



# THE WOUNDED GUARD AND THE ROYAL *Stylist*

Christmas in  
Augustine #2



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**CAMI CHECKETTS**

*The Wounded Guard and the Royal Stylist*

SWEET ROMANCE WITH SUSPENSE

CHRISTMAS IN AUGUSTINE

BOOK TWO

# CAMI CHECKETTS



*Birch River*  
PUBLISHING

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*The Wounded Guard and the Royal Stylist: Christmas in Augustine #2*

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Editing: Daniel Coleman and Ceara Nobles

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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>.

# *Also by Cami Checketts*

## **A Chance for Charity**

*Impossible Treasure*

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## **Christmas in Augustine**

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*The Wounded Guard and the Royal Stylist*

*The Impulsive Princess and the Soldier*

## **Sweet Royal Romance Suspense**

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*The Brave Prince and the Teacher*

*The Doctor Prince and the Outsider*

*The Ninja Prince and the Investigator*

*The Charming Prince and the Single Mum*

*The Crown Prince and the Traitor*

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*The Grieving King and the Emissary*

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*Matchmaking the Entertainer and the Firefighter*

*Matchmaking the Model and the Beast*

*Matchmaking the Spy and the Heiress*

*Matchmaking the Bodyguard and the Philanthropist*

## **Summit Valley Christmas Romance**

*His Perfect Match for Christmas*

*His Ski Resort Overrun for Christmas*

*His Cabin Invaded for Christmas*

*His Unexpected Wedding for Christmas*

## **Delta Family Romances**

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*Abandoned*

*Committed*

*Betrayed*

*Devoted*

*Compromised*

*Endangered*

*Accepted*

*Returned*

*Devastated*

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*Loving the Athlete*

*Loving the Rancher*

*Loving the Coach*

*Loving the Contractor*

*Loving the Sheriff*

*Loving the Entertainer*

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**Secret Valley Romance**

*Sister Pact*

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**Survive the Romance**

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*Romancing the Island*

*Romancing the River*



*Romancing the Spartan Race*

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**Billionaire Boss Romance**

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*Her Prince Charming Boss*

**Hawk Brothers Romance**

*The Determined Groom*

*The Stealth Warrior*

*Her Billionaire Boss Fake Fiance*

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**Texas Titan Romance**

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*Cozumel Escape*

*Cancun Getaway*

*Trusting the Billionaire*

*How to Kiss a Billionaire*

*Onboard for Love*

*Shadows in the Curtain*

**Billionaire Bride Pact Romance**

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*The Feisty One*

*The Independent One*

*The Protective One*

*The Faithful One*

*The Daring One*

**Park City Firefighter Romance**

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*Reluctant Rescue*

*Stone Cold Sparks*

*Snowed-In for Christmas*

**Echo Ridge Romance**

*Christmas Makeover*

*Last of the Gentlemen*

*My Best Man's Wedding*

*Change of Plans*

*Counterfeit Date*

**Snow Valley**

*Full Court Devotion: Christmas in Snow Valley*

*A Touch of Love: Summer in Snow Valley*

*Running from the Cowboy: Spring in Snow Valley*

*Light in Your Eyes: Winter in Snow Valley*

*Romancing the Singer: Return to Snow Valley*

*Fighting for Love: Return to Snow Valley*

**Other Books by Cami**

*Seeking Mr. Debonair: Jane Austen Pact*

*Seeking Mr. Dependable: Jane Austen Pact*

*Saving Sycamore Bay*

*Oh, Come On, Be Faithful*

*Protect This*

*Blog This*

*Redeem This*

*The Broken Path*

*Dead Running*

*Dying to Run*

*Fourth of July*

*Love & Loss*

*Love & Lies*

## *Books and 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 and their current status as a couple.

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 - Married in a quiet ceremony at the castle that was interrupted by Prime Minister Shule trying to find Hattie Ballard.

#2 - The Brave Prince and the Teacher - Prince Curtis August and Aliya Drummond - Married in their cabin in the mountains, expecting their first baby.

#3 - The Doctor Prince and the Outsider - Doctor Prince Steffan August and Hattie Ballard - Eloped in a remote village; living in Traverse near the hospital.

#4 - The Ninja Prince and the Investigator - Prince Derek August and Ellery Monson - Married at the castle; traveling with American Ninja Warrior and her mom and aunt.

#5 - The Charming Prince and the Single Mum - Prince Malik August and Sophie Pederson - Married in the castle

courtyard, reception and dancing interrupted by a bomb threat; living in Traverse with their daughter Sunny.

#6 - The Crown Prince and the Traitor - Crown Prince Tristan August and Jennifer Shule - Married in the castle's ballroom at Christmastime; living in the castle; expecting their first baby.

#7 - The Police Chief and the Musician - Chief Jensen Allendale and Livvy Moser - Married

#8 - The Royal Major and the Personal Trainer - Major Chad Prescott and Hope Radisson - Married

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

### **Christmas in Augustine:**

#1 The Royal Captain and the American Businesswoman - Captain Levi Favor and Faith Radisson (Hope's Sister)

#2 The Royal Guard and the Royal Stylist - Private Brad Rivera and Arianna Gunnell

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

#### Other Characters:

William Rindlesbacher - Fell off a cliff

Naomi Rindlesbacher - On the run

Treven Rindlesbacher - Shot by Chief Jensen

Henry and Leslie Shule - Former Prime Minister and his wife, Jennifer's parents, Helping Leslie heal and traveling a lot

Lieutenant General Philippe Cordon - Killed in a cave

Sunny Pederson - Sophie's daughter

Holly Monson - Ellery's mom

Aunt Elise - Ellery's aunt

Madeline Prescott - Chad's mum

Grace Radisson - Hope and Faith's sister - Murdered by David Zeus III in *Matchmaking the Model and the Beast*

## CHAPTER

### *One*

**ARIANNA GUNNELL**, the official royal stylist, decorator, party organizer, wedding planner, and whatever other tasks the beloved August family asked of her, glanced around the gorgeous ballroom of the Augustine castle with satisfaction. The Christmas ball that she'd organized with decorators, caterers, and musicians was well under way. A hundred fresh pine trees stretched toward the gilded two-story ceiling, almost touching the Baccarat chandeliers. The Swarovski crystal Christmas decorations added class and beauty. The ethereal lighting and everything draped with white tulle completed the picture of a magical Christmas ball.

No matter how long she worked at the castle or around the royal family, she was in awe of the beauty and grace of the building and even more so the people. Every royal, and their significant other, was dressed perfectly in Kiton or Brioni suits, Peter Langner or Valentino formal gowns, delicate heels from Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo, and men's dress shoes by Tom Ford.

Arianna knew their measurements and preferences and always sent multiple options to their closets for each event, allowing them the final say in what they wore. Of course each option she sent was the perfect fit, the colors that worked best with their skin type and hair color, and she made certain they couldn't go wrong with their choice. The August family members were grateful and gracious, and Arianna had the best job in Augustine.

Everything was perfect tonight for the royal family and their guests. She took pride in knowing the remarkable night had her stamp all over it. The ball would only be topped by King Nolan and his fiancée Madeline Prescott's royal Christmas wedding on the twenty-second.

Arianna's mind spun with details, appointments, and checklists. She could hardly wait for the event, though her dad would tell her to savor this moment first. She smiled. He'd see all the photos online in the morning and call to commend her on different aspects. She was very blessed to have him in her life.

Looking over the beautiful couples spinning around the dance floor, her eyes widened. Was that Brad Rivera dancing with the American clothing designer Faith Radisson? It couldn't be. She hadn't seen her childhood hero and close family friend Brad in over eight years. Not since the evening of his mum's funeral when they'd clung to each other, shared sorrow, and then shared the most incredible kiss of her life. She had thought he'd finally noticed her as a woman.

Then he had disappeared.

Why would he return now? For years, she'd hoped and prayed he'd come back. Not a phone call. Not a text. In fact, his phone had been disconnected and none of his friends had any answers for her or ideas of where he'd gone. She'd given up on ever seeing him again. Sometimes wondered if he was even still alive.

There he was. Brad Rivera. A ghost from her past. Returned.

An enthralling, too-handsome, charming ghost who had captivated her heart and her daydreams for the majority of her life.

Arianna had no clue how to react. She wasn't certain if she'd punch him or hug him if he approached her. Possibly a slug to the gut first and then a long, drawn-out hug?

Her eyes tracked the couple. Faith was darling—beautiful, talented, and full of light. She seemed much younger than



Arianna, but was actually two years older. The two of them had connected every time Faith visited the castle with her sister Hope, wife of Lieutenant General Chad Prescott. They'd talked and compared notes on designers, fabrics, cuts, weaves, and patterns. Faith designed Lady Fit workout wear; she and Hope owned the successful American company.

Faith couldn't hold Arianna's attention with Brad as her partner. He had clearly matured—he looked stronger and taller. His face was even more handsome with the manly cut of his jaw, the short beard, and an interesting depth, some might call it 'street cred' or 'real-world experience' in his brown-sugar eyes that hadn't been there eight years ago.

Brad's black Reiss slim-fit wool suit draped perfectly on his well-built frame. Reiss suits were a fraction the cost of Brioni, Stefano Ricci, or Kiton but always a classy look, and Brad wore the suit well. He could easily grace the front page of *Elle* or *Cosmopolitan* with his devastatingly handsome face, fit body, and the confident set of his shoulders and head.

Was he dating Faith?

"Excuse me, miss," said a dark-haired, dark-eyed server, about her height tonight, with the thirteen-centimeter heels making her as tall as most women and even some shorter men—almost a hundred and seventy brilliant centimeters. He inclined his head and held out a note to her. "This is for you, ma'am."

"Thank you." She reached for the note.

The man placed it in her hand, but then he wrapped his hand around hers, lifted her fingers to his lips, and kissed them. She didn't want to be rude, but she instinctively wanted to pull her hand free and wipe it clean. She didn't know this man and, as she met his gaze over their clasped hands, her stomach churned. The look in his dark eyes was ... possessive. Creepily so.

"I'll be seeing you very soon," he murmured.

"Pardon me?"

The man only grinned as if he knew some secret. He released her hand, straightened, pivoted, and slithered through the dancing couples until she lost sight of him. For some reason, she wanted to find General Raymond and have him assign guards to shadow the man.

Arianna shook her head. Surely she was being too suspicious. It had been almost a year since the Rindlesbacher family traumatized the royals nonstop and four months since the last Rindlesbacher, Naomi, had been killed. Arianna was still jumpy at royal events of any sort, praying no bombs or attacks would injure the people she loved and respected.

Flipping the typed card in her hand open, she smiled in relief.

Mason.

She'd gone on several dates with the funny, handsome Lieutenant Mason Henson. He was four years younger than her, a revelation that still shocked her. She loved his sense of humor, and he was tough, brave, had endured rough trials, and seemed much older than twenty-one.

Tonight, he'd had to miss the ball as he was in charge of keeping the lower castle barricade safe and screening all guests.

*Meet me in the outside gardens near the main fountain. I have a surprise for you.*

*Mason*

Did he have a break he hadn't told her about? He must have planned ahead and prepared something formal. She appreciated the effort.

Looking around, she could only see vibrant couples and satisfied guests. She hated to miss her own event, but she'd only be gone momentarily. Besides, Arianna always told herself that if everything didn't run like clockwork, with or without her presence, it wasn't planned well enough. Tonight, she had pulled off the ideal Christmas Ball.

Brad and Faith waltzed past her, yanking her attention from her perfect event and the note in her hand. They swirled

so close she could swear she smelled his clean, fresh bergamot and cedar scent. A tumult of emotions raced through her—longing, hope, anger, betrayal.

And Brad ... Their gazes locked.

It was only a brief moment, but his golden-brown eyes filled with an intensity and longing that lifted her.

Suddenly, her flawless ball was elevated. The instant connection to Brad, the man she'd loved for most of her life, turned up the contrast on the event, sharpening the colors and smells and the entire experience.

His mouth formed her nickname: 'Ari.' Then he and Faith were gone, waltzing past with the other couples.

Arianna blinked, swaying on her heels. She tried to breathe normally and couldn't. Everything was cloudy, confusing.

Fresh air. Escape from this room and Brad's overwhelming presence was the only solution. No one could ever compare to Brad, not for her. But he'd left her and now that he had come back to Augustine, had he come straight for her? No. He had come to her ball with a beautiful sweetheart in his arms.

She pressed a hand to her chest, fighting the dull pain there. Meeting Mason, laughing and teasing with a handsome man who *was* interested in her ... that was exactly what she needed right now.

Quietly slipping out the double doors of the ballroom, she clicked down the main hallway of the Augustine castle and toward the side staircase. It was quieter away from the crowd and music. Disconcertingly quiet as she descended the two flights of stairs to the lower levels and hurried through the hall to one of the rear exits.

It would be chilly outside. She should've grabbed her coat, but Mason could keep her warm. They hadn't kissed yet, but she liked him and wouldn't mind seeing how a kiss between them went.

No kiss had ever compared to Brad's.

Arianna pushed that intrusive and un-called for thought away. After the shock of seeing Brad again, it was good she was meeting Mason. She'd need strong support and humor like Mason's if Brad was back in Augustine for good, since one glance could make her want to push her friend Faith out of his arms and claim that spot.

She yanked open the rear exterior door and walked out into the chilly December night. Light spilled from the windows of the massive twelve-story castle towering above her, sparkling on the lightly-falling snow.

Old-fashioned lamp posts lit the garden paths. The trails were packed with hard snow, and she skidded with each precarious step of her spike heels. The heel points were sharp enough they should dig into the snow, but the teenaged Princess Kiera and her sidekick four-year-old Princess Sunny had run, danced, and flipped along these trails often and had turned them into ice paths. A dusting of new snow decorated the path, making each step more treacherous. The snow fluffed into the air with each mincing step she took, touching the bare skin at the top of her foot. She shivered. At least the silver heels enclosed her toes.

Her gown was a burgundy sequined Calvin Klein original. It had long sleeves and fell to the ground, but with a V-neck and a slit to her knee in the front, she had exposed flesh at her neck and legs that immediately prickled in the cold air. Her hands were cold as well, especially as she discovered she needed to hold on to snow-covered trees, bushes, and benches to progress along the trail. She loved her 'shoe weapons' as her dad liked to call them, but it was too slick for a spike heel out here and her feet were freezing.

Mason's secret rendezvous might not be as romantic as she'd hoped. If he appeared to wrap her in his strong arms, maybe he could warm her up and rectify this situation. She hadn't reached the fountain yet. Maybe he had an entire party planned for just the two of them.

"Mason?" she called, inching forward and wishing he'd come assist her. She adored her spike heels but these slippery shoes were a catastrophe waiting to happen.

No response. The garden appeared quiet and deserted. Was he hiding by the fountain or possibly not here yet? She didn't fancy waiting in the cold and missing out on the ball she'd worked so hard on. Plus, Brad was in the ballroom. What if he'd finished his dance with Faith and started searching for Arianna?

She longed to see him.

No! That pathetic longing needed to be done. Brad was a family friend, a childhood playmate, and a teenage infatuation. Nothing more. No matter that remembrance of their one shared kiss could still light her up from the inside out, she could not let her heart be entangled with a man who ditched her and all his friends for eight years.

She squinted through the thick foliage. Even without leaves, it was hard to see the other trails snaking through the garden, especially as pine trees flocked with a blanket of snow mingled with the deciduous, snow-covered limbs. The lamps were mostly romantic decorations, meant to light the path but not illuminate the entire area.

Was that fast breathing she heard?

A chill ran down her spine, and it had little to do with the glacial night air and her lack of coat, gloves, hat, or practical footwear.

She rounded the corner and finally the bench Mason had indicated by the snow-covered main fountain appeared. Where was he?

She shuffled forward, praying she wouldn't slip and fall, and glanced around. The night should have been peaceful and beautiful, light snow falling, the garden a winter wonderland, but something was off. Uneasiness prickled at her neck.

Glancing down, she saw a white card on the bench, similar to the one the server had handed her. She picked it up, her fingers numb with cold, and flipped it open. She read the printed card, shook her head to clear it, blinked twice, and then read it again.

*Surprise!*

*Beautiful Arianna Gunnell.*

*It is your honor and privilege to be Victim Number Seven.*

*Best wishes in the next life,*

*The Gifted Genius*

Arianna's breath came in fast pants. Her gaze darted around, but she couldn't see anyone. Was this somebody's idea of a horrific prank? The Gifted Genius had murdered six women in the past six months. Nobody in December yet. Each woman had been stabbed to death, always in the garden of a beautiful, well-known location with top security as if to showcase the killer's prowess and brilliance.

In each case, the murderer had left a note on the victims' chest. A note exactly like the one in her hands.

The server who'd handed her the note, creepily kissed her hand, and said he'd see her soon? No!

Something between a gurgle and a scream ripped from Arianna's lips. She dropped the note, pivoted, and sprinted away from the bench. Her heels slid out from under her, and she flew forward with a shriek. She hit the icy path on her knees and hands, the fabric of her dress ripping.

Crying out in pain and horror, for the first time in her life she couldn't care less about ruining an expensive gown. She had to get out of here before that evil man came.

Even as she thought it, she heard quick pants of air that were not her own.

"No!" She flipped onto her rear and scabbled backward, smacking into the bench with her back. Why had she left her clutch under a chair in the ballroom? Her phone would be a lifesaver right now. Literally.

"Good evening." A man stepped into the path in front of her—the path she needed to get back to the castle and safety.

The server.

"Help!" Arianna screamed, staring up into the man's cold, dark eyes.

He was breathing fast as if excited. He switched a long knife from his right hand to his left and back to his right. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Arianna's eyes were riveted to that horrific-looking blade.

He advanced slowly toward her, his lips curving into a smile.

"Help!" she screamed. There were cameras in the garden. Even in the wintertime, the guards would monitor them. "Please help!"

"Cameras are rerouted," he said. A step closer. "The guards finished their rotations through the gardens and won't be back until the top of the hour. The clamor from your successful party fills the halls of the castle and the entrances and exits. Thank you for coming so promptly."

Another step closer.

Arianna catalogued every horrible detail—the knife moving from hand to hand quicker and quicker. His chest rising and falling rapidly. His revolting smile.

The castle walls and windows were designed to keep noise out. And the cameras were rerouted? The massive castle would block her cries for help from making it around to the courtyard in the front, and the guards stationed below the castle in Greenville were too far away to hear her.

She didn't even know how someone would accomplish rerouting cameras, but she imagined a man didn't murder six women in the gardens of museums, famous cathedrals, and a castle, and escape without a trace—not without some planning and wickedly smart brainpower.

*Please help me*, she begged heaven above.

She was going to die. She hadn't even had a premonition. No warning. No prep. Her poor dad. They'd lost Mum eight years ago, when Arianna had only been seventeen.

And her murderer was only a few feet away.

"Any last requests?" He lifted an eyebrow and looked her over. "No? Don't you want to beg for your life? Tell me why I

should spare you? A precious baby at home? A mum who will never stop crying? A boyfriend who will never find love again?"

