of the castle with Gecko gloves. Lisa’s been questioned extensively, and they don’t think she was involved at all. She’s blaming herself because she loves you and she broke up with him over six weeks ago. That’s why Jobe went after you and when the notes started. Stupid, jealous kid.”

“Crazy.” T closed his eyes again. Ray wondered if he’d drifted off that quick. “Where is everybody?” he asked, keeping his eyes closed.

“Getting some rest at Steffan’s house. Malik’s coming at two. Everybody else will be here in the morning. Unless you want them to come now.”

“Nah. I’m pretty tired. I’ll take the morphine and rest.” His eyes flickered open. “After I talk to Macey.”

Ray’s stomach turned over. “Why?”

“To break off our engagement. My fiancée fell in love with my twin.” He smiled again, but stopped and muttered, “Ow.”

Ray stood and paced away from the bed.

“Ray?”

He paced back, not sitting down, clenching his fists. “Macey’s back in San Diego. Working with Sutton.”

T’s eyes widened, and he looked fully awake. “Why?”

“I … she … it’s what’s best, all right?”

“No, it’s not,” T hissed. “You love her. She loves you. Get over your tortured, sacrificing for everybody else, proud self-importance, and go get her.”

“It’s not about my pride and self-importance,” he protested.

“What is it about?”

Ray swallowed. His brother didn’t need this right now, but he heard himself say, “A few days before Mum died, she said to me, ‘You would do anything to protect this family, protect this kingdom. I know we’re safe with you around …’” He trailed off, and couldn’t look at his brother.

“So that’s why.” T sounded exhausted. “Mum would never expect you to take the load on yourself that you have. Mum would never have blamed you for her death.”

Ray knew that. In theory. But believing it … He clenched his fist and thumped it against his leg. Forcing himself to meet his brother’s gaze, he said nothing.

T’s eyes were tired but determined. “Mum’s death is not on your head. I’m fine. I’ll heal up, or I won’t. What do scars matter? Your soul mate is what matters. Go get her.”

Ray sank into the chair and stared at his brother. “If I hadn’t been so weak and kissed her, I would’ve been in the room with you and kept you from getting burned.”

T was worked up now, and even though it took a lot of effort, he laid into Ray. “For someone so smart, you’re being really stupid. Think about the timing. You wouldn’t have gotten there soon enough to stop the bomb. You would’ve gotten burned like I did. You’d be dead, or lying in a bed next to me. Let go of whatever guilt you have, about me and about Mum. Go get Macey. Mum would want you to.” He closed his eyes and seemed to sink into the bed, exhausted.

Ray shook his head, though T was probably right. He wouldn’t have made it in fast enough to stop Jobe; he would’ve just been lying in a hospital bed too. Or a coffin. It didn’t stop him from feeling guilty. His love for Macey was all tied up in that guilt. ‘Let go of whatever guilt you have’? He had no idea how to do that.

Besides, he had been responsible for security, so no matter how you looked at it, this was his fault. He’d even given T a hard time about leaving his window open at night and T had laughed and said the only person who could scale their walls was Kiera.

“I’m not leaving your side until you walk out of this room,” Ray insisted. “I need to be here.”

“Heaven give me strength,” T muttered. “Father above,” he prayed aloud. “Help my stupid brother to let go of this guilt. Let him see no matter how much he sacrifices, he can’t be General and bodyguard and everything else. Help him see that sometimes the best thing for him is also the best thing for everyone else. Help him to let his pride go, to let Mum go, to let his control go, and to go claim the love You brought into his life. Amen.”

Ray stared at his brother as he fell back against the bed, obviously drained.

“I’m tired,” T admitted. “I need to rest and heal. Tell the nurse to bring on the drugs.” He closed his eyes and could have passed for asleep if Ray didn’t know him better. “I don’t want to see you again until you’re standing here with Macey, holding hands or kissing in front of me. I don’t care. No more denying your love. That’s an order from your crown prince. Now go.”

Ray smiled but sobered quickly. He couldn’t just go get Macey. There was too much guilt and angst, too many things he’d done wrong, said wrong. Everybody here needed him.

“You’re still here,” grunted T.

Ray pushed out a heavy breath. What a mess. At least T was being himself and didn’t seem upset that he’d be scarred. Then again, he was talking nonsense about Ray being too proud and self-important and not blaming himself for their mum’s death and for T being injured.

All Ray had tried to do was give everything for his family and the kingdom.

And the price had been higher than he’d ever imagined.

It hit him like a gut punch. All of his sacrifice and hard work, and what had it gotten him? No one was happy. T was burned. Mum wasn’t avenged. A murder was on the loose. Macey was gone.

What had his sacrifice cost? Everything.

If only he knew how to let down his guard and fix it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Macey stood at her raised desk and typed furiously, trying to find the path through the dark web that led to a trafficking cell. She'd been consumed with finding these traffickers since she got home. Good thing, too—if she wasn't working, she was crying. She cried as she ran the beach each morning, she cried while she lifted weights in Sutton's home gym, she cried in the shower. She ate while she worked, so luckily she didn't have to cry through meals.

When she'd walked out of the Traverse Hospital a week ago, she'd driven the beautiful McLaren she'd taken Kiera to the hospital in back to the castle, calling Sutton on the way and simply saying she needed a flight home. He asked questions. She had no answers. By the time she packed, leaving the gorgeous wedding ring on Tristan's dresser, crying the entire time, and had a guard drive her to the Traverse Airport, Sutton had a chartered jet waiting.

It had only been a week, but she missed her castle, her family, and her prince. Ray. The tears pricked again, and she focused back on another dead end.

Dead ends. There had only been dead ends with the queen's murder case, too. Maybe if she'd found some answers, Ray wouldn't have sent her away. She'd replayed the stilted conversation so many times in her mind. Had he sent her away, or had she assumed and made it even messier and more confusing?

Footsteps came down the stairs. Male footsteps. She ignored whoever it was. They'd interrupt her if they needed to. Pushing her glasses further up her nose, she typed faster.

The urge to look in the small mirror that used to hang on the wall behind her monitor was nearly overwhelming. That was one benefit of her time with Ray in Augustine—she had developed bravery that had been nothing more than a mantra before her trip. Before Ray, she'd known who was coming down the stairs before the person hit the top step. And just for an added layer, she had placed a small mirror that allowed her to see what anyone behind her was doing.

On her first day back, she had thrown away the mirror and changed the monitor that used to show the stairs to a picture of a beautiful castle on a verdant mountain next to a waterfall. After about an hour and multiple sobbing sessions, she'd replaced the castle with an old school fish screensaver.

The person stopped behind her and didn't move. Macey started to sweat. She could hear slow, even breathing, but none of her monitors reflected the room behind her. Had she made the wrong contact in the dark web or triggered the wrong person and now they had come for her?

No. Sutton and his people wouldn't let anyone into the castle who wasn't screened. She was safe here. It was one of Sutton's guys needing help with something computer related.

She'd thought she could do it, that she wasn't the little girl who crawled into the closet and hid behind musty clothes.

Brave, bold, and beautiful, she told herself. *Take a deep breath.*

Odd, but she smelled musk, bergamot, and apples. She was just uneasy with the person not moving or talking back there, so she must be imagining Ray's scent to comfort herself. She dreamed of Ray far too often and had tried to summon him in this moment of alarm.

Macey forced herself to keep typing, but she didn't even know what she was typing. She was probably making a mess of her own programming.

Summoning the confidence she had found in Augustine, she demanded, “Do you need something?” She did not look, did not turn around. Besides Liz, Sutton, Agatha, Gage, and Cassie, who all had plenty of questions for which she had no answers, no one else had dared to bug her lately.

“You.”

The deep, husky voice was as familiar as her own hand. The Augustine accent was clear in that one word. Macey’s hands stilled on the keyboard. Her body tensed and yet filled with heat.

He’d come.

She whirled to face him, pressing back against her desk and staring. Her breath whooshed out. Ray looked more incredible than she remembered. His blue eyes pierced into her and his handsome face was too serious. She wished she could make him smile. He was dressed in a dark gray suit with a red tie, a prince through and through.

And she was nerdy Macey Clifton, typing away in her basement in a too-big T-shirt, yoga pants, her hair in a severe bun, her glasses on for protection.

He looked her over and breathed out, “Ah, Macey … how I’ve longed for you.”

Her heart took off at a gallop. She pushed her glasses on firmer and then folded her arms across her chest.

He took a step closer.

“How is Tristan?” she asked. She’d seen the reports online, but she needed a deflection.

“Good. They think he’ll heal … for the most part. A lot of scarring, and it’s been a painful recovery, but he’s happy to not be so handsome.”

He smiled briefly then. That dimple appeared, and Macey’s knees went weak. He was here. Was he really here for her? Had he really missed her? He’d let her go so easily a week ago, hadn’t chased her down and declared his love. Not that she blamed him. It had been an awful night.

“Emotionally? He’s dealing all right?”

“Yeah. He’s tough. He’ll be all right.” He took another step toward her.

She wanted him to close the distance and at the same time she wasn’t ready.

“Kiera? Is she holding up okay?”

“She’s doing better. Except she misses you almost as much as I do.” He took another step, almost close enough to touch her. The pulse point in her neck raced out of control.

“I miss her,” she admitted.

“Do you miss her older brother?” he asked, smiling again. Dang that dimple.

“Yes, I’ve been longing for Malik to give me something to laugh about.”

He laughed in surprise, and she joined him. It should’ve relieved the tension, but it ramped up quickly when Ray said fiercely, “I’ve longed for your laugh. I dream about it. I dream about you.”

He took that last step, and his strong body overshadowed her. He wasn’t touching her, not yet. She wanted to arch closer so he would, but she stayed pressed back against her desk like a mousy coward.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “You had no problem letting me go a week ago.”

