

A romantic couple embracing in a snowy setting. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both smiling and looking down. The background is a snowy landscape with a large, ornate castle on a hillside. The sky is blue with falling snow. The overall mood is festive and romantic.

THE  
IMPULSIVE PRINCESS  
AND  
THE *Soldier*

Christmas in  
Augustine #3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
CAMI CHECKETTS

*The Impulsive Princess and the Soldier*

CHRISTMAS IN AUGUSTINE

BOOK THREE

# CAMI CHECKETTS



*Birch River*  
PUBLISHING

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*The Impulsive Princess and the Soldier: Christmas in Augustine #3*

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## Free Book

Receive a free copy of *The Resilient One: Billionaire Bride Pact Romance #1* by signing up for Cami's newsletter at <https://BookHip.com/XXWHVD>.

## *Characters of Augustine*

There are a whole slew of characters between the Sweet Royal Romance Suspense series and Christmas in Augustine.

I hope it helps to have the couples listed with their books, their current status as a couple, and their children.

I hope you enjoy the book!

Hugs,

Cami

### **Sweet Royal Romance Suspense Series:**

#1 - The General Prince and the Nerd - General Prince Raymond August and Macey Clifton – Avalyn (5) Sutton (2)

#2 - The Brave Prince and the Teacher - Prince Curtis August and Aliya Drummond - Anne (7), Celeste (4)

#3 - The Doctor Prince and the Outsider - Doctor Prince Steffan August and Hattie Ballard - Michael (3 months)

#4 - The Ninja Prince and the Investigator - Prince Derek August and Ellery Monson – Children: Tommy (5), Frankie (3), Allyandra (6 months)

#5 - The Charming Prince and the Single Mum - Prince Malik August and Sophie Pederson – Children: Sunny (12), Jasper (7)

#6 - The Crown Prince and the Traitor - Crown Prince Tristan August and Jennifer Shule - Kelton (7), Chaz (5)

#7 – The Police Chief and the Musician - Chief Jensen Allendale and Livvy Moser – Harrison (6), Gerald (3)

#8 – The Royal Major and the Personal Trainer - Major Chad Prescott and Hope Radisson – Peter (5), Trisha (2)

#9 - The Grieving King and the Emissary - King Nolan August and Madeline Prescott (Chad's Mum)

### **Christmas in Augustine:**

#1 The Royal Captain and the American Businesswoman - Captain Levi Favor and Faith Radisson (Hope's Sister) – Jason (7), Grace (4)

#2 The Royal Guard and the Royal Stylist – Brad Rivera and Arianna Gunnell – Cameron (5) Taleah (2)

#3 The Impulsive Princess and the Soldier - Princess Kiera and Lieutenant Mason Henson

Other Characters:

William Rindlesbacher - Deceased

Naomi Rindlesbacher - Deceased

Treven Rindlesbacher - Deceased

Henry and Leslie Shule – Former Prime Minister and his wife, Jennifer's parents – Healing and traveling.

Lieutenant General Philippe Cordon - deceased

Sunny Pederson - Sophie's daughter

Holly Monson - Ellery's mom

Aunt Elise - Ellery's aunt

Madeline Prescott – Chad's mum and a member of parliament



## CHAPTER

### *One*

**CAPTAIN MASON HENSON** strode down the hall of the military training facility in the picturesque mountains of Augustine. Twelve days until Christmas. Less than two weeks to prove his family and friends wrong.

*Curses!* That wasn't a lot of time.

He'd been mocked with the title of 'Serial Dater' by his older siblings. He loathed it, but of course he had to act unaffected. He was the youngest, the most hilarious, and the best-looking family member. As blessed as he was and as often as he teased everyone else, he had to take it as well as he gave it.

There was an underlying grain of truth to their taunts, though. He was twenty-nine and had rarely been on more than a few dates with any one woman. He'd dated a lot of incredible ladies; he'd simply never been intrigued enough to date someone exclusively.

That would all change this Christmas. He had date number three set up tonight with the beautiful and accomplished Dr. Miriam Cruz. A doctor. The mocking siblings would be silenced, and they'd be silenced with style.

His older brothers and sister were blissfully married and simply wanted that joy to happen in his life. Mason was on their same page, but it had to be the right one. They assumed he dated only for fun, but he would happily settle down with the right woman. Whether Miriam was that woman remained

to be seen, but at least he could spend one holiday with his family without the mocking voices ringing in his ears.

His entire family would be shocked when he brought Miriam home for Christmas Eve dinner. He'd confided his plan to his closest friend Major Levi Favor. Levi, with his serious nature, had asked if Miriam made him a better man. Levi had been married for almost eight years now. It was easy to see that the sweet, vivacious, and talented Faith made him a better man.

Mason had scoffed and joked off the question. He hardly knew Miriam. They'd only been on two dates. He hadn't kissed her, and he hadn't even approached the idea of taking her home to meet the family yet. Levi had been concerned that Mason was only trying to get rid of his Serial Dater title and silence his siblings.

They weren't unfounded worries, but Mason pushed them away. Miriam was a fabulous lady. He enjoyed being with her, and he had two whole weeks to pour on the charm and win her heart. Tonight's plan of a Christmas concert at the Festival Hall of Hofburg in Vienna and a romantic dinner at the exclusive and crazily expensive Silvio Nickol would have Miriam begging to date him exclusively.

Mason smiled and rubbed his palms together in anticipation. No stress.

He stopped at Prince General Raymond August's door, straightened his uniform, and knocked. The summons to meet with the general was unexpected. Everything was in order with Mason's men. The kingdom of Augustine had never been safer, the Rindlesbachers were all dead, and it had been since years since that insane crew had attacked the royal family. Also, the general wasn't much of a people person and never did random interviews or simply wanted to chat or check in.

Something was up. It had better not affect his concert and dinner plans—or his more comprehensive plan to secure a relationship with an ultra-impressive lady and get his family off his back this Christmas.

“Enter,” the general called out.

Mason pushed down on the handle and swung the door open. Marching in, he saluted and stood military straight. As a jokester and with a long history of protecting and respecting the royal family, Mason felt about as close to family with the August monarchs as anybody in the military.

Still, nobody messed around with General August. Except maybe his sweetheart of a wife Princess Macey, his two cute children, and of course the famed ‘Wild Child’ Princess Kiera. Mason almost smirked thinking of the fun-loving and adorable little princess. She’d arrived home from her university studies in America several days ago. He hadn’t seen her yet.

Mason had a different nickname than ‘Wild Child’ for Princess Kiera. He liked to call her the Fearless Little Princess. He hoped her time in America and traveling the world was going well. It had been a while since he’d seen her in person. A year and a half, maybe? It had definitely been in the summer months. Last Christmas, he’d been on an extended trip with his family in the Canary Islands. Crazy how time flew. It would be fun to tease her this year and see which new parkour or extreme sports tricks she had to show off to him.

“Close the door, Captain.” General August stood next to a large window looking out at the bright winter’s morn.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll get right to the point, Captain.” General August faced him.

“That’s good, sir. I don’t have two hours to spend on our usual aimless banter.” Mason managed to deliver the line with a straight face. Levi would be cringing and sweating if he was here, but Mason had a good feel for where the line was for joking around with each of the royal brothers.

The general studied Mason for a drawn-out moment, analyzing the jest. Maybe it was a bit too familiar. Then again, was that the tiniest uptick of one corner of his mouth? It was as much as Mason ever got from the other man. “Princess Kiera is home from America until after the new year.”

“And already scheming something that’s giving the king stress?”

The general did smile now. “I love my sister, but you know what she’s like.”

“I do, but unfortunately, I haven’t seen her much in the past few years, sir,” Mason said. Princess Kiera had been attending an American university or traveling the world since she graduated secondary school. As a captain, Mason had responsibilities in Augustine and had never been assigned to her overseas security detail.

“Her personality hasn’t changed much, but other facets ...” The general blew out a heavy breath, looking as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

“Sir?” Mason felt his own eyebrows lift. The general was never jovial, but he was obviously put out. It was also common knowledge that he doted on Princess Kiera just like the rest of the family did.

What ‘other facets’ could be bothering him? Was Princess Kiera causing trouble for her security? He’d never heard anyone complain about guarding her, only regrets about being gone from Augustine for months on end. Maybe she’d found a nice American boy and was dating him exclusively? She was far too young for anything serious. What would she be now ... twenty-one? He’d heard she’d brought a ‘friend’ to Augustine with her, but he’d assumed it was a female friend. A new boyfriend likely would upset the entire August family. They were ultra-protective of Princess Kiera.

Mason pitied the poor fool who ever tried to secure her hand. It would be comical to watch. If the general was involving him because Kiera was scheming something with her ‘boyfriend,’ he’d get a front-row seat to six overprotective princely brothers and one renowned king giving the brave fool a viciously hard time.

“Forgive me.” General August thumped his clenched fist against his leg. “Please sit.” He gestured to the chair in front of his huge cherry wood desk and then sat himself.

Mason followed suit.

“I’ve had four guards protecting Kiera since she left home three years ago. We’ve rotated through men that I implicitly trust. It hasn’t been easy on them or their families.”

Mason nodded. It had been difficult to keep a well-trained, irrepachable, and willing group of soldiers with the princess at all times. They were paid extremely well, but all of the Augustine military was, so the extra money wasn’t as huge of a draw as it might have been.

“I assumed with her coming home this Christmas, her guards could have a well-deserved break. She would stay with the family and between the royal guards, myself, and Chad being at the castle, we wouldn’t need added security.”

Chad was Lieutenant General Prescott to most people Mason associated with, a fabulous guy whose elegant mum had married the illustrious King Nolan eight years ago. Chad was a lot more charming and easy-going than the general. Lieutenant General Chad and Mason got along smashingly.

“Of course Kiera had other plans.” The general planted his clenched fists in front of him on the desk. “She’s brought her friend Sarah home. They have been exploring the castle and Augustine for a few days and now they’ve set up a ski weekend, using Hope and Faith’s Switzerland home as their base to ski the Jungfrau region.”

“I see.” He didn’t really. So the friend was a female after all. Why was the general upset, then? Kiera probably had some scheme that was pushing General Ray’s limits. Did the general want Mason’s suggestions for the best men to protect his little sister and her friend? Men who wouldn’t give in to her adorable smile and scheming personality?

“You do?” The general studied him, then nodded. “Thank you. I’ll feel much better knowing you’ll be there. With your athletic ability and skiing talent, you might be the only man I trust fully who also has the skill to not only protect her but keep up with the ‘Wild Child.’”

Mason had no answer for that. He hadn't realized he'd volunteered himself to protect the princess and her friend on their ski vacation. Skiing was his favorite winter pastime, and he'd always enjoyed his interactions with Princess Kiera. She fancied herself a ninja warrior like her brother Prince Derek and his wife Princess Ellery.

It should be a fun assignment. A weekend wouldn't cut into his plans to commit to dating Miriam. Ah, when the smirks on his brother's faces turned to respect ... Mason could just hear it: '*Dr. Miriam Cruz?*' and 'Wow, little brother, she's accomplished and stunning.' He almost rubbed his hands together. There would probably also be the ribbing: 'What does she see in you?' and 'I give it a week, tops.'

"Can you think of anyone else you trust implicitly, is proficient in combat and security, twenty to thirty years old, and can snow ski at an expert level?" General August continued, not affected at all by Mason's lack of response.

"Um ..." Mason could think of a handful of men who fit all those parameters, but three of them had recently been in America with the princess. They were the exact men who needed a break. "Sergeant Naples is a skier, but I haven't personally skied with him."

The young sergeant had found out Mason loved to race, flip, and twist down snowy mountainsides and they'd chatted about different resorts and runs. If Naples wasn't simply bragging, he'd at least skied double black diamonds. Whether he could keep up with the princess would be an entirely different matter.

"He's solid in all other aspects," Mason continued. "Loyal to Augustine, excels at hand to hand combat and tracking. The tracking expertise could be essential in case the Fearless Little Princess manages to outrun us."

The general didn't smile.

Mason lost his quick. "We won't lose her, sir."

"I know you were teasing."

Mason bit his tongue. The general wouldn't know a tease if it jabbed him between his piercing blue eyes. He'd seen his superior officer smile around Princess Macey, his own two children, Princess Kiera, Lieutenant General Chad, his nieces and nephews, and occasionally Prince Malik.

“Sergeant Naples is a good prospect. Macey and I will do a deep dive into his background and military experience. You can't think of anyone else?”

“I can ask around about skiing ability and check into Sergeant Naples' skiing experience and time on the slopes.”

“All right.” The general nodded. “Let's correspond on what we find and check into any other prospects in the next hour, and then I'm putting it in your hands. I trust you'll pick the best man for the job. The two of you will be up close and personal with Kiera and Sarah. Kiera's been receiving some stalking-type texts from an unknown source lately.”

Mason's gut tightened.

“Sadly, it's a pretty common occurrence—texts from and crazy attempts by young men to get close to her.” General Ray shook his head and his fists clenched. “As well as the usual kidnapping attempts for ransom. Our men are top-notch and have always kept her safe. I expect you to do the same.”

“Of course, sir.” Mason loathed the thought of the Fearless Little Princess being targeted by kidnappers or lovesick boys who couldn't take no for an answer. Curses! Teenage hormones, anyway.

“Hope and Faith's home is secure. Chad's made certain of that. I'll have him send you the security information and the link to the cameras and sensors. I'm sending two other guards who will alternate patrolling the interior and exterior, sleeping, and staying as close as they can while you ski or go in public for restaurants or any other reason. Kiera set up a spa time in an exclusive hotel, but that security is impressive. Celebrities regularly book out private time there, and they will add their security to ours so you can relax a bit.”

Relax a bit? He'd have fun skiing, but he'd be on guard. He wouldn't relax if a stalker was after Kiera.

“Chad and I feel the best route is you and your cohort staying right with Kiera and Sarah as if you're couples. It will discourage any other men from getting close and put off the latest stalker if he's followed her, you see. The other two guards will watch with a wider lens. Thankfully, it's only three and a half days. You all should survive, and you'll all receive hazard pay. You'll deserve it.” He flashed a rare half smile. “Any questions?”

“No, sir,” Mason answered automatically. But he had a hundred questions. First, as couples? They were to act like they were dating? Wouldn't that be awkward with Kiera and her friend being young college students and Mason and Sergeant Naples both older and more mature?

Second, why did General August act like a ski vacation with his little sister would be taxing? Mason knew Princess Kiera was an insanely talented extreme athlete and a hilarious schemer, but Mason could keep up with her in the scheming department. He didn't know about Sergeant Naples' level of expertise, but Mason had never met a man or woman who could best him on a pair of snow skis.

“Thank you,” the general responded before Mason could ask questions or think of more. “Having you as part of this detail puts my mind at ease. I hate that I constantly take away Kiera's ‘best life opportunities,’” he smirked at that, “but I want her safe. I don't think she has any idea how devastated the entire family would be if something happened to her.”

Mason nodded. He'd heard about kidnapping attempts and more than a few idiotic college boys who thought they could make a conquest of the princess. Either made his blood boil. Princess Kiera was bright, innocent, and fun. The entire country adored her and especially her family.

He'd keep her safe from boys who wanted to damage her innocence and kidnappers who wanted money or the prestige, but ... as couples? What if the media took pictures and it upset



Miriam? Not that he and Miriam were exclusive, but Mason had his plans.

“And, Captain ... I hate to even bring this up, but I told my father I would.” The general looked down at the desk.

Mason felt as uncomfortable as the general looked. He had never seen the man not confident and in charge of the situation. What did he need to tell him now?

“Will you be ... considerate of Kiera’s feelings and not ...” He cleared his throat and studied Mason. “Lead her on?”

Mason could only stare at the man. “Kiera’s feelings regarding ... what, exactly?”

“You.” The general picked up a pen and flipped it in his hands.

“Me?” Mason put a hand to his chest, more confused than ever.

General August drew in a deep breath. “She’s ... my father and Madeline fear ... I think it’s just a little crush from her teenage years, and certainly she’s over any of that nonsense by now. It’s not as if she’s lacking in male attention.” He rolled his eyes. “But your reputation of dating a lot of women, and the age difference—the college girl pursuing the older man type of fling. You understand?”

Mason leaned back against his chair, horrified by the implications. Was the general saying, but not saying, he thought Mason would lead Kiera on and ... date and dump the little princess? The king and queen had noticed Princess Kiera had a crush on him?

No. She didn’t. Did she? They teased each other like siblings or cousins. Similar adventurer spirits. There were no ... romantic feelings.

“Oh, sir, no.” He shook his head. “I would never. And I mean *never*. Princess Kiera is ... I tease with her like a little sister. You think she ... might have a crush on me? Surely not.”

How awkward. Mason knew teenagers sometimes had crushes but got over them. He racked his brain to remember the little princess looking longingly at him or saying anything that would lead the king and queen to think she was interested in Mason as more than a friend, guard, and surrogate older brother. He and Kiera had so many different interactions throughout the years, but he couldn't come up with any red flags.

“Are you certain ...” Mason shook his head. “Maybe I shouldn't go on this assignment.”

He was struggling not to take offense. The August family knew him, trusted him. They surely couldn't think he'd chase ... Princess Kiera was a beautiful girl. In his mind, she was still fourteen, though it was obvious the math didn't support that. He'd overheard his mum say something about a 'late bloomer' regarding the fun-loving princess. He'd heard there were plenty of college boys going insane over her, but that didn't mean that Mason would ... chase a college girl.

General August now appeared calm and collected, and it was Mason who was stumbling and awkward and embarrassed. “You are my top pick, Captain Henson—your skiing ability, your excellence in every area of protection, the multiple awards you received when you rescued numerous members of the royal family during the Rindlesbacher days. All told, you have my trust and respect.”

“I appreciate all of that, sir.” Mason nodded. This was the royal family. He had taken a knife in the back to rescue Princess Aliya. He'd tracked down the vicious William Rindlesbacher in the dark woods and stolen a bomb from the man after scaling across balconies thousands of feet off the ground to escape the rigged house—the very house they were going to stay in for this ski vacation. He lived his life to serve and protect this family.

Even if there were a crush on the princess's side from her younger years—and who could blame any female for having a crush on him?—surely Princess Kiera was far past such silliness now.

Mason drew in a breath and straightened. “I promise you I would never pursue Princess Kiera, and I will make certain things are not awkward between us.”

“You’re certain? No interest in Kiera?”

“*None*, sir. Not like that. I think of her as a young friend, a surrogate cousin of sorts, an adventuring buddy.”

General August studied him as if he thought he was lying. The man bragged him up, said he and the royal family trusted and respected him, and then acted like Mason was some foul ... cradle robber.

That was just wrong. Sickening. Princess Kiera wasn’t officially a teenager any longer, but she was still eight years younger than him, and he’d always keep her in the box of a young, fun girl.

“I also am dating someone,” he added, not certain if that would help the situation. It was a stretch. They weren’t ‘dating,’ but he and Miriam had gone on two dates and a third was happening tonight.

“Oh, good for you.” The general’s shoulders relaxed, but then his gaze sharpened. “Will your girlfriend be all right with you appearing to be a couple with Kiera? The media might find you and take pictures.”

“Um ...” First of all, Miriam wasn’t his girlfriend. Second of all, appearing to be a couple with Kiera? The general had said that earlier, but there had been too much other information and it hadn’t fully sunk in. “Will anyone believe we’re a couple?”

“Because of your dating history as a player?” General August asked.

*Because Princess Kiera isn’t a mature woman*, was what he’d meant, but he obviously couldn’t say that to her brother and his general. So he merely shrugged.

“I think it’ll be believable. Kiera is desired by men the world over. Most beautiful woman in the world and all that rubbish.” General Ray rolled his eyes and clenched his fist. “If

any woman could make a player like you fall, it would be Kiera. If you think your girlfriend won't be upset."

"She isn't really my girlfriend. We're just dating."

"Oh, good. Perfect."

Mason had never been so confused. Make a player like you fall? Desired by the men world over? Most beautiful woman in the world? Had he missed a memo about the princess? He probably should download Instagram to his phone, but he doubted he'd open it even if he did.

"Thank you," the general continued as Mason mulled over his previous paragraph in his mind. "It eases my mind to know I can count on you, in all aspects of the assignment. It won't be easy to pretend to be a couple and not lead her on or get too close, but Kiera understands you're on assignment and, honestly, I disagree with my dad and Madeline on this one. She has had vast dating experience in America; there's no way she'd have a crush on you any longer."

Mason supposed that should all make him feel better. Pretending to be a couple and anything about getting close, in the way the general indicated, made him extremely uncomfortable. He didn't want photos of him getting out as some college girl chaser, no matter how many boys at her American university thought she was beautiful. But it was an assignment, and he'd get through it with style and a smile, as he always did.

General August stood. That was Mason's cue to leave. He was happy to escape at this point. He stood and saluted. Turning to go, he thought of an important question. "Sir. What dates are the detail?"

"Forgive me. This afternoon through Saturday evening. The lieutenant general will fly you all over to Wengen. Meet at the castle helipad at fourteen hundred hours." The general's blue eyes filled with concern. "I apologize for the short notice. Did you have plans, Captain?"

Only furthering his chance of a future with Dr. Miriam Cruz. Only having the last laugh at his siblings.

“Nothing that can’t be rescheduled, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Mason bowed slightly and hurried out the door.

Miriam would understand. She’d canceled on him Friday night when she’d been called in to an emergency surgery.

Mason would only be gone for three and a half days. He could still execute his plans for Christmas romance and be chortling in his siblings’ faces for the new year.

He hurried toward Major Levi Favor’s office. He’d share his assignment with his longtime friend and next above him in command, but he’d leave out the awkward part about pretending to be a couple with the college-aged princess. Then he’d go home to pack.

Skiing Wengen, Grindelwald, the famed Jungfrau, possibly across the Lauterbrunnen valley and up to the Schilthorn—he loved tackling the eighty-eight percent incline of the Direttissima. He’d be working, and he’d keep the ‘Wild Child,’ the Fearless Little Princess Kiera safe, but they’d have fun. They were supposed to appear as a couple, but that didn’t mean they’d be cuddling on the couch or kissing on the slopes. No way.

Mason always had fun, and Princess Kiera was a cute, impetuous girl and a talented athlete. He’d be relaxed and comfortable around her, as he always had been. He’d nip any thought of a crush making things awkward between him and his longtime little friend.

It would be a great weekend. A fun break from his usual schedule.

And then he’d get back to pursuing Miriam.

## CHAPTER

## *Two*

**PRINCESS KIERA AUGUST** bounced on her heels as she waited next to her dear friend Sarah Anderson in the castle's lower hallway. She'd said her goodbyes to her loving family, ignoring the stitch of guilt at the longing in her mum and dad's eyes and her brothers having to pry her niece Avalyn and her nephew Jasper off her legs. That had hurt.

It was only a few days.

After their ski trip to Switzerland, Sarah would fly home to Vermont to be with her family. The Andersons were a loving family who'd been cleared by researched by Macey and cleared by Ray and had become surrogate parents and siblings to Kiera in America. Sarah's eighteen-year-old brother Drake was hilarious and the loyal but teasing little brother Kiera had always wanted. After the ski weekend, Kiera would return to Augustine to spend over two weeks with her huge and wonderful family.

No matter how hard it was to miss out on three days with her parents, siblings, and in-laws, and especially her fabulous nieces and nephews, this plan had to be implemented. She and Sarah were dying to ski the Jungfrau. Nothing in the northeastern United States compared.

More importantly, Kiera had been scheming half of her life for a way to get Lieutenant—now Captain—Mason Henson to finally notice her as a woman, not some cute little girl.

She'd thankfully hit a growth spurt the past couple of years in all areas—height, curves, and a maturity to her face that

hadn't been there before. Magazines, media sources, and young men throughout the world had confirmed that she was indeed a grown-up and undeniably attractive to the opposite sex. The most beautiful woman in the world title still made her laugh, but she supposed that as a princess, people noticed her more.

It was finally time to pursue Mason. Kiera did a standing backflip and then rubbed her hands together.

"You silly. You can't backflip in a skirt," Sarah teased her.

"Oh, bosh! Pardon me." Kiera straightened her knee-length sweater dress, noticing the guards had averted their eyes. She preferred Lady Fit athletic wear, designed by Faith Radisson Favor and brought into the world by Hope Radisson Prescott. Two of her favorite women.

"Wait until you see him," she promised Sarah. "You'd backflip too."

"Sadly, I can only flip off diving boards, no matter how hard you work with me. And I have seen pictures of the famed Captain Mason Henson," Sarah reminded her, her dark eyes full of laughter. Kiera compared every man she dated to Mason and of course they came up drastically lacking. Good guys, but she'd learned that nobody was the right fit for her. Nobody except him.

"Not the same. It's impossible to capture his charm, his build, his sense of humor, that twinkle in his summer blue eyes ... ahhh." Kiera checked down the hall to make certain the door leading to the garages hadn't opened. She couldn't be caught drooling over Mason by Mason. It was essential he see her as a mature and impressive but still fun-loving and adventurous woman. *His* perfect fit.

*Please, all the angels in heaven, especially Mum, make this happen for me. I'll deal with stalker notes and kidnapping attempts and losing my mum at twelve and almost having my family killed by the evil Rindlesbachers and anything you want to throw at me ... if I can be loved by Mason.*

Her family all assumed the crush she'd had as a teenager had dissipated as she'd gone off to Syracuse University in upstate New York and dated all manner of men. General Ray and her darling sister-in-law Macey had to perform a deep-dive background check before she could so much as eat a gelato, or in America usually a shake or ice cream cone, with a member of the opposite sex. Her guards trailed her on every date, experts at being intrusive and not even attempting to keep their distance. She loved her guards like brothers and appreciated the safety and peace of mind they granted her.

It would've bothered her more that she could never be alone with a date if she thought any man could steal her heart from loving Mason. She'd known he was the most fabulous unrelated-to-her man on earth since she was thirteen. The crush had not dissipated as the two people she'd admitted it to—her step-mum and Macey—promised her it would fade as she dated and had 'real' relationships.

'Crush' was not even the correct term. She had long known Mason was the man for her. Now it was time to convince him. She'd finally 'grown into her astounding beauty' as per many magazine writers' and media influencers' words. More importantly, Kiera was famous for her schemes, and this one was brilliant. There were very few members of Ray's military who could keep up with her on a pair of snow skis, and three of them had been in New York with her recently and planned to go back after the new year since the downhill ski season would be in full swing. Those guards needed a long-awaited break, needed to relax with their families for Christmas and enjoy their beautiful home country.

Her closest friend Sarah needed to ski the famed Jungfrau.

And Kiera ... she needed Mason.

The plan was beyond ideal.

Of course no one but Sarah knew the extent of her scheming. Derek and Ellery had offered to come, but with each of her siblings and their spouses chasing young children all over the place and bouncing babies, she knew they'd be easily dissuaded and she'd get the chance to have Mason all to



herself. Well, him and three other guards and Sarah. She could work with that. Especially as Ray had said she and Mason, and Sarah and a guard, would ‘pretend to be couples’ to dissuade her latest stalker and any other men who wanted to hit on her. Ray hated men hitting on her.

A couple with Mason. Who cared if it was pretend? It would lead to feelings developing on his end for certain. She wanted to do another standing backflip, but Sarah was right. In a red knee-length fitted sweater dress and heeled ankle boots, she’d better keep her feet on the ground. For now. Dressing like an adult woman and worrying about showing the world her rear end—sadly, there had been a few photographs taken when she’d flipped or done tricks in a dress and inadvertently shown off her unders—was so constrictive sometimes.

The door to the garage opened and in he strode, leading the way for his men. Of course he led the way. He was a brave leader, a military hero clear through. He’d rescued her sisters-in-law Aliya and Sophie and her adorable now-twelve-year-old niece Sunny, and those were only a few of his courageous and impressive accolades.

Was he ready to rescue Kiera’s heart? Said heart skipped a beat at the mere sight of him and then took off at a gallop. It had been too long since she’d seen him in person. A year and a half, to be exact.

Captain Mason Henson. Six-four, two-hundred and twenty pounds of pure, perfect, muscular man dressed in a black military uniform, a pistol on his hip and a black duffel bag in one hand.