Arianna knew he was only baiting her. This man would never spare her.

Things had been going so well.

She closed her eyes. *Please send someone, if possible. If not ... I'll see you soon, I guess.*

Her stomach heaved and her body chilled with cold sweat.

*A weapon.*

The thought struck her from out of nowhere, so it had to be heavenly inspiration. She needed a weapon.

Another footstep. The man was growing closer.

Arianna opened her eyes but didn't look up at him. She searched frantically for a weapon. Something. Anything. A branch. An icicle. With the bench at her back, she couldn't easily reach either.

She couldn't run because of her impractical heels, so she needed to find ... what about a 'shoe weapon' or dagger spike heel? She reached for her right shoe. Grabbing at the delicate straps, she tried to yank it free. There was no time to undo it.

It didn't give.

"Well, then." The man was directly above her.

She blinked up at him, horror making her mouth dry. Her heart thudded violently against her rib cage as she yanked on her shoe. Why wasn't the clasp giving?

"I try to make it as painless as possible." He licked his lips. "But you'll probably fight. They always do. And then it ends up being a miserably painful death. Would you like to lie back and allow me to accomplish my work, or are you planning some last-ditch, futile fighting effort?"

Arianna hated this man. She'd never hated anyone like she did him. He'd violently murdered six women and she would



be the seventh. One death a month. Would she be remembered as December's victim?

"Fight!" she croaked out in a sort-of yell, but her throat was so dry it had little impact.

"All right then." He grinned, dipped onto one knee, and grabbed her shoulder, raising the knife high in the air. The light from the lamp post glinted off the long metal blade.

Arianna looked into the eyes of her murderer and saw agony and certain death coming from that knife. She yanked with all her strength and ripped her shoe off her foot. Turning the heel, she plunged the spike into his abdomen with all her strength, and maybe some strength from heaven above.

The man's eyes widened as a dark red spot blossomed on his white shirt around where the heel had penetrated his skin. He lowered the knife and grasped at the sparkly silver shoe stuck in his flesh. Yanking it out, he stared at it as if not comprehending that she could have wounded him.

Arianna should run. She knew she should, but she could only stare at the blood on his white shirt, sticky red covering the end of her five-hundred-euro, thirteen-centimeter Stuart Weitzman.

He chucked her shoe off into a bush and snarled at her, "I am going to make your death an absolute misery."

"No!" Arianna screamed.

She ripped off her other heel with her left hand. Thankfully, the clasp popped open easily this time. He growled at her and tried to grab at the shoe, but Arianna slammed her right fist into the bloody spot on his shirt.

He curled forward, grunting in pain and surprise.

She scrambled to her feet, grasped the heel between both hands, and brought it down on his right forearm.

He dropped the knife with a howl of pain, seizing the shoe to rip it out of his arm.

Arianna didn't wait around this time. She took off at a sprint back toward the castle. The icy path dug painfully at her

bare feet, but her traction was a hundred times better without shoes. This pain was nothing compared to what she'd endure if the Gifted Genius caught up to her.

The murderer hollered at her to stop, but she wasn't about to listen. She ran as fast as she ever had in her life, tearing her dress beyond repair and not even caring.

She might live.

*Thank you. Please help.*

They were the only phrases she could get through her mind. She repeated them over and over again.

Rounding a bend in the garden path, the castle and one of its lower entrances loomed in front of her.

“Thank you!” she praised heaven above between pants for air.

She flew across the open space and slammed into the door, gasping for oxygen, listening for footfalls coming from behind, and needing to be on the other side of this door.

Yanking on the handle, her eyes widened as she remembered there were security codes on the lesser used entrances. No!

Arianna pounded on the door. She punched in numbers on the keypad, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Nothing.

Banging her head against the door, she prayed harder for help and then she heard it ... footsteps coming from behind her, from the garden.

“No!” she screamed out.

He was coming. He was coming.

She turned as he reached the edge of the garden path, the knife in his left hand, blood staining his abdomen and his right forearm. His face was twisted in grotesque anger.

“Help!” she screamed, turning back to the door and pounding on it. “Help! Please!”

“You won’t escape me again,” he yelled.

The door suddenly swung inward, and two guards stood there. Arianna scrambled inside and right between them. The two large men were a shelter she needed desperately at this moment.

For half a beat, both guards stared down at her.

“Miss Gunnell?” Sergeant Mueller questioned. “Are you all right?”

“No!” she screamed. “The Gifted Genius! The murderer!”

They still stared at her, not comprehending what she was saying.

She turned and pointed, cowering between them as she peeked back out the open door.

The man was gone.

“Please!” She grabbed at Sergeant Mueller’s arm. “The Gifted Genius is in the garden. He had a knife. He tried to kill me.”

Was she making any sense?

“Go to the command center,” Sergeant Mueller instructed. “We’ll find him.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded to her, and they both took off out the door.

Arianna had no problem complying with his commands. She slammed the door closed and ran in her bare feet down the hall, past the kitchens, and toward the office for the royal guards. She slammed into someone exiting the office and cried out in surprise.

“Ari?” The man was tall and strong, with brown-sugar eyes and a devastatingly handsome face. “Are you well?”

“Brad!” Instead of punching him like she might have originally, she flung herself against him and held on for dear life. Shudders ran through her body as the horror of what might have happened hit her full force. Tears slid down her

face, hot moisture against the chill of her skin. “Oh, Brad. You’re here.”

Brad was warm, solid, safe, familiar, and yet even at this moment somehow thrilling. Like the excitement of home on a Christmas morning with a pile of lovely presents waiting to be opened.

His scent was still the same. He was happy, carefree childhood memories. Even with him being gone for eight years, she still felt like she knew and trusted him. Trusted him to protect her, but would he leave her with no goodbye or forwarding address again?

What did that matter at this moment? She’d barely escaped a violent ending minutes ago.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, but not for nearly long enough. Easing back, he looked down at her. She clung to his lower back and thankfully he didn’t release her completely.

“Ari? What is wrong?”

“Oh, Brad.” She studied his golden-brown eyes and wished he would never let her go, but he’d more than let her go eight years ago. He’d ditched her. She was too traumatized by her struggle with death, and the sense of rightness that Brad brought to her, to be properly upset at him right now. “The Gifted Genius ... he lured me out to the garden and then he ...” She sniffled and forced it out. “Tried to stab me to death.”

Brad blinked at her, confusion and disbelief filling his gaze. “*The Gifted Genius?* Here? After you?”

“Yes.” She bobbed her head.

“Ari.” Brad cradled her close to his chest. “How did you escape?”

Arianna clung to him and admitted in a whisper, “I stabbed him with my heels.”

Brad grunted out a disbelieving laugh. Then he kissed her on the forehead. It was a brotherly kiss, she was certain, but it felt like so much more. Probably because she was a mess right

now and the fact that Brad Rivera was here and holding her felt as surreal as it did wonderful.

“You and those heels of yours,” he said softly.

“What? They make my legs look fabulous.” She couldn’t believe she was teasing, but this was Brad. He was brilliant and irresistible, and she was safe now. With any luck, Sergeant Mueller and his buddy would capture the Gifted Genius and all of Europe would laud the Augustinian military men as heroes.

“I cannot argue with such *practical* logic.” He smirked down at her. He’d always teased her about her impractical shoes and fashion designs, and she’d teased him right back. His final shot was always, ‘I cannot argue with such *practical* logic.’

She smiled at all the memories. He’d been her big brother, her hero, her secret crush. Then he’d broken her heart. Her smile slid away. “Tonight, those *impractical* heels saved my life.”

“Ari,” he breathed out the nickname only he and her dad still used. “I can hardly wrap my mind around ...” He started to pull back. “I need to track him down.”

“Sergeant Mueller and another guard ran after him.” Far from wanting to hit him and demand answers, she simply wanted him to stay by her side.

The exterior door flung open, and Sergeant Mueller and the guard ran down the hall toward them.

“Did you find him?” Brad asked.

One negative shake of the head was all they received. Sergeant Mueller had the note and her blood-tipped heels in his hands.

“We have to keep looking,” Brad insisted.

“All the perimeter and gate guards are searching the area surrounding the castle and the village.”

Brad didn’t appear satisfied, but he said nothing. The sergeant outranked him, and she could tell it chafed at him.

“Miss Gunnell,” Sergeant Mueller continued, “I believe the General and the Lieutenant General will have some questions for you.”

Arianna nodded and leaned into Brad. “Please don’t leave me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said.

His words were the promise she needed to cling to. She’d almost been murdered, but somehow Brad was back just when she needed him.

If only they could pick up where they’d left off. Finally past the friendship barrier to kissing and loving each other.

No. That wasn’t happening. She’d focus on being grateful he was here as a friend, and she would not forget the fact that he’d left her high and dry eight years ago. Being in his arms was a thrilling kind of comfort, but she could never trust this man to stay by her side for good.

## CHAPTER

## *Two*

**PRIVATE BRAD RIVERA** stayed by Arianna's side, except to grab a warm blanket from the laundry to wrap around her, receiving a sweet whisper of thanks in return. He only nodded in response. How was he supposed to react to the adorable girl of his childhood transforming into the most captivating woman he'd ever seen?

He'd been stunned by the brief glimpse of her in the ballroom. Currently, she was disheveled and had barely escaped with her life. Brad had used her horribly eight years ago, the night of his mum's funeral. He'd let Arianna hold and comfort him, and when she'd bravely tilted her face to his and kissed him, he hadn't turned away.

He'd instinctively and selfishly responded, sharing the most incredible kiss of his life with Arianna. Then instead of telling her what a jerk he was, or being a man at all, he'd escaped from the nightmare that was his life at the time. He'd lost his mum and caused another beautiful woman's death days before. He'd ditched Arianna and any hope for a future with her in the worst possible way.

Sergeant Mueller ushered them up the stairs past the main levels and the ball that Brad had rushed away from half an hour ago. They were then escorted into General Ray's private office.

Arianna looked up at him with gratitude in her teal-blue eyes. Was it only him, or did he sense a leeriness as well? He deserved much worse than a leery look. He deserved a slap in

the face, a punch to the gut, ranting and screaming about what a jerk he was. But for some reason, she didn't give it to him. Instead, she'd hugged him and clung to him and even teased as they used to. It was probably the stress of almost being murdered by an infamous serial killer. He could hardly wrap his mind around that.

Brad couldn't deny he'd deserted Arianna years ago. He was serious when he'd told her he wouldn't dream of leaving her now. If General August didn't assign him to protect her, he'd resign from the military and make her safety his personal quest. He had hoped the military would be a great career path for him, as fighting, shooting, and protecting were the only areas in his life he seemed to excel at any longer. He'd become an expert at guerilla warfare during the past eight years, trained by tough tribal warriors and tested by battle after battle to protect innocent villagers from warlords, intertribal wars, and roaming thieves and attackers.

But for Arianna ... He glanced over her beautiful but tear-stained face, the dark smears under her eyes that made her look exhausted and vulnerable. Her dress was ripped, revealing far too much of her beautiful legs. Her feet, hands, and cheeks were red from the cold.

Still, undeniably the gorgeous and accomplished royal stylist he'd glimpsed on media posts with the royal family a few times. There was also a hint of the seventeen-year-old girl he'd surely injured.

He owed her, and he felt fiercely protective of her. This enthralling and in-peril woman was a link to his mum, his childhood, and a time before he'd destroyed his own bright future and short-changed his life.

Sergeant Mueller and Lieutenant Islandor stood back against the wall. Brad cradled Arianna against his side. They stood next to the large desk, waiting for the general and lieutenant general. It felt like they'd been waiting a long while.

He'd been in General August's office at the military training center, but not in here. Their military leader was impressive, no-nonsense, larger-than-life, and intimidating.



This office was more spacious and much fancier than the military center office. The entire castle was ornate and, if he was being honest, overwhelming after sleeping on a bamboo mat or the hard ground for eight years. Brad couldn't help but admire the Spanish Toledo fencing epee and foil sword pair and the Fusil model 1866 bolt-action French rifle hanging on the wall.

The general strode in, his face grim, his blue eyes not giving much away. Lieutenant General Prescott was right behind him. Brad released Arianna to salute each man. Arianna bowed to the general. It was odd with the general, as Brad never knew if he should bow as the man was a prince, or salute as he was the highest-ranking military leader of their country.

General August strode around his large desk but didn't sit, so no one else sat either.

Lieutenant General Prescott stopped next to the desk and looked Arianna over. "Arianna ... Ae you all right?"

She bit her lip and shook her head. "I survived, so that's good."

Brad admired her pluck. She had fought using an ingenious weapon and saved her own life. Though she'd clung to him after the fact, she wasn't falling apart like most people would.

The lieutenant general gave her a kind smile. "We're all very grateful for that beautiful truth. Hope sends her love and prayers."

"Thank you." She blinked quickly.

Brad had seen in the media that Arianna was very involved with the royal family and their close friends like the lieutenant general and his accomplished wife. She probably felt miles more comfortable in this situation than he did. Every man here was his superior, yet he wanted to jut out his chest, claim he was the alpha male, the most well-trained warrior, that he knew the best method to keep her safe, and that Arianna was his to protect.

If only she could be his to love.

Crazy that an hour ago he'd been dancing with Lieutenant General Prescott's sister-in-law Faith and been warned by the man that he'd be scrubbing toilets if he didn't treat her right. Faith was now with Captain Levi Favor, a man who had every right to hate Brad, and hate him Levi did.

Brad didn't feel much loss in Faith choosing Levi. They'd only had a few interactions. Currently, he was consumed with Arianna and thrown right back into the many times over the past eight years that he'd realized he'd left behind the perfect woman for him. And that she'd never take him back.

"Private Rivera." General August nodded to him. "You may take your leave. I understand you are not on duty currently."

"I won't leave Arianna," he protested too loudly and passionately.

"I want him here," Arianna said in almost the same tone.

He focused on her, and all the high-ranking men around him disappeared. She wanted him here. Could it be possible? She didn't hate him? He might have a chance to make things right with her?

Not when she didn't know the whole truth. A truth he never wanted her to find out.

"All right." The general didn't seem upset by their declarations, but nothing seemed to upset the man. He knew about Brad's experience and training in Africa and had intoned he was impressed. Of course the general had never admitted to being impressed out loud, or given Brad much more than an approving look when he hit dead center at target practice or won sparring match after sparring match. "Please sit."

Everyone obeyed. Except the two guards who were on duty standing against the wall.

"Chad." General Raymond nodded to the lieutenant general. "What do we know?"

“The Gifted Genius has disappeared. A farmer claims he saw a ‘winged man’.”

“In a flight suit?” The general clarified.

“That’s what I’m assuming. The farmer said the winged man swooped down and landed in the valley far below the castle. A silver Alfa Romeo four-door sedan picked him up. Chief Jensen is in a virtual meeting with contacts in Interpol and has his people searching throughout Augustine. Neighboring countries have been alerted, but without a license plate ...” He shrugged.

“It’s something, though. He’s not working alone.”

“It would appear not. We found devices on the garden cameras that looped the images from moments before Arianna entered the garden so the attack wouldn’t be seen by the guards monitoring the cameras.”

Arianna shuddered. Brad reached for her hand and thankfully she let him hold it. The general’s gaze flicked to their joined hands, then back to the lieutenant general.

“We also have Arianna’s blood-tipped shoes.” Prescott smiled at her. “Brilliant self-defense, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Arianna said.

Brad wanted to praise her, kiss her hand, hold her close again. None of which was appropriate for the moment, unfortunately.

“Chief Jensen’s crime scene analysts can determine the man’s DNA from that blood. If we find a match, we might have our Gifted Genius.”

“That is good.” The general never got excited about much. “Arianna, could you identify your attacker?”

“Yes.”

“Unfortunately, without the garden cameras we don’t have a visual on him.”

“He was a server at the ball,” Arianna said. “He handed me a note, asking me to meet in the garden.”

The lieutenant general nodded. "I'll have my men look back through the ballroom cameras for a server who approached you. If we can't find him, we'll have an artist help you render a likeness. Description?"

"Dark hair and eyes. Lean. Thinner and shorter than any of you. About my same height." She smiled slightly. "With my spike heels on, at least."

"Perfect." The general looked her over. "Who did you believe you were meeting in the garden?"

"Mason. Lieutenant Henson." She blushed and pulled her hand free from Brad's. The general noticed. Of course he did.

Brad certainly noticed. Lieutenant Henson? Good-looking. Hilarious. Everybody's friend. His gut tightened. He resisted the urge to scrub at his beard.

General August said nothing but pulled his cell phone out, pushed on a number, and requested, "Please send Lieutenant Henson to my office." He set the phone on the desk and studied Arianna.

"I don't think Mason had anything to do with the note."

"I don't either." The general's brows lifted. "But somehow a serial killer knew how to lure you to the garden. He knew you and Mason were dating."

"We're not ..." She looked at Brad and then away.

Fabulous. Lieutenant Henson was close friends with Captain Levi Favor. Brad had been pushed to interact with Faith by Princess Kiera. He suspected the young princess had been trying to manipulate Levi with jealousy of Brad going after Faith. Now the woman he was truly interested in, even though he had no more right to go after Arianna than he had Faith or Annabelle, was dating Levi's best friend. He'd stepped into another jumbled mess with Levi Favor. Big surprise. Maybe his impression to come home and set things right had been skewed, influenced by his longing to see Arianna and how tired he had been of the nonstop battles.

"Arianna," the general continued. "We have no idea how the Gifted Genius will react to you escaping from him. The

other six murders were completed in similar high-profile gardens with no fingerprints on the note or bodies. He may come after you to finish what he started, or he may wisely move on to his next victim.”

Brad wanted to reach for her again as she hugged herself.

“You will stay at the castle with round-the-clock protection until we capture him.” The general’s blue eyes were deadly serious, and nothing about his character or demeanor said anyone should ever mess with him.

Arianna did not get that memo. “General Ray,” she shot back, her voice full of exasperation. “I can’t simply stay here, be guarded night and day. I must shop and meet with decorators, caterers, wedding planners, florists, dress designers, suit tailors ... I have an appointment tomorrow with Cartier.” She nodded, as if the name Cartier should convince him.

The general lifted his hands, obviously confused.

“The jeweler! To pick out the tiaras.”

General August still looked nonplussed. Brad had to hide a smile, but it hit him how different Arianna’s world was than his own. A successful day in his world the past eight years was no wounds for his men that required finding a competent doctor and especially no deaths on his side of the battle. Arianna was worried about high-dollar jewelry, dresses, and decorations for one of the most illustrious families in the world.

Arianna shook her head and may have muttered, “Men,” under her breath. “General Ray.” She pinned him with a very serious look. “I am in charge of your father and Madeline’s wedding, the *king’s* wedding, in less than two weeks. The wedding of the century. We’ll have media coverage and esteemed guests to rival Prince Harry and Megan’s wedding. It must be spectacular, every detail has to be perfect. Do you understand? You *cannot* put me under lock and guard.”

Everyone stared at her. She was brave in so many ways, but also missing the bigger picture. No man in this room cared

about the fanfare of a royal wedding, only the security. The general and lieutenant general cared about the people to be married, their dad and mum respectively, but ‘every detail’ being perfect meant nothing to them.