“Macey …” He pushed out a heavy breath. “I’m sorry. I was full of guilt and anger at myself for letting T get hurt and for my mum’s death. I thought the world revolved around me and if I let loose, it would all come crashing down. I blamed myself for Mum, and for T, and it turns out, I’m not Superman. And I’m not the center of the universe. After all my guilt and self-sacrifice and control.” He shook his head. “No one was happy. My playing the martyr and letting my pride rule my decisions cost me everything. It cost me you.”

All she could do was stare at him and try to process. She knew he’d taken it all on his own shoulders, and now he was saying it had cost him everything, cost him her. Was she his everything? Her heart raced faster.

“T said I was being stupid and an idiot for letting you walk away.” He smiled briefly again. “Can you ever forgive me for letting you go?”

She swallowed. Of course she could forgive him, but she couldn’t be with him. She wasn’t right for a prince. She wanted to be the most important person to him, but she’d caused his family more heartache they didn’t need —Kiera crying, Tristan burned, Ray with all the angst and torture in his blue eyes.

“You’re not stupid or an idiot,” she managed through her thick throat. She was sad that his pride had cost him everything, and that T had been hurt in the process, but it wasn’t his fault. She hoped he could see that. “You’re honorable, and your family and duties should come first.” She wanted to be as honorable as he was.

“No.” He shook his head and lifted both of his hands, reaching for her. Her eyes widened but she didn’t move away.

His hands went to her hair. He gently worked the elastic out of her hair and tossed it on the desk. Her hair fell around her face, and she pulled in a quick breath.

Ray wasn’t done, though. He ran his fingertips through her hair, massaging her scalp. Tingles went through her. “I love your hair. It’s like silk.”

Macey was going to pass out. Right here and now, if he kept this up.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” she asked.

He stared at her and then he ran his hands through her hair and to her face. He trailed his fingertips along her cheeks, then slid her glasses off and set them on the desk. It felt so right to not have her shield up with him here. “There you are. I missed those deep-brown eyes. I love your eyes.”

Macey’s cells swirled with love for him. She loved *his* eyes.

He framed her face with his palms, his thumb caressing her cheek and then brushing over lower lip. Macey trembled under his touch. “I missed your lips. I love your lips.” His voice got deep and very husky as his gaze dropped to her lips.

Macey drew in a ragged breath, leaning heavily into her desk. She wanted to kiss him more than she wanted oxygen.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” she managed to repeat through a tight throat and trembling lips and the ache for him that was growing every moment.

“My family and my responsibility to my country are second and third on my list, Macey. I have a sacred duty to my family and country. Miraculously, I don’t have to sacrifice everything and suffer without you to do my duty. Sometimes what is right for me is also right for other people.”

Her eyes widened.

“My family and country are both of utmost importance to me. I will fight for them, protect them, give my life for them if needed, but I can also live for myself. It’s time for me to give up what someone recently called ‘my self-importance.’ I’ve done some deep soul searching, and there’s only one person at the top of my list.” He paused, and she swayed. Her hands automatically reached up to cling to his firm biceps, and she leaned into him and not the desk.

“Who?” she whispered.

“The most beautiful computer genius in the world. The woman who is ‘brave, bold, and beautiful’.” He smiled. “The woman I can’t live without.” He paused and bent closer. His breath brushed her lips as he said, “You, Macey. It’s only you for me. You will strengthen me, make me a better man, and together we can protect and serve my family and our kingdom.”

She clung to him and tried to remember to breathe.

“I love you, Macey.”

Macey’s body trembled with the beauty of those words.

“Will you come home with me? Will you love me, be my princess, and make me happier than any man deserves to be?”

Macey had no words. She stared into his incredible blue eyes and murmured, “Brave, bold, beautiful.”

He smiled.

She had to prove it, to him and to herself. So she arched up and kissed him.

He kissed her back. Oh, how he kissed her back. He tilted her head and kissed her more deeply. Then he cradled her close and filled the windowless basement command center with light and love and dreams she'd never dared dream.

When they finally pulled back, he murmured against her lips. "Is that a yes? Will you marry me, Macey?"

Marry him. Macey clung to him and admitted, "If you keep this up, I might pass out on you."

He chuckled. "I can catch you."

She focused on his gaze, filled with love for her. Then she swallowed and admitted, "I want to be with you, Ray. I love your family and I love you. I want to serve and love all of you. Augustine is my home. I never dreamed of being a princess, but I longed for love and safety and *you*, even though I didn't know you."

He smiled, but his expression quickly turned serious. "Is that why you hid behind your glasses?"

"I was scared. My mom had men over constantly, and some of them tried to …" She hated that they had to talk about this right now, ruin this beautiful moment. "I hid in my closet, on the top shelf behind some old clothes. Then my brother Gage taught me to fight. He kept me safe whenever he could until I could keep myself safe. But I was always scared, so mostly I hid."

He slid his hands around her back and cradled her close. "Your closet kept you safe."

"Gage and my hiding spot and lots of prayer."

"Thank heaven above," he breathed out. He stared at her. "You're incredible, Macey. To overcome that fear and make yourself successful, brilliant, and able to fight to protect yourself. You are the most brave, bold, and beautiful woman I've ever met."

She smiled, wanting to push all the ugliness away. “We’re going home, then?”

“Soon, I hope.” He pulled back. “But first …”

First? What could be more important than getting back to Augustine, to Kiera and T and King Nolan? Could they kiss the entire flight? She’d leave Sutton in a lurch, but Trent had done well in her absence, and he wanted her position in the worst way. She could work remotely. She wanted to protect and help the people in Augustine, but she loved her security work. Could she do both? Ray would help her have all her dreams. Even if she had to let some things go like he had.

Ray pulled a ring out of his coat pocket, grinning. Macey’s eyes widened as she stared at the brilliant princess-cut diamond. It was probably two karats, big enough to be noticed and fit a princess, but not as large and overwhelming as the ring Tristan had put on her finger. She loved this ring. Ray’s gift to her.

“How did you …?”

“I’m a prince. The jeweler gets things done quick when I ask.” He winked and dropped to one knee. “I’ve been so overanxious that I’m probably doing this all wrong.”

“You’re doing everything right,” she assured him. All that mattered was he’d come for her. That he loved her and soon they’d go home.

“Macey Clifton, I love you. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

“Yes!” Macey launched herself at him. Ray was still on one knee, but he caught her. Then he grinned, rolled onto his back, and pulled her with him.

“You’ll get your suit dirty.”

He laughed. “Since you pinned me in that dirt at the training center, I’ve been dreaming of letting you do it again.”

“Letting me? I see you still have some of that pride T tried to talk out of you. Don’t worry. I can cure that.”

“I look forward to it.”

She smiled, and then she pinned him down and kissed him. They took a short break to slide the beautiful ring onto her finger and then they continued.

Brave, bold, and beautiful. She was—because of him.

Her safety. Her love. Her prince.

Thank you for reading Ray and Macey's story. I hope you loved it!

If you're ready for more royal suspense and romance, please keep reading for the first three (unedited) chapters of book number two, *The Brave Prince and the Teacher*. Prince Curtis and Aliya, a hilarious Southern lady, get tangled in a fast-paced, intense, and flirtatious story.

Hugs and thanks for the support,

Cami

Sweet Royal Romance Suspense

The General Prince and the Nerd
The Brave Prince and the Teacher
The Doctor Prince and the Outsider
The Charming Prince and the Chef
The Rogue Prince and the Investigator
The Crown Prince and the Traitor

THE BRAVE PRINCE AND THE TEACHER - THREE CHAPTERS

Chapter One

Aliya Dummond inhaled deeply and looked around at the majestic towering peaks covered in emerald green beauty except for at the tip tops where gray rock jutted out, too tall to even grow trees.

“I love you more than Mama’s pecan pie, towering Alp mountains,” she called out, lifting her hands up to heaven, her tone become more reverent, “Thank you Jesus for your beautiful world.”

Jared laughed at her, apparently her love for this beauty and praise for heaven were humorous to him. Not to her. It was genuine and she felt deep gratitude for the good Lord and His creations.

“I take it you’re chuffed you extended your trip?” Jared asked, grinning at her as they walked at a decent clip up the steep mountain path.

“Happier than a preacher on Sunday morning.” She’d flown into Munich two weeks ago, alone, which bothered her parents, sisters, friends, pastor, fellow schoolteachers, her principal and boss, even the school secretaries and janitor. Basically everybody she knew. Even the checker at Ingles’ Market had an opinion about her ‘parking her booty at home like a good Southern girl’.

Nobody thought the ‘innocent teacher from Blue Ridge, Georgia’ could survive in Europe by herself. She’d gone with a reputable tour group and everything had turned out better than she’d envisioned, and she’d had lofty

dreams for her European tour. She'd an absolutely incredible time touring cities, countryside, and mountains in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. She'd become fast friends with Gracie from Phoenix Arizona, also an elementary school teacher so they had a lot in common.

A few days before the tour ended, the two woman had met Jared and Ammon from Bristol England at an outdoor café in Salzburg. They'd run into the men several times in Salzburg and on their day trip to gorgeous Lake Hallstatt.

Jared and Ammon proposed the women join them on the hike they had planned from Austria through Augustine and into Switzerland after their tour ended. A hike the men had each done several times. They promised a bed each night in either a mountain hut or a hotel, no sleeping on the hard ground, and even promised they'd take them to meet Prince Curtis of Augustine, a mate of theirs, and stay the night in his luxurious mountain cabin. They had all the equipment and each of the women had a backpack and good hiking shoes and clothes as lots of walking and some hiking had been part of their tour.