Yes, she knew his stats. She knew everything about him. Including that he’d never dated any woman longer than three dates. Her dear friend Faith had shared that piece of information with her. Faith had been explaining that she and her husband Levi, Mason’s closest friend, were worried Mason would never settle down. Kiera hoped it was a sign. Was he waiting for Kiera just as she’d been waiting for him? A princess could hope.

His blondish-brown hair was brushed back, and his short beard was the perfect length to highlight his strong jawline. The slight smirk on his lips showcased his good humor. He was as athletic, outgoing, talented, brave, mischievous, and hilarious as any person she'd ever met. Her ideal match in every way.

Those blue eyes, prettier than a clear mountain lake and warmer than the summer sun, zeroed in on her.

Kiera waited for it. He always got this huge grin when he saw her, and then the teasing would begin. 'Fearless Little Princess' was his longtime title for her. She prayed he wouldn't call her 'little' any longer.

A dart of fear pricked at her confidence in her skiing-weekend scheme and this long-awaited moment. What if he didn't even notice the changes like everyone else seemed to? What if he still thought of her as a child? What if all those other boys and entertainment writers were wrong and she wasn't gorgeous and mesmerizing to him?

"P-Princess?" He stopped dead in his tracks, the soldier behind him almost running into him. The duffel bag slid from his grip and thumped to the marble floor.

Kiera and Mason's gazes locked and held. Mason's eyes were wide and filled with something like shock. Kiera smiled. She wondered for the first time in her life if her smile was ... shy. So much was riding on this moment. Him finally seeing her. Their first meet-cute as adults.

"He is *unbelievably* hot," Sarah whispered to her.

She wanted to scream, 'I know,' but her throat was so dry she couldn't squeak out a response, and she didn't want to interrupt this eye-lock with Mason. The next step would be lip-lock. That made her smile bigger, even as heat filled her face. What would kissing this superhero feel like?

Mason blinked a few times, shook his head, and crossed the distance between them. The other guards flanked him.

Kiera's breath shortened as he reached her. It was one thing to see him from down the hallway. Up close and

personal? He was perfection in a manly form.

Mason bowed to her, his men following suit. “Princess Kiera,” he breathed out in a husky tone she prayed meant he was finally, finally interested in her. “What have those Americans *done* to you?”

She didn’t know if she should be offended or pleased. “Made me even more fabulous than ever.”

His gaze said he agreed, but he simply stared at her. She waited for the next teasing comment. His men seemed to be waiting as well as nobody else spoke. Mason didn’t move or draw his gaze away from her. She liked that.

“Excuse me?” Sarah huffed into the silence in the hallway.

“Oh, pardon me,” Mason said, seeming to recover and sounding as smooth and charming as ever. He gifted Sarah with his alluring grin. “I meant no offense to your home country. I was simply baffled for a moment. Cold clocked as if General August himself had knocked me flat to the ground. Our Fearless Little Princess is ...” He swallowed and said in that husky tone again, “All grown up.”

His blue eyes swept over Kiera, warm and full of appreciation. She went hot and cold from head to toe.

“You can stop calling me ‘little’ if I’ve *finally* grown up,” she sassied him, tossing her long, dark hair over her shoulder.

“Where would be my enjoyment in that, I ask you?” His gaze was smoky hot on her, but his voice was that lilting tease she’d missed. She loved the husky tone as well, but his charming accent was just as appealing and as familiar as her own voice.

“I’ll show you enjoyment,” Kiera said to him, then her eyes widened and his did as well. Had that been too forward? Well, she only had three and a half days to show him they could still tease, but it was also now time to flirt, connect, and fall in love like she’d dreamed of for years.

“Skiing enjoyment?” he covered smoothly for her. “It will be delightful to exhibit my skiing prowess. The Fearless Little

Princess will never be able to keep up with her brave bodyguard.”

The man behind him chuckled.

“We’ll see who won’t be able to keep with whom, my brave bodyguard.” Drat; he was still calling her ‘little.’

Sarah leaned into her side, obviously ready for a formal introduction.

Kiera knew an opportunity when she saw one.

She wrapped her right hand around Mason’s left. He startled, and she was temporarily thrown off as well. His hand was so large and manly and warm. A connection arced between them. Yes!

She squeezed his hand and edged closer. “Mason ... I mean, *Captain* Mason Henson. This is my dearest friend from Vermont, Sarah Anderson.”

Mason dipped his head to Sarah, not moving his hand from Kiera’s grasp. “Miss Anderson. It is a pleasure to have you with us in Augustine.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Sarah said, her dark eyes lit up. “Please call me Sarah.”

Mason smiled, but his gaze flitted to Kiera. He turned slightly to indicate to his men, and Kiera felt she should release her grip on him.

Bosh.

“Princess Kiera August, Miss Sarah Anderson. Allow me to introduce Lieutenant Braxton Mueller, Sergeant Josiah Naples, and Private Daniel Silva.”

Kiera of course knew Lieutenant Mueller, a massive, too serious but kind guard in his mid-thirties who’d guarded her half her life. She hadn’t met Sergeant Naples or Private Silva, both young and handsome. Maybe Sarah could distract them while Kiera focused on Mason.

As per the idea she had Chad to thank for, she and Mason, and Sarah and one of these guards, were supposed to appear as

‘couples’ on a weekend skiing getaway. Something about dissuading her stalker. She regularly had stalkers and didn’t get too fussed about a new one, but the couple idea with Mason was fabulous.

The guards bowed to her and nodded to Sarah, strong but silent types. Not Mason. He was strong but verbose and hilarious.

“Thank you for being willing to watch over us on our skiing adventure,” she said to the men.

“It is an honor, Princess Kiera,” Sergeant Naples said, his hazel eyes sweeping appreciatively over her. She’d seen that look thousands of times.

Mason flashed him a glance, possibly a warning. Was it her imagination or was he slightly annoyed? “We’ll see if it remains an ‘honor’ when she skunks you on the mountain, Sergeant.”

The sergeant’s brows lifted. “Are you an accomplished skier, Princess Kiera?”

“Yes sir, I am.” She winked at Mason and his smile grew even warmer. “I’ve never met a man besides my brother Derek who could keep up.”

“Challenge accepted, Fearless Princess,” Mason said in a husky growl that shot anticipation clear through her. His blue gaze was full of challenge and something else. He *had* finally noticed her.

Then she recognized another positive development. He’d dropped the ‘little’ from her title.

Kiera pulled the side of her bottom lip between her teeth, trying to hide a squeal of excitement. She’d do a standing back flip or run up the wall and do an aerial if she wasn’t wearing this bothersome dress.

Mason’s gaze trailed to her lips, lingered there for half a beat, then lifted to her eyes again.

Challenge accepted?

“The challenges have only begun, Captain,” she fired back at him.

His gaze held hers. She wasn’t certain what challenges she’d throw at him, but the ideas would come. And every opportunity would draw them closer together.

She grinned.

“Oh, boy. You’re in trouble,” Sarah said to Mason.

Mason’s gaze grew a little apprehensive. “No schemes.”

“Ah, Captain.” Kiera patted his cheek, wishing she could cup it with her palm, trail her fingers through the short hair shadowing his cheek and jaw, and draw him in close. “You know I’m your match in every way. Except when it comes to schemes. Then I’m always at least two steps ahead.”

Sarah snickered next to her. Kiera hadn’t meant to come across quite so forward. She had a plan, but she knew full speed ahead could push Mason in the wrong direction.

A guard shifted behind Mason, but all that mattered was Mason’s blue eyes. They were full of challenge. Had she made her point or missed the mark and he thought they were only going to tease each other?

“We’ll see, Fearless Princess. We’ll see.”

Indeed. He would see.

That she was his match, and it was their time to be together.

## CHAPTER

## *Three*

**MASON HID** his utter astonishment as he bantered with the princess and then loaded the gear into the helicopter and took off for Wengen.

He felt like he'd been slammed to the ground by an unexpected right hook from General August, then picked back up and pummeled by his revered leader again.

No. It was more than that. Everything had changed. He'd been walking along a dimly lit path his entire life and suddenly the path had shifted to an alternate reality of bright light—and that bright light was Princess Kiera August.

The world had shifted its trajectory when he opened his eyes and truly saw Kiera for the first time. Had that only been twenty minutes ago?

Why hadn't the general told him?

He realized immediately that the princess's older brother had tried. Mason hadn't comprehended what the man had been going on about. He'd been offended the man thought he would be interested in the princess. Now he realized how far behind he was.

What sane, red-blooded male with eyes and half a brain wouldn't be interested in the sassy, flirtatious, perfect, show-stopping beauty?

He snuck a glance at her in the helicopter seat next to his. They all had headsets on and Lieutenant General Chad was teasing with Princess Kiera about 'American boys,' clarifying

all the trumped-up stories of her guards having to protect her or chase the boys off. Of course Princess Kiera teased right back, telling even more tales that made his gut churn. She was obviously a hot commodity in America. She would be anywhere.

Princess Kiera needed a man, not a boy. A man like him.

*Don't even think it,* he warned himself.

Princess Kiera was not Princess Kiera. He supposed her smile was the same and the mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes, but the rest of her ... he could've walked right past her on the street and not recognized her. Except he would never have walked past a lady that shone this brightly. He would've stopped, flirted, and scheduled their first date. He would've made more plans to date her seriously than he had with Dr. Miriam Cruz.

Ah, curses. Miriam. How could he even think of 'dating' Miriam or anyone when a woman like Princess Kiera was on the planet?

He was flabbergasted that a person could change this much.

The Fearless Little Princess Kiera had somehow morphed into the Enticing Full-Grown Woman Kiera.

Had that happened overnight? Okay, he hadn't seen her in a while, and he wasn't one to get on social media, but ... come on. How did that happen? Even a year and a half seemed too short a time for such an unexpected development. Why hadn't somebody told him? He thought of the many times he'd heard about college boys going insane over her. The stories she and Chad were swapping confirmed that. He'd always relegated it to 'boys.' He should've asked more questions, googled her, done some kind of research.

This new Princess Kiera had a maturity of body, face, and soul that had thrown him off a cliff with no safety harness. He was free falling toward the ground, facing certain death, and trying to act casual, unaffected, and as if nothing had changed.



Another glance. She met his gaze and smiled. He was in awe of the depth, wisdom, and humor in her blue eyes. He was yanked in by her fun flirtations and the sultry huskiness of her voice. She had a level of magnetism that shoved him right off his pedestal of dating any woman he liked and women chasing him to bowing at her feet. She was like the sun and he was a planet whose only purpose was to orbit around her. He'd never experienced sensations and a pull like this with any other woman.

Woman. Princess Keira was a woman—and then some.

No wonder General August had warned him.

The worst part of this hit him. He'd told his superior officer, the General Prince, Kiera's older brother, that he had no interest in the princess. *Never*. He'd said he would never pursue her. Mason had been horrified by the suggestion at the time. Now he was horrified he'd reacted so strongly. Obviously, the general had known something Mason didn't during that conversation—the princess had grown up and was now the most mesmerizing woman on the planet. Curses!

He'd chuckled at the stories—that her guards had their hands full keeping overly-hormonal college boys away—but nobody had told him the adorable little princess had developed into an exquisite lady. Even worse for him, she could still tease and laugh and he knew she was still a crazy adventurer, his favorite qualities in a lady.

When she'd said she'd 'show him enjoyment' earlier in the castle hall, his entire body had gone hot. But instead of running to General August and explaining he needed a reassignment, he'd teased about skiing enjoyment.

The way she'd claimed she was 'his match in every way' made him want to phone the general and explain he'd been blindsided and had lied about 'never' pursuing the princess. She *was* his match in every way. He wanted to pursue her with a full court press. If it had only been her beauty, he could've resisted, but their shared history and connection, that mesmerizing twinkle in her blue eyes, and a list of personality

traits that was perfect from top to bottom made him want to never leave her side.

Of course he couldn't pursue her. And he couldn't tell the general, or anyone for that matter, what a mess he was. This kind of flip upside down and dropped on his head wasn't even to be shared with his closest friends Levi and Faith.

*Your match in every way.* She'd said those words. Whoo. His stomach flip-flopped and his pulse raced out of control.

Mason had never felt so outmatched in his life.

Princess Kiera was off limits to him in every way. General August, King Nolan, and Queen Madeline had worried he'd toy with her emotions because of her 'crush.' He should've backed out of this assignment the moment he'd seen her again and realized he was in way over his head.

But when she'd touched his hand ... Curses! Why didn't it feel like that when any other woman touched him? He looked at her hands, resting casually on her skirt. Then he made the mistake of looking at her long legs. He quickly forced his gaze back to her face. That didn't help. She was now smiling knowingly at him. She'd caught him gawking, which meant she knew exactly how interested he was.

She was the princess. His charge. Mason could not speed down this light-filled tunnel of unfamiliar yearning for her. Only a wall of pain and death waited at the end for him. She was ... the princess—beloved, protected, adorable, off limits. Hadn't he recently thought he pitied the poor fool who tried to pursue her? *He* was the poor fool!

No. He couldn't allow himself to be. He was on assignment and Kiera was off limits. He'd repeat that a hundred times. Did she still have a crush on him? Maybe.

He stole a glance at her again, probably his twentieth in the hour-long flight. Maybe his hundredth.

The helicopter settled down on the helipad next to Faith Radisson Favor and Hope Radisson Prescott's massive Wengen home. This spot was almost as pretty as Augustine. The town was set high in the Swiss Alps overlooking the

picturesque Lauterbrunnen Valley, the valley of seventy waterfalls. Mason had skied here in the winter and explored the valley and surrounding mountains, hiking and paragliding in the summer. He could swear there were more than seventy waterfalls. It was gorgeous.

Standing and stretching, he instructed over the loud rotors, “Lieutenant Mueller, please take Private Silva with you to check the interior of the home. Sergeant Naples, please perform a perimeter check. I’ll stay with the princess, Sarah, and the lieutenant general until you return.”

Each of the men nodded and took off their headsets. Mueller slid the door open, and they jumped down. The lieutenant general was busy up front shutting down the helicopter. Was he staying for a bit? Mason wanted him to go. He wanted to be alone with Princess Kiera.

*Focus on protecting her*, he commanded himself.

The area appeared deserted and peaceful. The camera angles and sensors showed a clean location, but he would take no chances. He felt eyes on him and looked to see Princess Kiera smiling at him.

Panic hit him square in the chest. She knew. She knew he was confused and a mess inside. She’d guessed that he thought she was the most captivating woman he’d ever encountered.

He grinned as if nothing was amiss, jumped out of the helicopter, and turned back to assist her down. Had he truly been instructed to stay by her side as if they were a couple? This was a mistake.

Thinking he could easily escort her out of the helicopter was another mistake. Huge, huge mistake.

He was eye-level with Princess Kiera’s absolutely fabulous legs. Long, lean, tan legs. Why was she wearing a knee-length skirt in the wintertime? Curses!

The helicopter rotors slowed and stopped.

She leaned down and winked at him, her blue eyes sparkling. “Part of the job? Assisting the helpless princess out of the helicopter, Captain?”

“Helpless?” He laughed at that. The princess was far from helpless. Then he flexed, just to keep things light. “With all this brawn, I’ve got to put it to good use.”

“And of course we both know I could perform a double gainer out of this helicopter, except this skirt hampers that opportunity.”

“I don’t know that anyone should complain about that skirt,” he said, then knew he should’ve held his tongue.

She grinned. “I’m delighted you think so.”

Kiera put her hands on his shoulders, and he instinctively wrapped his around her waist. He easily swooped her out of the helicopter and to the cleared concrete patch. She leaned into him, and he had absolutely no problem steadying her. None at all. In fact, having her pressed close felt more right to him than anything he’d experienced in his long years of dating.

Sliding her hands along his shoulders, slowly, deliberately, as if she appreciated every minute he’d spent in the weight room, Princess Kiera fluttered her long eyelashes. Those blue eyes of hers were mesmerizing. “All this brawn ... I’m certain we’ll find many good uses for it.”

When had she become the most proficient flirt of the year? Had she spent the past several years morphing into a model-gorgeous flirt? Did she have any time for school and studies? How was a man supposed to keep his head around a woman this appealing?

Unexpected jealousy churned in his gut. Was she flirting like this with all those college boys the guards had to fight off? She had to be encouraging them a little.

“I should hope so,” he tried to tease back. “I’m an expert at all brawny things—sparring with the best fighters in the world, lifting bales of hay, hammering in nails, pummeling any college boys who try to kiss or flirt with you.”

“Brilliant.” Her eyes twinkled merrily. “I’m certain the last impressive ability will come in very handy, as far too many *men* love to kiss and flirt with me.”

His gut tightened, more jealousy surging through him. Why hadn't she said 'try'? They attempted to kiss and flirt with her. They didn't succeed. Correct? He had so many questions for her recent guards. He'd ask her, but he couldn't reveal his hand like that.

"Captain? Kiera?" Lieutenant General Chad stood next to them with Sarah. Sergeant Naples approached. The other guards were still checking the interior.

"Sir." Mason stepped back, and Kiera's hands fell to her sides.

What was she doing to him? He'd been so distracted flirting—no, teasing—with her that he hadn't noticed anything else. A battalion could've descended on them and he would've been lost in her eyes. That could never happen again.

Never. Had he truly promised the general he'd *never* pursue Kiera? He'd had no inkling how short-sighted and idiotic such a promise had been.

The other guards exited the side door of the garage and nodded to him. All was clear.

"Let's load the gear into the house," Mason instructed.

"Yes, sir." The men came forward and grabbed suitcases, duffel bags, ski gear bags, skis, and poles. The helicopter was unloaded quickly.

Prescott gave Princess Kiera a side hug and lifted a hand to Sarah. "Have a fun adventure," he said. Oh good, he was leaving. Why had he shut the rotors down then? Just to silence the noise so they could say their goodbyes?

"Oh, we will." Kiera gave Mason a significant look.

Mason focused on his superior. The lieutenant general was also giving him a significant look. Mason held eye contact, hoping he conveyed that he'd fulfill his assignment and not get distracted by Kiera's long-lashed blue eyes or pretty bow of a mouth. Had her lips always been that full? Had her eyes always sparkled that prettily? He'd never taken the time to study them before.

“Stay on target, Captain,” Lieutenant General Prescott warned.

“I will, sir.” Mason understood exactly what he was saying. Don’t get sucked in or distracted. The princess’s safety was of utmost importance. He could do this. He saluted.

Prescott nodded to him, smiled at the women, and jumped into the helicopter.

Mason directed them away from the helicopter and toward the massive home. He spent time in the twelve-story, luxurious Augustine castle a good portion of his days, so mansions didn’t stun him any longer, but this one was light-filled, spacious, and top-of-the-line, with unreal views of the valley of seventy waterfalls.

Mason had some rough memories here. He had been beaten severely by four of William Rindlesbacher’s hired mercenaries, then locked in a room with little hope for escape before a bomb killed him, Levi, Prince Malik, Princess Sophie and her parents and young daughter. He’d been able to scale across the exterior wall, thousands of feet above the ground, and help rescue them. He’d also gotten some redemption, chopping the controls for the bomb out of William’s blood-stained hands.

Shaking it off, he escorted the women. It was impossible not to touch an elbow or lower back while escorting the princess. If only she had a thick coat on and not just that form-fitting sweater dress.

“Are you morphing into a popsicle?” he asked, leaning closer to her ear so she could hear his voice over the helicopter now lifting off the ground.

“My legs are a bit chilly,” she admitted, giving him a sassy look. “Are you offering to melt me out of my popsicle state?”

Mason’s eyes widened. This Princess Kiera could not be the same person he’d known before. She’d been a little girl, fun to tease, fun to challenge to crazy tricks and try to out-trick her. Now she was a master of flirtation. His stomach tightened

as he wondered how many men had fallen under the spell of her charming lines, brilliant blue eyes, and beautiful shape.

He didn't find his voice to answer as Sergeant Mueller held the door to the garage and they all filtered out of the chilly winter's day into the huge, open, heated, and clean space. No motorized vehicles were allowed in Wengen, and four electric golf carts and shelves and cupboards of sporting equipment hardly filled the space.

"Do I look like a popsicle?" Kiera asked him.

"Maybe Captain Henson thinks popsicles are delicious," Sarah said before he could respond.

Mason's eyes widened as Kiera laughed at that.

"I'm afraid he doesn't." Kiera's blue eyes filled with challenge.

"Red popsicles are my favorite," he admitted, then immediately knew he shouldn't have said that.

Kiera gestured to her red dress, an absolute perfect fit for her lean frame. "Are you referring to my lovely dress or my red legs, chilled from the cold?"

"Your legs don't look red at all."

"How do they look, Mason?" she asked softly.

They reached the stairs leading up into the house. Sergeant Naples held the door leading into the kitchen and living area.

Kiera didn't wait for his answer but pranced up the stairs, hitching her skirt up a few inches and showing those legs off to their full advantage with the now above-knee-length skirt and high-heeled ankle boots.

"Fabulous," he muttered to himself. "Absolutely fabulous."

Kiera glanced over her shoulder at him and grinned.

Trouble. He was in trouble, and she *was* trouble.

The only thing he knew at this point was he wanted to break his stupidly-made vow to his commanding officer. How

had he ever promised to never pursue the princess?

A few hours ago, he would've laughed at his current self. At this moment, and for the foreseeable next hundred years or more, Princess Kiera was the only woman he wanted to pursue.

He was in big, big trouble.



## CHAPTER

## *Four*

**KIERA THOUGHT** things were going well. Mason was giving her significant looks and teasing with her like the champion he was.

They'd settled into the gorgeous, open home perched on the edge of a cliff. She was used to living with a view; her family's castle was set on a hill and was twelve stories, but this home was thousands of feet above its picturesque mountain valley.

Faith and Hope's home was warm, decorated beautifully for Christmas with several festive trees, tasteful decorations, and numerous lit garlands. She, Sarah, Mason, and Sergeant Naples each settled into one of the upstairs bedrooms. Looking around, she was grateful for the spacious suite with her own bathroom, sitting area, and a balcony overlooking the Lauterbrunnen valley. The valley of the seventy waterfalls was breathtaking in any season.

Sergeant Mueller and Private Silva took downstairs bedrooms. They would each take turns patrolling and resting when they were at the house, and both would watch Kiera unobtrusively while they were out.

Security was such a part of her life that she didn't question it or try to scheme like she would in other areas of her life. The guards were only there to keep her safe. After her mum's death and the many attacks and scares the year after for her family, she liked safe. At least as far as not being attacked by people

with evil intent. She still loved her stunts and risk-taking. Risks where she was in control.

Some of her dates weren't thrilled about being shadowed by large, armed men at all times, but it was normal for her. This security detail was of the utmost importance. Macey had helped her in her scheming when Kiera told her sister-in-law that Mason was the only man for her. Macey then planted the idea in Chad's mind of having Mason pretend he was dating Kiera and another guard pretend he was dating Sarah, and then she'd encouraged Ray to accept said plan.

The sun was already setting as Kiera finished unpacking and freshening up. She hated the early sunsets and darkness of winter. She should've insisted on a trip to the Canary Islands, but then she wouldn't have gotten Mason assigned to her security. As a captain, he was too important for regular security details. Warm weather, sunny beaches, and more hours of daytime light were not worth missing out on him. She did fancy snow skiing, especially with Mason.

She didn't want to change out of this dress. 'Red popsicles are my favorite.' Mason had said that. Then she'd heard him murmur that her legs looked, 'fabulous,' a pause and then, 'absolutely fabulous.'

Her heart melted. He'd flirted beautifully, glanced at her often on the helicopter ride, and being in his arms as he lifted her from the helicopter and then steadied her had been heaven.

She rubbed her hands together as she often saw him do and let out a happy cry.

"Princess Kiera?" A hard rap came on the door.

Mason!

She ran to the door and flung it open. There he stood in all his twinkling, blue-eyed glory.

"Yes, Captain Henson?" She leaned against the door frame, blinking up at him.

"Everything all right, Fearless Princess?"

“Better than all right.” She swept her hand around, indicating the house but mostly him. “We’re here and it’s going to be epic.”

A slow smile grew on his lips. He crossed his sinewy arms across his well-built chest. He was strong and tall, but leaner than her brother Ray and some of the burlier guards like Sergeant Mueller. “The skiing?”

“The company,” she countered.

He lifted his eyebrows and sadly didn’t rise to the flirtation. “Why did you scream out, Fearless Princess? I thought nothing scared you.”

“Nothing does.” At least he’d dropped the ‘little’ from her title. She wanted him to say Kiera, no princess attached, in a husky sort of groan, right before he kissed her, right after he kissed her, or maybe when he took a short break from kissing her to look over her face and admit how in love with her he was.

“The scream?” he reminded her. His blue eyes seemed to see right through her kissing dreams.

Her face flared. “It was a happy scream. Happy we’re here. Happy we get to spend so much time together.”

His eyes widened slightly, but then he moved closer. Only a quarter of a step, but she could smell his warm, spicy amber and musk scent. Delicious. Almost as delicious as his accent and his face and all of him.

“You missed your favorite guard while you were in America?” he asked. It sounded like the way he’d always teased her, but it was more significant now. Things had changed between them.

“Ached for him, actually.”

Mason swallowed and studied her.

Kiera straightened away from the door frame and took a half step closer. She didn’t want to push him too hard or too fast and have him put up boundaries or walls. Their gazes were locked, and she could feel the warmth of his breath on

her face. She wanted his breath to intermingle with hers. Were all her fantasies about to come true? He definitely wasn't looking at her as if she were an adorable girl. This look was hot, delicious, and made her tingle from head to toe.

“Princess,” he murmured.

“Yes?” She nibbled at the corner of her bottom lip.

His eyes dropped, and then it happened. He leaned. He didn't wrap her up tight—yet—but his large, well-built frame shadowed her completely.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

He pulled in a quick breath, blinking as if awakened too soon. “Pardon me,” he murmured, stepping back and pulling his phone out. He glanced at it, and his brow furrowed. He strode down the wide upstairs hall as he swiped it open. “Miriam,” he murmured, as if he didn't want Kiera to hear. “Did you receive my message?”

The door next to hers opened, and Sarah poked her head out. She looked past Kiera to Mason and then back to Kiera. “Well?” she mouthed.

Kiera raised her hands, not sure what to tell her friend. She put a finger to her lips, trying to listen in.

“Many apologies,” Mason was saying, “for the last-minute cancellation.” He listened then chuckled low and deep at something Miriam said.

Kiera's stomach squirmed. Who was this ‘Miriam’?

“Thank you for being so fabulous about ...” He suddenly glanced back at Kiera. His blue eyes searched hers, then he turned away again. “Everything. Goodbye.” He pocketed the phone and turned, his gaze swinging from Kiera to Sarah and back to Kiera.

Kiera wanted to demand to know who Miriam was and if they were dating. What had he canceled last minute and what was she being fabulous about? Nobody had indicated he had any kind of girlfriend. Her stomach squirmed.

“Did you have plans for tonight, Princess?” he asked as he walked back and stopped in front of her, not giving her the opportunity to pry the information from him.

“Hope said the kitchen would be stocked with food options. I’ll cook for everyone.”

“You’ll cook for everyone?” he asked, his voice dubious.

“A few things have changed about your favorite princess since you last saw me, Captain Henson.”

“That, my Fearless Princess, is an understatement.”

She grinned. *His* fearless princess? She heard Sarah laugh softly.

“You can be my sous chef,” she told him.

“I’d be honored.” He bowed slightly.

“I know.” She winked. “After we eat, I reserved two hours of the pools and spa area of the Arenas Resort. You and Sergeant Naples can swim with us, since we’re supposed to pretend to be couples and all that, and Lieutenant Mueller and Private Silva can monitor the interior of the area. The hotel’s security will lock down all entrances to the pools, spa, and locker rooms after we enter, and their guards will patrol the exterior.”

Mason studied her. He knew her ploy—getting him alone as much as possible and making Christmas magic and romance happen. Would he call her out on it? Try to block her efforts? If the look in his eyes and the comments he’d let slip were any indication, he was absolutely stunned, shocked, floored by her growing into a woman.

“Your wish is my command, princess.”

Her stomach hopped happily, and she grinned. “I hoped you’d say that.”

Mason looked ... concerned.

That was all right. She’d wipe any concern away and show him they were meant to be together. And soon, she’d hear him

say 'Kiera.' Her name on his lips would be almost as delicious as her lips on his.

Kiera barely resisted leaping into the air, swinging from the light fixture, and executing a perfect double backflip.