“You can do your meetings over video conference calls and shop online,” General August said, not unkindly but definitely not bending.

“I cannot,” she protested. “I have to feel the fabric, see the colors and weaves with my own eyes, smell the flowers, compare the diamond patterns in the tiaras, taste the cake.”

“Arianna.” The general studied her. “I apologize that your job will be more difficult, but your safety is my primary concern, and it is only a wedding.”

“Only a wedding? *Only* a wedding?” Arianna rose out of her seat and pointed her finger at the general. Brad would be court martialed for less. She was glorious. “It is the wedding of the century. Your distinguished father.” She pointed to him. “And your exquisite mum.” She pointed to Lieutenant General Prescott. “The dignitaries, the celebrities, the news media who will be here ... I can’t. Only a wedding.” She sank back into her chair as if he’d decimated her.

General August leaned back in his chair and blew out a breath, looking as worn down as Brad had ever seen him. “You’re right.”

“Of course I am.” She tilted her chin as if she were the royalty. In Brad’s mind, she was.

The general shook his head. “All the people who have been invited and their entourages. Security is going to be a nightmare.”

“Security?” she sputtered. “General Ray, I don’t think you’re seeing the bigger picture. The entire *event* will be a nightmare if you consign me to the castle for the next ten days.”

General August studied her. Nobody else said anything. Brad hardly dared breathe. He’d earned the respect of his men, and leadership positions in several tribes, but he knew how

military bureaucracy worked. You didn't tell the prime leader off.

The general ... smiled. "Arianna. My family appreciates you. We deeply appreciate all you do for each of us."

"Thank you." She leaned back, looking surprised by the praise. As Brad had never personally heard General August praise anyone, only heard about rare commendations from the man, he was stunned.

"Obviously, you and I don't understand each other's worlds very well."

"That's an understatement," Lieutenant General Prescott murmured.

The general nodded. "But we are talking about your life here. You can't possibly believe my father or Madeline would care if every minute detail of their wedding is not perfect when compared to keeping you safe and alive."

"This is very heavy," Arianna said.

Brad hid another smile. He'd left behind a fun teenage girl and had returned to a brave, astonishing woman.

Arianna drew in a breath and then pushed it out. "But ... that murderer is obviously very smart." She tried another angle, obviously trying to relate to the general's world. "The details he's figured out. The deaths he's gotten away with. He's too smart to come back for me."

"We don't know that," the general said softly. "They haven't found any other casualties or witnesses near the other six victims. He works clean and only concentrates on his objective. Criminal profiles like his don't leave loose ends, especially one that could identify him. His pride alone at failing to kill you will probably make you an obsession for him."

He paused, and Arianna shuddered. Brad hoped she was taking this seriously.

"Please," General August continued. "Let us keep you safe until he's caught."

Arianna stared at him. Then she turned and focused on Brad. “What do you think?”

He shifted, surprised she valued his opinion and uncomfortable to be put on the spot with the two highest ranking officials in the military watching and listening.

“Your safety is my only priority right now,” he said, studying her deeply and hoping she believed him.

She deflated. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“I already told you I won’t leave your side. With the general’s permission, I will guard you twenty-four hours a day.”

Arianna’s eyes widened.

Brad prayed he hadn’t overstepped his bounds with her or with the general and lieutenant general, but his convictions still stood. If he had to, he’d quit. The only way he’d leave Arianna’s side was if she demanded him to or if the general threw him in prison.



## CHAPTER

## *Three*

**ARIANNA COULDN'T DRAG** her gaze from Brad's. Was he in earnest? He wouldn't leave her? His gaze seemed sincere, but he'd deserted her eight years ago. Could she trust him now? Her life was on the line.

Her brain was spinning—from Brad's pledge to the stress of how to coordinate everything for the wedding. Video chats and online shopping? Impossible! Was the general serious? She prayed General Ray would relax those restrictions.

Brad could stay by her side wherever she went and keep her safe. Did she dare suggest that? Everything was intense and too recent. She'd take some deep breaths and try to be compliant, but she had a list a decathlon long that she had to accomplish in the next eleven days. Doing it all from inside the castle? Impossible.

A rap sounded on the door.

Lieutenant General Chad stood and opened it.

"Permission to see Arianna, sir." Mason's voice.

"Please." Chad stepped back and Mason rushed in.

He saluted General Ray and then rushed around Brad to Arianna. Squatting next to her chair, he took both of her hands in his and looked her over, his blue eyes full of concern. "All right then?"

It was one of the few times he'd greeted her without joking around.

“*All right* might be a stretch.”

“I heard how insanely brave you were. Fighting off the Gifted Genius with your *shoes*? You’re the genius, not that scum.”

“I was mostly desperate, but it worked.” Arianna was hyperaware that everyone was watching them, Brad most intensely.

Mason laughed softly, then released her hands and stood between her and Brad, facing the general. “General Raymond, sir.” He saluted again. “I’ve been informed of the details and would like to request to stay by Arianna’s side until the perpetrator is apprehended.”

“Interesting.” The general’s eyebrows lifted. He looked from Mason to Brad to Arianna. He tilted his head to her and asked, “Arianna? Are you in agreement to stay at the castle until the man is caught?”

She grimaced. “Can I get back to you on that?”

He smirked. “No.”

“Surely, with your highly trained royal guards, I could at least make one quick trip to Milan and to the florist shop in Sicily and just a quick jaunt to Paris. Okay, and Rome. And then I promise I’ll behave.” She gave him her sweetest smile, but he only looked sternly at her. “If you could have the caterers come here to meet with me, I swear I could do ... most of the other appointments by video chat.”

The general was shaking his head. Mason gazed down at her, but it was Brad’s gaze that caught her attention.

“Please, Ari,” Brad said. “Let us all work together to keep you safe.”

The moment stretched, and she couldn’t look away.

“Pardon me.” Mason’s voice was stiff. “Why is Private Rivera part of this discussion?”

Brad stiffened but said nothing. As a new man in the army, he was ranked lower than any of these men. Would General Ray ask him to leave? Arianna felt a knot of desperation twist

inside her. She should want him to leave. It would be hard enough not being able to fly to the florists, the different dress designers, the caterers, the decorators. Did she want the drama of figuring out why Brad had deserted her on top of everything else?

“Arianna asked that Private Rivera stay,” General Ray informed Mason. “He is well-trained and experienced, and he volunteered to stay by her side just as you did.”

Mason stiffened, but he didn’t respond. When had Brad become ‘well-trained and experienced’ in protection or fighting?

“We’ll need both of you,” Lieutenant General Chad said “The question is, can you work together?”

So it wasn’t only her who’d sensed the animosity between the two men.

Brad stood and dipped his head. “Yes, sir.”

Mason glanced over at Brad. Arianna couldn’t see his face clearly, but it was obvious from his bearing that he was annoyed and considered Brad a threat. She and Mason weren’t dating exclusively, and Brad was a friend from years ago, despite how things had ended. But now was hardly the time to explain either of those things to Mason.

“I appreciate Private Rivera’s willingness,” Mason said, “but he is a new recruit, hardly proven, and not even through his training paces.”

General Ray and Lieutenant General Chad exchanged a look. General Ray nodded and Chad said, “Private Rivera has shown exceptional proficiency in marksmanship and hand to hand combat. His background is his to share, but it is impressive and relevant to this assignment. He also has a personal interest which will serve him well on this detail.”

Mason nodded stiffly.

Arianna wondered about this background of Brad’s. She had so many questions for him, but she was distracted by the horror of almost being murdered tonight, the suffocating idea

of not leaving the castle, and the terror of the royal wedding flopping.

“Can you work together?” Chad repeated, peering into Mason’s eyes.

“Yes, sir,” Mason responded.

Chad inclined his head to the general.

“Very well. Arianna, we will arrange a suite with a private bedroom for your stay. I will have an officer visit each of your homes and collect any personal items you might need. Lieutenant Henson and Private Rivera will stay with you around the clock. You are not to leave the castle without my permission, and don’t plan on getting my permission.” He gave her another rare smile, even as her stomach dropped. “Chief Jensen is already working with Interpol and the neighboring countries’ police departments to capture the perp. With any luck, you’ll be shopping in Milan before the wedding.”

“You’d better hope so,” she muttered. She understood they wanted her safe, but this was the pinnacle of her career. She adored King Nolan and Madeline; their wedding day had to be perfect.

The general smiled. Was that three smiles in the space of fifteen minutes? That usually only happened if Princess Macey or Kiera were with him. He stood, and Chad did as well. Mason and Brad both saluted. The two military leaders nodded and strode from the office. The officers standing silently behind them followed.

Arianna was left with two handsome men, and a very uncomfortable silence.

They both turned to her at the same time. Mason was closer. He reached for her hands as he’d done when he’d first entered the office. She let him clasp her hands, hyperaware of Brad watching. She appreciated Brad being willing to help protect her, but she owed him nothing. He was the one who’d left.

Why, then, was she wishing his hands were around hers and his golden-brown eyes looking into hers? Mason's summer blue eyes were very nice but she'd never seen eyes that topped Brad's. Mesmerizing.

"That must've been absolutely terrifying, and you bravely fought off the most wanted man in Europe. You're brilliant, Arianna."

"Thank you. I was a mess, praying for inspiration. My dad calls my spike heels 'shoe weapons,' and when I needed a weapon, that came to me."

"Ah, bless your dad. You are a bit shorter at the moment, aren't you now?"

She laughed. There was the Mason she was used to.

"Come now, let's get you to our suite. You can rest while Private Rivera and I hash some things out." He released her hands but wrapped his arm around her waist and turned her toward the door.

Brad was ... glowering. Oh, no.

"Are the pair of you currently ... dating?" Brad got out, the word rolling off his tongue like poison.

"Yes," Mason said.

"Not really," Arianna said at the same time.

Brad's expression lightened at her response.

Mason glanced swiftly down at her. "Not really?"

"We've gone on three dates," she protested.

"Yes, but ..." Mason's blue eyes suddenly filled with mischief. "They've been brilliant dates where you've laughed at my wicked good humor to the point of hiccups and you've wanted to pledge your heart and life to the most handsome and strapping lieutenant in the military."

Arianna laughed and even Brad smiled.

"Forgive me," Brad said. "It's none of my business and I shouldn't have asked such a personal question."

Arianna wanted to protest. She wanted him to be personal. With her. The longing for him, the hurt of eight years without him, and the terror of tonight intermingled until she could hardly think straight. Would Brad ditch her again? Most likely. Was he even interested in her any longer? Most likely not. He'd never truly been interested. Besides their family friendship, he'd only kissed her once. She'd instigated the kiss and he'd responded so not even a proper kiss. Then he'd run away for eight years.

"Nothing to forgive," Mason assured him, then he tightened his grip on Arianna's waist and leaned closer. "It's the 'not really' that I'd fancy an apology for." He grinned to show he was teasing. "Unbelievable. We both know you fell head over heels for me when I pummeled the king with snowballs and made your event an untold success."

Arianna laughed again, though she was confused and frustrated by Brad's responses.

Mason directed her out the door, to the side staircase, probably to avoid running into anyone, and up to the next floor where the guest suites were located. Brad fell into step behind them. Arianna could've sworn he was glaring at their backs.

"Now I know your shoes are wicked spikes, but they truly penetrated the Gifted Genius's abdomen and forearm?"

"Truly." She nodded. "I'll never doubt my Stuart Weitzmans again."

"I'm assuming that's a brand of shoe?" Mason's eyes twinkled.

"Someday, I will teach you to appreciate the finer things in life."

"You are the finest thing in my life, and I fully appreciate you."

Brad cleared his throat behind them. Arianna would normally have been embarrassed for a man she was interested in to overhear her and Mason's constant teasing. Now that everything had settled, the full import of Brad being here, and

him volunteering and being assigned as one of her round-the-clock private guards, hit her.

He'd kissed her and ditched her in the same night. True, they hadn't been close as teenagers, more her idolizing him and him being kind to the childhood friend two years younger than him. Yet they'd reconnected when his mum died, big time, and then he'd disappeared. She should've slapped him when she saw him again, but she'd been terrified and out of sorts, and now she would be even more out of sorts, stuck in the castle with the clock ticking to the royal event of the century.

"There you are!" Mallory, the head housekeeper, bustled up to them from down the hall. She clucked her tongue. "Now, my sweetheart. I can't take this in. Goodness gracious! I overheard those handsome military men. Almost murdered? The general instructed a suite be readied and luckily a large one was empty. I'll get a bath drawn with some tea sent up. Then you are going straight to bed. You two, come along now."

She took Arianna's arm and hustled her into a spacious suite at the end of the hall. Arianna stayed at the castle often, but she'd never had a suite this large. Two bedrooms off the main area with lots of space and windows and even its own kitchen nook and small dining area next to the open living room.

Arianna glanced back as Mallory directed her into the larger bedroom. Mason lifted a hand, smiling. Brad looked as if she'd deserted him. His brown-sugar gaze was full of longing.

He was the most devastatingly handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on.

Darn him. She could not let herself fall for him again. She'd been a silly teenager last time, but she was stronger now—smarter, accomplished, not mourning the loss of her mum and his.

Yet without Brad ... would she ever be complete?

Goodness! She could not be sucked into the vortex of thinking Brad Rivera should be her world. Not again. All that waited in that storm was loss and pain.



## CHAPTER

## *Four*

**BRAD SHIFTED** from foot to foot and loosened his tie as Arianna disappeared into the bedroom with the older lady who'd come for her. Why couldn't the general have assigned only him to watch over her? This was awkward, and with the protection of the castle and all the guards and security and cameras, they didn't need Lieutenant Henson.

Yet the murderer had gotten into the castle as a server and almost killed Arianna right under their noses. It was a miracle she'd survived.

The lady came bustling out the door. "You two take good care of that sweetheart. You understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Brad said.

"Of course, Mallory." Lieutenant Henson beamed at her.

"That's a good boy." She patted his cheek. "And so handsome." She looked between the two of them. "Both of you, smashingly handsome, aren't you now? I don't imagine the two of you will be sharing a bed. I'll send some pillows and extra linens and blankets up for the couch bed."

"Thank you, lovely Mallory," Lieutenant Henson said.

"Thank you," Brad added.

She nodded to him and hurried to the door. "Handsome, handsome," she muttered, shutting the door behind her.

Brad looked around the spacious suite. It was bigger than any home he'd seen in the past eight years. And of course it

was beautiful and had top-of-the-line everything. He wasn't used to this world, and Arianna thrived in it. Another sign that he'd never be the right one for her.

"Private," Lieutenant Henson said.

Brad's gaze darted to him. Mason seemed like a nice and fun guy, but he thought he was dating Arianna, and Brad wanted to make certain he didn't have that privilege.

Brad tugged at his tie again. He didn't deserve that privilege either. Why would he stand between her and a nice guy like Mason? A lieutenant. A man who fit in and knew her world, a man who wouldn't run from pain, take off for Africa after he'd taken advantage of two different beautiful angels in a matter of days, buried his mum, and contributed to the death of a woman he genuinely cared about.

"Brad, please, if we're going to be working ... closely together." He scrubbed at his beard.

"All right." The lieutenant folded his arms across his chest. He was in uniform and armed. Brad needed to have whoever the general sent to the military training center get his weapons and his uniforms and boots. "Mason, then."

"Mason." Brad didn't want to do it, but he strode across the space and extended his hand.

Mason shook it. Strong grip. Not messing around. The glint in his eyes looked to be humor, but Brad couldn't be certain. "You have a rotten, smelly, nasty history with Captain Levi Favor," Mason said, eyeing him.

"I do."

"Levi is my best friend."

Brad clenched his fists and held eye contact. "I know. The history is on me." He needed to talk this out with Levi, but the man loathed him and he didn't see how he could change that. "I would apologize, but I don't believe he'll listen."

When Brad had decided to come home, he knew he'd have to drop his pride and apologize. It needed to be done. The

timing and words hadn't come to him yet. He'd have to pray hard for help on that one.

Mason studied him and then he smiled slightly. "He is hard-headed."

Brad's eyebrows rose. That was putting it mildly, but he didn't say so.

"Are you pursuing Faith Radisson?" Mason asked.

"No. General Ray asked me to teach her to spar and Levi saw us and was ... upset. And then Princess Kiera asked me to escort Faith to the ball this evening." He lifted his hands.

"The fearless little princess." Mason shook his head, his grin widening. "That girl is fiercely loyal and will do anything for those she loves. She was probably trying to use you to make Levi jealous."

"Hmm. I think it worked. He cut in at the ball and they were dancing together when I left. I walked down to the command office, simply to see if anybody I knew was there, not ready to go back to my bunk alone, and Arianna ran into me." Fate, or was heaven trying to tell him something? His angel mum was always watching over him. Of that he was certain. He'd stayed safe in African war zones, protecting innocent lives time and again, and had miraculously been rescued and escaped two different captures.

Every mess in his life was on his own shoulders. Not heaven's fault.

Mason's gaze sharpened. "Are you pursuing Arianna?"

That was a harder question. He was tempted to lie and say no, but he and Mason would be working closely together for who knew how long. He wanted a good relationship with the man. "We were childhood family friends. The one time I had an opportunity with her, I messed up and deserted her. That was eight years ago. I highly doubt she'd give me another chance. Plus, she's dating you."

"Thank *you* for acknowledging that." Mason threw his hands in the air, but he was grinning. "What you aren't saying

aloud is if she is interested, you would climb to the top of the Matterhorn in bare feet and a loincloth to prove your love.”

Brad laughed. He couldn't help it. The guy was just one of those hilarious dudes who found the humor in everything. “You read me like a book,” he admitted.

Arianna being interested in him and forgiving him when she learned the entire story were two separate things. He doubted the magic of both would ever happen.

“I knew it.” Mason stepped closer. They were close to the same height. Mason wasn't quite as thick as Brad, but he was lean and strong. These men thought Brad was a new recruit, but they had no clue the battles he'd fought, the abilities he'd honed to stay alive and protect innocent lives, or the horrors and death he'd seen and inflicted. He would beat Mason, but he imagined they'd have a fair fight.

“So here's the part where I warn you,” Mason continued, his blue eyes twinkling. “If she chooses you and you ditch and hurt her again, I'll cut your kidneys out and eat them for a late afternoon snack.”

Brad winced and chuckled. “I'd expect nothing less.”

“And I also need to tell you ... may the most jovial and committed man win. Because I'm highly interested in the beautiful Arianna, I have a wicked sense of humor, and I didn't desert her eight years ago.”

“Touché.” Brad felt a twinge of annoyance, but the words were fair and true. Mason was definitely the most jovial. The most committed to winning Arianna's heart? That remained to be seen. Brad knew what he'd lost by leaving eight years ago. He'd known it and mourned it the entire time he'd been gone.

He'd been a legitimate, guilt-filled, sorrow-twisted mess the day he left. If he could admit his dark secrets to her and Arianna still gave him another chance, he'd be the most committed man on the planet. His chance with her was slim to none, however, especially with Mason in the competition and the fact that Brad had no desire to come clean, spill the story

he'd hidden from her, and see the disgust and anger that would surely appear in her teal-blue eyes.