The five-day long hike was exactly what Aliya had dreamed of doing and only gotten a nibble of with the larger, structured, and mostly over fifty, tour group. When Gracie agreed immediately, as much because she had a huge crush on Ammon and his 'sexy British accent' as her desire to do the extreme hike, Aliya wasn't hard to persuade. She'd be safe with a group and two experienced hikers. When was she ever going to get back to Europe and have an experience like this? When she was seventy and her knees couldn't handle the hiking?

Her parents, and the entire town of Blue Ridge, weren't happy when they heard she was extending her trip to hike the Alps with 'unknown foreign fellers' but what could they say. She was twenty-six and had saved for this trip for a year. Her small town was simply suspicious of anyone they hadn't known since diapers, even though tourists frequented the town because of its proximity to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"Where are Ammon and Gracie?" she asked as she and Jared ambled along the trail side by side. They were on day one, only six hours into the hike, and already Ammon and Gracie had fallen behind several times.

Aliya craned her neck but couldn't see the pair through the thick green trees. She was constantly amazed at the changing scenery of the Alps. Back home the trees were thick as molasses. It was hard to see much of the landscape unless you got to a peak. Here the peaks were insanely high and often the ground would clear and be a rolling, green meadow with a lake, sometimes there would be perfect mountain villages, each with its own quaint church. She was in heaven.

"Just between you and me, I think they stopped to take in the view." Jared winked, his grayish-blue eyes bright with humor.

"I don't think either one of them has their eyes open to see any view."

He chuckled at that. "You're probably right. Unless it's the view of 'Gracie's blindingly beautiful blue eyes'."

Aliya didn't begrudge the two finding love or romance on the trail. Except it put her constantly alone with Jared. He was handsome, nice, and could hold up his end of a conversation, but she wasn't interested in some dating fling. In five days she'd be flying home to Georgia and most likely never see him again. She was too practical and never led with her heart, her best friend Sydnee Lee was always saying. Truthfully her heart wasn't tugged by Jared, and living in such a miniscule town in the mountains before and after attending the nearby and also small Cumberlands University for her schooling, there weren't a lot of handsome male options available for heart-tugging.

"Should we stop and wait?" she asked.

"In a bit. Let them have their minute."

"She sure thinks he's the tomcat."

"I am not certain what that expression means."

"The actual expression is 'Well ain't he just the tomcat's kitten'." Aliya tried to think how to explain and then she laughed. "I really don't know what it means. Basically, a man thinks he's the best so if Ammon is Gracie's tomcat then she thinks he's the best. You know how it is, you're British, you have all kinds of expressions. Do you know what all of them mean?"

“Why certainly I do.” He chuckled.

She smiled, arched her eyebrows, and kept walking. She would be spending a lot of time alone with Jared the next five days, at least they could talk and tease easily.

A scream split the peaceful mountain air.

“Gracie!” Aliya jumped and spun to head back to their friends and help with whatever was wrong.

Jared had a knife out, a long, vicious-looking knife. His eyes glinted maliciously, no humor in them at all.

“Jared …” She backed up a step. “What are you … we need to go help—”

The scream came again.

“Gracie!”

The first scream had sounded surprised and scared. This scream sounded like their friend was in pain.

“I wouldn’t worry so much about Gracie.” Jared stepped closer and Aliya instinctively backed up again. “She’s simply learning that Ammon isn’t nearly the quintessential gentleman he portrayed himself to be.”

Aliya’s heart thumped in an out of control race. She eased farther away, her eyes flitting from Jared’s face to that knife. Her mind couldn’t compute that this seemingly-nice guy would be threatening her with a knife and that Ammon, who’d appeared to be head over boots for Gracie, was hurting her.

“What do you want?” she asked, trying to keep her lip and her hands from trembling. She clung to the straps of her backpack, trying to think if she had any kind of weapon accessible. Her pepper spray was … in a pocket of the backpack. Which pocket and could she reach it in time?

“It’s not so much about what I want as what you’re going to give me, beautiful.” He sneered and there was nothing handsome about his face anymore. “Ammon might not have informed Gracie how this will all play out, but I like my victims to know their options. It makes things more interesting.”

Victims? Obviously this snake in the grass had pulled this stunt before. Prey on unsuspecting tourists, lure them into the woods, and then cut their throats? Chills covered her body and she shivered.

Gracie screamed again, louder and louder, each scream increasing in pitch.

Aliya's neck tightened and her hands trembled violently. She wanted to help her friend, but didn't know how to get past that knife and the suddenly evil-looking man in her path.

"Nobody will hear your screams up here so don't think throwing a tantrum like Gracie is wont to do will bring you any form of rescue."

Aliya said nothing, but she wanted to scream. She clung tighter to her backpack straps and she prayed like she'd never prayed, not even when she and Sydnee Lee had fought off a black bear backpacking the Appalachian Trail for their senior trip. She remembered then what her dad had taught her as a youth, and she concentrated on it now—fight with any kind of weapon you can find and don't stop fighting.

Eventually the bear had given up and left them alone. She was terrified Jared wouldn't give up. The glint in his gray eyes was ugly and horrifying.

"This is going to end with me having all the fun I want with you, taking your I.D. and your money and then … here comes your choice."

Gracie's screams cut off, and that made Aliya more terrified than ever. Had Ammon killed her? No! He couldn't. He'd been so sweet with her. Too sweet … 'Too good to be true' Gracie had sighed just last night. Apparently that saying was as true as the good book.

Aliya couldn't catch a full breath. Her gut churned with horror and her pulse raced out of control. *Please help, please help*, she prayed to anybody in heaven who had a spare minute. She wanted to glance around for a weapon, but didn't dare look away from Jared.

"I'd rather keep you alive, and turn you over to the traffickers who will pay me even more than what I'll glean stealing your cash, maxing out your credit cards, and selling your identity. Unfortunately, if you put up a fight, throw a screaming tantrum, or give me any grief, I'll have to slit that pretty

throat and leave your body somewhere only the wolves will find it to devour." He paused. "What'll it be Aliya? Death or submission?"

He studied her and the only sound was the twittering of birds and a soft wind rustling leaves on the trees. Gracie wasn't screaming any longer. Not a peep. Cold sweat dripped down her back. *Please let Gracie be okay.*

"Come now, little bird. I know this is a lot to take in, but you've been confident and full of that 'southern sass'. Don't disappoint me now."

Don't stop fighting. She had to fight, but how and with what? Clinging to her backpack straps she let her gaze sweep the ground quickly before meeting Jared's grayish-blue gaze. He looked bemused. He had all the time in the world to taunt, defile, and murder her. Nobody around to help, and nobody to hear her scream.

"I rightly believe that I will be choosing death," she said, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice and sound sassy.

Jared smiled, and stepped closer.

Aliya whipped her backpack off and swung it at his head. It connected and knocked him to the side. He cursed, grabbed the backpack with his free hand, and yanked on it. Aliya held tight to the straps for a beat, and then she shoved the backpack at him, releasing her grip on it at the same time.

He sprawled backwards, landing on his rump. The look in his eyes was surprise and fury. Aliya scooped up a large rock and chucked it at his head. It connected with his forehead and Jared actually looked dazed.

Spinning, Aliya raced up the trail. Away from Jared and away from Ammon and Gracie. She hated leaving Gracie behind, but she'd been lucky to escape from Jared. No way could she take on Jared and Ammon. She prayed desperately that Gracie wasn't dead, that she could get help for her and her friend, and that she could get away from Jared.

Footsteps pounded from behind her. Her heart pounded louder and faster than the footsteps. Jared was coming. *No, please no! Somebody help me!*

She couldn't catch her breath and her legs were taking a beating as she increased her pace. All she knew was she had to not let Jared catch her.

Feeling lightheaded from the terror and the sprint uphill, she could not slow down.

“You can’t get away from me, little bird,” Jared’s voice floated up the trail to her.

Was he closer? He was gaining on her. No!

Nobody around to help. Gracie probably already dead. Jared closing the distance and Ammon wouldn’t be far behind. She looked over her shoulder to gauge how far away he was. She couldn’t see him through the thick trees.

She prayed and increased her pace and miraculously her legs gained strength. Sprinting up the mountain path, she could hear Jared’s footsteps coming closer and closer. Her head pounded in pace with his footsteps. Her legs ached but she would not slow down.

She finally, finally reached the apex and started down the other side of the crazy steep mountainside. Far below she could see a beautiful valley with a few open meadows and a lake. Suddenly, the trail was bisected by a fast-moving stream. It wasn’t wide enough to be a river but it looked deep and the water churned with an obviously strong current. It was mid-June but they’d seen snow and this stream was choked with spring runoff.

She didn’t want to get swept downstream, but she had little choice but to go through. If she tried to find a better crossing or waited, Jared would reach her. She couldn’t go back. She didn’t even have her backpack with her pepper spray and phone now. Not that her phone had any service.

Taking a deep breath and praying for help and strength, she plunged into the water. A few steps in and the bank slipped away and she dropped into the water, wet clear to her chest. Even though it was June, the water was icy cold. She took gasping breaths as the pulsating, throbbing liquid stung her arms and legs with its cold and its strength.

The current was so vicious, it threatened to sweep her feet out from under her. Aliya slipped on the mossy rocks, cried out, and tried to find footing and press through. Her feet touched solid ground and she used her arms simulating a breast stroke to try to propel herself toward the other shore.

Aliya stepped on a slick, mossy rock and pushed off. Her next step she found no footing at all. Her head went under water and the current shoved her downstream. The stream narrowed and picked up speed, spitting her head out so she caught a breath but holding her body in its grip.

She rode downstream like the worst river ride of her life, no sign of the rapids stopping and barely able to keep her head above water as she tried valiantly to swim to the side but the current was too strong and she was powerless to escape its grip.