## CHAPTER

## *Five*

### COOKING WAS FABULOUS— TEASING

with Mason about his lack of cooking ability, taking every opportunity to get close to him, brush his hand, flirt—but dinner was a little more stilted.

Sarah and Kiera worked to draw out Sergeant Josiah Naples, beginning with dropping to his first name only, and he finally seemed to relax. Sergeant Mueller ate with them, but nobody could draw him out. Private Silva ate while they cleaned up and then the four of them packed small bags with their swimsuits, flip-flops, and coverups. Mason teased Kiera that a princess shouldn't clean up. She teased back that this princess had talents he'd never seen, earning her a smoldering look that made her heart race.

Finally, they made it to the Arenas Resort. Kiera loved this hotel's spa area, and she gave them a quick tour. There was a separate, secluded area with a sauna, cold plunge, and hot baths. There was a sign in the 'therapy spa' section that instructed bathers to remove swimsuits. They'd all laughed a bit awkwardly about that. The main pool was huge, the perfect warm temperature, and had a whirlpool area and various jets to target every sore muscle from head to toe. Up on the rooftop, there were more hot tubs to take in the magnificent view.

After Mason swept the women's locker room and a guard was stationed at each exit, Kiera and Sarah changed into their suits. Hers was from Lady Fit's new swimwear line—a pale-

blue one piece. She slid into her flip-flops, fashioned her long, dark hair into a ponytail, and hurried out to meet Sarah, who was in a red two-piece that showed off her curves.

“Why didn’t you wear the bikini I brought for you?” Sarah asked. She was a Christian, but she liked to push Kiera to reveal a little more skin.

Kiera got more than enough attention. Her friend didn’t understand, but a clothing malfunction because a skirt was too short or a neckline too daring would go viral if it happened to Augustine’s princess. The few times she’d naively done acrobatics in a skirt had confirmed that.

“I like this suit,” Kiera answered with a smile.

“You’re exquisitely gorgeous no matter what you wear. Let’s go. This place is off the charts!” Sarah grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the entrance that led into the pool areas. “And don’t worry. I’ll distract Josiah—he’s a cutie—and give you time alone with Mason. He’s miles and miles past cute ... insanely hot. What a man.”

“You’re the best friend ever.” Kiera didn’t remind her friend she’d already said Mason was ‘insanely hot.’

They walked into the pool area and both stopped in their tracks. Kiera knew Sergeant Naples was standing right next to Mason and the other guards would be patrolling the area, but all she could see was Mason. She didn’t know that she’d ever seen him in a swimming suit. She tried to swallow and couldn’t.

His upper body was defined and lean, and his height gave his muscles a sinewy look that she absolutely favored. His abdomen was slightly hollowed out, making his chest muscles appear even more prominent and his shoulder muscles even broader. Every muscle was shredded. He could be on any poster and women would pay outrageous money for it. The fact that he wasn’t on posters or modeling somewhere, that she’d never glimpsed him without a shirt on and this show was for her and her alone, made her love him even more.



Her gaze traveled slowly to his face. His handsome, sculpted, irresistible face. She expected those blue eyes to be twinkling at her and his mouth lopsided in his smirky smile. Instead, his mouth and jaw were slack and his eyes were simply fastened on her, not blinking, not laughing, just staring.

For the second time today, she found her smile was ... shy. Kiera was never shy but as she stood there with the man she'd long loved openly admiring her, she was shy and full of hope. Her plan was genius. She would finally get Mason to fall in love with her.

Sarah slapped her on the butt and made her jump and laugh. Her friend hurried over to Josiah and grabbed his muscular arm. "Can we try out the steam room first?"

Josiah smiled at her, but he looked to Mason. His superior. Mason nodded. His eyes glinted with humor. "Sure. We'll come with you to make certain the swimsuits stay on in the therapy spa section."

Kiera wished he'd let the two of them go off alone, and then they could switch and have some time alone, but she was shocked he'd referenced swimsuits staying on. Just teasing like he always was. There was no way her dream man would ever ...

Kiera swallowed hard, and her stomach turned over. Was Mason a true player? She'd never asked, hadn't wanted to know about who he was dating, but she knew he dated a lot of different women.

"Oh, sir, I would never ..." Josiah appeared embarrassed.

"Be careful saying never, Sergeant." Mason focused on Kiera. "Sometimes that word can bite you."

Kiera glanced at Sarah in confusion, but her friend couldn't seem to muddle that one out either.

"Let's go." Kiera grabbed Mason's hand, pushing away the uncomfortable moment and any doubts about him. He was as full of integrity and purity as she had always believed. He'd been teasing. He was always teasing.

Mason startled, but settled quickly.

“We’re supposed to look like a couple, remember?” She winked at him and gestured to the floor to ceiling windows surrounding the main pool area. Anyone walking by could see in and take pictures.

“I doubt I could forget that if I tried.”

Did he want to forget it?

“I’m sure you’ve done the spa therapy at the castle,” she said. “This is similar.”

They walked hand in hand down the steps into the isolated and quiet spa area. It felt so right to have her hand in his. Kiera had a wonderful family, a busy, fulfilling life, and many and various experiences, but it somehow felt like she’d been waiting for this moment all her life. Mason by her side, their hands clasped, happiness and shared experiences waiting for them.

“Is that so?” He tilted his head and studied her as they slid out of their flip-flops. “How does the order of spa therapy go again?”

Josiah held the door of the steam room for Sarah. Hot steam filtered up and swirled toward the ceiling. They disappeared inside and shut the door tight. Kiera and Mason stayed outside, and she was thrilled. They were alone. At least momentarily, until Josiah or Sergeant Mueller walked past the opening to this area.

“Steam room, then cold plunge, then relax in the hot bath,” she told him. “Then we can go to the main pool and use all the jets, float around the lazy river, and relax.” If only she could get him alone in one of the rooftop hot tubs with dim lighting and the beautiful view of the quaint town and the valley far below.

“Hmm.” Mason looked around the small area. Of course nobody was there, but it was probably habitual as a royal guard. He pulled a black handgun from the back of his shorts and set it on a nearby towel rack. Her eyes widened. She should’ve realized he’d have a pistol and probably at least one

knife in the pocket of his shorts. He was serious about her protection, and she appreciated it.

“So you don’t do the cold plunge first?” He rubbed at his jaw as if thinking.

“Not unless you’re insane and like cold therapy.”

Mason released her hand and rubbed his hands together. “Guess I’m insane, then.” His grin was quick and wide. He wrapped his arm around her waist and yanked her off her feet, slipping his free hand under her legs.

“Mason?” she questioned breathily, shocked by his move. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned in, every dream coming to fruition. She was in his muscular arms, pressed close to his spectacular chest and abdomen. Would he carry her somewhere private and kiss the two hours away?

“You’ll love trying cold therapy first,” he said, his summer blue eyes twinkling. He rushed to the edge of the deep, cold pool.

“No!” she screamed, finally realizing his intentions and remembering exactly what Mason was like. A crazy tease and a schemer. Just not to her level of scheming.

They went over the edge. Kiera gasped but thankfully remembered to close her mouth before she went under. They plunged into the freezing cold water. It was worse than jumping into one of the waterfall pools in the Augustine mountains. The icy chill bit at her skin, stealing the warmth from her body. Their heads burst through the surface and Kiera tried to gasp for air, but she couldn’t. Her lungs had seized up.

Mason whooped and laughed, throwing his head back and spraying cold water everywhere.

The only good news was he still held her tightly against him. His warm body was the only thing that grounded her.

She finally was able to draw in a breath and then she wrapped her arms around his neck tighter and tried to shove his head back underwater. “You! How could you? I can’t believe you out-schemed the schemer.”

Mason chuckled and easily resisted her attempts to dunk him. He was tall enough he could easily touch; his head and the top of his shoulders were out of the water. Thank heavens he was holding her.

“Yes! This is really living, right?” His blue eyes sparkled at her.

She could agree that being in his arms was ‘really living,’ but chills encompassed her body and she shivered and tried to mold her body to his to get some warmth. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Oh, come now, Fearless Princess. I’ve seen you jump in waterfall pools that are colder than this.”

“No, they aren’t.”

He laughed. “If you stay in seven minutes, we’ll experience the true benefits of cold plunge therapy.”

“I don’t w-want the benefits.” Her teeth chattered.

Kiera realized he wasn’t getting out anytime soon and tried to pull free of his embrace. It was a sad scenario, as she’d longed to be in this spot, but she would not freeze to death for love.

Mason held her tightly, and Kiera realized she wasn’t going anywhere unless he agreed. If she asked, he’d release her, but even though he’d jumped in here with her to tease her, she certainly didn’t want to backtrack out of his arms. Maybe she *was* willing to freeze to death for love.

His gaze swept around the small area, but there was nobody but them. Private Silva walked past the stairway leading down. Mason tilted his chin to the man, and he walked on. Then he went back to studying Kiera. “Your teeth are chattering.”

“I know! Let’s g-go in the hot one.”

“I never thought the most beautiful and brave princess currently residing on earth would wimp out about a little cold water.” His gaze swept over her face, warm and sweet. In his blue eyes, she swore she could read everything she’d ever

wanted him to say to her—he wanted her and only her, he wanted to date her, form a relationship, be together forever.

The cold water suddenly wasn't as cold. She ran her hands over his muscular shoulders, the skin taut and perfect. His hands around her back and legs tightened, if that was even possible.

“Let's make a deal,” she said, trying not to chatter or stutter.

His brows rose. “Okay.”

Was this the moment to challenge him to kiss her? No, she needed to draw that out. He'd finally appeared to notice she was a mature woman, not the teenage girl he remembered. Now she needed him to realize she was the only woman in the world who could be *his* woman.

“You call me Kiera, no teasing, no little, no princess, and I'll stay in this crazy cold water a few more minutes.”

“You don't like me teasing you?”

“On the contrary, I adore your teasing, but I'm ‘Princess’ to the whole world. I want to be Kiera to you, and I want to hear you say it.” She ran her hands around to his muscular back, clinging to him, and was rewarded with him trembling slightly under her touch. At least she hoped it was a tremble and not a shiver from this blasted cold water. *Bosh*. All she wanted was to hear her name from his lips.

Mason studied her, as if questioning her motives. Her motive was simple: to secure his heart. She returned his gaze, and then she pulled the edge of her bottom lip between her teeth and gave him a come-hither look. That had seemed to affect him earlier today.

Mason groaned. His eyes dropped to her lips and then met her eyes again. “Kiera,” he whispered in a husky voice that warmed her from the inside out.

Kiera's stomach did a dance, and her body went hot from head to toe. She prayed he'd lean in, but he only studied her. “Mason,” she whispered, arching up toward him.

“Yes ... Kiera?”

It would happen. He would say her name before, during, and after he kissed her.

“I’m not even cold any longer.”

Mason smiled, but instead of kissing her long and slow, he sobered. “We’d better get you out of here, then.”

He easily carried her up the steps. She shivered involuntarily and leaned into his broad chest. He paused and his gaze swept the surrounding area, but all was clear. Sergeant Mueller walked past the stairs leading into the spa and nodded to them. If he found it odd Mason was holding her, he didn’t show it. Maybe he thought it was part of pretending to be a couple. Oh, shoot. What if Mason was only pretending? But in this secluded spa area, they were sheltered from the windows. Nobody could see them. No reason to pretend.

Mason carried her cradled against his chest across the tiled floor and down into the hot pool. It stung her rear, feet, legs, and abdomen like a million hot needles.

“Ouch,” she cried out.

Mason grinned, leaned back into a seat, and did the last thing she wanted him to do. He released his grip on her. She forced herself to pry her fingers from his shoulders. It would be awkward to hold on when he wasn’t touching her any longer. She floated away from him.

“This is great,” he said. “I never relax like this.” Even as he said it, he did another perimeter search. As if her stalker would jump out of the sauna at them.

*Relax?* There was nothing relaxing about touching him, him saying her name so beautifully, almost kissing him.

Kiera edged to a seat next to his, their arms brushing as she settled in. He jolted slightly but closed his eyes and looked for all the world to be enjoying the hot, thermal water and the soothing jets.

“No time to relax for our Charming Captain?”

He chuckled but sadly didn't look at her. "No, princess, no spare time. No rest for the too charming."

She was too hot now. The tingling sensation from cold to hot had stopped, but she didn't like what he was intoning. He was too charming. How many women was he currently dating? What about Miriam? Was that why he'd let Kiera go?

Her brother Malik and her stepbrother Chad had both been insanely charming players before they committed to the loves of their lives. Could she cure Mason of his playing ways?

Or was he happy with his life dating a million women and not interested in the princess he'd known forever and possibly still thought of as too young for him?

Drat! She had to scheme better. This time together could not be squandered. They'd made some great progress. Now she had to figure out how to capitalize on it.

## CHAPTER

## *Six*

**MASON WAS** in a rubbish truck full of trouble. Why had he even imagined it would be a fun joke, a way to cool his own ardor, to pick Kiera up and hold her in his arms so he could jump in the cold plunge with her? As if holding that incredible woman against his chest wouldn't affect him. It was something he would've done when the princess was twelve. She wasn't twelve any longer.

She'd felt so right in his arms—her womanly shape accentuated in the modest blue swimsuit, the sparkle and tease in her blue eyes, her asking him to call her Kiera. He blew out a breath and did another perimeter check, pretending not to be affected by her, pretending his whole world hadn't been tipped upside down this afternoon, that it didn't just keep on tilting. He felt like he was clinging to gravity by his fingernails. How was he supposed to 'pretend' to date Kiera but not pursue her or fall for her?

She was mesmerizing, and he was in so much trouble.

Should he call General Ray and explain he'd made a big mistake claiming he would never be interested in Kiera? He could convince the man that Kiera was his perfect match and the Serial Dater was ready to settle down. He could swear on the penalty of death that he would never trifle with her feelings.

No. The general would think he was teasing, and Mason was on an assignment here, not a dating op. The fact that this spa area was safe was no reason to let down his guard. He



studied the small surrounding area diligently. Quiet. No danger. Curses, he wanted some danger. Not the princess in danger, but something to distract him from her arm and leg innocently brushing against his.

Was it innocent?

She was so close he could easily slide her onto his lap and kiss her until he convinced her he would never leave her side again.

What was happening to him? This was a mess, and he was completely out of his mind. She was his Fearless Little Princess. His buddy. The cutie who did crazy tricks and made him smile.

Suddenly, she had become so much more.

Mason had been an absolute idiot to assume he could plan dates with Miriam and somehow move into serious dating and a relationship. Miriam was a nice, accomplished, and attractive woman who suddenly had no draw for him. He'd left a voice message earlier to cancel their date, but when she returned his call Kiera had been right there. Definitely not the time to somehow explain Miriam was great but a dim candle compared to the radiant sun that was Kiera.

Mason rolled his eyes at himself. He'd never say that to Miriam.

The fact was, Kiera had his heart in her hands with her radiant smile, a twinkle in her blue eyes, a few flirtations, and three or four minutes in his arms. What would happen if he kissed her, if he dated her, if he begged her father, the king of Augustine, to not cut off his head but instead let him love his daughter?

Curses. He passed a hand over his face and studied the opening to the spa area, willing Kiera's stalker to somehow bypass all the security in place and give him a chance to thrash somebody.

There was only one solution. He had to call General Ray as soon as they got back to the house and ...

Kiera swished her hands around in the warm water. Her arm brushed his and then accidentally brushed his abdomen. His body was so hot he almost combusted. Another cold dip might help.

He glanced at Kiera, and she smiled.

Nope. Nothing would help this mess.

He had to beg the general to let Mason date the formidable Prince General August's beloved little sister.

No! He had to ask for a replacement. He couldn't even keep his mind straight for five seconds.

Mason focused on the opposite wall and racked his brain for a possible replacement. He could only think of the guards who had been with Kiera recently in America. Those four men needed a break. But it was only three and a half days. Three days now, if Mason could survive the rest of the evening and the night without grabbing Kiera and breaking a promise for the first time in his life. He might be a jokester, but he was a stand-up jokester. His integrity and morality meant everything to him. Over his long dating career, a few women had claimed he slept with them, and it had made him sick. He would never ... not until he married Kiera.

Oh, my, curses! He couldn't even think straight.

*Guards for my replacement, guards for my replacement ...*

Lieutenant Jacob Islander. There. Finally, a name. Jacob was single, a decent skier. They'd have to commit Kiera to wait for Jacob on the slopes.

The problem was, Mason didn't want any other man, especially the kind and darkly handsome lieutenant, pretending to be in a relationship with Kiera.

Mason's gaze slid to Kiera again without his permission. Her blue eyes were open and fastened on him. She gave him the most alluring smile known to mankind. His heart raced out of control.

Nobody else could have this spot but him.

She moved against him, their arms and legs beautifully connected. His body seemed to tingle. What was that about? He didn't tingle. He was a man, for crying out loud.

“Mason.” She said his name so alluringly. “Can I call you Mace?”

Mason drew in a quick breath, his heart racing out of control. “I like that,” he admitted. Like it? He loved it.

Kiera grinned. “Thank you ... Mace.” She drew it out and made a simple nickname sound like a love sonnet.

Mason wanted to beg her to say it again and again. If he kissed her, would she say, *Kiss me again, Mace?*

He splashed his face with hot water, stinging his eyes with chlorine and scalding liquid. He blinked quickly.

Thankfully, Josiah and Sarah came out of the sauna and leaped into the cold plunge, laughing and screaming and having a jolly-good time. His sergeant and Kiera's friend joined them in the hot pool a moment later, and everyone was in good spirits.

Mason played along. He said some funny lines. At least, everyone laughed after he opened his mouth and spewed something out. He couldn't even remember what he'd said. He couldn't peel his gaze from Kiera's face. Her dark lashes looked thicker with a bit of moisture on them, and her blue eyes sparkled like the stars in the heavens.

She was heaven to him, and he ... he was a sappy mess.

Kiera directed them all to the main pool ringed with comfortable lounging areas and chairs and floor to ceiling windows. The security of the hotel had promised the glass was bulletproof. Impenetrable. Mason scanned the area. Sergeant Mueller and Private Silva were both close at hand, monitoring everything, and he knew the hotel had four guards stationed outside, two guarding the entrances and two roving the exterior. Barring a catastrophic event or a bomb strategically placed and undiscovered, they were safe.

His eyes followed Kiera as she slid into the huge pool, swam over to the small 'lazy river,' then rolled over to float on

her back and let the water push her around the concrete circle.

Why would she float on her back like that? He felt eyes on him and turned to see Sarah beaming. The American girl knew how taken he was with her friend. Who could help but notice? He had to hide it and stay in control.

Sliding into the warm water, he started using the different jets while keeping his eyes tracking from Kiera to the rest of the area. Enticing princess. No danger. Mesmerizing woman. No danger. Captivating Kiera. No danger.

Back and forth. It was his assignment to watch her. To pretend to date her. Best assignment he'd ever had. And the most difficult.

The jets relaxed his muscles, but nothing could relax the tension growing inside him regarding his assignment. The Fearless Princess. The most appealing woman in the world. He really needed to set aside time to check media regarding Augustine's royalty so he wasn't blindsided like this ever again.

Kiera circled through the variety of massaging jets, often closing her eyes and parting her lips slightly as she let the water therapy do its work. Mason's jaw slackened and his heart raced every time.

After far too long of him checking for danger, staring longingly at Kiera, and rotating through jets, Mason was ready to suggest they head out.

Kiera declared it was time for tricks. Mason couldn't help but smile and join in. The pool wasn't deep enough to get too crazy but Mason and Kiera competed for the best back flips, gainers, Baranis, aials, and Arabians. Josiah watched them quietly, a slight smile on his lips. Sarah rated their tricks, always giving Kiera the higher score. Which was probably deserved. Mason could accomplish any trick, but he didn't look nearly as graceful or fabulous doing it.

They had a lot of fun. *This* was the Princess Kiera he'd planned on spending three and a half days guarding. Well, the fun and tricks, at least. She still looked like heaven above had

designed the most enticing woman, placed her in a blue swimsuit, and then reminded him he'd said the stupidest words of his life—*I promise you I would never pursue Princess Kiera*—to his commanding officer and the princess's second-oldest and most protective brother. The general prince hadn't even asked for the vow. Mason had volunteered it. Why hadn't he just agreed not to trifle with her heart?

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

Mason fought to keep his head in the game, checking everywhere for danger and being reassured by Mueller and Silva's constant presence and the occasional guard passing outside the windows that everything was all right. If only it was all right inside his head and heart. He'd never been such a jumbled clutter of confusion.

His usual dating experience was taking fun, beautiful, sweet, and accomplished ladies on two or three fun dates, then happily moving on. He didn't lose his head and go insane over any one woman, no matter how impressive or alluring they were. Even with his plans with Miriam, he'd been in complete control and his heart hadn't gotten involved at all.

The problem was, Kiera was the complete package for him—fun, impressive, enticing, loyal, thoughtful, and gorgeous. And his heart was wrapped up, tied neatly with a bow, and ready to hand over the moment she asked for it.

The two hours were finally over, and they rinsed off in the locker rooms and then headed back to Hope and Faith's house in two four-person electric golf carts. It was unnerving being out in the open on a security detail, but the village was sleepy, the air biting cold, and nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

When they got back to the house, Mason checked the cameras and sensors while Kiera and Sarah waited in the garage with him. The three other guards performed interior and exterior checks. He tried not to notice Kiera standing close at his side. Did she brush against him accidentally? Keeping his focus was the most difficult task he could remember in a very long time.

When the house was clear, everyone went to their separate suites to hopefully get some rest as they would ski a full day tomorrow. Mason brushed his teeth, put on cotton shorts and a T-shirt, and flipped open his laptop. He checked the security cameras, but everything was clear. He texted General August and Lieutenant General Chad a report of everything that had happened so far, leaving out the most pertinent information—that he was a mess regarding the princess and could someone please help him or could he rescind a promise?

Mason had texts from his family, some friends, many different women, Levi, and Miriam. He responded to all of them, including non-committal friendly texts to each of the women. He had no desire to date anyone but Kiera and felt lackluster about the beautiful doctor now.

What was he going to do? Call Miriam and tell her they wouldn't be going out again? Abandon his perfect plan to show his brothers that he wasn't the Serial Dater?

He stewed about it ... for half a second.

Yes. That was exactly what he was going to do. There wasn't a woman alive who could compete with Kiera. It wasn't fair to any other lady, especially Miriam, to lead her on when he'd found the only woman that would do for him.

Mason pulled out his phone and pushed call back on her name. He quickly told her he'd met someone, not explaining that he'd known this 'someone' for years, and apologized that he couldn't date Miriam any longer. She was gracious and didn't ask questions. That was a blessing.

Now he could focus on Kiera.

Just not in the way he wanted to.

Curses! Would Josiah spar with him to get some energy out? There was a gym down the hall. He'd exercised at the military center early this morning, but it felt like a different lifetime. He might have to do a second workout today.

A rap on his door was exactly what he needed to get out of his own head. He leaped to his feet and rushed to fling it open. Standing on the other side was the one person he shouldn't be

ecstatic to see—the blue-eyed, dark-haired, exquisitely beautiful and far-too-mature princess. She wore a long-sleeved running shirt and fitted workout pants. Was she truly only twenty-one? If he'd met her on the street or at a restaurant, he'd guess she was somewhere between twenty-six to twenty-eight.

“My favorite bodyguard.” She grinned impishly, and the entire hallway lit up. Light from her smile and from heaven above poured into his room. He couldn't help but think that heaven was endorsing him pursuing her. Why else would he be hit this hard with unfamiliar and incredible feelings for her? Yet heaven wouldn't endorse him going back on his word. He passed a hand over his face.

“Hey,” he managed.

“Ray said to keep you informed when I get texts from the current stalker.” She held up her phone.

The *current* stalker. She said it as if it were old hat. How many had she dealt with?

“Can I come in?”

“Oh ...” He swallowed. He really shouldn't invite her in. They could chat in the hallway. “Of course.”

She brushed past him, leaving a sweet smell he couldn't have identified but knew he favored. He allowed himself a deep inhale.

Favored? That scent was the nectar of paradise.

Mason did the opposite of what he should ... stepped in and shut the door behind him. Leaning against the door for support, or maybe so he wouldn't rush to her and pick her up in his arms like he had when he'd leaped into the cold plunge, he felt weaker than he ever had in his life.

Kiera hadn't gone far into the room. Not nearly far enough for him not to smell her and want her and know he could touch her at any time. If he could dump his conscience in the garbage.

She turned to him and held out her phone. He straightened away from the door and took it. Their fingers brushed and set off a reaction into his heart.

Curses! He was a tough and hilarious captain in the Augustine military. He'd dated dozens of beautiful women—hundreds—but he'd never had a reaction like that from his fingers to his heart. He couldn't have reactions in his heart—especially with the woman who was off limits. How hard would his usually serious friend Levi laugh at him right now?

The phone was already open to the text. He glanced at it.

*You're mine, beautiful princess. I alone will possess you. Or you'll die.*

Ice filled his stomach.

“Kiera!” His eyes darted to hers. What he read in her gaze made him even more concerned. “Is this something you’ve seen before?”

She shrugged. “They don’t usually threaten to kill me.”

“What do they threaten?”

“They just want me.” She paused and crinkled her nose. “You know, in gross ways. It’s fine. I’m used to it.”

“Kiera.” Mason held up the phone, every muscle in his body tightening. He was certain far too many men ‘wanted her in gross ways,’ and if she didn’t respond to their liking, some idiots threatened or stalked her. “This is not fine, and you should not have to be used to it.”

She smiled softly. “I’m fine, Mace. I have four guards around me at all times. I send the numbers and texts to Ray and a contact of Jensen’s in the American police, then I block the number. Sometimes Ray or the police track the stalker down, but most of the time the men are smart enough that the messages are from burner phones and untraceable.”

Mason gripped the phone tightly in his hand. “How do they get your number?”

“Who knows? Maybe from somebody I date or somebody I exchange homework assignments with. Maybe they write my



number on the wall of the boys' bathrooms. I don't know. Ray trades my number out far too often. It's a pain. But the notes aren't always texts. Sometimes I get hand-written notes, typed notes, mailed notes, flowers or gifts, stuff like that."

She held out her hand. He wasn't certain what for. Did she want to hold his hand? Then her eyes fell to the phone in his hand. He felt instantly silly.

"I'm sorry you have to deal with this." He handed over the phone. "I promise we will keep you safe."

"Thank you. None of them have ever tried to hurt me. They only want my attention."

"I imagine they do." His jaw clenched. "It's still got to be annoying to have all those daft boys after you."

"Part of being a well-known princess. I'm sure Princess Belle of the Hidden Kingdom could relate."

No other princess could compare to her.

"Is it taxing being so desirable?" He'd meant it as a semi-tease, but he honestly wondered how she dealt with all of this and maintained such a delightful attitude.

"You tell me." A challenge flashed in her eyes.

"I can't complain about all the women flocking to me." He raised his hands, hoping to appear teasing and desirable. What had she heard about his 'serial dating'?

"Flocking?" She stepped close to him. His heart took off at a gallop. "It must be so rough on you."

"What can I say?" He tried to smirk, but he was pretty sure he failed. He wanted her to back him into the door, arch up, and kiss him. "I'm a desirable commodity."

"Do you think you'll ever settle down, Captain Henson?"

"Settle ... down?" He knew what she meant, but he wanted her to mean *with her*. Curses. He had to get this desire for the unattainable princess under control. How had he gone from thinking of her as a cute college girl to believing she was the woman of his dreams in a matter of hours? Quickly giving up

on any other woman and wanting no one but her in his life. It was insane yet somehow, with Kiera's blue eyes focused on him, it made complete sense.

"I'm sure the ultra-desirable Captain Mason Henson wants to fall in love and get married someday." She rested a hand on his chest, just over his heart. It was racing out of control. Her touching him, and saying words like love and marriage, only made it worse. "If only you could find the perfect woman for you."

He stared at her. Did she know? She *was* the perfect woman for him.

And he couldn't have her.

Kiera lifted her free hand and cupped his jawline. Her other hand slowly slid up his chest, along his neck, and into his hair. Mason quivered. *Quivered*. He'd never quivered in his life. He was always joking and laughing and showing off how tough he was.