“How about we alternate the sleeping situation?” Mason asked. “You take the bed tonight and I'll make do out here on the couch, then we'll swap tomorrow night.”

“That will work. Thank you.”

Mason nodded. “I'll bring your things in when they drop them off. We'll have to share the closet and bathroom.”

“Sounds good. I appreciate it.” Brad turned to go, but then he turned back. “And I appreciate you not holding a grudge about my issues with Captain Favor, and you treating me like an equal.” Brad was several ranks below Mason, and some military men would've made that an issue.

“General August and Lieutenant General Prescott obviously know your experience and are impressed with you. That's good enough for me. Plus, I'm more concerned about us working well together and protecting Arianna than I am about rank. You keep up your end of the security detail and I won't have any issue with you.”

“Thank you.” Brad should've just walked into the bedroom, but he couldn't resist asking, “Even if Arianna chooses to date me instead of you?”

“Have you looked at me?” Mason spread his arms, beaming.

“Stiff competition for certain.” Brad chuckled. He liked Mason. He hadn't foreseen that he would like his competition and the best friend of the man who loathed him. Levi loathed him for good reason. Mason was easygoing, accepting, and fun. The man took nothing too seriously, which was a stark contrast to Brad's life the past eight years where almost everything seemed to be a life or death decision. Actually, Mason had been serious when he'd first entered the general's office. He clearly took Arianna's safety seriously.

“Arianna is a brilliant and talented lady,” Mason said. “She'll make the right choice.”

Brad had no answer for that. The right choice for Arianna would definitely be Mason. She was brilliant, talented, and had developed into an impressive and successful lady in the past eight years. She was smart enough to stay far away from the man who'd ditched her. The man who had no future or means or even a solid foundation.

Was there any way he could prove to her and himself that he was the right choice? He didn't know. Because if he was honest with himself and put his selfish desires aside ... He didn't believe that he was.

## CHAPTER

## *Five*

**WHEN ARIANNA GOT** out of the bath, she sipped the chamomile tea Malory sent up and spoke with her dad on the phone. He was stunned and horrified by her attempted murder, begged her to listen to General August, not to leave the castle, and to stay safe. He told her no less than ten times that he loved her and was praying for her.

She didn't mention that Brad Rivera was back in Augustine and half of her protection detail. Her dad loved Brad like a son, had expressed concern and worry about him many times after he disappeared, and had no idea Arianna had kissed him and would've willingly handed her heart over if Brad had been inclined to stick around.

Arianna didn't sleep well despite the huge, comfortable bed and high-quality linens. It was great that the castle staff rotated through silk sheets in the cooler months and Egyptian cotton when it was warm out. She did the same thing at home, and she and Malory had chatted about those details before. She loved that lady and had appreciated a mum hug and caring concern tonight.

Her mind spun recalling the horror of the attack from an infamous serial killer. The way that awful man had licked his lips and grinned as he'd attempted to murder her. The fact that General Ray thought the man would come after her again was chilling ... nauseating ... terrifying, truly.

Then her mind churned with ways to make the wedding perfect without attending to the final details in person. She

groaned and prayed for help and inspiration. This was her crowning performance. She couldn't let King Nolan or Madeline, truly the entire country of Augustine, down.

Finally, her brain spun—and stuck—on Brad.

Brad Rivera. She could not believe he was here. In Augustine. At the castle. Her protection. And she'd been able to hold him close. His arms around her were the only part of the evening she wanted to savor.

She should hate him.

She didn't.

She should be very careful not to fall for him again.

Would she?

Had she ever stopped loving him?

Arianna gave up on sleep around four-thirty in the morning, prayed, stretched, used the bathroom, brushed her teeth, washed her face, put in eyedrops, and dabbed peppermint essential oil on her forehead, neck, and the tops of her toes to counteract little rest and too much stress. She dressed in some Lady Fit casual gear, compliments of Faith and Hope, and wondered if the big, wonderful fitness center, swimming pool, and spa would be available this early. The royal family were generous to a fault, but she didn't want to interrupt their time in their own workout facility. At her small home in Traverse, she would walk outside when the weather was nice and use her elliptical machine and favorite Pilates workouts when it wasn't.

Oh well. She didn't have time anyway, and she'd survive without the endorphins and stress release of a workout. Maybe. Stress had already been at a high level prepping for last night's ball, Christmas, and especially the king's wedding. Now she had to accomplish everything on her list using only her sense of sight and her people skills. She wanted to touch, smell, taste, compare, contrast, get up close and personal, dive into every last essential detail. She supposed not flying to Milan, Sicily, Paris, Rome, and driving to the other



appointments would save time, but this was what she did. And she did it right and with flair.

Arianna shuddered, said another prayer, and grabbed her laptop out of her oversized Gucci purse. Mason had brought everything to her late last night. He'd been kind and funny as ever. She wished he was the one whose handsome face she couldn't get out of her head. But no ... Brad Rivera. Were their mums plotting together from heaven as they'd always done here on earth?

She focused on her emails to shut out her worries, responding to various questions and fine-tuning the details. Then she had to start sending out requests to change the meetings from in-person to video chats. Ugh. Nobody would like this, most of all her. She was composing the first email when she realized she had no idea what to tell them. The general hadn't told her to keep her attempted murder a secret, but she doubted anyone in Augustine needed another horrific scare like a serial killer on the loose broadcasted to the world.

Setting her laptop on the side table, she rushed across the bedroom and flung open the door. The main area had all the lights on. The huge windows didn't bring in much light because of the blizzard outside blocking the sun.

She stopped in her tracks. Brad was on the floor, between the couch and recliners, pounding out military-precise pushups. Thankfully he had a shirt on, but that couldn't hide the well-built musculature of his back and shoulders.

He leaped to his feet. "Ari? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Well, I *was* fine." Until she'd glimpsed how perfectly built he was. He hadn't been scrawny the last time she'd seen him when he was nineteen, but he hadn't been this ... delicious-looking.

"That is a very ... nice jogging suit." He looked her over as well.

Arianna smiled. "Hope and Faith's creation. Those ladies make me look fabulous." She snapped her fingers and twirled for emphasis.

“I cannot argue with such *truthful* logic.” His eyes grew warm, hot even.

Arianna had no words. The castle had always been a beautiful workplace, but it had never felt like home before. Everything was more comfortable and yet exciting with him around.

She was thrown back to how easily they’d bantered throughout their lives. How she’d looked up to him. How she loved him. As children he’d let her tag along on adventures, but they hadn’t been close during their teenage years. He’d always been kind to her, but two years older in school and busy with sports and leadership positions. She’d longed for him to notice her and look at her like he was doing right now.

Then they’d reconnected a couple years after he graduated secondary school when his mum passed and especially the night of his mum’s funeral. Before he disappeared. She’d longed for him, and she had been ticked and hurt.

Suddenly, she needed a buffer. “Where is Mason?”

His brow squiggled, his golden eyes filled with angst. He rubbed at his stubbled jawline, and the motion made her heart ache. That mannerism was still the same after all this time. “I was trying to fit a workout in. Mason is in the shower. Do you want *him*?”

Was their time together going to be like this? Him second guessing if she wanted Mason? Her wanting to tell him she wanted *him* but she had to be smarter this go-around? She’d been a needy seventeen-year-old when he’d left. She’d wondered for years what she’d done to push him away, or if it was all tied in to losing his mum. In her immature mind, he hadn’t loved her enough, had still seen her as a younger cousin of sorts, that her kiss hadn’t rocked his world like his had rocked hers. She’d hoped he only needed to go see the world, then he’d come back for her and settle down.

She’d finally grown beyond those foolish dreams and worked into her current position in a rather intriguing way. Five years ago, she’d worked hard and achieved a sales position at a high-end clothing store in the Inner Stadt—Akris

Vienna. She'd missed her dad and Augustine, but the job had been ideal.

Queen Anne had traveled to nearby Austria for an exclusive showing. Arianna had been blessed to work with her. The queen had been as genuine and loving as the rest of the August family. The lady had been impressed with Arianna's knowledge, fashion sense, and her desire to move back home to Augustine. Within a week, she had a job offer at the palace. A dream come true.

Arianna studied Brad now. She should walk around him, get a water bottle out of the fridge in the kitchen area, and go back to work. Instead, she demanded, "Where have you been for the past eight years?"

His eyes immediately shuttered. He folded his arms across his chest, and she feared he wouldn't answer. Wouldn't give her even that courtesy. "Africa," he finally said.

"Doing what?"

"Volunteering in different villages—digging wells, building schools, teaching the villagers to farm, protecting them."

"Oh." That wasn't what she'd expected to hear. She'd feared he was chasing women or losing himself in selfish pleasures, drugs, and squandering his inheritance like the prodigal son. Sadly, he had no father, no mum.

She didn't know why she'd worried about any of those things. Simply looking at Brad, she could see he lived clean and was fit and healthy. His eyes were clear, but sometimes tormented. Had he gone through something awful while protecting the villagers?

"That is very honorable of you," she said.

"Thank you."

She couldn't very well ask why he hadn't come back from his very charitable humanitarian mission to love her, but she found herself begging to know, "You couldn't have called, written, sent a text?"

He pushed out a heavy breath and stared at her. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry, Ari ... I didn't think you'd want to hear from me."

"Pardon me?" Maybe she would still get the chance to slap or punch him. How could she not want to hear from him? He'd been her hero as a child and teenager. The older brother she'd always longed for. He'd killed snakes and taught her to fish and often took her on adventures in the mountains near their Traverse homes. She'd realized she was in love with him by the time she was fourteen, but he never seemed to reciprocate the next level of feelings and had grown too busy for her.

Until the fateful night of his mum's funeral. When they'd clung to each other, she'd taken a chance and kissed him, and he'd kissed her back. Wow, had he kissed her back! Then he'd broken the kiss and said he needed to go.

They hadn't said much as he'd walked her home that night. She'd known he was going through something unbearable. She'd been through it a year before, and his mum and hers had been incredible women, the best of friends. At least she still had her dad. Brad only had her. Okay, he had numerous friends, but she could understand what he was going through best.

The next morning she'd gone to work at the Harrod's in Traverse, knowing he'd be back at work as a delivery driver. She'd hoped for a text or a call, but nothing. By evening, she had gotten worried. She had gone to his home to check on him, but everything had been quiet. Nobody around. And the next night and the next. She'd tried his phone. Repeatedly. No service, and then after a few days it said the number was disconnected. Then his mum's home had gone up for sale and all his close friends would say was he'd gone to volunteer somewhere. Maybe they hadn't even known where.

"I'm sorry, Ari," he said again, scrubbing at his beard and then dropping his hand. "I did so many things wrong before I left. I should never have ... let down my guard with you."

What was she supposed to say to that? He had done her wrong, very wrong, but despite herself, she still cared for him.

Still loved him. Was he trying to say, but not say, that he shouldn't have kissed her? She needed to smack him.

“Can we please focus on the close family friends we used to be and keep you safe?” he asked in a low, pained voice.

Pained? She'd show him pain. She'd discovered spike heels could penetrate flesh. She had her massive suitcase and a nice supply of 'shoe weapons' right inside the bedroom.

“Good morning,” Mason called out, bounding into the main area with his usual bright smile. “Breakfast? We can plan the day while we eat.” He gestured to the four-person table in the kitchen area. “Get cozy. Grace said she'd send up a tray.”

A rap came at the door.

“Am I living right or what?” Mason grinned and hurried for the door.

Arianna stayed rooted to the floor, glaring at Brad. Friends. She should get him off this protection detail. One word to General Ray or Chad and they would do it.

“Thank you.” Mason shut the door and turned to them, a loaded tray in his hands. The scent of fresh-baked bread and sweet and savory flavors wafted to them. “Who's ready for deliciousness?” He looked between them. “Did someone die?”

Arianna gave a choked laugh. “I'm not hungry, and I have loads of work to do. I'll be busy all day. That's my plan. Sorry, but it will be very boring for you two. If you want to take turns going up to the gym or whatever, I'm sure the Gifted Genius won't break into my room. Thanks so much for being here for me.”

She whirled and hurried into the bedroom before either of them could say a word. The last thing she saw was Brad's brown gaze. Anguish was clear there. His usually golden, bright, enticing, brown-sugar eyes were darker, much darker.

Arianna had hurt him. She felt a sense of vindication that wasn't very Christian of her. He deserved to know how it felt.

Sorrow and longing followed the vindication. She wanted him to love her, not feel guilty or sad.

Christmas was not looking very cheery this year.

## CHAPTER

## *Six*

**BRAD RELUCTANTLY SETTLED** into the chair across from Mason at the small dinette set. He was certain breakfast would be awkward. He was highly committed to being here for Arianna, but their latest conversation only confirmed how angry she should be at him and she didn't even know the half of it. Her generous personality kept her from hating him, but she had to believe he would never stick around.

How could he keep his distance emotionally? She deserved so much better than him. Maybe after he graduated from secondary school, when his future had seemed bright, he could've bravely made a play for Arianna. She used to call him 'Brave Brad.' He almost smiled at that. He'd bravely fought and led the way in battle after battle, but revealing hurtful secrets only he and a deceased woman knew? It made him want to run.

It was far too late now to win Arianna's heart. He wasn't that ambitious, optimistic young man any longer. Too much death and heartache weighed him down, starting with his lack of control with Annabelle, Annabelle's horrific death, and continuing with each death of a fellow warrior or villager under his protection. Those people had become his people. He was questioning more than ever why he'd felt impressed to come home and face his past. Arianna would've been better off without him getting between her and Mason.

The handsome, smiley young guard surprised him yet again. He asked Brad question after question about Africa. He

was especially interested in the battles he'd fought and the tribal warriors who had trained Brad and their impressive methods of fighting with very few modern weapons and always a shortage of money, bullets, and supplies.

Brad shared a little, but he didn't get into his two separate captures and the torture. Instead, he focused on drawing Mason out. The lieutenant shared about his training under General August, Lieutenant General Prescott, and of course Captain Levi Favor. He had some heart-pounding tales of taking a knife in the back to help rescue Princess Aliya from two infamous killers and the story of Prince Malik, Princess Sophie, and Princess Sunny almost being murdered by the even more infamous William Rindlesbacher.

It was all intriguing and made the morning hours pass quickly, but he could tell Mason was going stir crazy and he felt the same. What would they do if they were cooped up in this room for months while Arianna worked and they waited for the Gifted Genius to be apprehended?

Mason insisted Arianna leave her door cracked. She and Mason had decided to use the intense snowstorms today and in the forecast as the reason she couldn't travel to her appointments. Today looked to be a vicious blizzard outside, the snow swirling in every direction and driven by wind gusts against the panes like bullets pinging off trees. Brad tried not to flinch at each assault.

Mason checked on Arianna several times and took her a protein shake and a water at one point. Brad wanted to be the one checking on her, but she was obviously upset with him. Nobody could blame her, least of all him.

So he paced, staring out the windows. He couldn't even see the picturesque valley blanketed in white; snow and more snow obscured any view and pelted the windows and the castle.

"Protection details are never riveting," Mason said from the kitchen area.

"Would you like to take turns using the castle's fitness center, as Arianna suggested?" Brad asked, rubbing his jaw.



“Is that all right with the royal family?”

“The August family is very generous, and the guards stationed here are always welcome to use the facilities.”

“It would be great to get some energy out and get a workout in, but I don’t know if I can leave her with only one guard.” He should’ve thought of that before he’d suggested it. He needed an outlet, but not at the risk of Arianna being under-guarded... or alone with the charming Mason.

“I could call the command center. They’d send up an extra guard to wait outside the door so we are still two deep.”

“That’s a great idea. Thank you.” It didn’t solve the issue of Mason getting alone time with her, however.

Mason pulled out his phone to make the call, then insisted Brad take the first workout slot. Brad didn’t like leaving Arianna and selfishly didn’t want her coming out for lunch and having a flirtatious interaction with Mason. At the same time, Mason kept checking on her and Brad hadn’t stopped him or declared it was his turn. Nobody he’d fought with would ever call him a wimp, but he felt like one regarding Arianna.

Brad raced up the stairs to the workout center and soon lost himself in an intense strength training and plyometric workout. The facility was incredible, from the top-of-the-line equipment, the variety of machines and weights, the cleanliness, and he could only imagine the gorgeous views. The storm was settling a bit. Thankfully, the gym was deserted in the early afternoon.

Jogging back down to their suite, he thanked the hulking Sergeant Ollie Bancroft who stood at the door. The man only nodded in response. He rapped on the door. He and Mason had decided to only take the key card when they all left the room at the same time. It was an extra line of protection to have to knock and not have an enemy somehow get the keycard and get in.

“Yes?” Mason called through the door.

“It’s Brad.”

Mason flung the door open. “Whew! You smell like a very good workout.” His blue eyes twinkled.

“It was fabulous. Thank you.”

“Enjoy the shower. You earned it.”

“I’ll wait until you return. So one of us is in the main area.”

“Good on you for being diligent.” Mason saluted him. “See you in a bit.”

Brad walked into the main area and found an array of lunch options on a tray. He wasn’t used to such a variety of delicious food. The villagers had always made certain their warriors were fed, even if it was roots and whatever animal they’d managed to kill. The hardest part had been the women and children often didn’t have enough. Brad had often tried to sneak part of his portion to the children. All but the very youngest had been trained to not take his food. It had been rough.

This was a very different world. He focused on the friends he’d left behind and then gratitude for Augustine’s abundance and the impressive, hard-working castle staff in his prayers. He knew the three of them weren’t the only guests, and most of the large royal family was here. They’d come for the ball last night and were staying through Christmas. General August and Lieutenant General Prescott were likely figuring out how the Gifted Genius had been hired on as a server, but it made sense with the castle busier than usual and hosting that ball and the king’s wedding soon; of course they’d hire extra staff.

Brad wanted to eat, but he also really needed a shower. How long would Mason be? He should’ve asked the man to stay while he showered. He hurried into the bedroom, leaving the door open, and slid out of his sweaty shirt, setting it in a laundry hamper in the closet. He splashed water all over himself, dried with a towel, and sprayed a shot of his &Horace cologne on.

Brad had taken little with him when he left eight years ago, packing up his stuff into boxes and leaving it with a neighbor

after asking a friend to sell his parents' home. When he'd unloaded his stuff upon his return, he'd found his old favorite cologne. It still smelled good.

Walking back into the main room, he stopped short when Arianna's bedroom door opened. She walked out, stopped, stared at his bare chest, and cried out, "My goodness, what happened to you?"

He lifted his hands in a placating gesture. "Forgive me. I returned from the fitness center upstairs and I smelled horrible. I should've thrown another shirt on, but I wanted to shower first." Who knew when they'd do laundry? He'd learned not to dirty an item of clothing unnecessarily, washing everything by hand during the past eight years.

She advanced on him, her eyes widening the closer she got. Did he smell that awful?