The stream plunged down the mountain, trees and undergrowth rushing by her on the side of the banks. She was helpless and could only keep her head up and try to keep her feet pointed downstream. The flow was a torrent taking her faster and faster as the descent became steeper and steeper and the water churned more powerfully.

Was she going to drown in this chilly water or would it eventually slow down and release her from its grip? She fought to keep her mouth and nose out of the frothing water and keep bringing precious oxygen. She prayed constantly and focused on the one positive—unless Jared jumped in after her it would take him hours to make the progress down the mountainside trails that she'd made in the past fifteen minutes of her vicious river ride.

The water got more turbulent and she could hear a roaring. Was that just in her head? It couldn't possibly be … Aliya didn't even have time to scream or react as the water spewed her over a ledge and Aliya was tumbling and free falling head first. Shouldn't she somehow spin her body and land feet first?

Too late.

Crying out in horror, she slammed into the icy water. It stung her head, but as she plunged quickly down, she realized she'd survived. If she could right herself maybe she could … Her head struck something, and everything went black.

Chapter Two

Prince Curtis Augustine spent most of his days hiking or dirt-biking the mountains framing the east side of the kingdom of August, a natural border

between their country and Austria. He patrolled the trails for any hikers—befriending, screening, sending information on to his brother Ray the general of the military or Ray's close friend Jensen the head of the police.

Curt also searched for the elusive, fabled 'cure' to the curse that had plagued the women who married into his family. Some believed the 'suicide curse' was the cause of his mum's death.

Curt and his brothers knew their beloved mum had been murdered, but not even brilliant Raymond, the general of their army, could find any clues that led to the culprit. For some reason, Curt felt driven to find the cure. The tales handed down with family folklore claimed the cure was in his mountains. Nobody knew where it might be, what it looked like, or what it even did. With his brother Raymond now engaged to the sweet Macey, there was even more reason to find the cure.

It was probably a waste of time searching, but what else did he have to do besides screen hikers for possible ill intent and host any travelers who knocked on his door?

Since he'd killed Suzanne eight months ago he'd rarely left his mountain. Losing his mum six months ago to a senseless murder had given him even less desire to return to the castle or 'real life'. He missed his family. Tristan and Raymond, his older twin brothers, came to visit fairly often with food and supplies, sometimes bringing his dad, their wild and adorable little sister Kiera, or Malik and Steffan. He hadn't seen Derek since Mum's funeral.

He needed to go visit Tristan. The crown prince had sustained extensive burns from a stupid kid's jealousy and homemade pipe bomb. They'd recently brought him home, with medical personnel staying in the castle to insure he healed as well as possible.

Today Curt had hiked several miles straight east, to the base of one of the passes that led to the Austrian side of their Alps. It was picturesque, prettier than the Sound of Music—live and in full color. He'd stopped at his favorite waterfall, stripped down to his shorts and plunged in the icy cold lake at the base of the forty-foot fall.

Some people paid for cryotherapy or took ice baths. Curt dove in a mountain lake and got all the cold therapy benefits anyone could ask for. He forced himself to be still for a few minutes and then swam around the small lake, swimming under the pounding pressure of the waterfall and letting it massage his neck, head, and back. It was invigorating and his entire body was going numb. If only his heart and his mind could go numb.

The agony of not being able to save Suzanne and then having her family blame him for her death hurt. It hurt all the time. He'd quit climbing after she died. Suzanne had been a close friend. They'd had a lot in common and he'd appreciated having a willing friend to hike, climb, and explore with.

His brothers had been his best friends growing up, but all of them had found their own busy paths in life and now he was left behind to flounder and wonder what his purpose was. Firefighting was done for him. A passion for rock climbing, bouldering, and hiking wasn't a productive career. Especially since he wasn't climbing any more. Ray utilized him as a support to their border control and he didn't think his brother was placating him that Curt was a 'one-man protective army', but he wasn't certain.

He felt tremendous guilt for Suzanne's death, but he didn't mourn her like he mourned his mum. Memories of his mum, her laughter, sweetness, and never-ending love for him were bittersweet agony. He loved his dad but the hard-working, king of Augustine had heaps of demands and meetings. His dad and Tristan worked long hours to keep up. It was little wonder his dad didn't think much of his fourth son wandering the woods and the media proclaiming him a 'mountain man'.

How his dad, Tristan, Ray, Steffan, and Derek kept living and working and being productive after losing Mum was baffling to him. He'd quit climbing after losing Suzanne. He'd quit living after losing Mum.

He swam away from the falls, treaded water, gazing around at the verdant trees and undergrowth. The mossy green rocks framed the water spilling off the cliff. The falls were running high today, still full of spring runoff even though it was mid-June.

A scream of terror rang through the air as a woman plunged over the falls headfirst. Curt didn't have time to make a sound of surprise before she hit

the water and disappeared.

The lake wasn't deep. Maybe six or seven feet. He and his brothers had of course climbed up to the waterfall and jumped off, but they'd hit their feet on some of the jagged rocks below. Some of them getting cuts and scrapes, but luckily no broken bones.

Please Lord, let her live, he begged. He had no clue who this woman was, but he couldn't handle another woman dying on his watch.

Curt swam quickly to where she'd gone under and performed a shallow dive. She was right below him in the water, long dark hair streaming around her head, not moving. He grabbed her underneath her armpits and swam to the surface. Her eyes were closed and pink blood and water streamed down her face from a cut he couldn't see, probably on the top of her head but covered by her hair.

Looping his arm across her chest, he tugged her to the shoreline. His mind scrabbled for first aid knowledge that he knew but hadn't practiced in awhile. He'd trained as a firefighter and an EMT instead of going off to university like the rest of his brothers. He'd worked with his country's wildland firefighters for stints and spent the rest of his time exploring and climbing. When he lost his mum he cut himself off from his firefighting buddies and didn't take any proffered jobs. He couldn't handle losing anyone else.

His feet touched the rocky bottom. He tugged the lady and pushed through the water until he was waist deep. Then he released his lifesaving hold on her, wrapped his hands underneath her back and thighs, and cradled her against his chest. He prayed she didn't have a neck or back injury, but getting her out of the cold water and making sure she had a pulse and was breathing had to take precedence right now.

Lifting her easily, he cradled her close as he slogged out of the water. His mind was scrambling, frenzied, thinking of the next move and how to keep this woman alive and get her to help. But somehow the weight of this woman in his arms felt … right. As if he'd been waiting all his life to cradle her close.

He thrust that thought away. Stupid, sappy thoughts had no place in a rescue mission.

Walking barefoot onto the shore he settled her gently onto the flattest spot of ground he could find. Grabbing his shirt off his pile of clothes he wiped at the mixture of blood and water on her face and neck. With her eyes closed she looked innocent, young, and incredibly beautiful.

He pressed the wet, bloody shirt against her head to stop the head wound from bleeding. He'd have to worry about sterilizing the wound later. If she survived.

He was dripping wet but the sun was warm and the adrenaline warmed him as well.

With his free hand, he felt the pulse point in her neck. It was thrumming, strongly. Thank heavens. He put the back of his hand to her nose and was rewarded with warm breath. Saying a quick prayer of gratitude, he held pressure on the wound, thankfully the blood wasn't seeping through his shirt.

A head injury. A beautiful woman. Him miles from help. Suzanne's awful death played through his mind.

He reached for his backpack, yanking it closer to him. Since that awful day of losing Suzanne he'd bought a satellite phone and always had it close at hand. He had to release the pressure on the injured woman's head to fish the phone out. Chad or Steffan first? Helicopter pilot or doctor?

Chad, he decided. His brother Tristan's close friend was an accomplished pilot and had the military base resources and personnel at his fingertips. Major Chad Presley would bring the right help along, and get them to his brother Steffan and the country's largest hospital in Traverse.

Curt and the woman were a fair distance from a spot the helicopter could land. They could lower a basket and get fairly close. The lake gave more clearance without trees than most areas in this part of his mountains but the forest butted up almost to the lake's shores.

Pressing on his shirt and the head wound with his left hand again, he scrolled through and found Chad's number with his right. Before the call

could connect, the woman's eyes fluttered open. Surprised and relieved, he looked into the most intriguing golden-brown eyes. Her long dark lashes were wet and framed her eyes so prettily he lost his train of thought.

She stared at him for a beat, her eyes wide, her pulse beating madly in her neck.

"Curt?" Chad said in his ear. "Everything okay?"

Curt had never reached out to Chad for anything besides an emergency. The last time had been eight months ago … He couldn't think about Suzanne right now.

This woman was awake. That was incredible news. Suzanne had never opened her eyes after her head slammed into the rock wall of the cliff.

"A woman fell off the waterfall," Curt rushed to explain. "She has a head wound and lost consciousness, but she's coming around now."

"Back or neck injury?"

"I hope not but possibly. Ma'am?" He stared into her eyes. "Do you feel any pain or tingling in your back or neck?"

She seemed to think then murmured, "No."

That was encouraging.

"Can you move your fingers and toes?"

She wiggled her fingers and he couldn't see her toes through her Solomon's but she rolled her ankles around.

"Good," he said.

"Have her just lie still," Chad said. "I'll come to you."

"I'm at the upper waterfall and lake."

"Be there in …" Chad paused, probably calculating distance. "Thirty." He hung up.

She moved as if to sit up. Curt put his hand gently on her shoulder. The warmth of her soft skin against his palm traced through him like electricity. He startled and her eyes got even bigger, her mouth softening.

“What’s your name?” he asked to distract himself from how it felt to touch her, but he found he wanted to know her name. He hadn’t even considered dating, hadn’t really been around women since Suzanne’s death. Why an injured woman would cause a reaction in him wasn’t something he wanted to explore.