He was the furthest thing from tough or funny right now. He was putty in Kiera's smooth, firm hands. If she arched up and kissed him, how could he keep his promise to General August that he'd never pursue her? Oh, man, he was in trouble. If she kissed him, could he claim he hadn't instigated?

He was rationalizing. He hated rationalizers.

Kiera arched up.

Mason's heart thumped out of control. He had to gently push her away. All he wanted was to wrap her up tight and kiss her so thoroughly she'd know she was the perfect woman for him. He impressively didn't lift his arms and haul her into his chest, but he also didn't turn his head away.

Why didn't he turn his head? What kind of rationalizing wimp was he?

She softly kissed his cheek. His breath rushed out at even that much contact. At least she hadn't gone for his lips when his defenses were so low.

"Goodnight, Mace," she whispered.

He adored that nickname on her captivating lips.

“Sweet dreams,” she said, biting enticingly at her lower lip.

It was a parting tease, he knew it was, but the words were said so alluringly it felt like a siren’s call. Kiera wasn’t a siren. She was beautifully innocent, fun and eager to do something crazy or adventurous, yet mature and resilient from all she’d gone through in life. She was everything he’d ever wanted.

Pulling away, she opened the door.

Mason stared. It was all he could do to resist grabbing her, hauling her into his arms, and showing her what he would dream about.

She gave him one more alluring smile, her blue eyes full of him, then she slipped down the hallway. He heard her door open and close. For a few beats he couldn’t move, could hardly catch his breath.

Finally, he forced himself to close his door instead of chasing after her and begging her to have mercy on his heart. Oh, and could she please call her general brother and explain why he had to break his promise?

Mason banged his head against the wall. Several times. He should pray. He should call someone for help. He should beg Josiah to spar with him. He should workout. He should go to bed.

Instead, he sank to the floor and asked for help, strength, answers, some kind of insight.

When he finally climbed to his feet, his knees ached and he had no answers.

*Sweet dreams?*

Did she enjoy intentionally torturing him?

Princess Kiera always had a plan or a scheme. What if he was only a conquest to her? A scheme to see if she could get the Serial Dater to fall? What if she played *him* and walked away with his heart?

His heart hurt just thinking about it.

Mason rubbed at his chest and went to get socks and shoes.  
The weight room was his only option right now.

## CHAPTER

## *Seven*

### TEASING MASON WITH 'SWEET DREAMS'

and then walking away from him was one of the more difficult things Kiera had ever done, and she'd kissed her own mum goodbye, stiff and cold in a coffin, until she saw her again in heaven when Kiera was only twelve.

She was being dramatic, but goodness, it would've been perfect to softly press her lips to his. She was—she calculated and thought through each look and touch—eighty percent certain if she would've kissed him full on the mouth he would've responded, and every one of her dreams would come true.

But the twenty percent risk that he might have turned his head or gently pushed her away concerned her. Leaving him longing for her was a strategic move in the game of love. It was excruciating, but smart.

It was clear he was fighting not to fall for her. Maybe because of this Miriam, or because he was her security guard. Maybe the age difference worried him.

Or maybe her dream man really was a confirmed player, didn't want to settle down, and would shatter her heart in the end.

She wasn't certain the reason, but she prayed for help. The plan was by Saturday night to have him telling her *she* was his perfect woman and that he'd happily settle down in a shack in the mountains or follow her around the world if she asked.

Kiera smiled to herself. She didn't want to control Mason or order him around, but she did want to love him.

The next morning dawned bright and exquisite. Everyone seemed to be in a fabulous mood as they cooked and ate breakfast together and then loaded up the golf carts to head to the gondola in town. Mason was his happy, teasing self, but Kiera could tell he was trying to keep his distance. Well, too bad for him as they'd be skiing and riding lifts together all day.

They got to the gondola and loaded up. Too bad for her, as there was a small crowd and they definitely weren't alone. With her helmet and goggles on, somebody would've been hard pressed to recognize her, so that was a relief. At the same time, it would've strengthened the 'pretending to be a couple' angle if a tourist figured out who she was and started snapping pictures. Kiera could've cuddled into Mason and used his strong, tall form to shelter her from the camera. She was tempted to pull her goggles off and start name-dropping her family, but she didn't.

When they exited the gondola, she popped her FC08 ski boots into her Foil Oro-Nero Gold skis.

Mason lifted his brows at her gold-plated skis, a gift from her incredible father. "The most ridiculously expensive freestyle skis on the market won't help you out-trick me."

"We'll see, my favorite bodyguard. We'll see." Kiera winked, pulled her goggles over her eyes, and took off down the slope.

The skiing was fabulous. She appreciated that Mason could not only keep up with her, but he might actually be faster than her. He didn't prove that, instead staying diligently by her side. Most of the runs they were on were intermediate, which was great for Sarah and Josiah to stay within visible distance. She and Mason found ideal spots to backflip, front flip, and do three-sixties.

Kiera fancied showing off for him, and he rewarded her with lots of praise and more challenges. Just before lunch, they launched off a twenty-foot cliff with a decent amount of

powder below it. As Sarah and Josiah were far behind them, they decided to climb back to the top and have another go.

Side-stepping quickly, Kiera reached the top of their jump first. “Double backflip with a twist?” she asked.

“I know you’re trying to impress me, but you don’t have to kill yourself to do so.” Mason pushed his goggles up on his helmet. His blue eyes sparkled at her.

“I know you’re already impressed by me.” She grinned. “I’m simply proving I’m the best trickster around and that the Oro-Neros are more than worth the money.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know about any of those statements.”

“Ah,” she protested. “Watch, learn, and be impressed, my inferior-skiing bodyguard.”

He shoved his poles in the ground, folded his arms across his chest, and gave her a fake glower. “Inferior-skiing?”

Kiera laughed. Then she shoved off with her poles, jumping at the same time and aiming her skis straight. She flew down the steep slope, hit the overhang, and launched off of it. Arching back, she easily rotated once, twisting her body for the second flip. She made it around and prepared to sink into the powder.

The spot she hit for a landing had been tracked out on their first run, so the powder wasn’t as deep as the last time, and she may have over-rotated. Slightly. The back of her skis hit packed snow sooner and much harder than she anticipated. Her skis popped off, and she was launched forward into the snow. Her chest and forehead slammed into powder and packed snow. The breath was knocked clean out of her, and her chest and head both ached.

“Kiera!” Mason’s urgent call broke through the now-spinning bright day.

Kiera tried to pull in a breath to respond, but she couldn’t. It was dark, and she desperately needed to breathe. There was no oxygen left in her body. Face down in the snow, she was sealed in an icy coffin.

“Kiera!” Mason gently rolled her over. She blinked up into his handsome face, though he looked like he was at the end of a long tunnel.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” he urged.

She clutched his arm and tried to pull herself up. He cautiously cradled her back and head to lift her. Finally, her chest heaved and then she pulled in a breath.

“That’s right, love. You’ve got this. Breathe.”

She followed his advice.

His goggles were still on his head, his blue eyes full of concern.

She took slow, long breaths and her vision cleared.

“How are your head, chest, back, and neck?” he asked.

She thought about it, mentally probing for pain. “Okay.”

“I shouldn’t have lifted you. What if you have a neck or back injury?”

“You’re worrying ...” She paused and took a breath. “Like an old grandma. If you hadn’t lifted me up, I’d be brain-dead.” Another long pause to breathe. “I couldn’t get a breath in.”

“Kiera! I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have challenged me to do a double backflip with a twist.”

He stared at her and then he started laughing. “You tease.”

“I’m the tease?”

Their gazes locked, and the moment slowed. She was lost in his blue eyes. Did she dare tell him how gone she was over him? No, she had to make certain he was dying over her too. She had to draw him in before she could confess how long she’d loved him. This plan had been months in the making; she could stick to it for a couple more days.

“All right then?” he asked softly.

“I will be when you kiss me,” she said.



His eyes widened, then fastened on her lips and filled with a heat that made her certain she'd never be cold or alone again.

He leaned closer. His eyes smoldered with longing for her and only her. Kiera's heart raced, and the anticipation of his kiss made her tingle. Finally, all her dreams were about to come true.

But he straightened. "Kiera ... I can't."

"You can't kiss me?" That was horrible.

His blue gaze captivated her as always, but torture and regret had replaced any desire in his eyes.

"Why not?" She would not settle for 'I can't.' He would explain, and quick.

His jaw tightened. "I can't."

"You don't care for me?" she questioned, going right for the jugular.

"Well, now." He reared back and shook his head. "You need to get that crazy idea out of your head right now."

She smiled. "You *do* care for me?"

"Deeply," he admitted, his voice husky and lovely.

"What is keeping you from kissing me, then?"

"Ah, Kiera ..." He cupped her face with his gloved hand. "I promised—"

"Hey!" Sarah and Josiah skied up to them. "You all right?"

Bosh! She would've been better than 'all right' if they would've quietly skied past. He'd promised someone not to kiss her, or he'd promised himself to another woman. Her heart thudded heavily in her chest. Worry made each breath hard to take in, like she was face down in the snow again after slamming into it. What had he promised?

"I'm fine, thank you," Kiera said.

Mason pushed to his feet and offered a gloved hand. She took it, stood, and swayed. She would've hit the snow-covered slope again if Mason hadn't wrapped his arm around her waist.

“Kiera,” he admonished. “You are not okay.”

“Give me a second.” The world swam, and dark spots danced in her vision. She closed her eyes and when she opened them again, all she could see was Mason’s handsome face and his lovely blue eyes full of concern. She liked his concern, but she wanted even more in his eyes. Love. For her.

“Kiera?”

“No worries. I simply stood up too quickly. Is it time for lunch?” she asked, she thought brightly, but did her words slur? “Didn’t we ski past a lodge at some point?”

“It’s time to get you back to the house,” Mason said firmly. “This ski vacation may be over.”

“No!” Desperation filled her. This ski vacation was about so much more than skiing. “I’ll be fine. I don’t want to ruin Sarah’s trip.” She looked at her friend.

“Kiera.” Sarah’s dark eyes were also concerned. “If you have a concussion or head injury, you shouldn’t be skiing.”

“But we can’t just give up on our ski trip.” Tears pricked at her eyes. It felt like she was giving up on Mason. Yet what if he’d already committed himself to never granting her, them, a chance? She hoped she was jumping to illogical and extreme conclusions.

“Let’s go back to the house, rest, and reevaluate,” Mason said, all reasonable and obviously not flipping out like she was about their chance at love being cut short.

“How about we go to the Restaurant Caprice?” Kiera suggested. The last thing she wanted to do was rest. She needed to maximize each moment with Mason. “It has an incredible view and food.”

“Are you sure you’re up for that?” Mason asked. He looked at Josiah. “I’m thinking we call the ski patrol and she rides down in a toboggan.”

“No way,” Kiera protested. “That’s humiliating and miserable. I’m the Fearless Princess. I’ve got this.”

He looked her over. “You’re sticking with me as we ski down, and if you get dizzy or go black again, I’m turning you over to ski patrol and then taking you to a physician.”

“All right, all right.” She smiled, she hoped confidently.

*Please let me not have a head injury or concussion,* she begged heaven above. Too much was riding on this ski trip.

Mason shuffled behind her. He placed his skis outside of each of hers, put his poles in one hand, wrapped his other arm around her waist, and pulled her back against his chest. His breath warmed her neck.

Oh! Well, this was a lovely development. She exchanged a look with Sarah, and the gleam in her friend’s dark eyes said it all. Maybe getting a head injury wasn’t such a bad thing.

## CHAPTER

## *Eight*

**MASON SHOULD'VE FOUND** another way to ski Kiera down to the gondola that would take them back to Wengen, but he couldn't think of a quicker, easier, and now that they were in this position, a more romantic solution.

They'd shared the thrill of skiing all morning and now they glided down the slope in a very intimate and slow-paced, yet thrilling dance.

Kiera was pressed tight to him, his arm around her waist. Their coats and gloves were between them as a slight barrier, but she felt perfect in his arms, different from any other woman. She also felt steady skiing, which was encouraging. If she had another dizzy spell where her eyes went unfocused, he would get her to a hospital. Hopefully she'd just stood up too quick.

They made it to the gondola, and she cuddled into his side the entire ride down. He was her protection detail; steadying her could be part of that.

It felt like so much more.

Storing their gear in the golf carts, they drove across the cleared and paved paths that threaded through the picturesque village to the restaurant. The other two guards followed them. Everything was safe and going well. Except for Kiera getting hurt and his yearning to hold her close for the rest of his life.

Kiera was right about a beautiful view and delicious food. The restaurant was busy, but even without her goggles and helmet, no one approached them or appeared to realize who

Kiera was. Men snuck glances at her, but perhaps that was because of her unparalleled beauty, not her royal status. Mueller and Silva watching from not too far away reassured him that Kiera was safe.

If only they could get back to the house where Mason could relax a bit more, and maybe hold Kiera close.

No! Holding her and loving her was not part of his job.

Mason could excuse ‘pretending they were a couple,’ the fake relationship as a blanket ruse, especially if that stalker who’d sent the text last night was watching. But nothing more could happen between him and Kiera. He’d promised the general.

Mason was coming to realize Kiera could trifle with his heart a lot easier than he could trifle with hers. She was an expert at drawing him in. He’d barely resisted kissing her on the mountain. Part of him wished he hadn’t resisted, but that would make him a liar, and his integrity was a vital part of his makeup. He could hardly imagine how those rosebud lips of hers would taste.

He shoved that thought away and focused on analyzing how his ‘assignment’ was doing.

Kiera appeared lucid and not in pain. As talented of an athlete as she was, he imagined she’d had her share of head injuries. That worried him, as subsequent head injuries were nothing to mess with.

Sarah excused herself to use the restroom as they waited for the check. Josiah stayed with them, but the man was quiet. He wasn’t intrusive in any sense of the word and had proven himself a competent guard so far, but definitely not a good enough skier to keep up with the princess.

Kiera’s chair was pressed against Mason’s. She leaned her head against his shoulder and his pulse took off. It was no trouble to wrap his arm around her and tuck her into his side. She glanced up at him, those long-lashed blue eyes of hers beguiling. Was she pretending to be a couple for anyone watching, or was she as invested in him as he was in her?

“You swear you’re all right?” he asked, his voice betraying him with a huskiness he needed to get under control. Her health, her safety, all of her, meant the world to him. How was he supposed to keep his promise to not pursue her when he was supposed to stick by her side, keep her safe, and ‘pretend’ to be a couple? It was a line he had no idea how to walk.

“Of course I am.” She sounded impertinent and brave. His Fearless Princess for certain. “I’m scheming ...” She paused and winked.

Mason’s heart felt like it flipped over. Scheming? To get him alone? To kiss for hours? He couldn’t do that. Kissing would definitely break his promise to the general.

“Of course you are,” he teased. “The Fearless Princess is first and foremost the master of brilliant schemes.”

“And proud of it.”

“I’m not sure *proud* is the term we should use right now.”

“Always proud.” She cuddled deeper into him, and his body lit on fire. “I believe we should block out a couple more hours at the Arenas Spa tonight.”

Mason smiled and did a check around them. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary or worrisome, he focused back on her beautiful face. As far as Kiera’s schemes went, it was a mild one. “While I fancy the vision of you in that swimsuit...” She beamed at him, and his heart seemed to beat only for her. How could he convince everyone, most especially General August, that he would never trifle with this woman’s feelings? He would only spend his life trying to make her happy. “You are going to be lazy and take it easy for a while.”

“Be lazy? Take it easy?” She pushed out a long-suffering breath. “I have no idea what those phrases mean.”

“That is the truth.” He grinned at her. Then he forced himself to search the room again. Everything looked calm and safe, and his men were watching over them. Poor Josiah was trying to not stare at them as he sat at their table waiting for Sarah to return.

“Truly.” Kiera drew his attention easily back to her. She bit at the side of her bottom lip, and his pulse took off. He knew those lips against his would change his world. “I don’t care what we do, Mace ... as long as we’re together.”

“Kiera ...” He swallowed and tried to catch his breath. What was she doing to him? He shook his head, but it didn’t clear.

“I can’t forget something you said when I was lying on my back in the snow.” She blinked prettily up at him.

“What was that?” Had he revealed how deeply he wanted to be with her? Was he breaking his vow to General August now, as he had her in the crook of his arm and had just told her he ‘fancied the vision of her in her swimsuit?’

Mason was flirting with her, and he knew it. He’d flirted with a lot of women, but the cute lines, the looks, and the teasing had never meant to him what it meant now.

He was a mess where Kiera was concerned. His Fearless Princess.

No. Not his.

Augustine’s princess. General August’s little sister. The beauty who was off limits to him and who he’d promised never to pursue. Curses! She was the only woman for him. He’d been blindsided by her, and he never wanted to go back to meaningless dates with impressive women who weren’t his perfect match.

How could he be falling in love with the one woman who was off limits?

The best path he could see right now was to somehow get through this mission without revealing he’d fallen for her and ‘pursuing her’ like he’d promised her brother not to do. They had to get her back to the castle, then he could meet with the general. He would have to humble himself in front of the toughest man he knew and admit he’d had no clue what he was committing to ... was that truly only yesterday? He’d beg the general for his blessing, while promising, swearing the

general could thrash and torture him if Mason messed up. That he would never trifle with Kiera or break her heart.

Would General August believe him? Curse his track record of serial dating. He'd thought it was fun and innocent, but now he'd messed up his own reputation.

If he somehow survived the general, he'd have to go meet with the king and get his blessing. Did he need to meet with each of her princely and overprotective brothers? He was definitely the 'poor fool' he'd laughingly pitied who wanted to date and someday soon love the princess.

Mason swallowed hard. Dating Kiera would be a risky and overwhelming venture, and somehow that fit her personality to a T.

Kiera gently touched his hand, and his heart lifted. Every hard thing he might have to do to prove he was the man for her and would never hurt her was more than worth it. She was all things exciting, alluring, and ideal to him. Whatever hoop he had to jump through or dangerous task he had to perform to prove he was committed to Kiera ... he would do.

Someone was approaching. It was Sarah. Mason's soldier senses prickled, and he focused in on her. She walked unsteadily to their table. Josiah immediately stood and took her elbow. Her face was white, and her lips looked blood red against her usually tan skin.

A quick scan of the rest of the restaurant revealed nothing amiss.

"Sarah?" Kiera questioned.

"Can we go back to the house?" she whispered so quietly Mason had to strain to hear her.

"Is everything all right?" Mason questioned, ushering Kiera to her feet and standing next to her.

Sarah glanced around, clutching her hands together. Her shoulders trembled. It was obvious she was distraught about something. What had happened in the bathroom? Mason's eyes darted around again, but he saw nothing nefarious.



“Yes. Fine.” She forced a smile. “I’m just exhausted from skiing. An afternoon nap sounds fabulous.”

The skin on the back of Mason’s neck still prickled with unease. Something was wrong. He caught Sergeant Mueller’s eye and tilted his head. The man nodded and moved slowly through the restaurant toward the bathroom. Private Silva eased closer to their table.

“What is he doing?” Sarah’s voice pitched up, her gaze following Mueller.

“Did someone come after you?” Mason asked in a low tone.

“Sarah!” Kiera stared at her friend. “What happened?”

“N-no, nothing like that.”

Mason’s uneasiness increased. Was she lying to him?

Sarah focused on Kiera. “It’s Drake,” she whispered.

Who was Drake?

Kiera clasped her friend’s hands. “Is he all right?”

“He’s ... missing. My parents are beside themselves. The police think he ran away, but you know Drake.” Sarah shook her head, her dark eyes bright with moisture.

Kiera pulled her into a hug. “Drake’s a great kid. He would never run away.”

“I know.” Tears ran down her cheeks.

Kiera held her closer. “Drake is Sarah’s eighteen-year-old brother. He’s a senior in high school,” she said quietly to Mason and Josiah.

They both nodded.

“Can we please go back to the house?” Sarah asked. “I want to be somewhere private to talk to my family.”

“Of course.” Mason gestured to his men.

Mueller approached and gave him a slight shake of the head. Nothing amiss near the restrooms. Sarah was obviously upset because her brother was missing.

Then why did Mason feel like something else was wrong?

The server walked up with their bill. Mason glanced at it, pulled out his wallet, and placed two hundred euros in the bill holder. "Please keep the change," he said to the waiter, ushering Kiera and Sarah away from the table.

"*Danke,*" the man said.

Mason nodded and his men closed ranks as they hurried out of the restaurant and into the bright, chilly day. Something was off; he could sense it. He couldn't see anything amiss, or anybody who looked to be paying them special attention or had nefarious intentions.

They made it back to the house with no incidents, but Mason felt uneasy the entire drive. Someone was watching them. Was it the stalker or something to do with Sarah's news of her brother disappearing? He couldn't imagine Sarah's brother had anything to do with his impression that danger was lurking nearby.

As soon as his men cleared the house, Mason ushered the women into the main living area. He felt much better not being exposed. The windows were floor- to three-story ceiling, but the drop-off was thousands of feet and there was no sniper hide site within range.

Josiah stayed close by but said little. His concern for Sarah was clear.

"Sarah." Kiera sat next to her friend on the couch. "What can we do?"

Mason was worried for Sarah and her brother. Yet, there was another threat in the air. He couldn't put his finger on it, and that bothered him immensely. He also couldn't forget that Kiera had a possible head injury and needed to take it easy.

"I don't know," Sarah said. "He's eighteen, so the police say they can't do anything until he's been gone twenty-four hours, or a ransom note or some sign of foul play appears."

Sarah shifted uneasily in her seat, staring at Kiera. She looked uncomfortable and worried and almost frantic. Mason couldn't blame her. If one of his siblings had disappeared as a

teenager and the police's hands were tied until some proof or a time limit, he'd be a mess too. Mason wanted to help brainstorm practical ideas that would help, but he was too focused on the current threat.

"Let's pray," Kiera suggested. Her suggestion was another confirmation that she was exactly the woman he'd been searching for.

Sarah startled, then nodded. She folded her arms, bowed her head, and closed her eyes. Kiera looked to Mason. Her gaze was full of trust and heaven's light.

"Would you like me to offer it?" he asked.

"Yes, please. Sorry, I'm still kind of ... cloudy."

Mason gritted his teeth. He didn't want to pull the attention away from Sarah and her family's stress and her brother, but Kiera was obviously not all right. And whatever the source of the other scratch of unease he'd felt at the restaurant and as they drove home needed to be pinned down and eliminated.

He prayed for Drake, Sarah, Sarah's family, for the police to take action, and for Kiera's head to be all right. When he closed with the amen, they all echoed it.

"Thank you," Sarah said.

"Of course."

"Sarah!" Kiera snapped her fingers and pulled out her phone. "What am I thinking? I'm not thinking, but heaven can always nudge, right?"

Sarah looked terrified. She grabbed her left breast and pressed her hand against it.

"Are you all right?" Kiera asked.

"Just stressed, and it makes my chest hurt." She rubbed her chest again, hard. "What idea did you have?"

"Macey used to work for Sutton Smith. He was like a father to her. I'll call her and she'll call him, and his incredible ops and network of security people will get Drake found pronto."

“*The Sutton Smith?*” Sarah stared at her.

“Yes. He’s a fabulous guy. He has visited the castle with his incredible wife Liz a few times.”

“Of course you would know Sutton Smith.” Sarah shook her head, then closed her eyes as if she were praying. When she opened them, she looked more settled than Mason had seen her since she’d gotten the news of her brother missing.

His unease settled immensely with Sarah’s change of demeanor. He couldn’t understand why the two were connected. Could Sarah be hiding something? Why would she do that?

“Would you really call him for Drake?” Sarah asked.

“Of course. I love Drake like the little brother I never had.”

“I know you do.” Sarah’s lip trembled. “Thank you. That would mean the world to me.”

“You’re welcome, dear friend. I’m just annoyed I didn’t think of it right away.”

“You probably have a concussion, Kiera,” Mason reminded her.

Sarah released her grip on her chest and seemed to breathe a little easier.

“Bosh.” Kiera waved her free hand as she pressed a number on her phone with the other hand. “I’m absolutely smashing.”

“I need to use the bathroom,” Sarah declared, rushing to the door past the kitchen and laundry, off the garage entrance.

Mason blew out a breath, watching Kiera as she spoke in quick, urgent tones to her sister-in-law, Macey. General Ray’s wife.

The only good news about a possible kidnapping or foul play of her friend’s brother and Kiera’s concussion? It might help Mason cool all the romantic urges firing through his body while he focused on keeping her safe.

If he could get Kiera back to the castle and out of his care, then meet with the male members of her family and pledge his sincerity and devotion, he might have a chance to pursue her with a clear conscience. Could they date and develop a solid and committed relationship before she went back to America after the new year? As a captain, he'd never been asked to be on her security detail in America, but he'd volunteer. Right now.

Everything felt very heavy with the worry over Sarah's brother, Kiera's accident, and the prickling of unease he couldn't quite get rid of. He wanted to talk to each of his men and make sure they were hyperaware and focused. He needed to be the same. If the unease increased, he'd call the general to either send more men or a helicopter to bring them home.

His overwhelming desire for Kiera in his life and his arms must be the bottom priority. For the time being.

But Mason feared it might never become a top priority. Especially if he needed to get the too-stern General August's blessing.

## CHAPTER

## *Nine*

**KIERA FRETTE**D over Sarah all afternoon and evening. It took the focus off her head injury, or whatever was going on. She was fine. She'd had her share of head injuries with all the stunts she did. This one was no big deal. She was only a little cloudy and tired.

Sarah was not herself. Not at all. Nobody could blame her. Sutton Smith himself called and retrieved what information he could from Sarah, then promised his next call would be to her parents to flesh out this case. His ops in the nearby areas would start investigating, but he would also spread the word throughout America to his numerous contacts and agents.

Kiera thought that would make her friend feel better, but she seemed to pace and tremble and worry more. Kiera thought about how she would feel if it was one of her brothers, or any of her family, in danger. She'd known that fear almost constantly after her mum was murdered and the Rindlesbachers went on a rampage. The depraved people had tried to kill her family and take over the crown. It had been horrifying, and sometimes she still had nightmares about that time of her life. She could empathize with Sarah's angst.

Mason and Josiah were great to stay close by, but she could tell they felt as helpless as she did.

“Do you want me to book a helicopter to Bern and charter you a flight home?” Kiera asked Sarah as they sat on the couches in the huge living area after dinner.

Sarah swallowed and looked away, murmuring, “Let’s wait and see what happens by morning.” She clenched her hands together, but they still trembled.

“Ah, friend.” Kiera wrapped her arm around Sarah and drew her close. If only there was more they could do. She kept praying in her mind for Drake to be found and for everyone involved to know how to help get him home safe.

Kiera had asked Sarah if she could tell her large family and have the strength of their prayers added to theirs, but Sarah didn’t want the news spread yet. That didn’t make sense to Kiera, but everybody dealt with things in their own way.

“I’m going to take a sleeping pill and try to rest.” Sarah broke from her embrace and stood.

“Oh ... okay.” Kiera was confused again. She didn’t know that she could rest if one of her siblings was in trouble. When Tristan was in the hospital after a bomb burned the left side of his face, neck, and shoulder, Kiera remembered hardly sleeping for days. She’d been twelve and Macey had left Ray at the same time. Macey had been a surrogate mum of sorts as she’d missed her mum so deeply. It had been a horrific time.

“It’s two a.m. at home. If I sleep for a few hours, then I can get up when they’re up and hopefully there will be some news.”

“That makes sense.” Kiera stood and smiled at her friend. “I’ll keep praying.”

“Thank you.” Sarah grabbed her in a hug and held her fiercely. “I’m so sorry,” she murmured in Kiera’s ear.

“Sorry?” Kiera drew back. Why should Sarah be sorry?

“For ...” Sarah swallowed and murmured, “all this stress.”

“Don’t you be sorry. None of this is your fault. Get some rest. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Assignment, sir?” Josiah asked when Sarah turned to go.

“Mueller is patrolling now; Silva is resting and will be on after midnight. Could you patrol the interior and I’ll assign them the exterior? I’ll spell you at midnight so you can rest.”

Sarah disappeared into the entryway.

“Will you rest now, Captain?” Josiah asked.

It was only eight p.m. Kiera hoped he didn’t want to rest, that he wanted to be with her, but he needed his sleep.