"I'm not concerned with your scent. I am speaking about *this*," she said, stepping in close and placing her warm fingertips next to the scar on his shoulder—a bullet wound.

"Oh," he said dumbly, far more affected by her touch than he wanted to admit.

"And this." She trailed her hand down his arm to the scar on his bicep. A knife wound.

Brad couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Her touch was mesmerizing, the concerned look in her teal-blue eyes even more so.

"And this." She ran her palm along his skin until she reached the burn marks above his wrist. Part of his captor's torture.

Brad needed to pull away. He also needed to make certain she did not see his back.

"And this." She placed her warm palm on the left side of his abdomen, right next to the scar where he'd almost lost his spleen—a spear that time.

He swallowed hard and flexed an arm. "You're inquiring how I developed all of my impressive musculature?"

“Your build is ...” Arianna looked over his chest and shoulders, then met his gaze. “Very impressive.” She finally pulled her hand back. “But I am horrified by all these scars. Who injured you?”

Brad wanted to smile again. She looked like she’d go hunt down and have words with anyone who dared hurt him. His stomach turned. He would never let her close to the fierce warriors that had injured, imprisoned, and tortured him.

“Worried about me, are you?”

He should be keeping his distance, but it was difficult with how appealing she was. He’d run and fought for eight years, penance and justice for the pitiful amount of self-control he’d exhibited after his mum’s death. He’d been alone and devastated when he lost his mum, but that was little reason to return Arianna’s intoxicating kisses. Especially after he’d lost control and done more than just kiss Annabelle the night before her tragic death. Annabelle had been engaged to Levi at the time, so Levi had every reason to hate him. Brad was the lowliest of scumbags. He’d found forgiveness and a relationship with his Savior while fighting and serving in the wilds of Africa, but sometimes the balm of forgiveness was hard to hang on to.

“Of course I’m worried about you,” Arianna insisted. “I thought you dug wells and built schools. You said you protected, almost as an after thought. This isn’t some occasional protection detail.” Her gaze turned knowing. “General Ray also said you were well-trained and experienced. I put that to the back of my mind because I was such a mess last night.”

“You were incredible last night. Braver than anyone could be.”

“Thank you.” She smiled softly, but it quickly disappeared. “Who hurt you?”

“I, um ... I trained with the warriors from the tribes and helped protect the people.”

“And you got all these scars in battle?”

“Most,” he admitted. What would she do when she saw his back? The battle had been going well, but he’d been struck in the head from behind as he battled two men in front of him. He never saw it coming.

When he awoke, he was tied to a tree along with his men who’d survived. There had been no way to fight or defend his friends, and he’d been forced to listen to their screams and grunts, or worse, them not responding to the lashings of the whip. That had been as painful as his own beatings. Especially when they started dying from their wounds.

If he edged back to the bedroom to grab a shirt, would that be too telling? He cleared his throat. “Are you hungry? Can I help you with something? How is your work going?”

Arianna eyed him strangely. “I’m grabbing a drink, and not great, honestly. I want to be out there.” She threw a hand toward the world of white, brushed by him, and sauntered to the fridge in the kitchen area.

Brad slowly pivoted with her to keep his back out of her view. He didn’t mention that even if she wasn’t in danger, this storm would have grounded her.

She pulled a seltzer water out of the fridge, shut the door, twisted the top off, and took a long drink. Her neck was smooth, and her lips glistened with moisture.

Brad stared. Openmouthed. She looked so appealing he almost forgot his purpose here.

“Are you all right then?” she asked him.

He shrugged, and Arianna’s gaze sharpened on his shoulders.

“You’ve matured ... a lot,” she said, focusing on the water in her hand and taking another sip.

“And you have grown into an exquisitely beautiful woman, Ari.” He wanted to rush across the space between them, scoop her into his arms, and kiss her.

What he should do was ease back into the room, put a shirt on, and wait until she hid in her bedroom again.

“Thank you.” She twisted the bottle in her hand. “What made you finally decide to come home?”

Brad’s heart slammed against his chest. He could only admit part of the truth. “I felt impressed that it was the right time. I needed to right some wrongs,” he said. The wrongs against Levi and against her. Protecting her was a good step in that direction—if he could keep his distance and not fall for her again. “And I was tired of fighting.”

The battles had never stopped. He’d realized he would most likely die, and that his death would accomplish little besides give his friends motivation to fight more. He had protected many and taught the skills he’d learned to men, women, teenagers, and sometimes even children to protect their families and homes. That gave him some comfort.

“So you came home and immediately joined the army to fight again?” She smirked. “That makes no sense.”

“It’s the only thing I’m good at,” he admitted, spreading his hands.

“Please stop doing that.”

“What?”

“Stop showcasing all that ... muscle.”

He smiled, surprised and pleased, and clasped his hands behind his back. “Oh. Forgive me.”

“That isn’t any better, you know. Arm muscles all bulging,” she muttered. She shook her head and then said quickly, “First of all, you’re wrong. You’re good at a lot of things.”

Brad raised his eyebrows. He supposed in school he’d been good at sports and voted as class president, but upon graduation he’d accepted the most lucrative job he could, hoping to save enough money for advanced training or the university so he could make something of himself and take good care of his widowed mum. He’d done neither, losing his remaining family member to brain cancer, no hope of a miracle once she was diagnosed, then running to Africa when he was only nineteen.

“Second of all, what wrongs do you need to right?” She tilted her chin up, her look slightly belligerent, as if asking him to make things right with her.

He couldn't. Not really.

“Too many, sadly.” He smiled, hoping to make it a tease.

“When I saw you at the ball last night, I wasn't certain if I should punch you or hug you.” She gripped her bottle of water tighter.

She wasn't going to bring up the moment their eyes had connected? He should've immediately asked Faith to excuse him and chased after Arianna. He never would've had the confrontation with Levi, and maybe Arianna wouldn't have been attacked.

But he couldn't change any of that.

He stepped closer, crossing the distance between them. Her teal-blue eyes were wary, but she didn't back away. When he reached her, he took her water and set it on the nearby counter. Then he leaned in close, prayed his quick wash off and cologne spray had covered the sweat smell, and asked, “Why did you choose to hug me instead of punch me?”

“I was in shock and horrified at almost being killed.”

“Ah. That makes sense.” He tilted his chin to her. “Would you like to hit me now? Nobody would blame you.”

Arianna's eyes trailed over his shoulders, arms, abdomen, chest, and back to his face. “I think too many people have hit you, Brave Brad.”

Brad smiled. He hadn't heard that nickname in a long time. The men he'd served with in Africa and the women and children they'd protected would've called him brave, but he didn't feel brave around Arianna. He wanted to run and hide rather than admit to her the reasons he'd left her behind with no way to contact him. She'd hate him when she knew the truth, and he'd hate himself if he hurt her again.

“That only leaves one option, Angel Ari.”

Her lips curved up at him using her old nickname. It still fit. “A hug?”

He wanted to hug her, hold her, but he had to stay in control. As long as he didn’t let himself kiss her, he should be all right. He’d try to put her in the box of a close family friend, a childhood playmate. “Unless I smell too awful.”

“You smell like you always do.”

He arched an eyebrow. “How’s that now?”

“Bergamot, cedar, and a touch of musk and sandalwood.”

“Only you could pin scents so specifically.” She smelled like a light floral perfume—tantalizing.

“I’m talented.”

“Yes, you are.” He should have resisted. Instead, he lifted both hands and cupped her smooth jawline with his palms.

She glanced at his biceps, then met his gaze. Her pulse raced like mad in her throat.

“You don’t have to hug me if you don’t want to. You could slug me in the gut right now. Do some fabulous damage.” He wanted to kiss her, not just hug her. She’d be smart to hit him.

She shook her head. “I don’t want to hurt you, and with abs like that, I might break my hand.”

Brad smiled. He needed to retreat. He had hurt her; he knew he had. She’d had the hugest crush on him when they were young, and he’d loved her like a favorite younger sidekick, always there, fun and cute. He had finally seen her for the beautiful woman she was on that fateful night. He’d clung to her, kissed her, knew she was the perfect match for him, and then he had disappeared rather than face her, Levi, and his own failings.

Brad released her and stepped back. She came with him, wrapping her arms around his back and moving in to hug him tightly.

As her hands ran along his flesh, she jumped and yelped, “Brad!”



“No, don’t,” he begged as she pulled away and tried to come around behind him. He held on to both of her hands, tugged her in tight to his chest, and clasped her there, releasing her hands and holding her tightly with his arms around her back.

“You’re scarred. Horribly,” she whispered, staring up at him, her teal eyes full of compassion and concern. She was quite a bit shorter than him without her heels on. She looked vulnerable, beautiful, innocent, perfect truly.

“It’s all right,” he reassured her, remembering too late why he should’ve gone and gotten a shirt. Instead, he’d stupidly teased her to hug him.

“It’s not all right. It’s awful. Who did that to you?”

“I was captured by the wrong side a time or two.”

“And they *whipped* you?” she choked out. “That’s what those scars are?” Tears crested her lids and rolled down her silken cheeks.

“Ah, Ari. Angel Ari. Please, don’t cry. It was years ago, and my people came for me. I lived.” It was better than he could say for a lot of his friends. The whippings had killed several of his closest buddies, heroic and unselfish men who had only wanted to protect their wives, children, and homes.

In this beautiful, magical castle and close to Arianna, it felt like another world. He missed those people, but the constant battle had drained him emotionally and physically. Spiritually, he was stronger than ever. Giving everything for others had brought him that gift.

“I’m so sorry.” She leaned into him, her hands and arms cradled between them. “So sorry.”

He held her, savoring the experience, knowing he didn’t deserve it, wondering if he’d ever get the chance again. He hadn’t felt anything this incredible in the eight years apart from her.

Arianna flattened her palms on the bare skin of chest, and his pulse raced. His skin seemed to tingle. He wanted her to touch him like that every day for the rest of his life.

This was not a good idea.

Glancing up at him, her tears had dried but her eyes were still bright. “Are you embarrassed by your scars?”

“No.” He wasn’t embarrassed, but he didn’t flaunt them either. They were sacred to him. His valiant friends had died next to him from the same wounds.

“Can I touch them?”

She was fearless. Always had been.

Brad didn’t know what to say. He simply nodded.

Arianna held his gaze as she slid her palms down his sides and around to his back. His body reacted far too strongly to her touch. He swallowed hard and forced himself not to move his own hands from the middle of her back, or capture her lips in a kiss. If he did either, he’d be lost.

Lost to her. It sounded incredible.

She ran her fingers and palms across the ridged scars that ran up and down his back. He knew scar tissue didn’t have much sensation, but the skin next to it certainly did.

Brad begged heaven for help and tightened his muscles to stay in control. He couldn’t kiss her and see if it was every bit as incredible as his memory of their one kiss eight years ago.

He couldn’t. Not until she knew the truth. And he didn’t know when he’d be brave enough to let it all out.

Had he leaned closer? Had she?

“Brad,” she whispered, moistening her lips and tilting her face up to his.

His heart thumped out of control.

“Yes, Ari?”

Her gaze dipped to his lips then her teal-blue eyes focused on his again. He couldn’t get his heart to calm down.

“Do you ever think about the kiss we shared?” she whispered.

“Only every other minute,” he admitted.

Her eyes widened, and then her lips curved into a smile. She ran her hands up to his shoulders and used them as leverage to lift herself to within a few centimeters of his mouth. All he had to do was lower his head. All of his long-repressed dreams would come true. The memories of those kisses and his dreams of her had gotten him through uncomfortable nights on the jungle floor, vicious battles, and his longing for home and for her.

He could kiss her. A simple kiss. He'd stay in control. He'd learned some lessons the past eight years.

But at what cost to Arianna?

She wanted him to kiss her. For some unfathomable reason, his Angel Ari had forgiven him for leaving her and wanted to be in his arms.

"Please kiss me," she whispered in a husky, irresistible voice.

Before he could fight with himself any longer, he bowed his head to hers.

Their lips brushed, and joy and light filled him.

A hard rap came at the door.

Mason.

Brad straightened, stepped back, and finally regained his senses.

He'd learned some lessons? Like rubbish he had.

She was a family friend? What a bald-faced lie.

"Please forgive me, Ari," he murmured. "It won't happen again."

Her blue eyes flashed. He was going to get slugged. He would welcome any pain she wanted to inflict on him, but Mason was knocking again.

Pivoting, he hurried to the door.

Arianna gasped behind him. It was one thing to touch his scars, but seeing them was probably even more shocking.

“Yes?” he called.

“It’s your favorite too handsome and hilarious lieutenant,” Mason called back.

He opened the door slightly. It was indeed Mason.

“Now I smell as despicable as you,” Mason said, a huge grin on his face.

“It’s a good club to be in,” Brad managed, his voice too breathy. His heart was still racing out of control from the interaction with Arianna—her hands on his skin, her scent, her firm body in his arms, and the barest touch of her lips.

“Thank you, Ollie,” Mason said. “We’ll bother you again soon.”

Ollie saluted, gave a half smile, and marched down the hall.

Brad stepped back and Mason walked into the room, deadbolting the door behind him.

“Arianna,” he called out. “Do you want a turn at the sweat chamber?”

Brad looked at Arianna.

She was focused on him, clearly upset and concerned. What a mess.

“Oh, no thank you.” She forced a smile at Mason. “I’ve got too much work today. I’m glad you could both get out. I need to head back to my room.”

She turned to go, and Brad let out a breath. “Care if I take the first shower?” he asked Mason.

“Be my guest.” Mason bowed slightly. “I’m certain you smell more foul than I ever could.”

“Many thanks.” Brad was grateful for Mason and his easy humor. He turned.

“Curses,” Mason yelled. “What happened to your back, friend?”

Brad paused. Instead of looking at Mason, his gaze slid to Arianna who had paused in her doorway. Their heavenly exchange of a few moments ago played across her face. He had to be stronger. He couldn't let himself be alone with her or touch her. Heaven would agree with him.

He focused on Mason, spreading his arms and smiling. "A few friendly whipping sessions. No worries."

Arianna gasped and stormed into her room, slamming the door behind her.

Mason's brows rose. "I'm sorry, friend, on all accounts. There is nothing friendly about your scars, and now you've ticked off the beautiful lady. Guess she'll be kissing me by nightfall." He winked, and Brad's stomach churned. Then he grew serious, as serious as he'd been in the general's office yesterday. "I am truly sorry. Captured and tortured?"

Brad nodded. Mason understood. Of course he did. It was part of their military training, the information on capture, torture, and how to respond to it. The real experience was nothing like the training. Brad wouldn't wish it on even the men who'd done it to him. Well, maybe on them.

"There is much more depth, experience, and pain to you than I would have believed two days ago," Mason said, his blue eyes full of compassion.

Brad shrugged. "We all go through hard things."

"Nobody I know has gone through enough lashes to be permanently scarred." Mason dipped his head respectfully. "Nobody I know has given eight years of their life to protect and serve a people not their own. I'm in awe of you, my friend."

Brad shifted uncomfortably. It was too high of praise. The service had been his penance at first, but God had blessed him and those people had become his own.

"Thank you," Brad managed. "I can't tell you how I appreciate your acceptance and good humor."

"Well ... thank heaven above that Arianna will choose based on the most good-looking and fun-loving man, not on

the most self-sacrificing and battle-tested.” Mason’s broad smile returned.

Brad chuckled. He turned to head for the shower. Heaven above would definitely shove Arianna in Mason’s direction. He needed to as well.

The very thought of Arianna in anybody else’s arms, even the happy, kind Mason, sounded like worse torture than another round of whipping.

## CHAPTER

## *Seven*

**ARIANNA COULD NOT SORT OUT** her feelings for Brad. She was angry at him, still in love with him, in awe of his toughness and dedication, sickened by what he'd gone through, and wished she could kiss him for much longer than the brilliant but brief touch of their lips earlier today.

Had he seriously asked for forgiveness for kissing her and said it wouldn't happen again? Curses, as Mason would say. How could he?

She paced her room and couldn't focus on work. The only explanation that made sense was Brad was wounded by his mum's death, had left to find himself, and then had been wounded time and again by the awful battles he'd been a part of. He couldn't let himself love Arianna because of that.

But there was another explanation, one she tried to push away but it crept back in. He still loved her as a little sister, not the romantic feelings she had for him. She was the one who kept pushing herself on him. How awkward.

Why, then, did he look at her the way he did? When he'd said he thought of their kisses eight years ago 'only every other minute,' she'd swooned completely.

Her watch beeped a warning. She had a video chat with Brioni in five minutes. Yikes.

Arianna raced into the bathroom, freshened her makeup, and then slid into a blue Giorgio Armani wrap dress. She almost put her heels on but realized the men's suit designer rep would never see her feet. She hated video chats. If only she

was striding into the business establishment dressed to impress with her heels on and accomplishing her work with a confident smile on her face. She loved what she did, and she loved people.

The computer beeped at her.

Ignoring her misery, Arianna put her smile on and accepted the call.

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The next nine days sped by. Arianna was insanely busy. Mason insisted she take a break each day and use the fitness facility, which she appreciated, and it did help keep her sane. Brad and Mason both trailed her to the gym and guarded her while she was there. It was awkward working out and knowing the man she wanted was watching her every move.

Sometimes she even indulged in a twenty-minute massage in one of the top-of-the-line Daiwa Supreme chairs or wandered through the beautiful solarium to recharge.

She was accustomed to driving to nearby stores in Vienna and Southern Germany or flying to Italy and France to interact with her favorite designers, florists, and caterers on behalf of the royal family. Doing it all from a bedroom was wilting her very soul. General Ray was protecting her, but he'd taken away a major part of her process. How was she, an artist, supposed to work under these isolated, detached conditions?

Arianna said a prayer and strengthened her resolve. She would make it all work and do it from a bedroom with only a computer and video chats because she was a professional. No stylist block would keep her from making the event worthy of her beloved and illustrious king and future queen.

Mason and Brad were right there to do anything she needed. Anything except Brad getting close enough to kiss her again. He gave her plenty of longing looks, which destroyed the theory of him not being interested in her as a woman, but he was very careful to keep his distance. It was obvious he was damaged. But how could she heal him?



Mason, on the other hand, flirted and teased with her constantly. She thought the world of him and appreciated his humor and easy-going nature, but she didn't know if his jabs about her choosing him were just to tease her and Brad or if he was serious. She wouldn't mind dating him after the Gifted Genius was caught. If she could get Brad out of her mind. She doubted either would happen.

There had been nothing new on the serial killer. She prayed he didn't choose another victim for number seven and December, but she didn't want him fixated on her either.

Arianna loved the Augustine castle—it was luxurious, spacious, and the views of the valley and mountains were insane, but she didn't fancy the idea of never leaving it. The suite they were staying in was probably as big as her cottage in Traverse with the open living area, two bedrooms and bathrooms. The granite counters, hickory wood cabinets, stainless steel appliances, cherry wood flooring, and leather furnishings were all the highest quality. Still, the space seemed to close in on her.

She spoke to her dad every few days on the phone, but she missed him and knew he missed her too.