She stared at him for a beat and then said slowly, “Ali … Aliya …” Another pause. “Drummond.”

“I’m Curtis Augustine.”

She gave him a very, very pretty smile and then tried to sit up again.

“Don’t move,” he cautioned, “You must’ve hit your head when you fell from the falls. I think it’s stopped bleeding but I’m not sure. You could have a spinal injury.”

“We have to move in a jiffy,” she said, panic suddenly filling her voice and eyes, “We have to go.”

‘A jiffy?’ She had an interesting accent. Definitely American. He swallowed and tried to think rationally, not just give in to a pretty pair of eyes that were capturing him. He could still remember Suzanne’s blue eyes as she’d talked him into letting her ascend the cliff first. If only he’d led out. He was stronger. Even though she’d been a climbing instructor he had more practical experience. She was dead because he’d let her go first.

“Just lie still, ma’am, and a helicopter will come take us to the hospital then we’ll get you home safe.”

Her eyes got intense and terrified at the same time. She grabbed onto his arm and begged, “Please. There’s something wronger than a preacher at a strip club in my head.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at that but he sobered quickly as her eyes were full of terror.

“I cain’t remember. But something bad is coming. Someone is after me.”

He glanced around, cataloguing, listening, while keeping his hand pressed against her head wound. It was hard to hear over the falls.

He tucked the edges of his shirt around her head to keep it in place. “Don’t move,” he cautioned.

Standing, he slid his pistol out of his backpack. His eyes slowly traveled over the forest surrounding the lake and meadow. Was someone really after her or was it the head injury talking? Why would she have come off the waterfall as awkwardly as she had if someone wasn’t chasing her? He glanced up at the top of the waterfall and around but again he saw nothing. How many minutes had it been? Alone he’d take any threat. With a beautiful, injured woman relying on him, he’d prefer to have his brother Ray, General Augustine, by his side. He should’ve told Chad to pick Ray up. Had his lack of seeing the situation clearly endangered another innocent woman?

He crouched back down by the lady’s side but kept looking around and kept his gun out.

“Who’s after you?” he asked.

“I don’t rightly know,” she said, her voice sounded terrified. She was definitely American, maybe from the south.

How did she not know? Had the hit to her head hurt her memory?

“Why did you jump off the waterfall?” he asked. Jumped wasn’t the right word. She hadn’t jumped. From his vantage point she’d been flung off by the fast-flowing creek. Maybe somebody threw her off? Had he scared them off, or were they waiting and watching?

“I don’t rightly know,” she repeated.

He looked down at her, frustrated. “What do you remember?” he asked, trying to soften his tone.

“I came to Europe for a tour,” she said slowly. “I met a friend … Gracie.” She closed her eyes as if remembering Gracie was painful for some reason.

“We were going to do something together after the tour. Explore the mountains … maybe? Then Gracie was screaming.” Her eyes flew open. “Why was she screaming?”

He lifted his hands.

“She was hurt. Someone was hurting her. I think a man was hurting Gracie.”

Tears brightened her brown eyes and then rolled down the sides of her face. He wished he could comfort her. He didn’t know her well enough to offer comfort.

“I can’t remember. I can’t see the men. But they were there.” She paused, her forehead furrowed in concentration. “Darn it … nothing is coming. I woke up, and you were here.” She stared at him as if he’d rescued her. He sort of had, but she’d been out of it so she wouldn’t remember that.

He looked her over. She trusted him and didn’t associate him with whoever had hurt her friend. That was good. Against his better judgment he said solemnly, “I’ll keep you safe Aliya. You’ll be okay.”

“You promise?” Her golden-brown eyes seemed to pierce his soul.

Could he promise? He hadn’t kept Suzanne safe, hadn’t been able to rescue her.

He held Aliya’s gaze and he said two words he shouldn’t have, “I promise.”

“I believe you.” She gave him a soft smile and he felt his chest expand. As the fourth of six prince brothers he used to fancy himself a heroic and brave prince like the stories his mum had loved to tell him. Losing Suzanne had made him realize he was no hero.

But this woman believed he’d keep her safe?

He nodded to her and stood quickly, gun out and checking the surrounding area. He dared any threat to come at them. He’d failed Suzanne. He would not fail Aliya.

Chapter Three

Aliya shivered, her clothes damp and her skin tingling from the sun trying to warm her up. If Sydney Lee was here she'd boss Curtis around, maybe tell him to lie on top of Aliya and warm her up. No way would Aliya dare be so brazen. Flushing just imagining Curtis touching her made her warmer. Thankfully she wouldn't see Pastor Jim soon and have to confess.

She stared at the insanely handsome man, who was currently holding a gun out and watching for threats as they waited for a helicopter to come rescue them. He looked like a superhero to her. He seemed familiar to her somehow but she knew she'd never met the likes of this tough, kind, and brave man in real life.

Despite the reassurance of Curtis's muscles and his weapon and his promise to keep her safe, she instinctively wanted to run from whoever was chasing her. Her head throbbed and she didn't know how far she'd get. She had to trust Curtis. He definitely seemed the trustworthy sort.

How did she even know someone was chasing her? The last thing she could remember was this morning when she and Gracie were getting ready in a hotel room. They'd been excited for a hiking adventure. With two men. Who were the men? She should know that. She felt like she should know those men. She strained to picture them, but it made her head ache worse.

Had Gracie been hurt by one of the men? Where was she? Where was Aliya? She was surrounded by the beauty of the mountains so they must've gone hiking. Where were the men and Gracie? What time of day was it? The warm sun was slanting, possibly late afternoon? She didn't dare interrupt Curtis's vigilant and protective stance and ask. She wished she understood why her mind was blocking out everything about those men and completely blocking the events from this morning to when she'd opened her eyes and looked into the blue eyes clearer than a summer's sky and warmer than the sun itself.

Curtis Augustine. Why was that name familiar? He had no shirt on and his damp shorts clung to him. He was beautifully shaped with a tanned, muscular upper body that made her mouth dry. She let her gaze trail over the strong, manly bumps of muscle in his arms, shoulders, and chest, and the lean, striated muscles of his abdomen and back.

Yikes. She was acting like a wanton woman. Pastor Jim and her mama would give her a preaching about lusts of the flesh. But my goodness gracious, had her mama ever seen a build the likes of that one? They grew their men strong in Georgia and her daddy was no exception, but Gracie had never seen a man to compare with the appeal of Curtis Augustine.

She flushed in embarrassment and looked out at the thick greenery instead, not wanting him to catch her staring. She needed to concentrate on how to find and help Gracie and who the men were that had hurt Gracie and somehow made Aliya jump off a waterfall. She glanced up at the water gushing over that ledge. She would never willingly jump off something that high. Had the men thrown her? Were they nearby waiting to hurt her and Curtis? Her eyes darted around but she couldn't see anyone. If they were there, what were they waiting for? All this thinking made her head throb.

Curtis glanced down. The lean lines of his face softened and he gave her a beautiful and reassuring smile that crinkled his cheeks and the corners of his eyes. "The helicopter will be here soon and we'll get you somewhere safe and my brother will stitch up your head and help you remember."

"Bless you," she said softly, loving his lyrical accent. This man felt like 'somewhere safe' to her. Could she stay with him? "Is your brother a doctor?"

"One of the best."

She loved the pride in his voice. She loved her family too. Her mama and daddy were going to flip out that she got hurt. She remembered that they hadn't wanted her to extend her trip. They hadn't wanted her to even come on the trip. They'd wanted her safe at home. If only she'd listened. She supposed she'd go home now. That was comforting, but she wanted to spend more time with her rescuer. Silly as she hardly knew him. He was a hero in her eyes and she probably had a rescuer's complex where she thought she cared more deeply for her rescuer than she truly did because of how he'd helped her and how appealing he was.

A steady thrumming drifted through the trees toward them.

Curtis turned and peered through the trees. She watched him. She liked watching him. A few moments later the thrumming got louder and then a

helicopter hovered above them in the air.

Curtis waved as the door opened and two men appeared holding a basket between them. He squatted down next to her. “They’ll have to lower the basket, there’s not room to land safely here,” he said loudly to be heard over the rotors.

“Okay,” she squeaked, tears pricking at her eyes again. She wasn’t always this emotional. Right? It scared her that she couldn’t remember this day or the men who she felt like she should somehow know. What else was she forgetting? Was she actually an emotional mess who cried all the time?

Curtis’s gaze was warm on her face as the two men stood on the edges of the basket, hanging on to the cables, and the contraption and men lowered toward them.

“It’ll be okay,” he said, bending down closer and almost whispering the words in her ear.

“You promise?” She grabbed onto his warm, firm arm.

“I promise.” His gaze reassured her as much as his words.

“Will you stay by my side?” she begged.

“You just try and get rid of me,” he said with a charming smile.

“Bless you.” She relaxed, releasing his arm. This was a man as true as a Southern gentleman. He wouldn’t leave her. He wouldn’t let harm come to her.

The men landed and stepped over to them. The one thumped Curtis on the shoulder, a big smile on his face.

“Thanks for coming, Chad,” Curtis’ voice was muffled by the helicopter but his eyes were as serious as she’d seen them and something passed between the two men.

“Anytime.” Chad nodded to him then turned to her. “We’re going to load you onto the board ma’am,” he said loudly, giving her a kind smile. He was a handsome man with unique green eyes wearing a gray military uniform.

“Bless you,” she said. She’d noticed Curtis’s unique and charming accent but this man’s accent was thick and suave. On his days off from the military she imagined he was quite the ladies’ man.