“I don’t think I could.” Mason exchanged a look with Kiera. She flushed from the longing in his blue eyes. He couldn’t rest because he wanted to be with her? Or was something else going on? Why was he upping the patrols? Mason and Josiah weren’t supposed to patrol. The cameras and sensors were all in place. Drake was the one in danger, not them.

“All right, sir. But please let me know if you’re ready to sleep and I’ll trade you off at any time.”

“Thank you.”

Josiah lifted a hand to them and disappeared into the entryway.

There was silence for a beat, and then Kiera turned to Mason.

“All right then?” he asked, his blue gaze sweeping carefully over her.

“I’m feeling a lot better, thank you.”

He gently threaded his fingers into her hair, softly massaging her scalp. Kiera couldn’t think of anything that had ever felt as incredible as his touch. She inched closer to him, resting her hand on his leg.

“Your head is all better?” he asked, his eyes full of her.

“If you keep doing that, I think everything will be better.” Her mouth turned down. “Except for worrying about Drake and Sarah.”

“I feel awful for Sarah and her family.”



She agreed. Drake was an amazing and responsible young man. He wouldn't just go wandering off. Had he had an accident or was somebody hurting him? She couldn't let herself go there or she'd be a mess. People liked to claim she was an innocent light to the world. She hoped she was but her innocence regarding how evil and depraved people could be had been destroyed by the Rindlesbachers years ago. She'd clung to her family and her faith and gotten through but sadly nightmares and fears still rose sometimes.

There wasn't much to say, as they'd already discussed every angle with Sarah. She cuddled into Mason's side on the gray leather couch. He ran his hand through her hair, along her neck, and to her back, then held her close.

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Kiera savored being close to him and prayed for Sarah and Drake yet again. She felt much better knowing Sutton Smith's ops were on the case. He was the best of the best regarding security details.

Kiera thought back through the day, all the drama and the good parts as well. She had a lot of questions for this beautiful man holding her.

"Mace ..."

"Yes?" He smiled down at her. "I like when you use that nickname."

She liked *him*.

"After I crashed, you used some nicknames," she reminded him. "You called me sweetheart and love."

He stiffened and his blue eyes filled with concern. "I did."

"Then when you were dying to kiss me, you said you couldn't." She stared up at him. "Why can't you kiss me, Mace? It's obvious you're head over heels for me."

He actually smiled, and all the worry and angst over Drake was pushed aside for a minute. "It's obvious, eh?"

"Oh, yes, my brave bodyguard. Anybody could see your longing for me from a mile around." She was being bold and

brave and hoped it paid off. He could just as easily pull away.

Mason studied her—his look revealed it all. He *was* head over heels for her. This was their moment. She knew it. She felt it, and she could hardly wait to grow closer to Mason emotionally and physically. Her body was flush with anticipation and her very cells felt energized.

The gas fireplace, some lamps, and the lights on the Christmas trees and garlands were on. The mood was romantic, except Josiah might pass through the room at any moment.

Suddenly, Mason released her and stood, pacing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Kiera felt his angst as if it were her own. What kept yanking him away from her?

She stood and leaped easily in front of him. Mason startled and reared back. He looked her over. “Sometimes I forget how quick you can move.”

“As long as you don’t forget that you want to kiss me.”

Mason pushed out a breath and took a step back. Her heart sank.

“You do want to kiss me,” she reiterated, praying she hadn’t read him all wrong. What if he was only being kind because she was the princess? What if she’d made this assignment awkward for him, pushing him too hard? What if he thought she was too young or off limits?

Mason *was* drawn to her. She could easily see and feel that. She’d have to pray whatever he felt for her was deep and alluring enough to break through these barriers and whatever reason he had to not kiss her.

“Kiera,” Mason groaned out her name and his summer sky eyes mesmerized her.

Then he did the last thing she wanted. He took another step back, away from her. Why did he keep moving away from her?

“*Want* is not the correct word.” He paused, his gaze tormented with yearning for her. He finally admitted, “I dream about kissing you. I long to kiss you. I fear I’ll never be complete until your lips meet mine and you know how deeply I feel about you.”

Kiera’s eyes widened. All of her many, many longtime dreams were about to be fulfilled. She crossed the distance between them. He thankfully didn’t back away, but his gaze became leery.

Sliding her hands around his neck, she pulled onto her tiptoes and angled her mouth within centimeters of his fascinating lips.

“That was beautiful,” she said, smiling. “Now allow me to complete you, as our lips finally meet in beautiful ecstasy.”

Mason didn’t smile in return. He gently grasped her arms and pulled them away from his neck. They were still close, but it was obvious she wasn’t getting kissed in this moment. “Kiera, I can’t kiss you. I’ve already crossed boundaries I shouldn’t have.”

She wanted to command him to kiss her, but that would be all kinds of wrong.

“What boundaries? Why can’t you kiss me?” she asked, not sure if she wanted to hear the answer. What if he had a girlfriend, or could never see Kiera as anything but a responsibility, a security assignment, the young princess? He’d said ‘how deeply’ he felt about her. That reassured her at this hard moment.

Footsteps came up the stairs and into the front entry. Mason released her arms and stepped back.

Josiah walked through the great room, took in their position and the obvious tension, and murmured, “Forgive me.”

“No,” Mason said. “You’re doing exactly as you should.” He took Kiera’s hand in his. Even that simple connection made her heart race and gave her hope that they had a chance. “I’ll escort the princess to her room.”

Kiera fell into step with him. They walked past Josiah, into the foyer, and up the stairs. When they were in the upstairs hallway, she said in a tight voice, “If you think you’re going to escort me to my room and walk away without giving me any answers, you have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

Mason chuckled. It eased some of the tension between them, but not enough. He squeezed her hand. “Oh, believe me, my Fearless Princess. I know exactly who I’m dealing with.”

“Do you *want* to deal with me?” she asked as they reached her door. She didn’t believe in beating around the bush.

Mason released her hand and rubbed at his jaw. “I do. I absolutely do, but ...”

“You can’t?”

“Not right now.” He looked over her face, begging her to understand.

“Because you’re in charge of my security?” she asked. That made sense, but if they were in her room and safe and secure, why couldn’t he let down his guard? She only had a few weeks home, and she wanted to make certain she didn’t leave Augustine without securing his heart and being brave enough to reveal how long and thoroughly she loved him.

“Partially.” He lifted his hands.

“Not good enough.” She grabbed her door handle and shoved the door open. “You’re coming in here with me, no interruptions from your men, and you’re telling me what this rubbish is about.”

Mason swallowed and then nodded.

Kiera hurried into her room and heard him follow. She turned on the gas fireplace and a lamp and then she turned to face him.

It was dim in the room, but not dim enough. She could clearly see the angst in his blue eyes and the slight bowing of his shoulders. The weight of the world obviously weighing him down. Mason always stood strong and straight. What was going on?

Fear churned in her gut.

His reason could be anything, and she feared she was about to get blindsided. The biggest fear was if his reason meant they could never be together. In her mind, there was nothing they couldn't overcome together.

But did he feel the same?

## CHAPTER

## Ten

KIERA STUDIED MASON, wringing her hands together, and praying they could talk through whatever obstacle stood between them.

Mason straightened his shoulders and clenched his hands at his sides. She could feel the tension rising between them again. He was going to tell her, and she feared it would not be good.

“Yesterday,” he began, then shook his head. “I can’t believe it was only yesterday. So much has changed.”

She let him stew. What had changed? They’d grown closer. That was a positive thing. Whatever he was about to tell her, though, would not be positive. She was sure of it.

“When General August called me into his office and assigned me to guard you for your ski weekend ...”

She nodded. Was this the time to tell him she’d schemed that up?

“I had no idea ... that you were ... that you are now ....” He gestured up and down her body.

“Pardon me?”

“I’ve always thought you were adorable. The Fearless Little Princess. My scheming, funny little friend. I had *no* idea you’d grown up since I saw you last.”

“Oh. All right then. So I blindsided you with my beauty and maturity?”

“That is such an understatement.” His gaze softened as he looked her over. “I felt like I’d been walking on a dimly lit trail my entire life and suddenly the sun washed over me and everything was light and warmth. You’re the sun, Kiera.”

“Mace ...” She was blindsided by the sweetness and depth of his feelings. She almost rushed to him, but he held up a hand as if he knew what she was thinking. What was that about?

“I was so overwhelmed by you. I was certain everyone would see straight through me,” he continued.

She smiled at that and bit at the side of her bottom lip.

“Please don’t do that,” he groaned.

“What?”

“Bite your lip.” He folded his arms across his chest, his posture tight. “It’s hard enough to stay in control when you’re in the same room.”

“You *do* like me,” she said, glowing with happiness as everything he’d said sunk in fully. *You’re the sun, Kiera.* He’d said that, and he couldn’t take it back.

“Like you?” His voice was incredulous. “Kiera ... I ...” He stared at her, and she thought he’d storm to her and sweep her off her feet, admit that he loved her.

Instead, he shook his head and said morosely, “If I would’ve had the slightest clue that you were all grown up now, and everything I’d always thought was incredible about you—your humor, great attitude, fearlessness, resilience, and sense of adventure—would percolate into the most perfect woman in the world for me ...”

He paused again, and her heart raced. The most perfect woman in the world for him? That was delightful, especially from his enticing mouth.

“I never would’ve made that promise.”

Her neck tingled a warning. “What promise?”

Several beats passed, tortured beats where their gazes were locked and all the longing she felt for him was reflected in his blue eyes.

“I promised the general I would never pursue you.”

The seriousness of his voice, his posture, and his gaze yanked the beautiful things he’d said earlier out from under her.

“Never?” she squeaked out.

He nodded.

“Never is a very, very long time.”

His brows lifted, and he splayed his hands.

“Why would you make a promise like that?”

Kiera pushed out a breath, frustrated and scared at the same time.

“Because at that point I was honestly offended when he intoned I would pursue you, that I’d trifle with your feelings, as if I was a man who chased, dated, and dumped college girls in my spare time. Like I said, I had no idea you were no college girl. Instead, you have transformed into my dream woman. The only light I want in my life, besides the Spirit of my Savior.”

Kiera adored hearing she was his dream woman and his light, that he saw her as a full-grown woman now. But a promise to her too-serious, too-protective brother, from one of his military men? How could they change, tweak, revoke that kind of oath?

“It had to be Ray, didn’t it?” She groaned. “You couldn’t have made the promise to literally any of my other brothers?”

“Prince Malik didn’t ask, you see.” He smiled at her, but his own frustration was evident in his blue gaze.

“Your word is your bond, of course.”

“You know it is,” he said, sounding miserable and resigned to his fate.



They had to change this promise. Somehow. She didn't want Mason breaking his word, but there had to be a way to explain and change this. Ray didn't bend to many people, but Kiera was on the list of those he'd do almost anything for.

"I'll just tell Ray you didn't mean to make the promise and it's finished," she declared, jutting her chin out.

"Kiera." Mason's voice was determined and his eyes even more so. "You are not going to your brother on my behalf. I will talk to the general and pray he is reasonable." He rubbed at his jaw. "But you understand this is a mess? I am the one who volunteered the promise. It's not as if he coerced it out of me."

She didn't want to leave something as important as her future to two men who were both far too honorable and protective. She could just imagine Ray saying Mason had made a promise and had to stand by his word.

This was love. It wasn't some military oath.

But now she could completely understand why Mason had acted conflicted and had said he couldn't kiss her earlier, even though he obviously wanted to.

She'd have to dissect the 'promise' conversation, the wording, what Mason had offered and what Ray had demanded. Ray was overprotective, as evidenced by him and Macey doing a deep-dive background check on any guy who wanted to talk to her and guards following her around campus, monitoring outside her apartment, and any travels she and her friends did. Usually, she appreciated her brother's diligence and wanted to be safe.

But this was Mason. They wouldn't have to check his background. Everybody knew he was perfect, most especially her.

"You volunteered the promise not to pursue me?" she reiterated. "Because you thought I was still a little girl?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I had no clue." He gestured to her. "It isn't only your enticing beauty that draws me in, Kiera. Though you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life."

Happiness bubbled inside her at the compliment.

“It’s all of you. You’ve matured in your mind and soul, and you mesmerize me completely. The fact that you’re still fun, adventurous, fearless, and always happy makes up the complete picture of the light you are to me.”

She grinned. He *was* head over heels for her.

Mason smiled back at her, but she could tell he was stressed. She could understand. With Ray involved and some promise between the two men, she was stressed too.

But then she had an idea. A very scheming idea. She would prove to Mason that she was his perfect woman and that he had no choice but to rescind his promise to Ray.

Maybe it was skirting the lines, but she didn’t care. Not tonight. She’d deal with the consequences in the morning. She’d just found out the man she’d loved half her life was mesmerized by her. There was no world where she could say, ‘Ah, thank you. We’ll chat this out tomorrow with Ray.’

Nope. She would do something about it. Right now.

“I didn’t promise not to pursue *you*.” She took a step closer.

“Kiera,” he warned, backing up. “You’ve had a skiing accident, the worry about Drake and Sarah, and I’ve revealed more about the depth of my feelings for you than I probably should have before I talk to General Ray. Let’s ... rest. We’ll figure things out with the general when we get back to Augustine. This is a lot to take in and see clearly.”

“Oh, believe me. The last thing I want right now is rest.” Kiera gave him what she hoped was a sultry look. “I have never seen things more clearly.”

“Kiera. I said the words ‘I promise’ to your brother. My general.”

“Your conscience can be clear. This is one hundred percent on my head.”

Mason’s eyes narrowed. He would try to block her, and he was tough enough to do it. He knew she was a talented

parkour expert, gymnast, and climber, but he had no idea the skills she'd picked up with the self-defense and sparring trainers Ray had insisted on. Usually her guards worked with her, but he'd found some American experts to train her as well.

Kiera walked to the bedroom door and swung it wide. Leaning against the wall next to the door, she gave Mason an innocent smile. "Thank you for sharing all of this with me."

He eyed her suspiciously.

"You're right. It is a lot to take in. Let's *rest* and see how we're both feeling after."

"Kiera?" He studied her, tilting his head as if that would help him look for the angle of her current scheme.

"Hopefully we'll have good news about Drake in the morning, Sarah will get home safe to be with her family, and then we can head back to Augustine and you can talk to Ray."

Mason slowly walked toward her, stopping right in front of her. So close. She wanted to reach out and grab him, press her lips to his. See if he could resist her or if she could talk him into calling Ray tonight and clearing up this nonsense about him promising not to pursue her. Okay, a promise wasn't nonsense, but this one needed to be withdrawn. Pronto. She would make certain he was on the same page as her.

"You're okay waiting?" He looked her over, probing for any deception.

"You're worth waiting for." She'd been waiting for him half her life. That was done now. She was his sun and she would shine brightly for him.

"Thank you." He still sounded suspicious, which showed how intuitive he was.

He eased in close, so close she could smell his delicious amber and musk smell, spicy and warm and all Mason. Her heart threatened to race right out of her chest, and suddenly he was in control of the moment instead of her.

He bent, and she could swear he was angling for her mouth. He was going to forget his promise? Pursue her and kiss her and make this the most magical Christmas of her life?

His lips brushed past hers and he softly kissed her cheek. “Goodnight,” he whispered, his warm breath and lips making her stomach flip-flop. “Sweet dreams.”

Kiera should’ve laughed at him turning her parting shot last night around on her. She didn’t. She was a bundle of desire. It took every ounce of self-restraint she possessed not to wrap her arms around his neck and press her lips to his.

Mason pulled back, smirking. He knew she was putty in his hands.

So Kiera pulled the side of her bottom lip between her teeth.

His gaze sharpened, and she thought she might have the advantage again. She thoroughly enjoyed this game they were playing, but she would have the last laugh.

Truthfully, it was no laughing matter. Their future was on the line.

Mason might be mad at her for what she had to do, but sometimes a woman had to improvise. A master schemer like herself would make that improvisation count.

## CHAPTER

## *Eleven*

**MASON COULDN'T BELIEVE** Kiera would let him walk out of her room without plotting and executing some kind of masterful ploy to kiss him. It made him a bit concerned—was she as taken with him as he was with her? He'd laid his soul out there and she hadn't proclaimed her deep love in return.

He did appreciate teasing with her about 'sweet dreams' and her biting at her bottom lip like she did so appealingly made him want to grab her, kiss her thoroughly, and repent later.

No. They'd be home soon. He'd pray for heavenly help, and he'd beg the general to understand why he should've never made that promise and tough, unbending General Ray would give him his approval to date Kiera in earnest. He wouldn't let himself think about the man holding him to what he'd promised. That terrified him.

Mason allowed himself to give Kiera one last longing look and then forced his feet into action and turned to walk out of her room.

Kiera launched herself onto his back.

"Kiera?" He couldn't help the laughter in his voice. He'd known she was up to something. "You are the Wild Child."

She laughed as well, leaning against his back, arms wrapped around his shoulders, legs wrapped around his waist. "No, I'm not. I'm a Wild Woman."

“I have to agree on that, don’t I now?” He needed to set her down and get out of here. He stepped back into the room.

Kiera released one hand from his shoulder and shoved the door closed. “My leap of love changed your mind?” she asked, wrapping her arms around his chest from behind and leaning into him, her breath tickling his ear.

“No.” He had to be firm. He wrapped his hands around her legs and savored touching her. “I’m going to carry you to your bed and dump you on it.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“I know so. I’m trained in physical combat of all forms. I can dump my Fearless Princess on her bed.”

Kiera simply laughed. It was a tinkling, beautiful laughter, but there was something devious about it.

Then she wrapped her forearm around his neck and clasped her other hand around her wrist. She yanked hard enough he felt his throat constrict. The pressure on his windpipe was awful, and he was instantly wheezing for breath.

“Kiera,” he wheezed. “S-stop.”

If it had been any other person in the world, he would’ve ripped their arms off, or leapt and slammed their body back into the hardwood floor his weight on top of theirs adding insult to injury, or reached back and exerted just the right amount of pressure to their neck to knock them out before they had any hope of incapacitating him. He was well-trained, extremely fit, and had real world experience to boot.

But this was Kiera. He couldn’t hurt her, even if it saved his own life.

“Like I said,” she purred in his ear, her grip so strong around his neck he was starting to see spots. “I didn’t promise not to pursue you.”

*This* was pursuing him? What had Kiera learned in America? What was her plan here? He knew she’d never kill him, but she might knock him out.

“You’re not even going to fight me?” she asked, all innocence and sweetness in her voice, even as she choked him out. “All you have to do is submit, and I’ll let you go. Just a little tappy-tap on the arm, my tough protector, and a sweet kiss goodnight. On the lips this time. That’s all I ask.”

Fighting back was not an option—anything he did would hurt her, and he could never in this life hurt Kiera. But Mason could not bring himself to put up any resistance, not even tapping out. He wanted a sweet kiss on the lips goodnight, but he couldn’t give in. She had beaten him, pure and simple. It was enough to make him laugh, if he could draw the breath to do it. If Kiera wanted to make him sleep for a few seconds, she’d earned it, and honestly he didn’t mind. He’d never been choked out in such an enjoyable manner before.

He sank to his knees. Blackness edged around his vision. He was shocked and impressed that Kiera had the guts to do this to him.

“Goodnight,” she whispered, softly kissing his temple. “Sweet dreams.”

Mason felt himself slump to the side, and Kiera’s arms softened around his neck as the world went black.

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Mason blinked his eyes open, laying on his back and staring up into the most beautiful face on earth. Kiera kneeled next to him, leaning down close enough he could smell her enticing scent and almost taste her fresh breath. He shouldn’t want to kiss her right now.

His head hurt and his throat was raw. As he drew in long breaths, his head calmed slightly.

Kiera had choked him out. He still couldn’t quite believe it. Someday he’d be laughing outrageously at this. Right now, he was a little foggy and a lot drawn to her.

“Forgive me,” she whispered, drawing the side of her bottom lip between her teeth. “Thought you’d tap out.”

Mason's heart pounded out of control. What was she doing to him? How could he resist kissing her right now?

She bent closer, framed his face with her palms, and pressed her lips to his.

Mason knew he should do something, but his head was a bit cloudy and the instant their lips connected, the only lucid thought he had was that he'd found his version of paradise.

He lost his head completely. Everything in the world disappeared but Kiera. His arms came around her, and he didn't know how he'd ever let her go.

This woman, this connection, this kiss ... it was all that mattered to him.

Kiera was all he'd need for the rest of his life.



## CHAPTER

## *Twelve*

**KIERA WAS IN SHOCK—THE** best possible kind of shock. It had worked. Her crazy ploy to knock him out and take down his defenses had worked.

She forgot to gloat or think of her next plan as Mason returned her kiss. He wrapped her up tight, and she leaned into him. Their upper bodies connected, her hands weaving into his hair, his hands covering her back.

This kiss, this connection, was otherworldly. Kiera had always known Mason was the one for her, but she'd never imagined a kiss could be like this. She was floating on clouds, tingling all over, and warm from head to toe. She never, ever wanted to leave his arms.

They broke apart, both pulling in quick breaths.

Mason's eyes widened. He sat straight up, bringing her with him, his arms still around her lower back and hers wrapped around his neck. "Kiera." His voice was rough and full of desire.

Kiera smiled and moved to kiss him again.

"Kiera, you ... I ... please don't do this to me. I can't resist you."

Their gazes locked in the dimly lit room, their breath intermingling.

"I'm sorry," she felt she should say.

"No, you're not." He chuckled, which made her feel better.

“Well, I’m sorry that you didn’t tap out. I can’t be sorry about the results. That kiss ...” She prayed they could do it all over again, but she’d likely have to knock him out and take him by surprise again.

Mason let out a growl that made her stomach do a happy dance and made her think she would get another kiss tonight.

Mason pushed off the floor and stood, then swept her off the floor and against his chest. Kiera leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his neck again. This was perfect. The man she spent her life with needed to be this strong and capable. Beating him through a surprise attack was all fine and dandy, though she knew he could’ve fought her and won even with her cheating. Mason was far too tough and trained for her to best him, and she loved that about him. She loved even more that he’d let her win.

Striding toward the bed, Mason seemed as strong and determined as ever. No sign of any deficit from being knocked out just minutes ago.

He stopped next to the bed, and his expression was almost a glower. “I cannot believe you choked me out.”

Kiera shrugged and tried to look innocent. “I can’t believe you let me. You didn’t even fight.”

“I could never hurt you, Kiera.”

“Oh, my.” Her heart softened. “I thought you’d tap out. I don’t want to hurt you either and you kept your promise, since that was all me. And I felt if we kissed, you’d know that we were meant to be and you wouldn’t let Ray or anyone else pull us apart when we go back home.”

Kiera bit at the side of her bottom lip. She hadn’t meant it as a signal, but his arms tightened around her. She could see his pulse racing in his neck, and his gaze sharpened on her mouth. Would he kiss her again? She didn’t want him to go against any promise. That was why she’d knocked him out and kissed him. To take all the blame on herself. But oh, how she wanted his mouth on hers again. Just one more soft touch.

She arched up toward him.

Mason tossed her onto the bed.

She landed on the soft mattress with a surprised, “Oomph.”

He backed away, his blue eyes full of regret, a battle waging inside him, but his face and body were strong and determined.

“I thought you could never hurt me,” she said, sitting up but not moving toward him.

“That hurt you?”

“No. I’m just teasing.”

“If you had any idea how badly I want to kiss you right now ...” He took another step back. “That kiss ... You ...” He shook his head. “Goodnight, Kiera. Sweet dreams.”

His lips curved into a bit of his normal smirk, and she couldn’t help but smile back.

“You had the last laugh,” she said.

“No. I’m putty in your hands.”

Kiera’s eyes widened. Before she could do anything about that beautiful statement, he spun and all but sprinted for the door. He opened it, slid out, and closed it before she could protest.

Kiera lay back on the bed and grinned. He was putty in her hands? Ah. She adored every bit of her tough-but-soft-for-her man. That kiss confirmed they were meant to be together forever.

They’d get back to Augustine. Ray would see how much they loved each other and bend. If he didn’t, Kiera would pursue Mason and force him to go to America with her. She had her own resources. She adored her family, but she didn’t need them financially. She only needed Mason. Not financially, but in every way.

Sliding off the bed and onto her knees, Kiera prayed. First, for Drake to be all right and get home safe, for Sarah and her family to have peace and strength. Then she focused her prayers on Mason and them being together. Soon.

This would be the best Christmas in the world.  
With a kiss like that, it already was.

## CHAPTER

## *Thirteen*

**KIERA FELT HANDS ON HER.** Her eyes fluttered open. The Radisson cabin in Wengen. She was lying in bed in the guest room she always stayed in. It was pitch black, but someone was in her room, touching her.

“Mason?” she whispered, though she immediately knew it wasn’t his amber and musk scent.

A hand clapped over her mouth, and she let out a scream too late. The sound was muffled by the hand pushing her down into the bed. Multiple hands ripped her out of the quilt and bedsheets. She was airborne. A hand pressed hard against her mouth and wrapped underneath her armpits. Another pair of hands secured themselves around her legs.

She screamed, but no sound escaped. She bucked her body, fighting against whoever had her in their grip. No matter how she squirmed or tried to hit at them or get her legs free, they held her tight. As the men rushed her out of the room, she wondered if they had infrared goggles on. It was so dark she could barely make out their shapes.

She begged heaven above for help. There had been numerous kidnapping attempts or attacks on her throughout the years, but nobody had actually gotten her in their arms and manhandled her.

Where was Mason? Her other guards? She prayed these men hadn’t hurt or killed them.

Fighting and kicking, she got a leg free and landed a solid hit to Leg Guy’s abdomen. He grunted but secured her legs

again.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. She tried to call out, praying it was Mason or one of her guards who could help her fight.

The men reversed and hurried back toward her room. The door was still open. They rushed through and closed it quietly behind them. They stayed close by the door, the men holding her so tightly she couldn't budge, everyone seeming to listen to those footsteps. Kiera's heart raced. She prayed for help and to know when to move. The footsteps approached and then stopped.

The door handle started to turn. Yes!

Leg Guy released her legs while Mouth Guy kept his hand clamped around her mouth and abdomen and dragged her toward the balcony. He was huge, his body towering over her and wrapping around her. She kicked at him, and he grunted. The bedroom door creaked open just as he released her mouth to fling the balcony door open, cold air piercing her.

"Lights!" she screamed to whoever was opening the door, praying the intruders had night vision goggles on.

"Kiera?" It was Mason's voice.

Leg Guy slammed into Mason, and she could hear them punching and hitting against the wall.

The lights flipped on. Both attackers cursed and flipped goggles off their heads. Kiera's arm was free. Holding nothing back, she slammed her fist into the nearest man's throat. He gagged, released her completely, and shoved her out onto the balcony. The icy snow bit at her bare feet. She stumbled but remained upright.

The man came at her.

She leaped and kicked him in the temple, throwing him against the exterior door. Inside, Mason and Leg Guy were still battling it out.

Mouth Guy growled and rushed at her. The light from the suite behind him revealed he was twice her size and built like

a tank like her brother Ray.

Kiera ran toward the suite railing, leaping onto it. It was a wide balustrade but slick, and this balcony jutted out over nothing. Almost five hundred meters to the valley below and certain death. She wasn't afraid of heights, but one wrong step ....

Kiera was terrified and exhilarated. This was her childhood, defying death through boldness and agility.

The man skidded to a stop. "Don't, princess. I need you alive."

"Come get me, then."

Grunting, he slowly advanced. The sounds of the battle inside were slowing. Kiera prayed Mason was winning.

Another step and Mouth Guy could reach for her.

Kiera sprang forward, tucked, and flipped over his head, landing behind him. He cried out in surprise and whirled to face her. She kicked him hard in the chest. He slid back and hit the icy balcony.

"Kiera!"

Mason rushed out the door and slammed into the guy, jabbing him in the face over and over again. The guy tried to fight back and landed a few hits, but Mason was glorious. In a few heartbeats, the guy slid to the snow-covered concrete.

"Princess Kiera?" a voice called from the bedroom.

She turned, fists raised and ready for another fight. Lieutenant Mueller was there, hurrying toward her. Leg Guy was sprawled on the floor in the bedroom, unconscious.

"You're all right?" Lieutenant Mueller asked as he approached.

"Yes ... Mason." She pointed.

Lieutenant Mueller hurried to Mason and Mouth Guy. Mason yanked the guy to his feet, impressive with how large Mouth Guy was, and spun him around. Lieutenant Mueller yanked his hands back and cuffed him.