Tomorrow was the royal wedding. Arianna should be resting, but she was too keyed up. It was almost midnight, and she paced the bedroom, thinking through each detail and making certain she hadn't missed anything. She had done the very best job possible, even confined to the castle.

Thoughts of Brad kept sneaking in. She tried to ignore them, but they kept coming and coming. What was she going to do about him? How could she break through to him, heal his wounds, love him? He resisted her at every turn. Something was deeply wrong inside him. He still had light, but he was much more serious than the easy-going, charming young man she'd known.

She needed a drink of water and prayer. Lots of prayer.

Rushing out into the main area, she stopped short. Brad popped to his feet next to the couch. He was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts and obviously sleeping on the couch bed.

She'd come out early in the morning a couple times and Mason had been sleeping on the fold-out. They took turns? She'd assumed Brad had somehow won a bet and gotten the real bed.

His gaze traveled over her and then he said in a beautifully husky voice, "You and those ..." He cleared his throat. "Barely-there pajamas of yours."

Brad and her dad had both given her a hard time about her pajamas, Brad especially on family vacations together or when her parents went away and she stayed with him and his mum.

But Brad had never looked at her like this while she was wearing them before.

"What? I sleep hot." She tossed her long hair and commended herself for wearing the summery pajama set even in the winter—a cotton tank top and shorts. "And they make my arms and legs look fabulous."

"I cannot argue with such practical logic." His gaze was hot. He turned and pointedly looked out the windows, which was silly as it was pitch dark outside. "Can I get you anything? Are you all right?"

Arianna was fed up with him avoiding her. She marched around the coffee table and into his space, and finally she got his attention. She jabbed a finger into his chest and said, "Yeah, you can explain why you're keeping your distance when we're stuck in the same castle suite."

He studied her, and she had the horrible, sinking feeling that he was going to close off and not give her anything.

"Brad." Arianna put her hand on his arm. He tensed under her touch, but she refused to be dissuaded. She kept her hand there, liking the feel of his warm, firm flesh. "I thought we were friends."

"We are," he said.

"Good friends," she said, sliding her hand up his arm. She was rewarded with him trembling softly. Her hand crossed the soft fabric of his T-shirt, appreciating the musculature of his shoulder, and then cupped the back of his neck with her hand.

He drew in a breath and didn't move away. A Christmas miracle. Only a few days until the holiday arrived. Would her dad come here to spend it with them? Would they be stuck in this suite or join the royal family?

"Good friends," she repeated, easing closer and hoping Mason wouldn't hear them and come investigate.

"Ari ... we've always been good friends."

"Thank you." She wrapped her other hand around his neck, playing with the soft hair at his nape.

He groaned but sadly did not wrap her up in his arms.

"Good friends don't avoid each other," she said, inching closer still. She could see his pulse pounding in his neck, feel the brush of his chest against hers, smell that fresh bergamot and cedar scent. She inhaled deeply. "You smell delectable."

"Ari." His voice was tight, and she couldn't tell if her idea was backfiring or not.

"Yes?" She tried to sound extra sweet as she wrapped both her hands tight around his neck and arched up onto her tiptoes, leaning into him.

His eyes widened. "You are not acting like an angel."

Ari laughed. She felt decidedly un-angel-like, pushing him to hold her. Why wouldn't he wrap his arms around her and hold her close? Darn his self-restraint. Or were her fears true, and he simply wasn't interested in her?

Instead of backing away as she probably should, she ignored all his signals, pulled his head down closer to hers, and softly kissed the left side of his mouth.

Brad pulled in a quick breath, and then he wrapped his arms tight around her and pulled her clean off her feet. The world spun in the best way.

Arianna slowly, achingly brushed her lips across his and kissed the other side of his mouth.

He held her tight, and she waited for him to capture her mouth. She needed him to prove he returned her feelings, that

she wasn't simply forcing herself on him.

"Ari," he ground out. She felt the words against her lips. "Good friends don't kiss each other."

Disappointment swirled in her, but she wasn't ready to quit. Not yet. He hadn't set her down. That was a good sign. "Brave Brad. You are so much more than a good friend to me."

"What am I?" His golden eyes fastened on her as he held her tightly to him.

"You're my friend." She softly kissed his lips but drew back just as quick.

His eyes were wide, his breath coming fast.

"You're my fondest dream—day and night." She kissed him again, longer this time. He started to return the kiss but she pulled back, wanting to taunt, tease, and capture him completely.

"You're the love of my life." Arching up to him, she pressed her lips to his. She kissed him with all the love and pent-up longing stored inside her, and she refused to back away.

Brad returned the kiss. Oh, how he returned it. He held her as if she were his world and kissed her as if the sun would not come up tomorrow. He kissed away the darkness of the night and the pain and yearning of the last eight years.

Eventually, he pulled back and stared at her. His eyes were full of wonder, love, hope ...

It *was* a Christmas miracle.

Then he set her on her feet and bent down close to her. "Curses, Ari. What are you doing to me?"

She smiled and arched up to kiss him again. He had clearly spent far too much time with Mason. "I'm doing what I was meant to do. Loving you."

Brad dipped her low and kissed her until she knew he loved her, knew it from her lips clear down to her toes.

Many, many minutes later, he pulled back. Then he did something wrong. So wrong she couldn't even find the words to protest. He ushered her to her bedroom, gently nudged her in, then stepped back out of the doorframe.

“Brad?” she asked.

She wanted to kiss the night away. To hear that he loved her back in words. To know why he'd left and to hear his promise that he'd never, ever leave again.

“Ari, I can't do this to you again.” He stood ramrod straight, though the angst on his face showed he wanted to be pacing—or fighting someone. “I'm sorry, but I'm not the right one for you. Mason is.”

“I don't want Mason. I want you.”

“You don't know what you're saying. If you knew why I left, what I've been through, how I've changed, how unworthy of you I am...” He shook his head. “Please. Get the idea of us being together out of your head. It's not right for either of us.”

Her mouth hung open, her heart threatening to fracture. “Tell me why you left so we can work it out.”

“No,” was all he said. At any moment, he would grab the door and close it on any hope of a future.

Frustration filled her. How could she get through his thick skull? “How could you kiss me like that if you don't love me?”

He shook his head and rubbed at his jaw. “I'm still waiting for you to slug or slap me.”

“That's your response?” Her voice rose to a shriek. She was surprised Mason didn't come charging out of the other bedroom. “I don't want to slug you; I want to love you and kiss you!” Stupid, thick-in-the-head man. Ugh! “Tell me why you left. Let's figure this out together.”

She was begging now, such a fool for him. Why couldn't she love the happy-go-lucky Mason? No, it had always been Brad for her. And he couldn't love her back for some reason.

“You claim you love me,” he said softly.

“I do.”

“Then please leave this alone. Please. Only pain lies down that road, and I care too much to hurt you like that.”

“It will hurt me?” She put a hand to her chest.

He nodded.

“More than you leaving? For eight years? More than you kissing me but not returning my love?” Nothing could hurt as bad as she had eight years ago and as she did at this moment.

He nodded again.

“Can you stand there and tell me you don’t love me?”

He looked her over for a long moment, released a breath, and then he said, “Ari. I love you like a sister.”

Arianna stared at him. Then she slammed the door in his face.

Running to the bed, she fell on it and let herself cry. She sobbed like she hadn’t since he’d left her eight years ago.

She loved Brad Rivera. And she despised him at the same time.

## CHAPTER

## *Eight*

**MASON PEEKED** his head out as soon as Arianna slammed the door. “All right then?”

Brad grunted. Nothing was all right. “Yes, thank you.”

Mason’s brows rose, but he eased back into his room without asking all the questions he probably had. It had been kind of him to not interrupt their kissing session, but maybe that would’ve been better in the long run. How was Brad going to keep his distance from the most alluring woman in the world now that he’d kissed her like that?

Brad must’ve fallen into an exhausted slumber at some point because morning came. Standing on the other side of Arianna’s door last night, after she’d slammed it in his face, and listening to her cry, was worse than being whipped and burned and taunted and tortured.

Brad hadn’t actually lied, saying he loved her like a sister. He *had* loved her like a sister—for years. He just hadn’t completed the sentence. He loved her like a friend. He loved her like a man should love the most perfect woman in existence. He loved her in every possible way, and therefore he couldn’t act like the selfish jerk he’d been eight years ago.

Arianna didn’t come out when breakfast was delivered. He and Mason took turns showering and dressing in the Ralph Lauren tuxes that had been delivered yesterday for them. They were to blend in with the guests at the wedding and not leave Arianna’s side. Today with the guests and extra staff and media and craziness of the wedding was definitely the Gifted

Genius's best time to strike. Brad knew General August would screen everyone and have top-notch security in place, but there were a load of people coming into the castle for this wedding, many of them unknown variables from a security standpoint.

Mason kept joking as they waited. Brad tried to smile, but he couldn't have recalled what his verbal responses were.

"What is going on today, chump?" Mason asked as they waited for Arianna. She had appointments with every member of the royal family, the caterers, the decorators, the musicians, the florists—anybody who touched this royal wedding would get final instructions from her today. The wedding officially started at five p.m., but they knew it would be a busy day.

"You look like you lost your best friend." Mason bumped his shoulder with his own. "Anything to do with the variety of ... noises I heard last night?"

Brad pushed out a ragged breath and scrubbed at his beard. He *had* lost his best friend. Arianna had to hate him now. Why couldn't he stay in control around her? He shouldn't have kissed her like that last night.

"Thank you for being my friend," Brad said. He snuck a glance at Arianna's door. Firmly closed.

"Of course." Mason smiled. "I didn't know how I'd manage working in such close quarters, knowing Levi despises you, but you're a good man. Have you ever thought about talking things out with Levi?"

Brad studied the large windows and the bright winter day outside. "I need to. He hates me, and he has good reason to. I should've talked to him before I left for Africa, but after I kissed his fiancée, Annabelle, and Arianna within a few days of each other and Annabelle died and Arianna looked at me like I was her hero and love combined..."

Mason was uncharacteristically silent, and Brad couldn't bring himself to look at him. Was he making any sense? He couldn't even admit to Mason he'd done much more than kiss Annabelle.



“This all happened right as my mum passed,” he said. “After my mum’s funeral, I had nobody left except Arianna, and I knew I wasn’t worthy of her, so I just ... ran.”

He finally stopped talking and forced himself to look at Mason.

His friend’s mouth was slightly open, his eyes wide. “Curses, my friend! You are messed up, aren’t you now?”

Brad laughed. Mason was like the brother he’d never had. “I am,” he admitted. “Any advice?”

“Always. Loads.” Mason grinned, but then he looked Brad in the eye and said solemnly, “Forgive yourself. Turn it over to Jesus. Work things out with Levi. Most importantly ... tell Arianna why you left and give her a chance to forgive you and to show you how incredible she is.” He tilted his head to the door. “That is one special lady. I’ve tried repeatedly to tease and flirt with her. She’s friendly with me, but I see it in her eyes and in yours. And I may have heard it last night—you know, I had to make certain everything was secure.” He smiled. “You love each other. Don’t waste love with an amazing woman like her because of your past mistakes.”

Brad studied Mason. It was all solid advice. He thought he *had* turned it over to Jesus, many times. It had become almost a daily occurrence as he fought through his days. He could always put more trust and faith in the redeeming power of the Savior. Now that he was back where he’d begun, it all felt overwhelming and he didn’t know how to make things right.

Telling Arianna ... everything. Would she forgive him? It was tough to envision, as he hadn’t forgiven himself. He’d simply worked, served, prayed, and pushed all his ‘feelings’ into a box he never opened. He didn’t know how to forgive himself, and he really didn’t want to work things out with Levi and ask for that stoic man’s forgiveness.

Before he could respond, Arianna’s door swung open and she strutted out like she was on her own personal runway. She was more gorgeous than any model he’d ever seen, that was for certain.

Her long blonde hair fell in soft waves, her blue eyes were outlined with smoky makeup and long lashes, her skin was creamy and perfect, and her lips were irresistibly full and red and just waiting for him to take possession of them. Her dress was the most feminine business suit he'd ever seen, a deep forest green made of a soft-looking fabric that outlined her curves perfectly. Her sky-high spike heels were silver and sparkly and made her legs look perfect.

"Angel Ari," he murmured. "You are a vision."

Her teal eyes softened. "Thank you."

The moment stretched, and he envisioned himself crossing the room with determined strides, sweeping her into his arms, and ruining her carefully applied lipstick with kiss after kiss after kiss. Those all-encompassing kisses from last night were begging to be repeated.

She broke the moment with a soft smile and the question, "Even the heels?"

"You and those heels of yours." It was what she was looking for, but he wanted to gush that he loved her sassy, too-high heels. He loved every bit of her. If only he'd told her everything last night, especially how much he loved her. Now was definitely not the moment for spilling his guts.

"They make my legs look fabulous." She gave him an impertinent and too-alluring look.

"I cannot argue with such truthful logic." He grinned. "Every bit of you is fabulous."

She blushed. He loved it. Then she looked at Mason and blushed deeper.

"Well then, since Brad and I both know *we* look fabulous," Mason quipped. "Shall we get going?"

"You do both look fabulous. I chose your suits." Arianna smiled, but then her jaw tightened and resolve filled her gaze. She slid her large purse over her shoulder. "It's going to be an insane day."

"We'll be by your side, no matter what," Brad told her.

“Like stink on a skunk,” Mason said, and then he pulled a face. “That wasn’t great. Like floral perfume on the most beautiful woman on earth.”

“Better.” Arianna smiled. “Thank you. It will ease my mind to know you’re both there for me.”

She walked past them, and Brad inhaled her intoxicating floral scent. She was the most beautiful woman on earth. If only he could tell her so.

Mason arched his brows at him and then murmured for only Brad to hear, “I’ve got your back, friend. We’ll make something happen.”

Brad wanted to make many things happen with Arianna, but he didn’t know if Mason’s interference would help or hurt. At least he wasn’t competing with him any longer.

The day went by too fast for Brad. Arianna was the consummate professional, in charge of every detail, large and small, and doing it all with a flair that was all his Angel Ari.

He had observed her in the dress and tux fittings with the royal family the past ten days, but it was mesmerizing to see her going nonstop and in her element. Nothing escaped her notice. Though she was kind and shared her beautiful smile generously, she was also no nonsense and didn’t waste a moment.

Brad thought he was a bit of swiss army knife, fixing things, building things, protecting people, even telling stories and helping settle some simple village disputes, but he was in awe of Ari. She had done the work of ten people, and with one hand tied behind her back, for the last ten days, working from that bedroom. No wonder the too-serious general had complimented her and told her how grateful the family was for her. The queen and princesses were involved in the wedding plans, Ari had told him that, but everyone looked to Arianna for instructions.

The wedding finally arrived. Brad had been blown away by the spacious and extravagant ballroom before, with its two-story windows overlooking the picturesque valley, a winter

wonderland all on its own. Today, Arianna and the decorating crews had taken the room to a different level. He swore she had an army of house elves working behind the scenes.

The massive room was mystical, ethereal, almost as beautiful as Arianna herself. It smelled and looked like a Christmas garden full of pine, cinnamon, poinsettias, and other white and red Christmas flowers he couldn't name. He lost track of how many towering pine trees they'd brought in but was stunned by the twenty-foot tall 'trees' made of stacked bright-red poinsettias.

There was so much white airy material floating around, and the lighting was only the natural light from the windows and fairy string lights everywhere. The entire scene was ideal for a royal wedding and felt intimate and warm despite the huge area.

It was also a nightmare from a security perspective. He didn't envy General August or Lieutenant General Prescott or the dozens of royal guards he saw on duty. Interestingly, Levi was not there. Not that Brad was rushing to see the man.

Brad had lived in huts with dirt floors and a few homemade decorations for the past eight years. He wasn't much for opulence or showy displays, but even he was impressed and could feel the magical perfection of Arianna's 'epic performance,' as she'd called it.

He and Mason sat on either side of Arianna, waiting for the wedding procession as if they were regular guests. Arianna hadn't wanted to sit, worried about every little detail, but after she placed the long, silver, fancy embossed wedding knife next to the insanely towering wedding cake, she'd looked around with satisfaction. The princes' wives had finally convinced her everything was perfect and that they would walk out at the right moments. They encouraged her to sit down and 'savor her hard work' before the ceremony started. Brad and Mason both agreed and escorted her to their seats.

Now, Arianna shifted uneasily in her seat. Brad could feel the apprehension radiating from her and see the checklist ticking through her head.

Maybe it wasn't his right, but he reached over, wrapped his hand around hers, and leaned in close.

She startled, looked down at their clasped hands, and up at him.

“It’s absolutely perfect, Ari. Almost as angelic and beautiful as you. You’ve done the work of ten specialists and done it with precision, flair, and beauty. You should be very proud of your accomplishment, especially finishing the process from a computer and a bedroom. This will be lauded as the wedding of the century.”

She smiled, relaxed slightly into her seat, and squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

He wanted to say more, to hug her. Things were still unsettled between them, and that was all on him. Could he do as Mason had asked? Tell her the truth about why he left and see if she could someday forgive him and consider dating him? His gut churned simply thinking about it. She’d hate him as much as Captain Levi Favor did, and nobody could blame either of them.

The music started and Arianna tensed again. Amazingly, she didn’t withdraw her hand. Her grip grew firmer, accepting the support he offered.

Mason was checking their surroundings, but he looked at their hands and then gave Brad a sly wink. Brad smiled and then focused on checking their surroundings as well while the many, many bridesmaids and groomsmen were led down the aisle by the adorable young princesses—Princess Sunny and Princess Kiera.

It was tough to know who could be dangerous. He catalogued every man who was slight, shorter than average height, with brown eyes and brown hair. General August had sent them the video footage from the ball of the man approaching Arianna, but he could have altered his appearance by now.

Nobody appeared dangerous, but he wished he could scan each of their faces into a facial recognition program. It

wouldn't help though, as whoever the Gifted Genius was, nobody had a solid profile or a name on him.

He stared at the king and the lineup of princes and princesses on either side of King Nolan and the vicar. Famous, extraordinary, yet benevolent people.

There wasn't a price tag that could be put on this experience for the people around the world who would die to be here. And here he was, Brad Rivera, a private in the Augustine army, sitting at the biggest social event of the century next to the woman who had pulled the entire thing off. He was very proud of Arianna, and very aware that he hadn't earned a spot amongst the people she mingled with on a daily basis.

Brad glanced back at the royals and noticed the king shifting nervously from foot to foot. King Nolan always appeared so confident. Seeing the renowned king exhibit some nerves made him feel relatable.

The music played for the bride to walk down the aisle. They all stood at the vicar's request. Unfortunately, Arianna took that as her cue to release his hand.

His eyes darted around for danger, but he was as intrigued as anyone to see Lieutenant General Prescott escorting his mum, Madeline, down the aisle. The bride was a stunning and elegant lady, radiantly beautiful in a long, classy white dress.

She walked past them, and they all turned. The lieutenant general handed his mum off to the king of Augustine and all the king's children beamed. The king's grin was huge as his bride leaned in and whispered something for only him to hear.