The other man gently put a soft collar around her neck and held her head as Chad and Curtis slid their hands under her back and legs and eased her onto a hard board. She couldn’t understand why Curtis’s hands produced a strong tingling sensation but Chad’s were just hands. They strapped her onto the board. She didn’t like that. It was awful to feel like she was bound but she instinctively trusted these men.

They loaded her and the board carefully on top of the basket, securing it. The two men conferred for a brief moment and then Curtis stood on the edge of the basket, grasping the rope and smiling down at her. How did he know she didn’t want to be away from him for a moment? It was terrifying to think of being lifted while laying helplessly on this board, but she trusted Curtis and Chad. They had been nothing but kind. She was anxious to get away from whoever was out in the woods. Would they have followed her? Was she safe now? How could she find Gracie?

She and Curtis lifted off the ground. Aliya cried out. He crouched down as the cable pulled them up, holding onto the ropes.

“It’s okay,” he called to her.

Aliya focused on his face, his blue eyes. It was okay. Curtis was here.

They were quickly level with the helicopter. A man waited inside while the pilot held the helicopter steady. The man offered a hand, Curtis took it and leapt inside. Then the two of them carefully maneuvered her and the board into the helicopter, sliding her in and away from the door.

The basket and cable descended back down.

Curtis took a blanket from the other man’s hands and squatted next to her, tucking the blanket around her and making fire race through her body as his hands brushed her hand, her side, her leg, and then her neck.

“You all right?” he called to her.

“Yes. Bless you,” she talked loudly to be heard over the rotors.

He nodded and started to straighten.

“Curtis.” She tried to reach for his hand but grasped his warm leg instead.

He immediately squatted back down, those blue eyes holding her in his grasp. “Yes?”

“Can they look for Gracie?”

“Of course.”

The other two men swept into the helicopter. They pulled in the basket and cable, shut the door and the helicopter climbed up above the trees and then swooped over the mountains.

Curtis and Chad put on headsets and talked rapidly into them. Curtis gestured to her a few times and his eyes swept over her often. Aliya was the farthest thing from comfortable, lying on the hard wooden board, her head throbbing, in wet clothes, and worrying about Gracie. She closed her eyes and she must’ve drifted off.

She was lifted into the air. Her eyes sprung open. The helicopter had landed and Curtis and another man carried her off the helicopter, settling her on a waiting rolling bed, still attached to the board.

A man and a woman wearing scrubs smiled down at her as they rolled her in through some double doors and into the sterile, clean-smelling whiteness of what could only be a hospital.

She tried to look back out at the helicopter as the bed progressed into a surgical area. “I didn’t thank them,” she managed.

Curtis was right there. “It’s all right. I’ll tell them. They’re going back to search for Gracie and the men from the air. Chad deployed men to search from the ground as well. Do you remember if you were on a trail above the waterfall?”

She searched her mind but nothing. As she focused on the mountains all she could see was Curtis. “No,” she managed, frustration filling her. “I do believe I started the day in Salzburg but … everything after that is a blur.”

“It’s okay. Any description of the men?”

They stopped moving in a small curtained off room, but didn't transfer her off the hard board and onto the nearby bed.

"Prince Curtis," the female nurse said, her voice a little breathless as if awed to be in his presence. Her eyes trailed over his well-built chest.

"Shaylie," the male nurse said in a quiet reprimand.

The female nurse's eyes snapped up and focused on Aliya, as if remembering she was at work. She grabbed a blood pressure cuff.

"Prince?" Aliya echoed. He was a prince? Of course he was. She might not have her memories of today but she had the rest of her memories and she could easily picture Prince Curtis, his five handsome brothers, adorable little sister, and stoic father, all wearing black as they buried the queen of Augustine. Curtis's mama, the queen.

His brothers were often in the media or on magazines, most especially the oldest, Crown Prince Tristan, who recently had received an insane amount of media ink and video time being burned in an explosion. Then Prince Tristan's twin, the General Prince Raymond had stolen Prince Tristan's fiancé. It had been quite the scandal but settled when Prince Raymond and his fiancée Macey gave an international press release. They admitted they fell in love while Macey was engaged to Prince Tristan, but it took Prince Tristan almost dying and the crown prince forcing them to admit their love for each other.

Prince Derek, also received a lot of attention. A sensation of American Ninja Warrior; everybody loved cheering for a prince. Though there were always some grumbles from men in her hometown about the number one Warrior not being an American.

Curtis resembled his brothers strongly but besides that funeral scene she'd never seen him splayed across magazines holding some beauty like his brother Prince Malik, the Charmer, news and media outlets liked to call him.

"Can you let Dr. Prince Steffan examine and clear her before you quiz her about the day's events?" the man asked.

Curtis nodded shortly. Aliya didn't know if he was annoyed he couldn't question her or annoyed at the lady calling him 'prince'.

A man strode into the room, wearing scrubs and snapping plastic gloves on, a stethoscope around his neck. He looked very doctorly, but he had the bearing of a prince as well. He also strongly resembled Curtis, with darker hair and a sharper jawline. He grinned widely at Curtis. "Wish I could give you a thumping hug but I'm all sterile, and you dare grace my esteemed hospital appearing like a wet teenage thug with no shirt or shoes on."

His accent was almost as strong as Chad's had been.

Curtis chuckled and folded his arms across his chest. Aliya drew in a sharp breath at all those muscles flexing in synchrony. She heard it echoed by the nurse.

"Shaylie," the doctor prince said. Steffan? "Please get my brother some scrubs, extra-large."

"Of course Dr. Prince Steffan." Her face was lit up as she stared at him.

"Doctor Steffan is fine." He was still smiling but there was steel in his voice.

"But you're a prince," she protested.

"The scrubs, please."

She nodded eagerly and scurried out of the room.

"She's new," Dr. Steffan said to Curtis. "Thank you for not being star struck, Gray," Doctor Steffan said to the other man.

"I just hide it better, Doctor Prince."

Doctor Steffan laughed then turned to her. "And how are you feeling ma'am?"

"Aliya, please," she managed. "Y'all are princes?" her voice squeaked tellingly. What on earth kind of alternate reality had she fallen into?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cami is a part-time author, part-time exercise consultant, part-time housekeeper, full-time wife, and overtime mother of four adorable boys. Sleep and relaxation are fond memories. She's never been happier.

Join Cami's VIP list to find out about special deals, giveaways and new releases and receive a free copy of *Rescued by Love: Park City Firefighter Romance* by clicking here.

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1ST CHAPTER - MATCHMAKING THE SINGER AND THE WARRIOR

Chapter One

Gray Denizen, Smokey G to most of the world, sat in the steaming hot tub on the deck of his Wengen rental home overlooking the picturesque, snow-covered Lauterbrunnen Valley in the Swiss Alps. The sun had set while he marinated in the water and the valley of seventy waterfalls, the real home of the Hobbit, was now just some twinkling lights far below. He loved it here. He wanted to come back in the summer and hike, bike, and soar down the mountain slopes with a parasail, see it green and flowering instead of covered with mounds of snow. It was insanely beautiful with its blanket of snow, he could only imagine the mystical beauty of this area lush and green.

The snow skiing for Christmas had been insane, but all of his friends had gone back to "real life". They loved to tease him that his life was a vacation, but Gray's life was his work. He loved composing songs and recording them. He didn't love the endless travel, performing in front of huge and raucous crowds, or all the details involved with social media, media, and being afraid any word he spoke might get misconstrued.

He'd finished his European tour right before Christmas and sent his staff and assistant, Janie, home for the holidays. Instead of going to his house on the Fort Lauderdale intercoastal he'd decided to beg some friends to come here. Janie had found this unreal mountainside village, only accessible by train or helicopter. He'd had to opt for the helicopter simply to keep a fan from seeing him and letting it slip where he was. Apparently he was in

danger. He was always in danger, had been since childhood so it didn't bother him much.

The few single friends, who hadn't bit the marriage bullet, and he trusted not to post on social media or brag about spending Christmas with him, had met him here. They'd skied the famed Wengen, Grindelwald, and Jungfrau resorts. Incredible. And he'd been able to stay incognito with helmet, goggles, and a face shield on. No Russian mafia busting through the door to ruin the holidays.

But now he was semi-alone. He was used to his assistant Janie, his cook Liam, his personal trainer Joseph, his two incredible housekeepers Quincy and Nellie, plus millions of fans looking for any opportunity to talk to, stare at, or touch him. It was odd to have true peace and quiet. His security guys were still here, led and trained by his trusted stepdad, Russ.

The four tough men claimed they had to stay with him. There'd been some backlash about him helping a beautiful woman escape her Russian mafia-affiliated boyfriend so now his security team refused to leave his side. Apparently even if you were a famous billionaire singer you didn't mess with the Russian mafia. What was the good of being famous and wealthy if you couldn't right some wrongs in the world?

He swirled the hot water between his fingers. He should get out, fix himself something to eat, read, and go to bed. In a few days he'd fly to Grand Cayman and his staff would meet him there. They'd have two weeks to relax on the beach, which usually meant beach runs, lifting weights, and long hours working on new song lyrics. He'd start a short five-stop tour of the Caribbean Islands after that. He thought he wanted these few days after Christmas to decompress, but peace and quiet alone wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

He liked all his security guards but with twelve hour shifts of either monitoring the cameras they'd set up in the basement or doing their rounds inside and outside the house they only had twelve hours off to exercise, run get groceries or supplies, or have a tiny bit of free time. He tried not to bug them during their moments off, unless they'd spar or lift with him.

Great guys, most especially his stepdad Captain Russell Brown. He loved and respected Russ above anyone in this world. He knew retired Marine felt the same, but he wasn't exactly a profuse or friendly person. Tim, Kaden, and Cameron were each twenty years younger than Russ give or take a few years. They were all willing to go pickup dinner, help keep things clean without the housekeepers here, have a conversation with him, or work out with him, but none of them were big on brainstorming song lyrics, or discussing the latest clean romance novel he was reading. He smiled to himself, not that he'd admit he read clean romance to anyone.