“Is the house secure?” Mason demanded.

“I don’t know, sir. I was patrolling outside and noticed the power was out, so I called you and Silva. I followed some tracks in the snow to the back patio. A man jumped me from behind. He’s dead. I got the power back on and started searching the house. No sign of Naples.”

Had they taken Josiah out?

“What about Sarah?” Kiera asked.

“I assume she’s sleeping and safe in her room. We’ll check.” Mason looked her over. “You were incredible.”

“Well, if I can choke you out, I can whip a couple minions.” She grinned, relief rushing through her. They were safe. “Even one the size of King Kong.”

Mason chuckled but quickly got serious. “Cuff the other one. Let’s secure Kiera and Sarah in Sarah’s suite. You’ll stay with them. I’ll inform the general and get help coming, then Silva and I will find Naples and take out any more threats.”

“I’ve found Sarah for you,” a man’s voice floated up to them from the wide porch that ran behind the great room area.

Kiera rushed to the edge of the balcony, focusing down and to her left. The main patio light flicked on, lighting up the dark night. A man yanked Sarah where they could see her. She was bound and gagged.

“Sarah!” Kiera cried out.

Mason wrapped an arm around her to steady her. “What do you want?” he demanded of the man.

“Come downstairs and we’ll chat.” The man was dark, tall, and mean-looking, his face split from under his eye to his chin with a long scar.

“I’ll be right there,” Mason said evenly.

“Bring the princess and your large friend.” He pulled a knife out and pressed it against Sarah’s throat. Sarah’s eyes were full of terror. “This one dies the second I see you without Princess Kiera or the other guard.”



Kiera's stomach turned over. She couldn't let Sarah die. Turning, she hurried into the suite.

Mason caught up to her and grabbed her around the waist. "Kiera. Stay with Mueller."

Mueller had flipped Leg Guy onto his stomach and was cuffing his hands behind his back. The man stirred but didn't fight.

"No way." She ripped free and ran for the bedroom door.

Mason and the lieutenant both caught up to her as she raced down the hallway.

A door pushed open, and a bloodied man staggered out. Kiera reared back.

"Naples!" Mason rushed to his side.

Josiah straightened, blood running down his face from his hairline. He brushed it away. "I'm fine, sir. A man jumped me in my room. He won't bother us again. What can I do?"

Kiera watched as Mason looked Josiah over, gave a small nod as if clearing him to return to duty, then leaned in and spoke in low tones. "Call the general. A man has Sarah downstairs. They want the princess. Follow us quietly and look for an opportunity to take him by surprise."

"Yes, sir." Josiah pulled out his phone and stepped back into the room where he could follow the instructions without alerting the man holding Sarah captive.

Kiera hurried down the hallway.

Mason wrapped his arm around her waist before she hit the top stair. "I'm not letting you go," he said, his blue eyes full of determination. "No one will hurt you, Kiera."

She forced a smile. "I know, but Mace ... they don't know I can fight. Let's use that."

He blew out a breath, clearly ready to argue.

Sarah screamed, a blood-curdling scream that made the hair on the back of Kiera's neck stand up. She wasn't afraid for herself, but her friend ...

Kiera flew down the stairs, Mason by her side and Mueller behind them. They sprinted through the entryway and stopped short in the huge great room area. The man had Sarah next to the open patio door, cold air seeping into the room. Sarah's gag was gone, but her hands were tied behind her back. Kiera looked for blood or injury. Why had she screamed?

The man only smiled at them as they all slowed and then stopped twenty feet away.

"Kiera," Sarah panted. "He has Drake. They're killing him. Please. I'm so sorry. Don't let them kill Drake!"

Kiera's heart thudded out of control. This man had orchestrated Drake's kidnapping to get to her? Had Sarah inadvertently helped him? Was that why she was sorry?

The man held up a cell phone. She couldn't see the screen clearly.

"Tell the princess that my men will kill you if she doesn't comply," the man said into the phone.

"Kiera?" Drake's voice. "Don't go with him! Let them kill me!" Then he cried out in pain.

"No!" Kiera screamed, her heart racing out of control. She rushed across the room, Mason at her side.

"You stay back," the man commanded Mason, dropping the cell phone on a nearby table and yanking the long knife out again, pressing it against Sarah's throat.

Mason and Kiera both stopped.

"Princess, you come to me," he commanded. "Or both of your friends die."

"If you hurt Drake again or cut Sarah, you'll be the one who dies," Kiera said, grateful her voice was steady when she was absolutely terrified of what this man could and would do to Drake and Sarah.

Kiera could navigate heights with nothing but a thin wall or tightrope under her. She didn't balk at swinging through the air at dangerous heights with or without a safety net. In all of those cases, she was in control of her fate. Yet, standing here

on solid ground, with her brave protector at her side, Kiera had no control over the situation. The thought was dizzying and enervating. She took a step forward, determined to get that knife somehow and use it on the man.

“I have all the power here,” he roared, pushing the knife against Sarah’s neck. Sarah flinched.

“On the contrary,” Mason said, pulling a gun out and aiming it at the man. “Your men are dead or incapacitated. If you kill the boy or Sarah, you’ll die instantly.”

The man only stared at them. “The princess is coming with me,” he insisted, “or they both die.”

“No,” Mason commanded.

“Yes,” Kiera stated firmly. This was the only way she could have control over the situation and save Sarah and Drake. By putting herself in this man’s power and relying on her skills to get out of it.

She glanced back at Mason. His blue eyes were full of angst.

“Yes.” She faced the man again. “You’re going to have your men release Drake and let him go free.” Drake was a tough and resourceful kid. Him offering to die for her had touched her deeply. She prayed if he got free, he could get to safety. “When he is free, I’ll trade Sarah and you can take me with you.”

“No, Kiera,” Mason said from behind her.

“Deal.” The man spoke into the phone. “Let him go and put him out on the street.” He smiled, looking over her possessively. “I knew you’d offer yourself for them. Ever the benevolent princess.”

Kiera’s stomach rolled over at his look.

“You promised you wouldn’t hurt her,” Sarah whimpered. “You promised me.”

“Oh, I won’t.” The man grinned. “She’s going to be a massive paycheck for me. No, I won’t hurt the beautiful princess.” He licked his lips.

Kiera was going to be sick, but she was strong and she knew how to fight. She'd been in tough situations before and trusted herself to get out. On the other hand, she knew schemes, and to get this far, the guy with the knife had to be super competent. She could only pray that the slightest opening would appear for her to outwit or overcome this jerk. She wouldn't let Sarah be hurt and she couldn't say goodbye forever to Mason.

## CHAPTER

## *Fourteen*

**MASON HAD NEVER FELT SO** helpless. Even when four of William Rindlesbacher's men had ganged up on him and thrashed him outside this very house or he'd taken a knife to the back from a serial killer for Princess Aliya, he'd at least been able to fight. It felt like his hands were tied right now. In the worst possible moment.

"Set your weapons down," the kidnapper commanded Mason and Mueller. "Don't cut the boy loose yet," he said into the phone in Kiera's hands.

Mason wanted to take the shot and end this.

"Please," Kiera whispered to him.

He had the shot. Frustration filled him. The man would die, but he could easily cut Sarah's throat, and with Drake not free ... they'd kill the boy as soon as they knew their leader was dead.

"Set it down, now!" The man turned the knife just a centimeter. Sarah cried out as the sharp knife cut her skin and blood ran down her neck, staining her shirt.

"Mason," Kiera begged.

With both Drake and Sarah being threatened and Kiera giving him a pleading look, he didn't know how to refuse.

Kiera! She was the most fearless person he'd ever met, and he loved her. He could not allow this man to take her. There had to be a solution somewhere within reach that he could use to protect her.

Mason held his gun up and carefully set it down. Mueller followed his lead. It felt like he was just handing over Kiera.

No! He'd fight. Somehow. Once Drake and Sarah were safe.

Kiera had the man's phone in her hand and watched the screen. They waited as the men in America cut Drake's bonds and took the boy outside. Kiera gave a play-by-play as he and Mueller were far enough away that they couldn't see the phone.

Mason hoped they would leave the kid alone, but feared they'd grab him again as soon as Kiera traded places with Sarah. She was a few feet away from the man and Sarah. He knew she planned to fight as soon as they made the exchange. She could easily get cut and killed, or the kidnapper could overpower her. Mason had to act in the crucial moment. His Ruger was at his feet. He could dive and shoot. As long as he didn't hit Kiera. The shot had to be perfect.

"Drake," Kiera said. "Take the phone and get away from that house."

The men must've handed over the phone to the kid.

"Get away and then call the police," she instructed.

"Okay." There was a pause then. "I'm outside, but Kiera ... don't go with him," Drake demanded into the phone.

Kiera looked at the man and Sarah. "Release her."

"Get over here."

Kiera slowly eased toward them, still clutching the phone. Sound erupted through its speakers. Drake cried out in surprise.

Kiera stopped and yelled, "What's happening?"

"We're with Sutton Smith," a male voice said through the phone.

"Sutton Smith?" the man holding Sarah questioned. For the first time, fear showed on his face.

Mason dove, sweeping his gun off the ground.

Kiera hurled the phone at the man's head and then leaped at him. The phone connected with his head, and he reared back. Kiera grabbed the hand holding the knife with both of hers and yanked it away from Sarah's throat.

"Sarah, drop!" Mason commanded as he rolled to his feet, his pistol in hand.

She dropped to the floor. Thankfully, Kiera needed no instruction. She leaped, kicked both feet off the man's chest, and hurled herself away from him.

Mason took the shot. He hit the man in the throat. The kidnapper flew backward and slammed into the hardwood floor.

Mueller ran to secure the kidnapper. Josiah hobbled into the room and headed for Sarah, Private Silva right behind him.

Mason holstered his gun and ran for Kiera. She'd landed on a leather couch and gracefully bounced up as if from a trampoline. She stuck the landing and threw her arms around Mason's neck as he reached her. Her body shook against his. She'd been so brave; it was surprising to feel her tremble.

"All right then?" he asked, staring into her blue eyes.

Kiera didn't answer. She drew in a steadying breath, and then she kissed him.

Mason couldn't stop himself from responding. He was swept away by the love and depth of her kiss. He knew they were meant to be together. Now he had to carve a path.

He did keep his head slightly better than their first kiss, simply because of the danger that had been surrounding them and might still be. Her safety had to come first.

He broke the kiss and ushered her head to his chest, holding her close. She cuddled into him, clinging to his lower back.

"Silva?" he asked.

"I've searched the exterior, sir. They had a golf cart for a getaway." Silva held up a key. "Lieutenant Mueller disposed

of the only threat out there. Sorry we didn't hear an opening to come intervene."

"You did great. Thank you. Lieutenant Mueller, can you and Private Silva keep doing sweeps inside and out and make certain the property is secure?"

"Yes, sir." They both saluted and hurried off. Mueller had cuffed the man on the floor, but he wasn't stirring.

Mason only wanted to hold Kiera close, but he had to make certain she was safe. "Sergeant Naples, bring Sarah. Let's guard them in the theater downstairs until the general arrives."

The theater had no windows. If there were any more kidnappers lurking, they could defend the women in there. Mason almost smiled to himself. Kiera had done a fabulous job of helping with the defense and the offense.

Josiah nodded. He untied Sarah's wrists, and Sarah grabbed the phone that was on the floor. Her brother was still on the line, in Sutton Smith's ops' hands as they took out the kidnappers in the house where he'd been a prisoner.

Kiera cuddled into Mason as he directed them all down the stairs and they listened to Sarah's conversation with her brother. He wanted answers from Sarah, and he wanted to know Kiera was safe. Then he would talk to the general. He had to work things out so he could kiss Kiera without guilt, date her, and someday soon beg her to be with him forever.



## CHAPTER

## *Fifteen*

**KIERA COULDN'T LEAVE** the circle of Mason's arms. She hoped she didn't tremble visibly, but he probably felt it. The fear of Drake or Sarah being killed overwhelmed her. It threw her back to losing her mum and all the times her family had been threatened by the Rindlesbachers. She was glad she'd been able to keep her head and help somewhat in the fight. Mason had been magnificent.

As they waited in the downstairs theater, they had to say goodbye to Drake so he could speak with the police.

"I am so proud of you, Kiera," Drake said. "You were so brave. You saved my life."

"You saved mine! Drake, I'm so terribly sorry they hurt you to get to me."

"That is on them, not you. I love you."

"I love you too." Kiera sniffled but couldn't hide the tears pricking at her eyelids.

"I love you, sis," Drake said.

"Love you too." Sarah's voice was a mixture of relief that he was okay and a despondency. Kiera feared she was blaming herself.

The call ended and there was quiet for a beat. Kiera didn't know how to ask what Sarah's part was in those kidnappers gaining access to the house. They'd obviously shut off the power, but how had they gotten past the guards and through the secure doors?

“I’m so sorry, Kiera,” Sarah said in a broken tone. “You and Drake were both so brave and I ... I’m the worst person in the world, and this is all my fault.”

“Oh, Sarah.” Kiera forced herself to leave Mason’s arms. He gave her an encouraging nod. She hurried to her friend and kneeled in front of her as Sarah sat on the couch. She clasped both of her hands with her own. “This is *not* your fault. Evil people manipulated you. I know you love me and would never hurt me. They used Drake to get to both of us. I’d rather have Drake safe a million times over.”

Sarah stared at her, then she flung her arms around Kiera’s neck and sobbed. Kiera eased up onto the couch next to her and let her friend cling to her.

“You’re the most amazing friend and person in the world,” Sarah sobbed. “I love you so much and I’m so sorry.”

Kiera held her. “I know. I know you are.”

“How can you be so forgiving?”

Kiera held back her own tears and tried to explain, “I haven’t told you much about after my mum died when I was twelve and the continual nightmarish attacks by the Rindlesbachers for the next year and a half.” She looked at Mason. His blue eyes were concerned for her and full of the memories. He’d been part of the defense of her family at the time. She loved him even more for it. “Those people were so evil. They manipulated my parents’ closest friends, our prime minister and his wife. Henry and Leslie were like my adopted uncle and aunt and the Rindlesbaachers tricked them into inadvertently killing my mum and almost killing all of us. I know from personal experience how people can selfishly control and ruin lives. Like Drake said, it’s on them. This is not on your head.”

Sarah stared at her and hugged her tightly again, and then she dried her tears.

After a few beats, Mason asked, “Can you tell us what happened?”

Sarah looked from Mason to Josiah to Kiera. She nodded. “I got a text at lunch saying to quietly go to the bathroom or my brother would die. When I walked to the bathroom, I got a call from my mom about Drake disappearing. My mom was telling me what she knew when that man grabbed me and told me to say I’d call her back. Then he shoved me into the family bathroom and showed me Drake on a video chat—all tied up and bleeding. They said they’d kill him if I didn’t keep my mouth shut. Drake begged me not to listen, and they kept hitting him and cutting him.” She let out another cry.

Kiera was sick. They’d hurt Drake and devastated Sarah so they could kidnap Kiera and get a huge paycheck. She knew the guards surrounding her at all times were necessary, but it was awful to think her friends were in danger because of her royalty and her family’s money.

“They put a listening device in my bra.” Sarah squirmed as she said that.

“That’s why you covered it when we talked about Sutton Smith?” Mason asked. “Then headed to the bathroom while Kiera called Macey.”

“Yes. I don’t know if they noticed.” She shifted on the couch, then continued, “They said they’d call me when I had to open the rear patio doors. They’d heard your instructions to your men and planned to attack before you went back on duty.”

“Luckily, I couldn’t sleep,” Mason said. “Too stirred up by somebody.”

“No sweet dreams?” Kiera heard herself ask.

“Not yet.”

They shared a look that heated her clear through, but both sobered as they focused back on Sarah.

“They promised they wouldn’t hurt you, just threaten you so they could get a bunch of money. The police were doing nothing to rescue Drake, and my parents don’t have any money or contacts. I felt so desperate and afraid, and I couldn’t handle them hurting you or Drake.”

Sarah stared at her, her dark eyes red and her face crumpled with sorrow. “When you offered to have Sutton Smith help, I got so hopeful. I decided I wouldn’t do what they asked and I’d pray and pray that they wouldn’t hurt Drake, that somehow Sutton would find him and you’d be safe.”

Kiera and Mason exchanged a look. They waited.

“But then they called.” She started crying in earnest again. “A video chat again. The man told me if I didn’t go open the door right then, they would kill my brother. They started cutting his chest. They had him gagged then, but tears were running down Drake’s face and I could see how much it hurt and I knew they would kill him.” She took a breath. “I told them if I opened that door, they had to let Drake go and promise they wouldn’t hurt you. Well ... you know what happened next.”

Kiera nodded. “It all worked out. Your prayers, you putting Drake first—you did exactly what you should have.” She paused. “But next time, find a way to tell me the truth. We have a lot of help with my family, our guards, and Sutton Smith’s ops.”

“I will,” Sarah promised. She shuddered. “I really hope there isn’t a next time.”

“Me too, friend. Me too.”

There were suddenly footsteps coming into the main floor above them. Lots of footsteps.

Mason leaped to his feet, drew his gun, and hurried to the door. Josiah didn’t move quite as fast—he had obviously been beaten up pretty good—but he hobbled to Mason’s side, pulled out his pistol, and took the other side of the door.

“It’s just Ray,” Kiera said, though she loved how protective Mason was.

“We’ll make certain of that.” Mason waited.

A rap came at the door. “Captain Henson?” Mueller’s voice. “The general is here and would like to see his sister.”

“Copy that.” Mason’s bearing became stiff. Was he dreading talking to Ray? Kiera wanted to take care of the mess for him but knew he was a man and a soldier and wanted to iron it out himself.

Mason cautiously opened the door, nodded to Mueller, and looked around.

“It’s secure, sir,” Mueller said.

“Thank you.” Mason holstered his gun, walked to Kiera, and offered his hand. “Time to face the music, or the general.”

She put her hand in his and he helped her up. “Can we do it together?”

He smiled. “No. I am a manly man who must fight my own battles.” His smile grew. “Though you did an incredible job of showing me up fighting tonight.”

“Thank you for acknowledging that but you fought brilliantly. I’ll let you do the talking, but let’s face this united.”

“Sounds like a smashing plan.” He held on to her hand as they ascended the steps together.

Ray rushed her, wrapping her up in a tight hug and lifting her off her feet. He was so huge he completely surrounded her. It was the complete opposite of how awful she’d felt when Mouth Guy had surrounded her with his arms earlier tonight. With Ray, it was safety and home and big brother protection.

“You’re all right?”

“Yes, big bro. I’m amazing. I’ve got Mason.” She reached for Mason’s hand, noticing half a dozen royal guards in the main area.

Mason saluted with his free hand. “Sir.”

Ray looked at their hands and his expression became severe. “Thank you for protecting her.” He looked around. “Let’s get back to the castle. A lot of people want to hug you, Wild Child.”

“Don’t call me that.” She pushed at his burly shoulder. “Let’s go. We’ll have to hire somebody to clean up Hope and

Faith's house.”

“Macey's on it.”

“I'm not going to hug anyone without Mason by my side, though.”

Ray's brows lifted. “Captain Henson and I will speak about that.”

“You are not leaving me out.”

Ray didn't answer. He gestured for them to go in front of him.

Mason gave her a pleading look. Oh yeah, he was a manly man fighting his own battles. She smirked at him and gave him a look that said he should speak up. He smiled slightly at her and mouthed, “Timing.”

She smiled back, but she didn't know if timing would help.

Kiera, Mason, Sarah, and Josiah slid into boots and coats and walked out into the cold night air, loading into the first helicopter with Ray and none other than Lieutenant General Chad flying it for them.

“Kiera!” He gave her a hug before they all strapped in. “Ah, Wild Child, the scrapes you get in.”

“She fought more bravely than anyone I've served with, sir,” Mason said, pride evident in his voice.

Chad looked at Mason and at their joined hands. He smiled. “Impressive.”

“How well I can fight?” Kiera asked sassily.

“How brave you two are.” He tilted his head to Ray, who was climbing in.

Kiera laughed at that, but Mason didn't. That surprised and worried her. The flight back was full of sharing everything that had happened, teasing from Chad, stern questions from Ray, apologies from Sarah, and support from Mason.

Kiera had high hopes for their future together. Sure, he'd made a stupid promise to her brother, but they could work that

out. Ray was serious, but he wasn't her dictator, for heaven's sakes.

They swooped into her valley at almost one a.m. The castle was all lit up. The feeling of coming home overwhelmed her, and she leaned into Mason's shoulder. He was not hilarious and much stiffer with Ray watching them, but he did squeeze her hand and murmur, "Home."

Yes. Home.

They landed on the helipad and hadn't even opened the door when her family burst out of the closest castle entrance. Kiera smiled.

Mason helped her out of the helicopter, but then she was swarmed. Her dad and mum got first hugs, and she had to reassure her sweet mum that she was all right over and over again. Ray then ushered everyone back inside the castle.

Then she was mauled by her brothers and her sisters-in-law. The little ones were in bed, so she'd have to hug and love on them in the morning. She kept reiterating she didn't want any of her nieces and nephews to know she'd been in danger. She hated the thought of them being traumatized and worried about her. Hope, Faith, and Levi were there as well. She was surrounded by so much love.

Everyone was kind to Sarah as well, and Mason stayed close by.

When Macey was hugging her for the second time, she whispered, "Ray's crazy worried about you and Mason. He didn't appreciate that I schemed with you to give you a chance with the Serial Dater."

Kiera cringed at that title. "Not that Ray has any control over me, but I love him and he shouldn't be worried," Kiera whispered back. "Mason and I love each other."

Macey startled and pulled back. "You know he has a girlfriend."

"Excuse me?" Kiera glanced around for Mason. He'd been separated from her while she was focused on Macey.

He was talking to her dad, who looked unusually stern. Mason snuck a glance at her but focused back on her dad. He shifted uncomfortably. What was going on?

She looked at Macey. “He does *not* have a girlfriend. What are you talking about?”

“He told Ray two days ago that he would never fall for you, ever, and then reassured him he was dating someone. I asked Levi about it while we were waiting tonight. He said Mason is dating a doctor, Miriam ... something, and he’s taking her home to meet his family for Christmas.”

Faith’s stomach pitched. No. No way was Mason two-timing her. He’d fallen for her. He told her he hadn’t realized she’d grown up; that was why he made that promise to Ray. When he’d seen her he stepped into the light. He’d said she was the sun. Right?

Had Mason fallen for her, or had she pushed him and pushed him to flirt with her, kiss her, be with her? Had he been holding back because of his promise and a girlfriend? What she thought was a clever scheme to make him submit and kiss her now felt like she was some clumsy cavewoman, bashing a man over the head and dragging him to her cave.

Why had he said all those beautiful words and kissed her so enticingly then?

She was going to be sick. She looked around and saw Mason walking down the hall with Ray and her dad. Mason’s back was ramrod straight, and he did not look back.

She wanted to chase after them, talk to her dad and brother with Mason, present a united front like she’d said.

But Levi and Faith walked up to her, stealing her attention. She hugged Faith tightly. Then she turned to Levi and lowered her voice. “Does Mason have a girlfriend and he’s taking her home to meet his parents?”

Levi studied her, obviously guessing she was seconds away from breaking down. He finally nodded. “Dr. Miriam Cruz.”



Kiera swayed into Macey. Her sister-in-law put an arm around her waist. “Kiera’s exhausted,” Macey announced. “I’ll walk her up to her suite.”

“G-goodnight,” Kiera tried to say. She cleared her throat and then forced out. “Love you all.”

She heard many I love yous, some goodnights, and then somebody called out, “Sweet dreams.”

Kiera’s throat filled with raw emotion. She rushed for the stairs, pumping up them double time as the tears came. Sweet dreams. Not without Mason.

What was happening? She’d known the obstacle with him promising Ray not to pursue her would take some time and talking to overcome, but ... a girlfriend? No way. He hadn’t breathed one word about a girlfriend.

Dr. Miriam Cruz.

It was a beautiful name, and she was a doctor. An accomplished, older, with-it lady. Kiera didn’t even have her bachelor’s degree yet, let alone a doctorate.

A sob rose from her throat.

Macey ran up the stairs behind her. “Kiera,” she called, out of breath, “you’re faster than Chaz.”

Kiera almost smiled, thinking of Tristan’s five-year-old who adored her and could run faster than any of the little ones.

Finally, she made it to the fourth floor and sprinted down the hall to her suite.

“Let me stay with you,” Macey panted as she reached her door.

Kiera was already disappearing inside. “No. You’re right. I’m exhausted.”

“You’re also heartbroken.” Macey’s dark eyes were full of compassion.

“I’ll be fine. Love you.” Kiera shut the door on Macey’s protests.

She felt like a jerk of a sister, but she needed to be alone. She should collapse on her bed in tears, but she wasn't a mope around and cry sort of girl. Maybe she could escape out of the castle like she used to.

Determination tightened her jaw. She had to be in control. If she could move and escape, do something, maybe she wouldn't sob and feel sorry for herself.

Kiera changed into warm, waterproof Lady Fit winter running gear and found her Gecko gloves in a drawer. She put socks, slip-on shoes, a coat, a long rope, her cell phone, a water bottle, and some cash in a backpack. Walking to her balcony, she ignored the tears streaming down her face. If she didn't think about Mason betraying her, it wouldn't be true.

She didn't know if he really had a girlfriend, couldn't wrap her mind around the Mason she knew and loved playing her.

Yet he was a player. She'd heard that time and time again.

No! Levi and Macey could've gotten misinformation.

But most likely not.

All Kiera knew for certain was she wasn't sitting around waiting for him to come find her.

## CHAPTER

## *Sixteen*

**MASON HAD ALWAYS THOUGHT** of the king as the most generous and friendly monarch on earth. He respected the man deeply and had sworn his life to protect him and his family, but the king often had a smile on his face and a kind word for his guards. After Mason saved Princess Aliya from a serial killer, taking a knife in his own back, and then helped rescue Princess Sophie, Princess Sunny, and Princess Sophie's parents, stripping the bomb from William Rindlesbacher's filthy paws, the king had been even more generous and kind to him.

At the moment, the king was as stern, unyielding, and terrifying as his glowering son, General Raymond August.

Mason listened as they took turns reiterating that he had voluntarily promised not to pursue Kiera and reminding him he had told General Ray that he had a girlfriend. They were both stunned that Captain Mason Henson, the man who had protected their family and who they'd trusted above most men in the world, would go back on his word to the general and try to double-time some girlfriend and Kiera.

He wasn't quite sure how it took half an hour to go over those points time and again. It was one-thirty in the morning, he was exhausted, he wanted Kiera's hand in his, and he had no idea how to explain his actions or convince the overprotective king and even more overprotective general that he was in fact the one man for Kiera and wholly committed to her and her happiness.

Finally, the king rubbed a hand at his brow and sank into a chair. He gestured for the general and Mason to sit. They both obeyed.

“Please explain yourself, Captain Henson,” the king said, staring at him with those uncanny blue eyes, the very color of Kiera’s eyes, but the king’s eyes didn’t have long lashes or that perpetual sparkle.

“King Nolan. General August.” He nodded to each of them. “Please know that you and your family have my utmost respect and allegiance. I would never do anything to betray or hurt any of you, most of all Kiera.”

Her dad’s brows rose, maybe at his impassioned plea, maybe at him forgetting the ‘princess’ title.

“Two days ago, when General August asked me to pretend to be a couple with Kiera to protect her, and then intoned that I would pursue her, I was honestly offended. In my mind, Kiera was still a teenager in pigtails. I hadn’t seen her in a year and a half, and I don’t spend time on social media.”

“She did mature ... quite a bit over the last little while,” the king conceded.

“In every way, sir. Not simply physically, but emotionally and even spiritually. She’s become the perfect woman in every way imaginable.”

The two men exchanged a look.

“Realizing Kiera is all grown up is no excuse for going back on your word,” General August said. “And you told me you had a girlfriend.”

“When I told you I had a girlfriend, it was to prove that I would never pursue a college girl like I thought Kiera still was. I don’t have a girlfriend. I’d gone on two dates with Dr. Miriam Cruz and had planned a third, but as soon as I realized how gone I was over Kiera, I called Miriam and explained we wouldn’t be going out again.”