The deep love the king and future queen shared seemed to radiate and fall like dew on the crowd. He heard women sigh.

Leaning closer to Arianna, he glanced down at her. She smiled up at him.

The entire crowd was silent, as if holding their breath or cataloguing this moment of love, beauty, magic, and their opportunity to be part of it. Arianna had orchestrated all of it. Except for the king and queen falling in love.

Arianna turned her attention back to the wedding party as the vicar started speaking. Brad stared in awe at the majestic royal family, all lined up and watching their father marry their future mum. Brad felt like he was on the edge of a movie set, yet it was all so real and genuine. The loving, smiling, and huge family displayed before him was as out of his sphere as the elaborate castle and admired monarchs.

The wedding progressed quickly. Brad checked for danger and was hyperaware of Arianna close by. She was obviously still keyed up, checking each moment to make certain it went according to plan. When King Nolan kissed Madeline, an Oscar-worthy kiss that made everybody cheer, and then they sauntered down the aisle, beaming with their hands clasped, she seemed to relax a bit.

“You did it,” Brad said. “The most epic and beautiful wedding of the century.”

“I did.” Her smile was radiant, and she seemed to bask in the moment and his praise. “Now let’s go make sure everything is perfect for the dinner, reception, and dancing.”

Brad chuckled. “It will be. You planned it.”

She only raised her eyebrows, grabbed her huge purse, and slid away from the wedding crowd. He and Mason took up pursuit. They stayed by her side like shadows—or stink on a skunk, as Mason would say—throughout the dinner, speeches, reception, dancing, cake cutting, throwing the bouquet, sending off the king and queen with sparklers, flower petals, and confetti thrown everywhere.

It was a lot—extravagant, incredible, mystical, and light years from the simple celebrations or weddings he’d witnessed over the past eight years.

Brad had a brief thought of eloping and avoiding all the fanfare, if he ever talked Arianna into marrying him. Then he almost laughed at himself. Arianna would want a wedding as insanely perfect and big as this one. He’d happily go through it with a grin on his face. If she’d agree to marry him.

Okay, he was getting ahead of himself. He didn't know if he could even spit out the truth to her, and she was still in deep danger from a serial killer. Even if he spilled it all, she'd probably hate him.

The king looked like a vibrant, strong thirty-year-old as he swept the queen off her feet at the end of the send-off tunnel and carried her out the double doors of the ballroom amidst cameras going insane. The crowd cheered and cheered long after the happy monarchs disappeared.

Finally, the room settled. Guests chattered with each other and started filtering out, many stopping to tell Arianna how 'lovely, exquisite, perfect, etc,' the wedding had been. She'd received similar compliments all night and had beamed each time.

Brad let out a breath of relief. It was over. Arianna had done it, the killer hadn't attacked, everything was perfect, and Arianna could be proud—and get some much-needed rest.

"I did it," she breathed out.

"You did. With style." He grinned at her. "I'm in awe of you and the entire evening."

"Thank you." She paused, closed her eyes, and smiled to herself. Her eyes fluttered open, and Brad wanted to kiss her. "I should supervise cleanup."

"No." Brad admired her resolve, but she was not supervising clean up. He wrapped his arm around her waist, earning a grin from Mason and a sweet gasp from Arianna. "Everything you have accomplished is incredible. This was all picture perfect. There will be plenty of people to clean up, and nobody on earth cares if carrying out the garbage and sweeping the floor is done perfectly. We're heading back to the suite so you can rest."

She looked ready to protest.

"Or ..." Mason's blue eyes twinkled. "I fancy a walk up to the solarium. Something relaxing after such a busy day."

Arianna looked at him strangely.



Brad was pretty certain this was Mason's attempt at matchmaking. He could roll with that. The solarium was beautiful and romantic. Mason could stand guard while he talked to Arianna. His gut churned nervously at the thought. Was he ready? If he didn't take a chance now, they'd never have the opportunity to create a future together.

"I think that is a splendid idea," Brad said, though nerves assaulted him. Seeing Arianna in her element today had been incredible, but it had also confirmed how much she had going for her and how little he did. He was a new recruit in the military, at twenty-seven years old.

He tried to be 'Brave Brad' as she used to call him, kept his arm around Arianna, and escorted her toward the door. Different guests or royals stopped her to tell her how perfect the wedding had been. She graciously responded. Brad noticed several people, especially General August and Princess Macey and Prince Malik and Princess Sophie, eyeing Brad's arm around her waist, Arianna leaning into him. Were they thinking she was out of his league? They were right.

Brad kept walking with Arianna, searching for any threats even as his heart raced and he was hyperaware of her brushing against him, his hand on the curve of her hip, her floral scent tantalizing his senses.

This felt like their moment. Was it? Would he ruin her perfect night by confessing his mistakes? He prayed to know what to say, when to say it, and how to love Arianna unselfishly ... if loving her was a gift he might be blessed with in his life.

He tried to take Mason's advice and turn it over to Jesus, to somehow forgive himself and pray Arianna would understand, see his growth and penance, and give him a chance.

He also prayed to accept the Lord's will. If heaven above could approve of Brad and Arianna being together, he'd praise Him, but if it wasn't right ...

He'd claimed to turn his heart to Jesus and to fight and protect in His name. Was it finally time to face his past and trust that the good Lord could help him and Arianna through

this? He needed strength, mercy, and grace. From heaven above and the perfect woman at his side.

*Please help.*

His heart thumped so fast it was difficult to breathe. He'd thought facing vicious guerilla warriors with only a knife and a spear was terrifying.

Telling Arianna what he'd done eight years ago was much scarier.

## CHAPTER

## *Nine*

### ARIANNA WAS WALKING ON CLOUDS.

The wedding had been even better than she'd envisioned because of the people involved. King Nolan, now-Queen Madeline, and all the royal family were genuine, beautiful, and had made the event even more magical. Every detail and stress had been worth it. A lifetime of hard work, including a week or so feeling hobbled by her confinement, had paid off, and she was singing heaven's praises. She couldn't wait to talk to her dad tonight.

Currently, Brad had his arm around her and they were riding up the elevator with Mason to the solarium. Everything had come together perfectly for the wedding. Could she and Brad come together tonight in the beautiful rooftop garden? Brad seemed nervous.

She didn't understand Mason's role. He was smirking at them and appeared to have no problem with her in Brad's embrace. Had he given up on his pursuit of her? She couldn't imagine he would push her toward Brad, but she didn't know what else to think of the arrangement.

They exited the elevator and walked quietly past the fitness center and spa area. Arianna's heels' rhythmic clicking and Brad's quick breathing were the only sounds. They made it into the solarium. Other couples milled about, looking out over the sparse lights of the valley or at the plants, trees, flowers, or

water features. Some sat on benches, hugging or talking quietly.

Brad escorted her through the garden and to a quiet spot.

“I’ll be over here guarding you from intruders,” Mason said, winking and saluting as he stopped next to a potted plant.

“Thank you, my friend.” Brad returned the salute.

They walked to a bench and settled down. They had a measure of privacy with trees, flowers, and bushes blocking them from other couples. The well-maintained indoor garden was a beautiful spot, almost as magical as the royal wedding and the mystical and ethereal setting Arianna had created in the ballroom.

Brad took her hand, his hand trembling against hers. His obvious nerves had Arianna’s heart beating faster.

She waited for him to initiate the conversation. He’d gotten her alone, after all. Did he only ‘love her like a sister’ or could his love deepen into something more? Was that why he was nervous?

“You and Mason have become good friends,” she said to break the silence.

“He is a great man,” Brad said. He turned toward her, rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand and leaving tingles in its wake. “I’m so impressed by you and proud of you, Ari. The wedding was ideal in every way, and you are incredible at all you do.”

“Thank you.” His praise meant a lot, but she couldn’t help but ask, “Proud of me like a sister?”

Brad’s eyes grew wary. He released her hand, rubbed at his stubbled jawline, and then stood and paced to the next tree and back again.

Arianna stood. She’d been wearing these spike heels for hours and wouldn’t mind taking them off, but she appreciated the added height boost. Now she was eye-level with Brad’s chin instead of his shoulder.

“Are you ever going to talk this out with me?” she asked. “Or are you going to run again?”

Brad flinched and then nodded. “I deserved that. Honestly, I deserve a lot more than that.” Brad scrubbed at his beard again. “Ari, I fear when you find out what I’ve done, you’ll hate me.”

“I could never hate you. Please, can you just tell me why you left without an explanation or any contact? I thought we were better friends than that.”

His eyes widened and then turned a darker brown, full of her and the memory of last night. Her reference to friends brought back the way she’d instigated those insanely beautiful kisses. “We are friends,” he said softly.

“Please talk to me, Brad.”

“You deserve to know. We have to get through this.” His look changed from heated to concerned. He said in a quick beat, “Before my mum died, I’d been delivering to a clothing shop here in Greenville almost every day. There was a girl, Annabelle. I liked her a lot. I pursued her, but she was engaged to Captain Levi Favor.”

Her eyes widened. She knew Captain Favor. He was a serious, dark-haired guard who Faith Radisson was very interested in.

“I should’ve stayed away from her, knowing she was engaged, but you know me. I was a nineteen-year-old punk.”

“You weren’t a punk.” But it hurt already. Arianna had always known Brad was the one for her, but he hadn’t felt the same. Of course she’d known he had dated different girls; she’d watched it throughout secondary school and after he graduated. She’d dated, but nobody could compare to Brad. Not for her.

“I was.” He shifted his weight and clenched his fists. “The day my mum died, I was a disaster.”

“I remember.” She’d tried to be there for him and hold him after she and her dad helped him make the funeral arrangements, the memories of her mum’s funeral fresh on

their minds and both of them sick for Brad and concerned about him. As soon as the plans were done, he'd thanked them and took off.

"I went to Annabelle after you and your dad helped me. She held me and comforted me. Her parents weren't home. I ..." His mouth twisted, and he looked away. "I stayed the night with her. We ..."

Arianna took a step back, her legs running into the bench. "You slept with her?"

He'd slept with someone else's fiancée, ditched all the high morals he'd always claimed to have, and then three days later he'd let Arianna hold and comfort him? When she'd innocently kissed him after his mum's funeral, he'd returned it, giving Arianna the most beautiful, all-consuming kiss. She'd imagined he cared deeply for her, finally saw her, and maybe even returned her love. But he hadn't. He had loved some other woman. Pain split her in two, and she almost doubled over.

"Yes," he admitted quietly.

Silence fell between them.

He rubbed at his jaw and then said, "It gets even worse."

"Worse?" She was going to be sick. How could this revelation possibly get worse? Then it hit her. "You have a child who doesn't even know you? You left your baby and your love behind for eight years?" She tried to keep her voice down, but it screeched. No one peered around bushes—not that she cared at this point.

"No. Nothing like that."

She took a deep breath. It didn't settle her rolling stomach.

"The next morning, Levi found us hugging outside Annabelle's villa. She felt awful, a huge load of guilt. I could see it in her eyes. She loved him. Instead of telling him what we'd done and asking for him to forgive her, she begged him to leave her alone, turned and ran from both of us. Up the mountain. She could run crazy fast. Levi chased her. I left,

humiliated and full of regret. I had no idea what to do, so I let them work it out. I found out later ... she ran right off a cliff.”

Arianna could hardly catch a full breath. “She died?”

“Yes. And it was my fault.”

Arianna could only stare at him. She couldn’t claim that it wasn’t somewhat his fault. It sounded like a horrible accident, but if Brad hadn’t taken comfort in that woman’s arms and slept with her, she wouldn’t have felt so guilty when her fiancé found them and ran from him. Ran right off a cliff? That was horrific.

“During Mum’s funeral, I was miserable in every way.” He looked her over. “For some reason, I saw you that day—really saw you for the first time. The friend you’d always been. The beautiful woman you were growing into. You were a beacon of light, hope, and happiness. You were everything I wanted and in no way deserved. Then when you held me that night and comforted me and we kissed ...”

“You used me just like you used Annabelle,” she finished for him.

Brad didn’t refute her. He looked absolutely miserable.

He’d never cared for her like she did him. He’d used her for comfort and a distraction, days after sleeping with another woman.

If Brad had come to her, explained, asked for forgiveness, they might have worked through it. But he’d left her, as if they had no past together. No apology. No word of where he was going. As if they had been nothing more than brief acquaintances.

For eight years, Arianna had hoped there was an explanation, and that her dear friend would return and explain and everything would be okay. This revelation that every negative assumption she’d made at the time had been right ... that he didn’t love her ... it made the pain of those days and weeks come back to her like a hit from a sledgehammer.

Arianna collapsed onto the bench. From the high of accomplishing a pinnacle of her career to feeling like a dumb

teenager with a crush on someone who never cared about her, barely knew she existed.

“I tried to help everyone I could in Africa, tried to somehow make amends for my sins,” Brad continued, as if more words would make it better. “But I was truly still hiding. I’ve turned to God, asked for forgiveness, and I can’t tell you how many times I was protected in Africa. Well, you saw my scars. They show the healing from physical wounds, but my spiritual wounds are still raw. I’ve tried but I don’t know how to truly turn my past mistakes over to God and believe He could help me fix it all somehow. I needed to clear this up with you, and I need to apologize to Levi.” He lifted one hand. “I can’t even express the depth of my regret and sorrow.”

Arianna stared at him. He was sorry; she could easily see that. He’d worked and tried to make recompense by helping so many in Africa. He was trying to turn it over to God, and it seemed he needed her forgiveness. But did he need or want her love?

She had no idea what to say. It was a lot. She wanted to forgive him, and she loved him despite the feelings of betrayal and being second choice to poor Annabelle who’d died tragically. Poor Levi. No wonder he was so serious and never dated.

“Can you ... ever forgive me?” Brad asked, his brown sugar eyes pleading with her.

Arianna stood, put up a hand, and took a step back. “Please. I need a moment.”

“I understand.” Brad simply stared at her.

A scream built in Arianna’s throat. If he loved her and wanted to be with her, he would say that. She’d instigated every kiss they’d ever had. He’d responded, but that didn’t mean he loved her. It was probably only a physical reaction.

Tears blinded her, and she whirled and ran. She had no idea where she was going, but she had to get away from Brad and the fact that he didn’t love her. Dodging around trees and



water features and couples, she heard Brad and Mason calling to her, but she didn't answer. She couldn't—

A hand wrapped around Arianna's arm and yanked her behind some bushes and trees. She screamed out in surprise, but it was quickly smothered by a hand over her mouth. A second strong arm wrapped around her waist.

“Finally, you are here. Exactly where I need you.”

The voice was horrifying familiar.

The Gifted Genius!

Arianna's heart thudded violently against her chest. He was in the castle, and he'd gotten her alone.

She felt a cold breeze and then was yanked out a patio door. It shut behind them with a soft *snick*. Icy wind stung at her face and hands, and hot tears pricked at her eyelids.

“I don't have much time, so it will have to be painless and quick, my beautiful victim. My wife came along to help out. We'll kill you and then put you back in the solarium. A rooftop garden. Perfect for December.”

A woman stepped out of the shadows.

The Gifted Genius's chin bumped against her head as he nodded. “Come now. You've got this, love.”

Instead of coming toward them, the woman retreated until her back hit the snow-covered barrier surrounding the patio. Arianna's eyes had adjusted enough to see that his wife's face looked ... absolutely terrified. Her lip was split, and she had a bruise on her cheekbone. Her injuries and terror made no sense. Arianna was the only one who should be terrified in this situation. She was about to be worse than injured—she'd be dead.

The woman's hair was slicked back in a tight bun, and she wore a black wing suit. A long silver knife glinted in her hand. The embossed wedding cake knife. Arianna would've gasped in outrage if she could get a sound through the sweaty hand gagging her. They were going to kill her with the very knife

she'd personally ordered and arranged to rest next to the elaborate ten-tier wedding cake.

Arianna didn't have time to be outraged. If she didn't fight, she'd be dead and they'd be flying off the balcony's ledge to plan how to kill their next victim. The outside air stung her bare face and legs, but she was too full of hot terror to feel the cold.

Heart racing out of control, she prayed for help. Then she bit the Gifted Genius's hand and kicked back at his leg with her spike heel.

He cursed and released her for just a moment. She screamed as loud as she could and tried to get around him and grab for the door.

His hand clamped over her mouth again, yanking her back and drawing her even tighter to his chest. Leaning back against the glass door, he wrapped a leg around both of hers to pin her in place.

"Kill her," he demanded of his wife.

"Please," the lady begged.

Arianna felt a glimmer of hope.

"Do it." The Gifted Genius's voice was colder than the biting wind. "Or you know the consequences. This is your shining moment."

Tears raced down the woman's face, but she nodded. Raising the knife, she stepped toward them.

Arianna screamed against his hand, fought and squirmed with everything she had as terror flooded her. She dug her fingernails into the Gifted Genius's leg and tried to bite at his hand again. He only held her tighter; his breath coming in fast pants as if her death excited him.

She should've told Brad she loved him, even if he could never reciprocate. Now she'd never have the chance.

Death was racing toward her.

## CHAPTER

## *Ten*

**BRAD WATCHED** as Arianna spun and ran from him. Agony weakened his limbs. His heart thudded dully in his chest, seeming to agree that without Arianna there wasn't much hope or happiness in his future.

She couldn't forgive him. He wanted to tell her so many more things, that he had 'used her' but that kiss with her had shown him she was the woman he wanted to be with, and how very wrong he'd been to ever pursue Annabelle. He wanted to tell her he loved her and wanted a future with her, but it wasn't fair to overwhelm or push her right now.

Then it hit him. He couldn't simply let her run away. He was her guard right now, and though everything with the wedding seemed to have gone well, the Gifted Genius was still at large and there were guests and extra staff milling about the castle.

"Ari!" he called, taking up pursuit.

She'd disappeared.

Mason was instantly by his side and running with him.

"Ari!" Brad called again.

From somewhere ahead and to his right, he heard her scream. It was cut off far too quickly.

He and Mason raced toward the scream. He couldn't see her. Had someone hauled her behind one of the many thick patches of greenery or trees?

They slowed and both drew their pistols. Brad looked to Mason and tilted his head to the right. Mason nodded. He would come around to the right, Mason to the left.

Brad eased into the thick section of trees and bushes. Where was she?

A moment later, Mason appeared and shook his head. No sign of Arianna.

Frustration and fear boiled inside Brad. She couldn't have simply disappeared.

Another muffled scream chilled him clear through. She was to their right. They both hurried through more trees and saw the glass balcony doors and retractable glass walls that surrounded the solarium.

Leaning against the glass door was a slight man with dark hair, wearing a black wingsuit. He was wrapped around somebody who could only be Arianna. It was dark out on the balcony, but it had to be her.

Brad and Mason approached the door silently. He peered through and could see a woman directly in front of Arianna and the man. She wore a similar black wingsuit, a silver knife clutched in her hand. The woman looked battered and terrified as she stared at Arianna and the man.

“Kill her!” the man yelled loud enough they could hear it through the door. He moved closer to his wife, away from the glass.

Mason nodded to Brad, and his friend eased the door open just enough.