A thud came from around the side of the house. Gray straightened, staring that direction, but with the low lights glowing through the three-story windows behind him he couldn't see anything. A dart of apprehension made the hot tub feel even hotter. Had the Russian mafia somehow found out where he was? The house had been rented in an umbrella company's name that wasn't affiliated with his name at all, and he hadn't so much as gone to dinner or anywhere besides skiing, where his face was completely covered.

He'd waved to Tim a few minutes ago as he'd walked by the side of the massive patio through one of the trails he and the guys had dug into the deep snow. The backside of the patio dropped off into nothingness so at least there was one angle that couldn't be approached.

Scrambling out of the hot tub, his bare feet hit the cold patio and steam rose from his body. His body temperature was high enough from his soak and the quickening of his pulse that he welcomed the piercing cold air.

Not bothering with the stack of towels, he hurried to the edge of the patio where Tim should be, and tried to peer into the darkness. If there was trouble, more of his men would come running, but Gray knew he was way around a fight. He'd been raised in East L.A. and he'd learned young how to keep him and his mom safe from thugs, and his own father.

"Tim?" he questioned.

A small person sprang out of the darkness and knocked him flat on his back. Gray bucked his body and rolled, holding onto the person's arms and pinning his assailant underneath his much larger frame.

His attacker was a … woman. His eyes widened. An exquisitely beautiful woman. He could only stare in shock as she smiled sweetly up at him, her blue eyes lit with mischief and her smooth skin crinkling at the edges or her lips and her eyes. Her gorgeous smile conveyed she was ecstatic he was pinning her down.

He felt a rush of desire fill him that was completely out of line for the situation. This woman had attacked him. He should be afraid, or at least annoyed. Was she an ultra-fan, affiliated with someone who was targeting him, or a completely different kind of danger to him? There were sparks swirling between them and her small frame underneath him felt really, really nice. He listened for other sounds, but the night was still. Was she alone? Where were his men? Even if she'd bested Tim, which was highly unlikely, someone would've seen on the cameras this woman knocking Gray down. They should be bursting out the patio door with guns drawn.

"Well, hello handsome," she was slightly out of breath, probably because he was twice her size and pinning her down, but he liked the sound of her voice and the breathlessness of it. "I liked the reversal. Don't tell anyone I let you get away with that. I do have a reputation of ruthlessness to uphold."

He almost laughed at her smart-aleck response, but he realized immediately … This woman wasn't a fan or dangerous to him. He knew this woman and he really shouldn't be feeling sparks of desire, or pinning down this famous and very happily married woman. Why was Scarlett Lily sneaking onto his back patio and knocking him down when she should be in California with her husband and son? It was out of character for her to flirt with or tease anyone besides her husband.

"Scarlett?" he questioned, easing off of her, standing, and offering a hand up. She took his hand and stood easily, still grinning at him.

He pulled his hand back quickly, trying to ignore how right her smaller hand had felt in his. What was he thinking? He helped all manner of women around the world, but if they were married, even if their husbands were despicable scum balls, he was very careful not to cross any boundaries or have untoward thoughts. He'd controlled himself even around the gorgeous Malory Grange when she was married to that loser Senator Ted Malouf. After she'd been divorced Gray had made his play, and been shot down by a

woman for the first time in his life. But if he could control himself around the likes of Malory, he could definitely keep himself from feeling attracted to Scarlett.

Scarlett Lily Quinn was one of the top A-list actresses in the world. He'd known her for years, hosted the Grammy awards with her, and ran into her at numerous events and parties. Her husband, Griff, was a tough ex-Navy SEAL who Gray had been impressed with, the farthest thing from a scum ball. Gray knew Scarlett was expecting their second child. He thought she was due soon. He looked and her stomach was far too flat to be almost through a pregnancy. She looked fit in tight black clothing that outlined her lean frame and all of her curves. Very, very fit. And he shouldn't be looking at her like that. He scrubbed at his beard with his fingertips.

"Close but no cigar," Scarlett drawled out. "Sara Sanderson. I'm Scarlett's stunt double."

"Oh. That's right." Relief filled him. He wasn't attracted to a married woman. *Thank you heaven above.* But Scarlett's stunt double … interesting, very interesting.

He still had no clue why she was here or why Tim or one of his other security people weren't rushing out here to intercept her. He stared at Sara's beautiful face with startling blue eyes and smooth dark hair. It was incredible how much she and Scarlett looked alike with the exception of the eye and hair color. Did Sara dye her hair, or wear a wig for her stunts? Colored contacts, or did they not really get close enough to show a stunt doubles' eye color?

"We met in …" He was grappling. He remembered meeting her. Very well. But he traveled so often, most of the locations blended together. It had been tropical. An incredibly lush jungle. The cloud forest. A high-profile wedding. A benefit concert.

"Costa Rica," she supplied. "Colt Quinn and Kim Heathrow's wedding, and you did a benefit concert for Jex and Pearl Steele's extreme sports camp for the refugees' children."

He nodded. All the pieces clicking. It sounded like she remembered their first meeting too. He liked that. She'd been beautiful, sassy, and grinning

then as well. He'd felt an instant attraction to her, but hadn't seen her since and finding her phone number had proven tougher than he'd imagined it would be. That had been a couple of years ago and he'd been busy composing songs, playing on his saxophone or the keyboard, recording songs, and exhausting traveling tours like the one he just finished, and the one he was set to start in a couple of weeks. At least the Caribbean was a short tour.

"It's good to see you," he said.

"It's good to be seen." She winked and looked over him. "You're looking *fabulous* as always."

"Thank you." He was pretty sure she was teasing him not flirting with him. He resisted flexing to make sure she knew how hard he worked to look 'fabulous'. He stayed extremely fit with both his own personal trainer and a world-renowned chef who cooked healthy and delicious food traveling with him.

"You're not going to return the compliment?" She flipped her long dark hair over her shoulder and winked.

He laughed. She was irresistible. It was the same impression he'd had last time he'd met her. No wonder he'd tried so hard to track down her number. But Scarlett had insisted she couldn't give Sara's number out to any of the many men who asked, he'd hated that response, and even his impressive assistant Janie had struck out. But Janie was always jealous of any woman he was interested in so he suspected she hadn't tried as hard as she should.

"You look even more gorgeous than last time I saw you. Your beautiful face is more exquisite and mind-blowing than the sunrise over the Jungfrau."

"Ah." She patted his cheek and said almost condescendingly. "That smooth tongue of yours. Maybe if you wrote a song about me I'd believe you were sincere."

He chuckled. "All right. Challenge accepted." He shivered, the cold wind brushing over his half-clothed and wet body. His temperature was dropping and quick. The water still dripping from his suit had gone from warm to

freezing. He'd probably gotten her wet from pinning her down, but she didn't shiver or act cold.

"Let's get you inside," she said, tilting her head toward the glass doors.

He gestured for her to go first. Sara smiled and shook her head. "Gentlemen," she said in a scoffing tone.

His eyebrows rose. What was that about? He had a lot of questions for her. But first … "How did you get past my security guy?"

"Oh, Tim?" She looked back at Gray. "He's fine, but he is duct-taped and zip-tied next to the garage."

"Excuse me?" He stared at her, pretty certain she was joking but admittedly not a hundred percent. His security guys were top notch and he couldn't imagine Russ not coming himself with an intruder penetrating Russ's intricately-woven security web. No matter how gorgeous and welcome this intruder was.

"I'd tell you to go look, but you need to get dressed and wading through that snow might give you frostbite. It's freezing out here." She did the cutest all-over body shiver he'd ever seen. Maybe cute was the wrong word. He could write an entire song about how appealing she looked right now. "I know, I'm gorgeous. I can read it in your eyes, and yes you did get me wet pinning me down." Shaking her head and laughing at him, she said, "Come on, my irresistible saxophone player and singer extraordinaire. Let's go." She bounced to the patio door and flung it wide, slipping inside.

Gray grabbed a towel and hurried after her, squeezing some of the water out of his suit before securing the towel around his waist. He shut the door behind him, appreciating the warm house, the in-floor heating making even the wood floor warm. She walked over to the fireplace, picked up the remote, and clicked it on.

"Nice place," she said, giving a cursory glance around at the three-story open area with the massive three-story stone fireplace on the wall next to the double doors to the master suite, the wall perpendicular to that was three levels of windows overlooking the valley almost two thousand feet below, the huge living room and the state of the art kitchen and dining area on the

opposite side of the windows. The ‘nice place’ was a twenty million dollar mansion perched on an exclusive mountainside a short walk from the high-dollar resort village of Wengen and one of the most gorgeous settings in the world, but it didn’t seem to impress this lady too much.

“Thanks,” he murmured, so confused right now. Why was Scarlett Lily’s stunt double in his living room, teasing and flirting with him, and had she truly bested his highly-trained security guards? If that was true, why had she let Gray pin her down? He thought himself a great fighter but he hadn’t bested even Kaden yet, despite the tips Tim always gave him when they sparred, and Russ and Cameron were ten times tougher than Kaden. Russ was a decorated and accomplished former marine who Gray thought would win a battle against any man, or woman, in the world.

“Come over here and get warm,” she said again. “I’ve got a bit to tell you and then you can shower while I get settled and we’ll chat more as I’m sure the questions will keep coming.”

“Did you really tie Tim up?” he asked in disbelief, walking to the fireplace and getting in her space, staring down at her beautiful and seemingly-innocent looking face. He could see that her exquisite blue eyes that seemed so lit up and friendly were actually guarded. He’d met and helped many, many woman over the years and could usually read what they needed and the anguish they’d been through. This woman had a shield up that he doubted anyone could get through.