The general shrugged. “And promising to ‘never pursue her’ and then when I show up, you’re holding hands and Kiera is claiming you can’t leave her side... how is that not trifling

with her heart and pursuing her?” He paused, then growled, “Did you kiss her?” as if the thought had just occurred to him.

“She did kiss me,” Mason admitted.

Her dad’s eyes widened. The general’s fists clenched.

“And I kissed her back,” he added.

“This all feels ... out of character to me,” the general said. “I know you date a lot, but you’re one of the most honorable men I know. I never would’ve figured you for someone who would go back on his word.”

“You’re right, sir. Kiera blindsided me ... in every possible way.”

“How did she blindside you and kiss you?”

“She leaped onto my back and choked me out.”

“Pardon me?” her dad said.

Mason nodded. “There is no world where I could hurt Kiera. I let her knock me out. When I came to, she kissed me.” He smiled, though he shouldn’t have. “She said right before she jumped me, ‘I didn’t promise not to pursue you. Your conscience can be clear. This is on my head.’” He rubbed his hands together, then immediately stopped.

The general and the king stared at him. Mason was slightly embarrassed. What princess had choked out her own bodyguard? And they both knew he could break out of any kind of hold.

They looked at each other. “Schemes,” General August muttered, then he actually chuckled before shaking his head.

“Sounds exactly like my girl,” the king said. “Choked out one of our top men.”

Mason shifted in his seat.

“You told her about your promise?” General August asked.

“I did. She wouldn’t take my answer of ‘I can’t’ when she tried to kiss me or get too close.”

“I’ll bet.” The king blew out a heavy breath. “So you tried to resist her falling for you?”

“More the other way around, sir. Tried and failed not to fall for her. Honestly, I fell the second I saw her. She was like the sun to me ...” He trailed off at the general’s arched brows.

“The sun?” General Ray grunted out.

Mason held eye contact with the king, whose brows were raised. It was rough. “I could’ve done better at keeping my distance. It was difficult with our task of pretending to be a couple.”

“I can understand that.” The king drummed his fingers on the desk. “You understand Kiera has had a crush on you for a while now?”

“I never recognized it before. Kiera’s always been friendly and fun with everyone around her, but the general told me about the crush.”

“We didn’t want her falling for you and you breaking her heart. The ‘Serial Dater’ and all of that business, you understand,” the king said.

“I do understand, sir. I don’t know how to convince you, besides the proof of my actions in the future, but ...” He swallowed hard. Was he really going to do this? Taking a deep breath, he prayed for help and then rushed out, “I am head over heels in love with your daughter, and I promise you I would never hurt her, break her heart, or walk away from her. She is the most incredible woman on earth to me, truly the light I don’t know how I’ll survive without, and I love her deeply.”

They both stared at him, hardly blinking. The silence in the room was heavy.

The king looked at the general. “We need to talk to Kiera.”

General August nodded.

They both looked back at Mason. The king appraised him and then said, “Captain Henson, you have been above reproach as a royal guard for over eleven years. We trust you

and we like you, but this is my little girl. I would ask that you give this some time to settle and see where both of your feelings are. If you are the right one for her, I will welcome you wholeheartedly into the family. Let her be with the family for Christmas and you'll both have some time to think and pray and make the right decision.”

The king studied him, his blue eyes piercing. It wasn't an awful request. Let everything settle. Let Kiera figure out what she was feeling without him right there. Let her family have some time with her this Christmas. Mason had imagined a much harsher request, if he were being honest.

Yet ... How could he not find Kiera as soon as he walked out of this office, tell her he loved her, and that he'd laid it all out for her dad and brother—his king and general?

He stared at these two powerful men. His next words could make or break his career. More importantly, they could make or break his entire future with the woman he loved, and her family.

## CHAPTER

## *Seventeen*

**SCALING THE CASTLE WALL,** then climbing down the cliff below the castle was almost too easy for Kiera, even with the ice and snow. She slipped a couple times but recovered.

The feeling of having her fate back in her hands softened the sting of the evening's other events.

No. If Mason had only been playing her ... She couldn't even think about it.

When she reached the valley floor, she put on her winter coat and gloves, socks and shoes. Her toes were numb with cold, but she didn't care.

Kiera wasn't certain where she wanted to go, just away from her family worrying about her, and from the horrific vision of Mason having a girlfriend. Ugh! If she stopped for too long, she let herself think about that and it was devastating. All the beautiful words he said to her, their out-of-this world kisses, their connection, their love ... Gone? She couldn't believe it.

It was almost two in the morning. The country road leading into Greenville was deserted. Stars sparkled in the sky and reflected off the snow. It was beautiful.

At least there was no danger with the kidnappers all apprehended. She supposed she still had a stupid stalker out there, but she'd only had two messages since the one she'd shown to Mason. She almost smiled, thinking of Mason's



reaction. He was so protective of her, considerate of her feelings. Incredible.

Her smile turned to a frown. Until he neglected to tell her he had a girlfriend. How was that even possible? Captain Mason Henson didn't have girlfriends, not in the many years he'd guarded their family. Besides, he loved Kiera. Right?

She shook her head and started walking toward Greenville. She should be rebellious and head for Traverse, find a nightclub and go dancing, but she didn't have it in her.

Maybe she'd walk around the lake, if the path wasn't impassable by the snow, and then go to the guard station and give some poor guard duo a conniption fit. As she walked, she stared at the stars and the snow and tried to stomp feeling back into her frozen toes.

Approaching the beautiful village, set next to the lake and below her towering castle, she looked around at the picture straight out of a winter wonderland. The moon reflecting off snow-covered boughs and the lake an ice skater's dream. The nearby shops decorated and twinkling softly in the night sky. She had one year left in school, then she'd graduate with a degree in exercise physiology and move back to Augustine.

But if Mason was here, and he didn't love her but was dating Dr. Miriam...

Bosh! She couldn't be here and watch him love someone else.

Kiera sighed. Her phone buzzed in her bag. Stopping, she pulled it out and glanced at it. It was on 'do not disturb' this late at night, but there were dozens of texts and missed calls from Mason. There were also missed calls from Ray, Macey, her mum, and her dad.

She clutched the phone to her chest. She wanted to read them all, see what happened in their 'meeting,' but at the same time she didn't. Could she trust Mason?

This was *Mason*. She'd trusted and loved him for so long. How could he not be true to her? The girlfriend thing was most likely a misunderstanding. It had to be.

A car idled up beside her. She edged away from it. The guard station was just at the end of town, maybe half a mile away. She could run there if needed, but she didn't want to. She'd proven tonight she could react and fight well. If someone tried to hurt her, she'd fight them. It would honestly be a relief to not focus on the angst in her mind over Mason.

"Princess Kiera?" The man's voice was filled with happiness. "I found you!"

She peered at the man who'd leaped out of the car. "Jeremy?"

He hurried up to her. "Have you missed me? I've missed you desperately. Have you liked my texts? I know how you love to tease. I tracked you down here to be with you for Christmas. To prove my love and make certain no other man touched you." His grin twisted and became a gleeful sneer. "No one but me will ever have you."

Kiera was so confused. She had dated Jeremy last year, gone to a couple university basketball games with him, and he'd kissed her after their second date. It hadn't gone well, and she definitely wasn't interested. She'd told him no when he had asked her out again. He'd gotten weird and ugly about it, so she'd blocked his number.

"You're the stalker?" she asked, feeling two steps behind. He didn't fit here in Augustine, and though he had taken her rejection hard, she wouldn't have figured him for one of her creepy stalkers.

"Stalker?" he demanded. "I'm the love of your life."

She couldn't help but laugh. "Sorry, Jeremy. You and I are never happening. Go home."

Kiera turned and headed toward town and the guard station.

Jeremy leaped at her. She dodged, and he thumped onto the icy road on his hands and knees. He cursed and jumped up, blocking her path to town.

"Jeremy," she said patiently. "Stop being an idiot. You don't love me; you love some fantasy of a princess. If you try

to jump at me or touch me again, I will hurt you.”

“You’ll hurt me?” He laughed, and it annoyed her deeply. “You don’t have your burly bodyguards around tonight. I was coming back from the bar in Traverse. It’s fate that I found you. I’ve been waiting for almost a week.”

“You’re an idiot and you’re drunk.” She shook her head, but a bit of fear traced through her. Her self-defense classes had taught her that inebriation would slow reflexes but also numb the person from feeling pain. He might not stop until she knocked him out.

She set her jaw. Fine. She’d knock him out, then.

Spreading her stance wider, she motioned to him. “Come get me, you idiotic, drunk fool. After I wallop you, you can crawl back to America in shame.” When her dad and Ray found out about this guy, they’d ship him out with a no-return label and a free pass to an American prison for his lame attack.

She winced. They also wouldn’t be happy with her sneaking out. The multiple calls showed someone had figured out she was missing.

“I’ll show you how much you’ll like being with me,” Jeremy sneered at her. “I’m not drunk. Just enough to take the edge off.”

“Then you’re emotionally imbalanced. You need help, not alcohol.” She gestured again. “Come on, then.”

Jeremy let out a roar and lunged at her. Kiera feinted to the right. He’d predicted that and changed trajectory. She leaped the other direction, and he smacked into a snowbank. She came around behind him, clasped her forearm around his neck, and yanked harder than she had in any of her practice sessions or with Mason.

Mason. He’d let her choke him out, and she would never regret the beautiful kisses that had followed. Was she only pursuing him, or did he love her like she hoped?

Jeremy was digging into her arms, gasping for breath, thrashing around. She held on and yanked harder.

His motions were slowing. He'd be knocked out soon. Then she'd jog to the guard station and they could take care of him.

The low purr of a motor sounded, and then lights almost blinded her. She must've relaxed her grip a bit, because Jeremy fought with renewed strength.

The side-by-side Polaris Razor stopped and four men leaped out.

"Kiera!" Mason cried out, rushing toward them.

"Mace?"

Jeremy pushed off the snow and slammed her onto her back as she clung to him. His weight knocked the air completely out of her, and her head reeled with pain.

She broke her grip, and Jeremy rolled on top of her, grabbing at her.

"No!" Mason roared. He ripped Jeremy off of Kiera.

For a moment, Jeremy hung suspended in the air, shock and fear painted on his face. Then Mason body slammed him into the ground. Jeremy moaned and curled into a ball, air leaking out of him in a whine like a punctured volleyball.

"Take him to the guard station," Mason commanded.

The other guards rushed forward, picked Jeremy up, and hauled him away.

Mason knelt by her side, tenderly touching her face. "Kiera. Where are you hurt?"

She groaned and sat up, touching the back of her head. No blood. "I'm fine," she snapped. "Why did you call and text a million times and come find me?"

Mason reared back, his blue eyes full of confusion. "Let's get you back to the castle." He stood and helped her up.

Kiera stretched and rolled her head, stretching her neck. "No. I escaped for a reason."

"Escaped from who?"

“You,” she flung at him.

He swallowed and held her gaze. “I never wanted to hurt you. What have I done?”

“Maybe having a girlfriend and pretending you were interested in me.” She folded her arms across her chest, angry at herself for spitting that out.

Mason’s face softened. He reached for her, but she stepped back. His hand dropped to his side. “I don’t have a girlfriend, Kiera.”

“Does Dr. Miriam Cruz know that? Because I hear there will be an extra place set at the Christmas Eve table at the Henson home for the esteemed doctor to meet the illustrious, charming, and backstabbing Captain Henson’s family.”

She was revealing exactly how ticked off she was. She’d held it in earlier. The tears had come, but she’d focused on climbing and escaping and then the walk hadn’t taken near long enough before Jeremy had attacked her.

“Oh, Kiera. I apologize that you worried for one moment about Miriam. I went on two dates with her. We weren’t dating, but I said that to the general to prove I wouldn’t chase after you when I thought you were still a young college student.”

The Razor raced up to them again. Mason tilted his head in question. Kiera waved them away. “Thank you for coming, but we need a few minutes,” she said.

“Yes, Princess Kiera.”

“I’ll call when we need a ride,” Mason told them.

The men saluted and drove off.

“Why did Levi say you were taking her home for dinner?”

“I thought I should try to progress the relationship and confided in him. He asked me if she made me a better man, and I scoffed at him. I liked her and wanted to shut my brothers and sister up about the Serial Dater thing.” He looked her over. “Miriam is a smart, beautiful lady who I thought I could date seriously.”

Her stomach squirmed. He liked the doctor. She was smart and beautiful.

“But Kiera...” His voice was soft and husky as his gaze swept over her face. “After I spent ten minutes in your glorious presence, I knew you were my light. I realized no woman in the world could measure up to my Fearless Kiera.”

Kiera studied him. She believed him. Was she ready to soften? Could he ‘pursue’ her now, or was there still the garbage with her brother between them?

He edged closer. “Do you believe me? Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

“How much?” She swallowed, but her throat was dry and all she wanted was to be in his arms. His arms were the perfect spot for her.

“I love you so much that I just threatened to quit the military for you.” He took a step closer.

“That’s a lot,” she managed. Had he quit? Had Ray taken it that far?

“I love you so much that I faced down my king and my general, two of the men I respect most in this world. I told them I had to pursue you, that I couldn’t stay away from you, not even for an hour. I told them I would be true to you and protect, love, and cherish you for the rest of eternity.” He edged in closer, took off his gloves, and cupped her jawline with his warm palms.

“That’s a long time.” She drew in quick pants of air. It was cold outside, but she didn’t even care about her frozen feet or Jeremy’s attack.

Mason didn’t love Miriam. He’d stood up to her dad and Ray for her. He’d come for her.

“I love you so much ...” He paused and softly brushed her mouth with his, starting a tingling sensation in her lips and making her arch up for more. “The only person who can keep me away from you is you, Kiera.”

Their breath intermingled. She clung to his biceps to steady herself.

“If you don’t love me back, I’ll never smile again. The joy will be wiped from my soul, but I will crawl away if you command me to, because I love you that much.”

Kiera’s body trembled. She adored this man.

“I want to see your smile every day for the rest of my life,” she admitted. “I love you, Mace. I’ve been in love with you since I was fourteen, but I realize now that was only a crush. The depth of my feelings for you now is all grown up and even more thrilling and perfect than I’d ever dreamed it could be. I love you and I will never stop.”

Mason grinned, and then he kissed her. The kiss swelled and their love circled around them. Even the cold night air couldn’t penetrate it.

When they finally came back down to earth, Mason cradled her in the protective circle of his strong arms and said, “I’d better get you home.”

“I do fancy feeling my toes again.” She smiled up at him.

“Kiera,” he scolded. “I’m going to have to take better care of you.”

“You already do.” She looked up at his handsome face. “Did you honestly quit the military?”

“I tried.” He gave her his usual smirk. “Predictably, they can’t live without my superior skills, bravery, and charm.”

“I certainly can’t.”

He kissed her again, dipped her back and kissed her so thoroughly she was panting for air when they broke apart.

They smiled at each other and started walking slowly up the street toward the guard station. “Did Ray cuss you out and demote you?”

“In a manner of speaking. I’ve been reassigned.”

“What does that mean?” She wanted Mason to have his career as she worked through school and figured out what she

would do, but she didn't want to live apart for another year and a half.

"It's going to be the toughest duty I've had yet."

Hopefully it wasn't anything too dangerous. If her brother was using his rank to keep them apart, he would hear about it from her. "Don't keep me in suspense."

"Well, I'm in charge of guard duty ... for one precocious, impulsive, gorgeous, mesmerizing princess who has been known to cause her guards gray hairs with her clever schemes."

She stopped and turned to him. "You're coming to America?"

"Yes, my Fearless Princess. Just try getting rid of me."

She kissed him hard and fast. "Is that okay for you? It's a demotion, isn't it?"

"Not in my mind. I'll be with you." Mason swallowed and suddenly looked nervous. "I also pitched an idea to your dad that he wasn't too thrilled about, but he said you could decide."

"What's that? My dad usually likes all my ideas."

"This one was all me, beautiful princess."

"Okay. Lay it on me. I'll see if it has merit or we need to restructure. I can out-scheme anyone. Even you."

"I must admit that I bow to your superior scheming. Wait until I tell our children that their mother choked me out to con me into kissing her the first time."

She laughed, then froze. "Our children?"

He winked. "What do you think of going back to America as a married woman?"

Kiera couldn't catch a breath. "Married ... by the new year?"

"If you're one hundred percent ecstatic about the idea. Otherwise, we'll date and take as long as you need."



“Don’t you dare backpedal on me,” she threatened. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Yes.” He shook his head. “And I’m failing. Nobody would believe the most hilarious and charming Augustinian Captain could make such a muddle of this.”

“I can’t believe it, that’s for sure.”

His eyes widened.

She paused, as if thinking. Then she smiled and eased closer. “Yeah, I’m not really okay with this. I need the most perfect, charming, handsome, and hilarious Augustinian Captain to do a better job with his marriage proposal.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked.

“You don’t have a lot of time if we’re getting married by the new year.”

“Is there anything I can do to convince you tonight?” He wrapped his warm hands around her hips and pulled her in tight.

“You can try.”

Mason smiled against her lips and proceeded to kiss her. He kissed her until she wanted to shout to the world that she was ecstatically in love and her dream man felt the same about her. She was in heaven, and she’d be married to Mason by the new year.

## Epilogue

**“AUNTIE KIERIE.”** Curt and Aliya’s, seven-year-old Anne, her grandmum’s namesake, tugged at Kiera’s white satin gown. “Do I look beautiful?”

“Yes, you do, my angel.” Anne looked very similar to Kiera’s deceased mum. It was uncanny. She hugged her.

“You look amazingly beautiful,” Anne told her. Then she arched up and whispered, “Thank you for letting me be your bridesmaid and not another flower girl.”

“Why’s you got to get married on Christmas?” Derek and Ellery’s five-year-old Tommy demanded to know. “I got a new train I want to play with.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, love.” Kiera bent down to hug him. He let her for a beat, then squirmed away. “Sometimes it just feels right and you have to go for it.”

She smiled to herself. Everything about Mason felt right. Plus, they wanted some time to be all alone on a honeymoon before she started school on January fourth. There would be guards following them and stationed outside their beach villa in Costa Adeje, Canary Islands, but Mason could protect her and she’d proven she could fight to protect herself.

Arianna Gunnell Rivera came toddling into the dining room that connected with the ballroom. “Oh, goodness, it is *time*.” She shot Hattie a warning look. “And don’t you dare try to tell me to go sit down with my sweetheart. Brad knows as well as you should that I’ll be a lot more stressed sitting there and that would be worse for the baby.”

Hattie laughed and raised her hands. “You do your thing. We all are grateful to you.”

“Thank you,” Arianna said primly. “All right. Mother and father of the groom.”

Mason’s parents smiled at Kiera, and his mum blew her a kiss as they strode out. They were fabulous people. Of course they were. They’d raised Mason.

“Mother of the bride. Out you go.”

Her dad kissed her mum. “I’ll see you soon, beautiful,” the king whispered, but they all heard.

Her mum rushed to Kiera, looking gorgeous in her red lace dress. She grabbed both her hands and kissed her on each cheek. “I love you so much, Kiera. You are my girl through and through.”

Kiera teared up. She’d adored her mum Queen Anne, but she had lost her too young. Queen Madeline was her mum in every sense. “I love you.”

Her mum fanned her eyes. “No crying. Don’t mess up that makeup.”

Kiera laughed. “Oh, I’m definitely crying.”

“I’d better go.” Her mum gave her one more smile, then confidently pranced out the door.

“All right, you heap of bridesmaids and groomsmen, you had better know the order,” Arianna said, smiling. The bridesmaids were in red satin, a different cut than her mum and Mason’s mum, but the same color.

Princess Sunny and Princess Anne held hands and strutted out as only a teenager and a seven-year-old could do.

Mason’s siblings and their spouses went next. When he’d brought home not a doctor but a princess for dinner, they were all stunned and very gracious and welcoming to her, though apparently they had given him a crazy hard time when she wasn’t listening, saying he wasn’t good enough for her and it would never last. Mason assured her they’d get comfortable enough to tease her soon. She only wanted to assure them they

were wrong. Mason was incredible, everything she'd ever wanted, and they would last through eternity.

Kiera got a kiss from each of her brothers and their beautiful wives and overheard most of them admonish their children to 'be good' as they each walked out. Steffan and Hattie and Derek and Ellery carried their three- and six-month-olds, respectively.

Ray and Macey were second to last.

Ray looked her over. "Are you certain about this? I can still thrash and demote him."

"I'm certain, but I love you for protecting me."

"Love you too," he grunted out.

Macey hugged her tight and then they walked out.

Tristan and Jenn each hugged her. "I'm so proud of the woman you've become," Tristan told her.

"Thank you."

Her dad was teasing with his grandsons. He loved being 'King Papa.'

"You cute little monkeys ... ring bearers," Arianna called. "Line up."

Her dad helped them, and nine adorable little men, her nephews and Mason's, from two to seven years old in black suits, white shirts, and red ties, holding pillows aloft, lined up. Only the oldest, Tristan and Jenn's, Kelton, and Malik and Sophie's, Jasper, had rings on their pillows. Kelton had Kiera's gorgeous round two-karat diamond.

Mason had outdone himself with the ring and asking her, having Chad fly them to a snow-covered mountain valley where a huge tent was set up with a delicious dinner, music for dancing, and his chance to ask her to marry him with the perfect charming and alluring speech.

Jasper had Mason's comfort fit gold band for the 'simple and distinguished man' in Mason's words. He was always joking and making her smile.

“All right. Out you go,” Arianna instructed. “Look sharp there, boys.”

They looked proud and amazingly, nobody pushed or tripped each other and they all marched straight and cute out of the room.

“My darling flower girls,” Arianna crooned.

The eight nieces lined up, from eighteen months to six years old—four from Mason’s side, four from hers. They were absolutely darling in their white dresses with red flowers embroidered into the gossamer fabric and red silk bands around their waists.

They held hands in pairs and danced out.

Her dad strode up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist. “I love you, Kiera. You’ve always brought me and your mum ... both of your mums ... such joy and light and love.”

Kiera was crying then. She kissed his cheek. “I love you.”

“Okay. No crying. Out you go.” Arianna beamed at them as the music changed.

Kiera threaded her arm through her dad’s and sauntered out into the ballroom. Arianna had outdone herself, Kiera was certain, and on a short timetable, eight months pregnant, and during Christmas time with two young children.

She’d heard terms like winter wonderland and the most beautiful royal wedding of the century. More beautiful than even her dad and her mum’s had been eight years ago.

All Kiera could see was the groom.

Mason stood next to the vicar, a long line of groomsmen at his side, her bridesmaids stretching the other direction. He had a slight smirk on his lips, but then he saw her and his expression changed to a look of wonder and awe.

Kiera smiled, knowing he was going to tell her how beautiful she was, how she took his breath away, how she was his sun and light and love.

He broke with tradition and took off down the aisle toward her at a jog. The crowd tittered in surprise.

“Dad?” She glanced up at her kingly father.

He chuckled. “I expected nothing less.”

“A little help. This dress is huge.”

He laughed louder. Then he crouched and rested his clasped hands on his thigh. Her dad was still so strong. Kiera tossed her bouquet to somebody in the crowd. She used her dad’s shoulder to push herself up, then his leg and hands to launch herself into the air with a big boost.

She did a perfect gainer, thankful she’d thought to wear white fitted Lady Fit running shorts under her dress. She landed right where she’d intended to, in Mason’s strong and waiting arms.

He chuckled and pushed her dress back into place, cradling her against his chest.

“You are perfect for me,” he whispered, still staring at her with that mix of awe and wonder mingled with adoration.

“I know.”

He grinned and then captured her mouth with his.

Kiera was sure the audience was tittering or laughing, and maybe some more traditional guests were aghast. She didn’t notice any of it. Mason’s mouth was on hers and she was already in paradise.

The wedding of the century could wait.

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Thank you for reading Mason and Kiera’s story. I hope you love them as much as I do!

Read on for an unedited excerpt of my newest book, *Impossible Treasure, A Chance for Charity #1*.

Hugs and Merry Christmas,

Cami

# *Impossible Treasure: A Chance for Charity*

## *#1*

### Chapter One

Brylee Auburn placed her trembling hand into the hand the pilot offered and climbed out of the helicopter, surrounded by the verdant beauty of a tropical island's towering mountains. She'd flown commercially to St. Lucia where this helicopter had been waiting to transport her to an 'unknown and remote location'.

That was all she'd been able to pry out of the pilot. She released his hand, took a few steps away, and then turned back to yell thank you, though she doubted he heard her over the helicopter rotors.

The wind whipped the end of her ponytail into her face. The pilot gave her a friendly wave and a smile before disappearing back into the helicopter. She automatically waved in return. Then she wrapped her hand around her hair to secure it, and turned to face this insane challenge.

Unprepared for anything that was about to happen, she felt exposed without her cell phone, purse, and laptop. She'd been allowed to bring her favorite cinna-mint lip balm. Fingering the tube in her pocket to make sure it hadn't disappeared, she felt marginally reassured.

Nope. She really didn't feel reassured at all. Lip balm. Against unknown challenges, dangers, and obstacles, with a mysterious retired special ops hero as her partner. The tough guy would realize instantly how pathetically unqualified she was to survive in the wild and tackle any risky physical trials.



Could she keep the farce up long enough to prevent him from requesting an upgrade in his partner? How far into the show did they have to be to make it more cost-efficient to keep her rather than trade her out?

Brylee had foolishly promised herself she'd do anything to protect children. This was extreme, even for her level of dedication, but a million dollars ... it would change her charity's entire landscape and her opportunities to rescue more families would abound. Maybe she'd even hire some military heroes of her own. She quite fancied tough, military heroes. In theory. She hadn't met many in real life.

Her palms were clammy and her shoulders tight as she walked away from the helicopter, past another helicopter with a pilot who nodded to her, and toward a clearing in the thick forest. She had no clue what kinds of trees could produce such huge leaves and how bushes and undergrowth could be so thick she couldn't even see through it. A towering waterfall cascaded over mossy green, emptying into a small pool to her left. A misty spray poofed from the pool, making the air even more humid.

To her right—a cameraman, a dark-haired man with corded muscles displayed as his arms were crossed at his chest and a half-smile decorated his handsome face, a gorgeous and famous blonde lady in a formal gown and heels, and a guy who looked like a not-very-approachable Thor with his own set of muscles in a tailored suit. The intriguing crew waited for her next to the creek below the waterfall.

Military hero. She studied the two men and prayed the dark-haired guy was her partner, co-worker, co-conspirator, protector ... she had no idea what to call him. He was a bit standoffish in his stance but at least his dark eyes looked warm. He looked really good—capable of protecting her and helping her earn the million dollars for Liberation Crew.

Not-nice Thor was as well-built as the dark-haired hero, but she hoped the suit was a sign that he was with Mercedes. There was something about the blond man—chilly and unfriendly. She shouldn't compare him to Thor. She liked

Thor. She admired all the Avengers, in particular Natasha . She longed to be like the brave, funny redhead.

The helicopter she'd arrived on swooped off into the air. Her ears were full of cotton and the waterfall was loud, but she could still hear the show's host, the billionaire heiress Mercedes Belle, call out, "She's here! Yay!" The beautiful blonde clapped her hands together and gracefully swept toward her, in five-inch heels. Impressive.

Brylee figured she should walk the woman's direction, though she yearned to wave the helicopter back down and beg the pilot to take her safely back to Texas. Her family, friends, and employees would understand. She was fearless rescuing children from traffickers but this tropical paradise had unknown dangers she'd never experienced. Spiders, snakes, jumping off that waterfall?

She shuddered. Death may be coming very soon. Had she said sincere enough goodbyes to friends and family? The foundation probably wouldn't keep going without her. None of her crew were passionate enough about it to spend the hours and supplement it financially like she did.

Dang, she should've prepared better.

She stopped a foot away from Mercedes. The lady kept coming, grasping her upper arms then brushing each of her cheeks in an air kiss. Her rich floral perfume was as beautiful as she was, it overpowered even the smells of damp leaves and tropical flowers.

Brylee was underdressed in a comfortable t-shirt, running pants and shoes, her long hair in a ponytail. Mercedes looked like a supermodel, her makeup a work of art. The silver dress molded to very large curves upstairs and far too skinny limbs on the bottom. She was gorgeous, but Brylee wasn't certain proportions like that were humanly possible.

"Brylee Auburn, you are the most gorgeous redhead on the earth," Mercedes said. "I love how your hair matches your last name."

Brylee had read through the emails she'd received numerous times. She hadn't quite understood what they'd meant about 'be prepared for exaggerations and inflammatory statements from your show's host. Use your own unique flair to reply and make the show even more interesting'.

When Mercedes winked slyly for only her to see she realized the 'inflammatory statements' were only beginning. Most people probably wouldn't even take Mercedes' words as a shot, but Brylee hated being teased about her hair and had typed that in on the paperwork under, Sensitive Subjects. Her ex-boyfriend had told her he'd stay with her if she dyed her hair and the 'average blond' he'd replaced her with was equal to her as a 'gorgeous redhead' because men didn't like redheads.

She pushed Mark's jerky words away. It appeared even the prelude to dying for her cause wasn't going to be easy or fun. She shouldn't have given them any ammo in the sensitive subject section.

"I'd say 'flaming redhead' not auburn," the blond Thor muttered to the cameraman just loud enough for her to hear.

Brylee's back straightened as Mercedes and the dark-haired hunk both shot the imposing blond dirty looks.

Luckily she didn't have to think how to respond to the jerk as Mercedes continued, "Ooh! You will be perfect. Absolutely perfect. The camera is going to eat you up!"

Mercedes grinned as if they were best of friends. Brylee had always been impressed with what she'd seen publicized about the generous sweetheart. Her family money was insane. She'd taken her monthly annuities and become even more famous and wealthy as an influencer and talk show host, of course creating her own perfume, clothing, and jewelry lines.

"Are you truly from Hickville, Texas?" Mercedes asked. "I couldn't believe it was really called that. I researched you and your town. I so admire you rising above the demographic, getting your doctorate degree, and then moving back home to help your family, friends, and thousands of refugees. Incredible."

Brylee thought she should say thank you, the 'demographic' was a bit of a shot but her town was depressed economically and since the children weren't required to go to school past the eighth grade, some of them never even attempted to get a high school diploma and simply worked their family's land or got a factory job. It was sad and Brylee tried to help and inspire, but her main focus was on rescuing refugees pouring across the border and at desperate risk of being trafficked.

"Southern rednecks," the blond muttered. "They don't even go to school."

"Watch it," the dark-haired guy shot at him, his arm muscles bulging as he clenched them tightly across his broad chest.

The blond gave him an ugly look, but luckily shut his mouth.

"You truly have my utmost respect," Mercedes reiterated, as if trying to cover the jerk's underhanded statement. Brylee wondered though, if the man's comments were scripted. Make him look like the jerk and Mercedes the angel, but still stir up conflict? It would make sense.

Sneaking a glance at her military counterpart, she saw his lips had drawn into a firm line and there was a flicker of annoyance in his dark eyes.

Brylee felt more than a flicker of annoyance. She imagined even though Mercedes had disapproved of the man's comments, she may have secretly encouraged them to increase her new reality show's ratings with some conflict right off the bat. Brylee's gut churned. She didn't appreciate disparagement of her hometown. The people of Hickville were her people and she would defend them.

"I am from Hickville, but I don't rightly know about the school thang," she put on a thick 'hick' accent. Different accents made the children laugh. She'd become somewhat an expert at a few of them and had thought of using the talent of sorts on the show when she'd read to be prepared to use her own unique flair. "I personally had to stop ma schoolin' after I

completed a doctorate degree in human relations and religious studies. I didn't learn much, not my letters or anythin' hard like that." She smiled sweetly. She almost threw in a 'bless your heart' but refrained. "Though those teachers did try an learn me that you're supposed to be kind to your neighbor, and a few more high-falutin' ideas about charity. Those theories must notta caught on outside of Texas's fair borders." She glanced at Shawn for emphasis.

A burst of laughter from both Mercedes and the military man brought a grin to Brylee's face. Brylee shared a conspiratorial smile with the tough, dark-haired man before focusing back on Mercedes. The Thor guy was glowering but said nothing. He was intimidating, petty, and became less good-looking every moment. She wouldn't think of him as Thor any more, that was insulting to the handsome Avenger. At least her military hero could laugh with her.

"Ah, I love you," Mercedes gushed. "'Charity never faileth'. My Grams used to always say that line to me if I got snippy." She leaned in and whispered. "I hope you and the kind and generous people of Hickville will forgive Shawn for goading you. I'd heard you could do accents and had a wicked wit and the producers wanted to bring that out right up front."

Mercedes gave her an impulsive hug. Brylee still thought her perfume was too strong but she immediately liked her.

"Don't apologize," Brylee said, hugging her back. "You got me. I almost threw a bless your heart in there."

Mercedes chuckled and the military man smiled.

"Come now, I didn't do anything bad enough to warrant that from a southern beauty." She winked. In spite of her setting up Shawn's goading, Brylee really did like her. How a drop-dead gorgeous billionaire heiress could come across as genuine and welcoming was beyond her. Besides a few college associates, she'd never met anyone who could claim true wealth.

Mercedes linked their arms and turned her toward the three men. "Let's introduce everyone and get this party started." She

smiled and sauntered toward Shawn, the cameraman, and the dark-haired military guy.

Brylee kept up, pasting on a confident smile of her own that she wasn't feeling. Despite Mercedes showing she was on her team, the laughter from the military man and the welcoming smile he now gave her, all of her insecurities washed over her.

She'd thought Shawn was intimidating, but the dark-haired avenging angel was one handsome and buff-looking dude. Despite the slight smile on his intriguing lips, it was obvious he could crush her without breaking a sweat.

How was she going to be an equal partner to this specimen of a man?

*"The Brylee Auburn, creator of Liberation Crew, has established a safe house where immigrants can be protected from human traffickers while they wait for their sponsors or safe transportation is lined up to unite them with their sponsors."* Mercedes spoke her lines as if Brylee had created a cure for cancer. Her voice was full of emotion and fanfare. Her smile was sincere, glowing, and beautiful. No wonder she was lauded as the most beautiful, wealthy, and generous woman of their day. "Beautiful Brylee ... we are in awe of your generous gifts of time, talent, and ingenuity. Thank you for inspiring all of us and blessing the lives of so many." She bowed to her.

"Thank you," Brylee managed, her throat suddenly thick. She worked countless hours, using every resource and idea she was blessed with and received many thanks from the people she helped, but to be recognized from such an illustrious lady, and to know the world was going to see the praise, made her humble and a little emotional. "Thank you for your generosity and offering this chance to help so many more than I ever could on my own."

"It's an honor, a privilege, and my small way to make a mark on this world." Mercedes' teal-blue eyes focused in on her and her gaze was deeply sincere. This lady had a lot of depth and was a very generous soul.

Mercedes grinned at Brylee and then turned to the military hero.

“Now ... Let me introduce Captain Cash Trapper, special ops captain and creator of Healthy Life. This one man has established numerous gyms in inner cities throughout America where retired vets can exercise and spar free of charge but even more importantly have the opportunity to give back and work with at-risk youth. Cash believes instilling healthy lifestyle habits during childhood and teenage years will translate into success in other areas of their life, and we believe he’s right.” Mercedes beamed at Cash. “Well, just look at him. I’d subscribe to whatever theory he’s got.”

Shawn gave an audible grunt of disapproval, his blue eyes flashing.

“Thank you, Miss Belle.” Cash’s voice was warm and his dark eyes softened as he met Mercedes’ shining gaze.

Brylee wondered if the two of them had a relationship or at least some history.

She glanced at Shawn. His jaw was clenched tight and he glowered at Cash. So Shawn liked Mercedes and so did Cash? Brylee wouldn’t fancy watching the two men go at each other. She’d imagine two bulls goring each other would be less intense. It was amazing they could stand feet apart and not automatically launch into a brawl.

Cash refocused on Brylee. He stepped forward and extended his hand to her.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

He didn’t have a Southern accent but he’d obviously lived in the South, or maybe his mama had simply raised him up right.

Brylee pressed her hand against his and as his warm palm melded with hers and his strong fingers closed around the back of her hand she felt ... surrounded by him. It was only a handshake, but it was an incredible moment. This was a man who would be there for the woman he loved. Not drop her like a hot rock because she had red hair.

Cash's hand held hers while his deep brown eyes captured hers. The smoky, compelling, and intense look in those soulful eyes of his was as incredible as his handshake.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, fine sir, and look forward to intellectually stimulating conversation and the use of your superior muscle mass to protect and inspire me on our shared perilous adventures to secure money for our noble and charitable purposes."

His jaw went slack as she spoke and his grip on her softened. He'd obviously recognized her heavy Southern accent earlier was a farce, but he hadn't been prepared for high-handed sarcasm spoken with her professor voice.

A deep laugh burst out of him and she couldn't resist sharing in his mirth.

"I think you and I will do just fine on our 'shared perilous adventures'," he said with a grin.

She'd gotten his approval. Yay! How soon would he regret it? Maybe the challenges wouldn't be as sketchy as she feared. She could keep him laughing. He could be the brawn. Maybe after a hard day of adventuring, they could get to know each other and she could touch one of those muscles, offer a shoulder massage? Hmm. His smooth, rounded muscles were ... yummy-looking. Was he fascinated with Mercedes, or was that simply a kind look he'd given the famous lady earlier? She scoffed at herself. Men didn't look at women like Mercedes with ... kindness, more leering and desire for the most appealing and wealthy bombshell currently on earth.

In an airy voice as if she were an advertisement for an emotional healing retreat, she said, "I am forecasting and delightfully envisioning only positive karma, clear chakras, and soul-edifying light on our mystical journey."

He laughed, even louder. Then he winked at her. Brylee felt that wink and that laughter clear down to her toes. He appreciated her accents and version of humor that some people thought was odd. She instantly felt accepted by him.



Releasing her from the handshake he turned her to face Mercedes with a gentle hand on her lower back. Then he removed his hand from her back and slid his palm against hers, threading their fingers together. She looked up at him, startled. It was a bold move from someone she didn't know and it felt absolutely incredible.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Let's face whatever challenge our sweet host is going to throw at us as a united team. Us against the world." He paused and stiffened. Shocked by his own words?

She feared he would pull away. Bending around so she could meet his gaze she searched his. She was lost in the depth of his brown eyes. Smiling, she hoped he wouldn't pull away.

"Forgive me ..." He swallowed. "That was too bold."

"You are *ridiculously* bold," she hoped he could hear the teasing in her voice. He smiled slightly and she liked it.

She arched up. Her lips brushed his jawline and made warm tingles spread through her. "I appreciate ya deeply," she said, hoping he could see that she meant it. His support, his hand in hers, his boldness lifted her. She could do this with him by her side. "Your team sounds like the most ideal spot in the world."

They shared a smile that touched her clear through.

She hadn't come looking for romance on this shared adventure, but this guy shouted charming and appealing hero like no one she'd ever met. 'Us against the world.' He'd actually said that.

He smiled, his cheeks crinkling as he squeezed her hand. Then he straightened and faced the show's creator and host, who was grinning so widely at the two of them she could've been a proud Texas 'Mimi'.

"All right, Miss Belle," Cash said easily. "We're ready to walk the gauntlet you've schemed for us. Brylee and I against the world, or at least against this week of challenges you have lined up."

Brylee liked his cheek and there was no doubt he was a brave soul who could back up that bravery. She glanced at Mercedes. Could this sweet and welcoming billionaire really have planned a gauntlet of dangerous challenges for them? It seemed out of character, but Brylee didn't really know the lady. Mercedes had plenty of social media and regular media attention, but she'd probably schemed a lot of drama to ensure the show would be a smashing success.

“Ah, you two are seriously my favorite couple ever!” She clapped her hands together. Her long, pink nails matched her perfect pink lips. Brylee would think she was a diva, but she'd seen too many kind acts from the lady online, and had felt her genuine kindness this past fifteen minutes.

Cash stiffened at that, but thankfully didn't pull his hand free.

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# *The Royal Captain and the Designer*

## Chapter One

Faith Radisson peeked around the corner of the solid mahogany wood doorframe. Her heart took off at a gallop.

“He’s coming,” she whispered to her co-conspirator, Princess Kiera August.

They hid in the elaborate ballroom, quiet on this early December morning. Outside the towering Augustine castle, the world was picture perfect—high mountains covered with green pine trees and bare-limbed deciduous trees heaped with snow. Inside the ornate and spacious castle, decorated like a fantasy for Christmas, Faith’s world would be perfect—as soon as they waylaid Captain Levi Favor and talked him into a snowball fight. Faith had it on good authority that he was finished with his shift and headed home.

She would love to see his home. Rumor had it he lived on a farm out in the gorgeous valley. He had his own home, but he took care of his aging parents and their farm. Of course he did. His life was focused on caring for and protecting others.

Before she could meet his parents and see his home, she had to convince him to date her. She’d met Levi over a year ago on her first visit to the royal family’s palace in Augustine. The delightful Kiera had talked Levi and Lieutenant Mason Henson into guarding them on a hike through the forest to the waterfall.

Faith had been enamored with the captain since that first meeting, but regrettably, something held him back. He would

initially respond to her flirtations or meet her gaze with a smolder in his dark-brown eyes, and she had only seen him truly smile for her. It was thrilling to see the impervious, brave captain let down his shield. If only for a moment.

A moment or two was usually all she got. He'd school his reaction and be respectful but keep his distance. The only gossip she'd gotten out of anybody was he'd buried a sister and a fiancée. What heartbreak. She could see the pain inside him, but he impressed her. He chose to protect, serve, and work hard instead of giving up or wallowing in grief.

Faith knew loss—deep loss that only was manageable with loads of prayer, faith, and listing positives in her mind. She'd experienced her Savior's healing grace over and over again. Her oldest sister Grace was in heaven, and Faith knew she was watching over her. It was Grace who had taught her to pray and make positive lists as a young child.

Her Savior and her Grace would help her heal her wounded hero. She was determined that this Christmas, invited to stay in Augustine for the entire month to celebrate the marriage of her brother-in-law Chad's loving mum Madeline to the incredibly kind and welcoming King Nolan, she would get Levi to fall for her. Maybe it was an impossible quest, but Faith did not despair. Despite being deserted by her parents at twelve, losing Grace to a brutal murderer two years ago, and almost being shot and killed by the foul Ramone Pitcher last year, she'd seen miracles and would never stop believing.

Levi's footfalls approached. The strong, determined step was unmistakable, and her heart beat in rhythm with his approach. She wiped her sweaty palms on the black nylon, polyester, and elastine blend Lady Fit running pants she wore. Pants she'd designed for comfort, a flattering fit, and moisture-wicking. She also wore a pale blue fitted T-shirt under a white running jacket. All Lady Fit, of course. Her long blonde hair was loose, her makeup carefully understated. It would be obvious to any female she wasn't headed to or from the gym, but she wanted to look pretty, fit, and casual. Hopefully she achieved that objective in Levi's mind.

She prayed today was the day she and Kiera convinced him to spend time with them. The snowball fight was only an excuse, but nobody could say no to the adorable thirteen-year-old princess, beloved youngest child of the August family. If Levi was that hardened, maybe there was no chance to soften him.

Faith edged to the center of the doorframe. Kiera moved with her, giggling quietly at their ploy. She adored the young princess. She'd overheard Hope telling Madeline that Faith enjoyed Kiera so much because she was still youthful and a child at heart. While that was partially true, Hope spent so much time with Kiera because she'd also lost her mum at a young age and knew how it felt to live in a world of grownups. Though her sisters were only two and four years older than her, they'd all been forced to grow up quick when their parents left them. Faith had delved deep into her creative mind and mostly shut the real world out. She liked her make-believe world, but she'd discovered she loved people as well. Especially Kiera, all the royals, her new brother-in-law and his mum, and of course the enticing Captain Levi Favor.

Being here at the castle for Christmas was a dream come true. The royal fantasy dream was fabulous, but it was the complete, loving, and faith-filled family dream-turned-reality that she could never get enough of.

As she stepped forward to intercept Levi, she got a hard shove to her upper back from behind. Stumbling, she slammed into Levi's side.

He jolted and turned. Thankfully, his reaction was to wrap his strong arms around her rather than letting her fall in a heap to the hardwood floor.

"Faith?" he whispered, his dark eyes full of her. It was a husky, beautiful whisper, tinged with that fabulous Augustine accent that created more yearning inside to never leave this spot.

She wrapped her arms tightly around his firm lower back and blinked up at him. "Forgive me. I had a little devious shove from behind." She smiled to show that no harm was

done. Bless Kiera. Faith hadn't known it was coming, but it had been timed perfectly and Faith couldn't complain about the results.

Levi released her, deftly unwrapped her arms from around him, ushered her behind him, and said, "Stay here while I search for the perpetrator."

"Levi!" she said in exasperation, forcing herself not to get distracted by his lyrical voice. Faith loved America, but this man with his Augustinian accent could easily convince her to trade nationalities. "It was Kiera. She was only trying—"

Levi whipped around to face her. His dark eyes pierced through her, sharp and probing. "Trying?"

Faith bit her lip. How to explain without sounding as desperate as she was to get his attention? Positives—Levi was right here, Kiera was on her side, and Christmas magical romance could still happen.

She looked over his tall, manly frame, the dark eyes framed by thick lashes and brows, the shadow of a beard on his jaw. He was enthralling. She'd never encountered his equal, and unfortunately, he looked at her as if concerned for her sanity—or maybe as if he thought of her as a child. She wasn't certain, but either way, it could explain why he kept his distance.

Glancing down, she lost her courage and realized she needed a different scheme than a snowball fight to entice a soldier this manly and perfect. She could only imagine how many distinguished and proper Augustinian women pursued Captain Levi.

"Faith?" he questioned, and then he gently tilted her chin up with just the edge of his forefinger. It was a simple touch, nothing to faint about, but the warmth of his finger and the depth of his gaze made her head spin.

They studied each other. A long, beautiful moment where hearts connected, birds flew back north during the winter to sing for them alone, and heaven smiled down on their future union.

He cleared his throat, yanked his hand back, and clasped his hands behind his back. Even through his black uniform, she could see the muscles outlined in his chest, shoulders, and arms. She designed feminine workout gear, not male. Looking over Levi, she created in her mind the ideal pattern and fabric blend to showcase his irresistible frame and well-developed muscles.

“Come on, Captain Levi!” Kiera performed a front flip through the double doors of the ballroom and launched into their space in the hallway. The ‘Wild Child,’ as her brothers still called her, could rarely walk into or out of a room. “We want you to have a snowball fight with us.” Her blue eyes lit up, and Faith was grateful the princess was firmly on her side. Nobody could resist Kiera.

Levi bowed, military stiff, to the princess, then glanced from Kiera to Faith and back. “A snowball fight?” he repeated, as if he’d never heard of such a thing.

“Yes.” Kiera lifted her brows. “You make balls of snow and you hurl them at each other.”

“Ah, I see.” Levi’s lips tilted in a half smirk.

“Brilliant. Faith and I made a fort in the gardens yesterday. With all the trellises, benches, and fountains everywhere, there are lots of spots to hide. We’re each on our own team. It’ll be epic! Though *you* might have bruises. I have impeccable aim.” Kiera’s blue eyes twinkled.

For just a moment, Faith could see the raw longing in Levi’s dark eyes as he focused on her. He wanted to be with her; he wanted to do something carefree and fun. Then that familiar shutter fell over his emotions, and he gave an insincere smile. “It does sound epic, Princess Kiera, but apologies. I have a meeting at the military training center.”

“Ah, bosh!” Kiera wrinkled her nose. “You adults are only fun in the two hours after dinner. All day long it’s work, work, work. Except for Faith.” She beamed at her. “Faith is my best friend and always has time for me.”

“Ah, right back at you.” Faith grinned. Little did Kiera know, Faith worked until late in the night and any hour that Kiera was in school or otherwise occupied so she could be fun when Kiera was home.

She focused back on Levi, and the look in his eyes was interesting. He thought she was whimsical, cute, carefree, and definitely too young for him. Faith prayed she was reading that wrong, but she felt she knew him so well.

“I hope your snowball fight is epic.” He nodded to Faith and bowed to Kiera. “Pardon me.”

Even with the dismissal, Faith’s stomach swirled with warmth simply from him looking at her and using the power of his accented voice on her.

He turned to go. Kiera gave Faith a look of desperation that Faith felt to her soul. Positives—he hadn’t walked away yet. There was still a chance. Kiera was on her side and an expert at getting what she wanted.

“We’ll walk you to the garage,” Kiera declared.

He swallowed, obviously not wanting to agree, but bowed slightly. An obedient royal guard for certain. “Thank you, Princess Kiera.”

Bless Kiera.

Her young friend rushed to Levi’s right side and linked her arm through his. She was almost five feet tall, and he had to be at least six-three. The height discrepancy and the muscular soldier overshadowing the young teenager was adorable.

“You come on his other side,” Kiera instructed Faith. “Captain Levi will *lo-ove* escorting two beautiful ladies.”

Her brother-in-law Chad would’ve said something charming about how beautiful they were. Captain Levi only studied her as she sidled in and slid her hand through the crook of his arm. She didn’t know if he loved it, but she savored every moment.

Positives—her hand grasping his arm, the bump of his bicep pronounced, his sandalwood and cedar scent. He



smelled like autumn in these incredible mountains. She didn't need charming lines. She only needed him. This stoic man was heroic and the perfect fit for her. He could protect, love, and ground her. She could inspire him and make him smile.

She hoped.

Their gazes locked. Faith was so close to him she could see the pulse point in his neck. Was it racing for her? She swallowed and prayed she wasn't the only one affected by this simple touch.

He focused forward and escorted them down the hall. His bicep tightened under her hand, and he kept himself military straight as they walked. Faith feared this entire idea had backfired. What if he held himself aloof from her because he had relegated her to Kiera's age in his mind? What if she was simply too inexperienced to date a real man and a captain in the military as well? She'd never had the time or inclination to date. She'd never known men like him existed.

"Are you excited for Christmas?" Kiera asked, breaking the silence that only their footsteps filled.

There was a pause as he seemed to search for an answer. "I like the Christmas Market on the Traverse River Walk," he said carefully, as if choosing his words. "What about you, little princess? Are you excited for Christmas?"

"Of course I am!"

They reached the stairs and descended slowly, arms linked. Faith wasn't about to pull away.

"My dad is going to marry Chad's mum—my mum now too," she sang out. "And the Rindlesbachers are finally *dead* so we can play and host parties without worrying they'll try to explode us."

"Kiera," Faith whispered, stunned by her words.

"Sorry." Kiera shrugged, unrepentant. "I've heard lots of people say that."

"She's not wrong." Levi smiled down at Faith.

Positives—that smile, his touch. Her knees went weak, and she leaned into him. He held her arm more securely.

“And the best news of all is Faith is going to stay with me for one entire month!”

“All month?” Levi’s brow squiggled, and his muscles stiffened against her.

“Yes, sir,” Kiera sang out. “By the end of the month, I’ll teach her to climb up the side of the castle better than Spiderman and race me down the poles.”

Faith refused to slide down the brass pipes that ran the length of the exterior walls of the twelve-story castle. Kiera refused to give up on trying to coerce her into it.

“I’m not in favor of that plan,” Levi said to Kiera, a stern note in his deliciously accented voice.

“Favor?” Kiera giggled. “Because you’re Captain Favor?”

They reached the lowest level and walked toward the garages.

“Wait,” Kiera protested. “You’re not in favor of Faith staying with us all month? Why not? Faith’s the best.”

Faith’s heart raced. He didn’t want her here? Her hopes were more far-fetched than she’d believed.

“I’m not in favor of Faith risking her life climbing the castle or sliding down those tubes of death.” Levi expertly skirted the question of wanting her here.

“I would never kill my favorite friend,” Kiera insisted.

“I’m in the business of protecting all of you,” Levi said. “I am telling you it’s a no on climbing up or sliding down the exterior of the castle. Especially when everything is covered in ice.”

Faith appreciated him protecting her, and was impressed he could stand up to even Princess Kiera.

“Ah, you’re no fun,” Kiera moaned.

“Thank you,” Faith whispered to Levi. “You’ve saved my life.”

He grinned down at her. His smile was perfect. The grin took it to the next level. The effect was beautifully inspiring and devastating to her peace of mind. She would sketch that grin as soon as possible.

They reached the door that led to the massive garage. Levi gently disentangled his arms from each of their grasp and backed toward the door. “Thank you for escorting me.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” Kiera waved, turned, and sprinted down the hall. “I’ll be in the kitchen.” Then she somehow ran up the side of the wall and did a twisting flip off of it. She laughed happily and dodged through one of the kitchen doors.

“That girl.” Levi shook his head, pushing a hand through his short hair. “It’s hard enough keeping her safe from external influences, then she has to risk her life every other minute doing crazy stunts.”

“It’s impressive how you protect everyone, but ...” Faith tilted her head and studied him. “You aren’t a big risk-taker, are you?”

“Me?” His brows lifted.

She nodded.

“I rock climb, ride dirt bikes, paraglide, and cliff dive. Why?”

“Wait a minute. You’re a crazy maniac and that’s okay, but Kiera can’t take a risk?”

“It’s quite different for a lowly soldier to take a risk than the favorite princess.” His gaze traveled over her. “And I definitely don’t want you taking any risks.”

His gaze had made her warm all over, but his words made her want to defy him.

“Why not?” She jutted her chin out and planted her hands on her hips.

“You are young, innocent, and a bright light, Faith. The world needs the illumination only you can provide. You have your whole life ahead of you. Don’t ruin it by following Kiera down a tube of death and killing yourself.”

The concern in his dark gaze was touching, as if he cared deeply for her. There was a darkness in his eyes that scared her. Why wouldn’t anyone tell her how his sister or fiancée died? She also didn’t like the way he acted as if she were some young, innocent child.

“How old do you think I am?” she demanded.

He looked her over, his dark eyes unreadable now. Finally he shrugged. “Far be it from me to hazard a guess at a woman’s age.”

Even his romantic accent couldn’t distract her from being annoyed. She stalked toward him. He was probably eight inches taller than her and double her weight, but he straightened and backed into the wall at her approach.

Faith reached him and poked a finger into his chest. His well-muscled, lovely chest.

“I am not a child,” she said, drawing herself up to her full height. “I am twenty-seven years old, and I am a highly successful millionaire, head designer, and part-owner of Lady Fit.” She could add she’d basically raised herself as her parents had been pathetic and her sisters busy trying to keep her fed and clothed while they started their business.

His eyebrows rose. “You should be very proud of your success.”

“I am, thank you very much.” She studied him, but he gave her nothing else. “How old are *you*?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Two years,” she spluttered, pushing a clenched fist at his chest. She rather liked touching it. “Two years apart and you treat me like I’m Kiera’s age. Like I’m some little girl.”

Levi’s gaze traveled over her. It was smoky hot, and her knees went weak. Then he wrapped his hand around her fist.

His eyes dropped to their hands. He slowly, gently opened her clenched fist one finger at a time. Lining up their palms, he stared at her paler, much smaller fingers against his roughened brown palm.

Faith didn't move, could hardly breathe. The simple touch grounded and lifted her.

Positives—Levi touching her, his delicious scent.

A tremble went through him. "So small," he murmured.

A few beats passed, and then he focused on her. "Faith, I realize you aren't a child." Pulling his hand from hers, he pushed it through his hair and then dropped it to his side. "Believe me, I'd be a blind fool not to notice that."

Hope blossomed in her chest, and she gave him a tentative smile. Levi had noticed her. He didn't think of her as a child.

"But you are whimsical, creative, beautiful, and innocent."

Those were all good things. Right? She wasn't nearly as innocent as everyone believed. She'd seen death and devastation, had been scarred by those who should've loved her. But that didn't mean she had to take the negative path in life or let the dark moments stain her.

Levi let out a frustrated grunt and shoved his hand through his hair. His dark eyes were tortured as he looked at her as if it were the last time he'd have the opportunity to do so.

"Good day, Miss Radisson." He nodded to her, pushed the garage door open, and stormed through it.

The door banged closed like Faith's hopes. Miss Radisson? Ugh! Despite some beautiful moments, her dreams of Levi wanting to date her took a hit.

How would she ever get Levi to return her feelings?

Positives—none that she could think of.

Her mind scrambled. She always found positives. Even when Grace had been murdered, at least she'd had Hope.

Positives—her sister and all of their new extended family loved her. It was Christmas, and Levi had willingly touched

her and granted her his smile.

Then he'd walked away. That was definitely, definitely a negative.



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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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