“Zip-tied and duct taped,” she corrected in a sing-song tune. “Of course I did. The rest of your security men are equally incapacitated. You’re right. We should actually go say hello to them quick and let them go. They can go free Tim. He might be getting chilled out there. Though I needed to prove a point, and I checked the surrounding area thoroughly and put up extra perimeter security when I disabled yours. I’ll know if anyone but me tries to infiltrate your beautiful rental home, but it’s probably not smart to leave your guys out of commission with all the people you have after you at the moment. Plus, if I’m going to be working with your security I shouldn’t make enemies out of them. I might get my hand slapped for that one.” She grinned.

Sara was equal parts gorgeous, appealing, cute, baffling, and possibly unstable. Hand slapped? Did she ever get in trouble for her sassy tongue and antics? Who could get upset at a woman with a smile that friendly and seemingly-sweet? If she'd truly bested his security, she was light years from sweet.

He had so many questions but he started with. "All the people after me?" He scrubbed his fingers through his beard. "The Russian mafia?"

"They actually aren't the most worrisome party at the moment. You like to tick people off, don't you?"

His eyes widened. He ticked bad people off when he helped those who needed him, but most of the world loved him and his music.

"Come on. Sorry to put off your shower and getting warm, but you do look mighty fine in that swimming suit." Sara's voice was still lilting and happy as if she were teasing or laughing at him at all times. He couldn't imagine any world where this small and innocent-looking woman could take out his well-trained security. She must have help hiding somewhere outside.

"Who's working with you?" he asked, looking around.

"We'll get into that soon, but for the moment I'm here alone."

She turned and walked toward the stairs. No, this woman didn't know how to simply walk. She bounced or danced or skipped. With each step she lifted slightly onto tiptoe, her hair floated around her shoulders, and she pranced to the stairs and down them. Gray was certain he'd never been around a more fascinating woman in his life. He'd thought he was in love with Malory Grange for almost a year and a half, regularly begging her to marry him, but Malory had shockingly found and married her former fiancé two weeks ago. He'd imagined it would hurt more, but he knew Malory had always been in love with Van Udy. Gray had helped her escape her horrific ex, Senator Ted Malouf. He was happy for her. Even Malory hadn't held the appeal Sara did, and he hardly knew Sara.

They descended the stairs and walked into the massive living area of the basement with its own kitchen and living section, four bedrooms, a workout room, and a separate theater. The carpet of the basement was warm with the

radiant, in-floor heating on here as well. It felt good on his toes. Sara looked over her shoulder and for a brief second her gaze focused on his chest, her cheeks turned a becoming pink, and she tripped over something.

Gray reached out a hand and steadied her. She stilled under his touch and he found himself wrapping his hand around her waist and slowly tugging her toward him. She stared up at him, all traces of laughter and teasing replaced with a warmth that made his heart race faster than when she'd knocked him down on the patio.

She rested her palms on his shoulders. The warmth of her fingers and palms seared into his bare skin. Gray let out a telling groan and focused on her summer-sky blue eyes. Her gaze captured him completely and lyrics raced through his head. He was lost and found in her gaze. Her touch lit a fire in him he'd never known existed outside of song lyrics and romance novels.

"Mpmf!" A strangled yell came from across the room and a body scooted from behind the pool table.

"Cameron?" Gray questioned, stunned by what he was seeing. His tough bodyguard. Incapacitated just as she'd said. Zip ties secured the man's hands behind his back and to his feet which were also secured together. His mouth was covered with duct tape.

"Apologies." Sara's grin was back and that teasing, almost-mocking light filled her blue eyes. She pulled from Gray's grasp and strode toward Cameron, pulling a knife out of her pocket and flipping it open.

Russ and Kaden stormed out of the bedroom they'd converted into their security headquarters. Russ's face and neck were mottled red, the skin around his mouth looked raw and there were patches of his beard missing. His dark eyes were furious. Kaden was actually smiling, but the kid had perma-grin and he didn't have a beard so maybe he wasn't as upset about the effects of the duct tape.

"Ah, good job." Sara straightened and faced the two security guys who would make most people run the other direction if they were marching their way. She held the knife loosely in her hand. "You two get gold stars. Did you both get free, or did one of you free the other one?"

Russ reached her first and knocked the knife from her hand. It skittered across the nearby countertop. “I broke the zip ties,” he grunted out.

He reached out with both hands, blood dripping from one wrist, most likely from his struggle with the zip ties, and moved to grasp her upper arms. Sara knocked his hands away, dodged underneath his arms, landed a vicious punch to his kidneys, and then she leapt, and kicked him in the side of the head. Russ stuttered, but straightened quickly.

“Gray,” Russ grunted out. “Move away while we take care of this problem.”

“Stand down, Russ,” Gray commanded. “Do you know who this is?”

“I don’t care if she’s the President. She incapacitated and took down my men. By herself.”

She really was alone and had taken out his security? What in the world? He’d never been so impressed, confused, and interested in a woman.

“I don’t hit women,” Russ growled at Sara. “So you still have the advantage, but you got the drop on me last time. I will have you hogtied and answering some questions.”

“Russ!” Gray sharpened his voice. “You work for me and you will keep your hands off of her.” He’d never talked to Russ, any of his security, or probably anybody since dealing with high school bullies, like that. But even his respected stepdad would have to be called out, and stopped, if he wanted to hogtie this woman.

Sara gave Gray a sweet smile. “Ah, that’s so cute. You’re trying to protect me, Smokey G? Just like you protect all the beautiful women who flutter their eyelashes at you?” She fluttered her eyelashes and it was an enticing move on her part. If only it hadn’t been done sarcastically.

Gray’s chest tightened. Did she realize the danger she was in? Russ was obviously ticked and no way could she best him and Kaden at the same time, and without the element of surprise to aid her. He didn’t like the derogatory way she’d referred to his propensity to protect women in danger. He personally thought it was one of his best qualities, but she seemed to be making fun of him.

“Thank, you sweet boy,” she said, pumping her eyebrows at him, “But I don’t need your protection.”

Sweet boy? Wow. She was a smart aleck to the tenth degree.

She looked to Russ. “I took you down once tough guy, I’ll do it again. Oh, and so sorry about the beard. It looks awful, by the way.” She patted him on the cheek before darting away.

Russ let out a roar and lunged at her. Kaden came around to his other side. The two men were huge and despite her obviously impressive training, skills, and bravado, it had to be terrifying to see these huge bodyguards coming at her like that.

Gray rushed to protect her. He wouldn’t let any woman be hurt while he was there to keep her safe.

Sara squatted and used Russ’s shoulders to launch herself into the air. It looked like a move off an action movie. She kicked Russ in the head again and he knocked into Kaden. She flipped and landed next to Gray. Scrambling behind him and onto his back, she wrapped both legs around his waist and one arm so tight around his neck he was immediately gasping for air. She shoved a pistol into his temple that he hadn’t even seen her pull out.

Russ and Kaden were rushing their way, but they both froze. They looked angry enough to chew up and spit out nails. But they also looked helpless, which he’d never seen out of his security team. Russ’s eyes were desperate. He’d do anything to keep Gray safe. Gray knew Russ had made a deathbed promise to his mom to protect her only son with his life.

The room went cold, despite the warm woman wrapped around him from behind. This was no romantic move. Sara was tough, crazy, an impressive fighter, and she was going to kill him. Gray had assumed because of her association with Scarlett Lily that she was a good person and had stupidly let her in his house. He wasn’t sure why she hadn’t killed him outside, but he suspected she was enjoying the game and ridiculing all of them before finishing them off.

At the moment, he didn’t have time to philosophize about her motives or how tough, accomplished, and insane she was. She must’ve been sent by

the mafia or maybe by that crazy Princess Byoode to kill him. It didn't look like Russ or Kaden could intervene before she pulled the trigger. Could he talk her out of killing his men? His life flashed before his eyes. He'd helped a lot of people, especially women in danger, but he had no family left, no legacy but his music and all of his money to leave behind. Was this how it would end for him?

"Please," he croaked out. She was letting in just enough oxygen to keep him from passing out. "Kill me if that's your objective, but let my men go."

"No," Russ barked out. "Don't kill him," he demanded, desperation making his voice even rougher. "We'll do anything you want."

"Please," Gray repeated. He appreciated Russ and knew he truly would do anything for him but if this woman was going to kill him there wasn't much hope of him living through a bullet inserted in his brain. "These men aren't part of your hit," he said in what he hoped was a logical and sane tone. "You'll still get paid by whoever sent you and you won't have four great men's deaths on your hands as well." He squeaked in another quick breath. "If there's any humanity left in you, please let them live."

The room went quiet. Sara held on tightly to him but she quivered slightly. Russ and Kaden stared at him in horror. He could see Cameron out of the corner of his eye, struggling to move around the pool table and get closer, even though he was bound.

He focused on his stepdad. The man's dark eyes were full of frustration and despair. He couldn't handle letting Gray die after they'd both lost Gray's mom. Gray understood Russ's anguish, but this was a sacrifice Gray would make every time.

He knew Cameron, Tim, and Kaden would also give their lives for his. He knew they would. But right now it was his turn to take that burden.

Gray waited for her to pull the trigger, praying that she'd honor his request and his last act would at least preserve the four men who had protected and served him and their country. He wasn't ready to die, but there were worse things. He'd see his mom and meet his Savior soon. That was a comforting thought. All of his billions were earmarked for Jex and Pearl Steele's charities. His money would help many children throughout the world.

It wasn’t the worst way to end his sojourn on the earth. As long as Sara let his men live.

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