Brad aimed through the opening and shot the woman in the shoulder. She shrieked and was thrown back against the barrier. The knife fell into the snow on the patio.

“Love!” the man screamed.

Mason yanked the door all the way open.

The man whirled to face the threat, keeping Arianna in front of him as a shield. Her eyes were full of terror.

Leaping through the door and to the left, Mason held all the man's attention. His pistol was aimed at the man's head. "Release her and back away," he demanded.

Brad eased through the door before it clanged shut and slid to the right on the darkened balcony. Cold air swirled around them. Had the Gifted Genius taken the patio lights out?

The man didn't seem to notice him, so focused on Mason. "My wife," he cried out. "You shot her!"

"I'm alive," the woman squeaked.

"I'll kill you if you don't release Arianna," Mason said evenly.

"I hold all the cards here," the Gifted Genius shrieked.

Brad should secure the woman, but she didn't appear to be a threat. She held her shoulder with her other hand, blood seeping through her fingers. She looked to be in shock but also relieved. "I couldn't kill her," she whimpered. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You'll pay for that later, dearest." The man spoke evenly, no malice in his voice, though it was obviously a threat.

The woman shuddered and looked down.

"I'll take care of the problem," he continued, "and we'll fly to safety."

Brad inched to the side, the snow thankfully muffling his steps. He had to get behind the man. The wife glanced up at Brad, locking eyes.

His gig was up. When she shouted a warning, he'd have to jump at the Gifted Genius.

The lady blinked at him, nodded slightly, and then looked away.

Brad was stunned. Did she want her husband captured? If the bruise on her cheek, her split lip, and his 'you'll pay for that later' comment added up to abuse like Brad assumed, maybe she did.

He kept inching to get behind Arianna and her captor. The man edged closer to the balcony's edge. The packed snow gave him a natural step up. If Mason shot him, he could easily pull Arianna off.

Mason, Arianna, and the wife consumed the man's attention. For the moment. Did he have other weapons on him? He was obviously as brilliant as his moniker claimed, to have killed six women in highly visible spots without being captured or identified. Brad had to assume he had a backup plan and multiple weapons.

"Release Arianna and step back," Mason repeated. "Or I kill you and your wife spends her life in prison."

"I have to kill number seven first," the man cried out. He sounded unhinged, desperate, capable of anything. "She'll fly to her death!"

The Gifted Genius shoved Arianna toward the barrier that surrounded the balcony.

Brad leaped, grabbed both of the man's arms from behind, and ripped him away from Arianna. The man tried to turn to him, but Brad yanked both hands tight behind the man's back and shoved him down onto the snowy patio. He dropped onto the man's back, digging his knee in. The man cried out and squirmed but was no match for Brad's strength or size.

"Brad," Arianna cried in relief, pivoting to stare down at them.

"Don't move, ma'am, or I will shoot," Mason warned, his pistol now trained on the wife.

"I won't. Please. I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "I don't want anyone else to die."

Brad was sick for the lady. She appeared to be a victim and a pawn.

The man stopped struggling and whimpered, "I think you broke my arm and maybe my back."

"Good." Brad glanced up. "Ari. Can you call General August?"

“Y-yes.” She backed toward the doors, and Mason handed over his phone.

He could hear her talking to the general. Sergeants Bancock and Mueller pushed through the doors a moment later, a warm rush of air coming with them from the solarium. They raced onto the patio, their bulk crowding it even more.

“We heard a muffled shot and screaming,” Sergeant Mueller explained.

“Thank you,” Mason answered. “Arianna is on with the general. He’ll get a medic for the wife. Can you secure the perp?” He nodded toward the man Brad had pinned to the ground.

“With pleasure.” The two large sergeants moved toward him.

Brad eased off the man.

The Gifted Genius tilted his head to the side and whimpered, “He broke my arm.”

Neither of the men answered him. Mueller cuffed him and then ripped him to his feet. They each took an arm and shoved him through the doors as he protested and squealed in pain.

“He won’t hurt anyone else,” the wife said. She slumped back against the balcony barrier and then crumpled onto her side in the snow.

Mason hurried to her, still holding his gun out in case she was faking unconsciousness. He kneeled and put two fingers to her neck. “She’s got a pulse. Probably passed out from blood loss or the shock.”

“You’ve got her?” Brad asked.

“Yes, my friend.” He tilted his head toward Arianna. She hung up the phone and was looking back and forth between them.

Brad needed no more prompting from his friend. He hurried to Arianna, opening his arms wide, and she collapsed against him. He took the phone and tossed it to Mason, then

wrapped her up tight. Her body trembled and his neck grew wet with her tears, but she didn't make a sound.

Suddenly, she looked up at him and whispered, "You saved me."

Before he could respond, she arched up and kissed him.

Brad knew how to respond to that. He pulled her even closer and returned the kiss, praying she could feel how deeply he loved her and wanted to make things right with her and be together.

Arianna pulled back, stared at him, and then slapped him hard.

He blinked in surprise.

She grabbed his suit jacket and tried to shake him. "Why? Why do I always instigate the kiss?"

"I'm ... sorry," he managed. He'd happily instigate kisses every moment... if he knew she could forgive him and they had a chance.

She stepped away from him and glared. Even through the glass doors, he could hear a commotion coming their way. Soon they'd be separated for questioning.

"Ari, please."

"Thank you for saving me, but this changes nothing between us."

Before Brad could respond, General August and Lieutenant General Prescott, medics, and other military personnel burst through the patio door and onto the scene. The medics set to work on the wife. Brad was led inside the solarium for questioning. His last glimpse of Ari was the lieutenant general putting a blanket around her shoulders and leading her away.



## CHAPTER

## *Eleven*

**ARIANNA WALKED** into her bungalow in Traverse, staring around at the cozy, perfectly decorated space and wondering why it seemed so cold and empty. General Ray had escorted her home himself, waited stoically by her side while his men swept her small house, and then followed her in. There were two policemen watching her house from outside. She didn't know why; the Gifted Genius and his wife had been arrested. There was no other threat to her. She was grateful for their diligence and supposed they were trying to help her feel secure and comfortable.

Chief Jensen had already gotten out of the wife that they'd snuck into the castle secured to the bottom of the baker's box truck. The woman was obviously abused, but she swore this was the first time 'Klein' had forced her to help murder someone.

It was a relief to have the nightmare behind Arianna. To know she was safe and that man wouldn't target anyone else.

All she could think about was that she hadn't seen Brad again before she left. She needed time to wrap her mind around what he'd told her. To forgive him. If he didn't love her, she'd have to figure out how to be friends with him again. It would be difficult being around him and having him see how she longed for him.

It still felt like such a betrayal—he'd left Arianna's side the night his mum died, as she was trying with everything she had to comfort him, to be with another woman. He'd loved

Annabelle and slept with her and then the day of his mum's funeral, he'd let Arianna hold and comfort him. He'd made her believe with his kiss that he loved her. And then, instead of facing Arianna or Levi, he'd disappeared.

Arianna finally crashed into her bed that night. The next morning, she busied herself shopping for food for a nice Christmas Eve dinner for her and her dad, wrapping presents for him, and organizing, wrapping, and delivering the gifts she'd bought for neighbors and friends.

Freedom to do what she wanted and be out of the castle was lovely.

Missing Brad was awful.

It was just past five p.m. when her dad banged through her front door.

"What on earth?" he demanded. "I have to hear from the news that the Gifted Genius and his wife are in custody and rush here to find you?" He was still wearing a shirt and tie from his work as an accountant. He always told her she got her creativity from her mum.

She smiled. "Sorry, Dad. I should have called you back last night, but it was really late and pretty overwhelming."

"Ah, girlie. Come give me a hug and tell me all about it. Then we'll walk down to the Christmas Market and buy junk food for dinner."

Arianna laughed and rushed to him. He held her close, his musk and lime scent familiar and comforting. She was proud of herself for not crying. Her dad was all she had now.

Why couldn't Brad ever be hers?

Darn!

The tears came then.

"What's this?" her dad asked, pulling back slightly. "Ah, my sweet girl, are you traumatized by that murderer? I'm going to march to the prison, tell Chief Jensen I'm the dad and some vigilante justice is not out of line. He'll understand."

That made her smile. Her dad was fabulous but had probably never so much as thrown a punch. He wouldn't be the one to execute any kind of justice.

“Come now. Tell me the story.” He led her to the couch, and they sat side by side.

She drew in a breath. “Well, the wedding went better than I even envisioned.”

“I knew it would.” He smiled. “I'm so proud. I saw some of it on the news. The reporter from BBC said, ‘This gorgeous and magical event will be lauded as the royal wedding of the century.’”

“Thank you. The wedding went perfectly.”

“And after the wedding?” he prompted.

“After the wedding, Brad took me up to the solarium.”

“Brad?” His gaze sharpened.

“Rivera.”

“Brad's returned?” His eyebrows lifted. “How is he? You've been spending time with him? What about your guards?”

Arianna was in a lot of trouble. “Dad. I didn't tell you because I'm kind of a mess where Brad is concerned.” That was the understatement of the year. “But he and Mason have been my guards this week. Brad came back and enlisted in the military. Apparently he learned to fight and protect the villagers in Africa. He's quite impressive.”

“The boy has always been impressive. Africa, huh?” Her dad shook his head. “I can't believe he's back. It's been, what ...”

“Eight years.” She'd counted the days where most people, even her dad, had gone on with their lives.

“He disappeared for eight years and then simply returned?”

She nodded.

“What do you mean, you’re a mess?” His gaze sharpened on her. “You still have a crush on him?”

“You knew?”

“Ah, girlie. Your mum and I always wondered when he’d notice you weren’t simply his childhood buddy.”

“I don’t think he has,” she admitted miserably.

“Well, he’s a fool if he doesn’t see how beautiful and perfect you are. Do you still have feelings for him?” Her dad studied her. He’d never been the type to chase her boyfriends away, but he never complained when she dumped one of them, claiming the boy or man hadn’t been ‘worthy of his girlie.’ He would probably love for her to date Brad, and Arianna could imagine their mums had schemed toward such a day.

“Too many feelings for him.” Love, frustration, longing, anger ... She mulled it over in her brain, knowing she was in for a grilling. Brad’s secrets or mistakes with Levi’s fiancée weren’t hers to share, and she didn’t want to open up the wound of how he’d treated her just yet, so she left it at that.

Her dad didn’t disappoint. He started directly into the questioning. She shared as much as she could about the past week and the attack last night and Brad rescuing her. Leaving out some details confused her dad and made him wonder how Brad couldn’t be with her. She finally admitted that he cared for her and had asked her forgiveness for leaving, but he didn’t love her.

They talked for so long they missed the Christmas market and ordered pizza. Nothing was resolved when he gave her a final hug and headed home, but at least she knew her dad was firmly on her team, as always.

That night, she had multiple texts and missed phone calls from her royal friends and Faith, Hope, and Chad. She appreciated their concern but wished Brad had been the one to reach out.

The next day, they did all the traditions that Mum had always insisted on. Apparently, when Arianna was small, she had been miserable waiting for Christmas morning and driving

her mum insane, asking, ‘Santa now?’ over and over again. So Mum had instigated indoor and outdoor activities, filling every minute of Christmas Eve.

Arianna and her dad did them all, even though they felt a little silly having a snowball fight, but the ice skating and walk along the river both went well. They played a myriad of card games, read Christmas books and delivered gifts to children at the hospital, set up the hot cocoa bar, decorated sugar cookies, and took plates of decorated sugar cookies around to residents in the retirement center. Arianna’s sugar cookies were masterpieces. Her dad’s were very boring. They laughed that nobody wanted his.

By nine, they were on her dad’s couch watching *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Arianna was exhausted, but it had been a wonderful day. They’d missed and reminisced about Mum, but these traditions always made Arianna feel close to her.

She’d only thought of Brad every other minute. Her heart raced as she thought of him saying, ‘Only every other minute’ when she’d asked if he ever thought of their first kiss eight years ago.

Her dad slumped on the couch next to her. “I’m too old to fit that much into one day,” he muttered. “Can you take pity on me and bring me one of *my* beautiful cookies and some cocoa?”

“You’re the only one who will eat those cookies,” she teased as she went to his kitchen.

“Lucky me, then.”

She laughed and made up a plate of cookies and made them each a hot cocoa. As she settled down on the couch next to her dad, she couldn’t focus on the silly movie and could hardly swallow a bite of too-much-sugar.

“Why don’t you go find him?” her dad asked.

She glanced at him. “Brad?”

“No. Santa Claus.” He smiled and took the cocoa from her hand and set it on the side table. “You obviously love him. I

can see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice.”

Arianna drummed her nails on her leg. If she went to him, did that mean she'd forgiven him? Was she swallowing her pride and begging him to love her? She knew he cared for her, but what if he didn't share the intense love that wanted to burst from her?

“There are some things you left out of your story,” he continued.

Arianna's eyes widened.

“I'm a dad. I know things.” He grinned proudly and then got serious. “I know you're longing for him.”

“But what if he's not longing for me?” He should've come for her. Right? But then she thought of her parting words after she had kissed and then slapped him.

“Then he's an idiot. I'll whoop him, and you'll move on.”

She smiled. Very few people could 'whoop' Brad, and her dad wasn't on that list.

“Go talk to him. Even if it doesn't end the way you're hoping, it's better to know what he's thinking rather than put thoughts in his head. Sometimes men can't express deep emotion easily. Present company excluded, of course.”

Arianna stared at him. It would hurt if Brad didn't want her, but wouldn't she rather know? She had to move on or move forward. Somehow.

“Okay.” She stood, and her dad stood with her. “I don't know when I'll be back.”

Resolve filled her. It was time to talk to him. Tellingly, she hadn't even thought about if she could forgive him, only if he loved her. She could forgive him, and she could admit the truth.

She wanted to be with Brad. If he loved her back.

“I'll be properly entertained with cocoa, cookies, and Jim Carrey.” Her dad lifted his eyebrows. Mum had been the Jim Carrey fan.

“I think you’d be okay to change the movie,” she whispered, as if Mum could hear her.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Arianna laughed and hugged him tight, then hurried out of his house and drove the short distance to hers. She touched up her hair and makeup and changed into a red fitted Carolina Herrera dress and heels, setting her Veronica Beard white wool and cashmere blend coat next to the door.

Maybe too fancy if he was at the military facility, but not if he was at the castle. She wanted to surprise him, so she texted Faith asking if she had seen him at the castle tonight.

Impatiently awaiting her reply, she paced and tapped her fingers against her leg.

Her phone rang.

Brad?

She looked at the phone. Faith. She swiped it on. “Hello?”

“Arianna, do you love Brad?”

“Yes,” she admitted hesitantly. “How did you know?”

“Chad saw you kiss and then slap him after that whole nightmare with the Gifted Genius.”

“Oh.” She supposed that might’ve spread. “Have you seen him tonight?”

“Yes.” Faith paused and then admitted, “I ran into him outside the ballroom. He asked me questions about me and Levi.”

Arianna wondered what Faith was going through right now. If she loved Levi and he was still mourning Annabelle. What a mess. “I’m sorry,” she said hesitantly, not sure where Faith and Levi stood and what the sweet lady knew.

“Me too.”

Faith let out a heavy breath. “Brad kept saying he was sorry and had to go.”

“Go?” Her voice pitched up. She hadn’t even realized until this moment how terrified she was of him taking off again. “Where did he go?”

“I don’t know, but Lieutenant Henson took his shift for him tonight.”

“He’s gone.”

“Yes.”

“How long ago?”

“Oh ... a couple hours.”

Her heart thudded dully in her chest. He was sorry and he’d had to ‘go.’ He’d even gotten out of his shift, which wasn’t something she’d think Brad would do. If he’d been coming to her, he would’ve been here an hour and a half ago.

“Thank you.”

“Are you all right?” Faith asked.

“Not really. You?”

“Not really either.”

Arianna had never been a fan of misery loving company. She’d lost her mum to cancer and wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Then Brad had lost his mum the same way, and it had broken her heart. She wanted Faith to be happy. Hopefully she could be. With Levi.

“I’ll pray for you,” Arianna offered.

“Thank you. I’ll do the same for you. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” Arianna tried to infuse some excitement into her voice, but it was lacking. She hung up the phone, walked to her bedroom, and lay down face first on the bed. Her makeup was going to get smeared all over her Lux Sateen bedspread—a find at Harrod’s—and she was going to ruin her expensive dress. She couldn’t have cared less.

Brad had stayed by her side until the Gifted Genius was caught. That was all he’d really promised. Right?



She'd told him she needed time. It looked like he was going to give it to her. Maybe eight more years of it.

Tears stung her eyelids and dripped down her nose, and her body heaved a sob.

Had he really left her? Let her kiss him and then simply walked away again?

She'd been so set on telling him she forgave him, that she loved him, to see if a Christmas miracle was in store for her.

She was betting on a no.

## CHAPTER

## *Twelve*

### ARIANNA WOKE TO A POUNDING NOISE.

Sitting up on her bed, she reached for a tissue and swiped at her nose and eyes. The tissue came away black and brown from her smeared makeup.

The pounding came again. She glanced at her clock. It was only ten-thirty. Not insanely late, but late for someone to be pounding so insistently. Something had to be wrong. What if the Gifted Genius had escaped?

She scrambled off the bed, through her room, and down the hall. Every light in her living area was on, so she could understand why somebody thought she was home and awake.

The pounding stopped. She hurried to the door and looked through the peephole.

Brad.

The fear of the Gifted Genius fled, but all the longing and love for Brad swelled inside. He hadn't run away. Had he come for her?

He stood there, looking glorious in his black guard uniform. He also looked ... beat up. Who had hurt him?

She flung the door open. They both stared at each other as freezing air swirled around her and into her home.

“What happened to you?” she asked. “You look a fright.”

He smiled. "I'd never say you look a fright, but ... are you well?"

Arianna could not imagine how awful she looked. She'd laid face down on her bed, cried herself to sleep. The tissue she'd swiped under her eyes would've just smeared the mascara, eyeliner, base, powder, and eye shadow. Who knew how horrible she looked? Her lipstick was probably gone, and her hair was surely mussed.

His gaze traveled over her dress and heels. "That is a beautiful dress."

"Thank you." At least part of her didn't look a fright.

"You and those heels of yours," he said softly.

"What?" Her voice broke. "They make my legs look fabulous."

"I cannot argue with such *practical* logic." He smiled. "What happened to you?"

"You first."

He nodded. "May I come in?"

She stepped back and walked over to the couch. He followed her in, shutting the door behind him. Neither of them sat down. She wanted to go wash off her makeup and reapply. Her hands trembled. The implications of him being here hit her as hard as thinking he'd ditched her again. Did he love her? Or was he here to explain why he couldn't?

"Can you give me a moment?" she managed.

He tilted his head. "To wash off your makeup?"

"And reapply."

"I'll wash off your makeup. You don't need anything on your beautiful face to look gorgeous to me."

She stared at him. He couldn't be serious.

"Come on." He took her hand in his. The connection to him surged through her. He smiled over at her and hope surged even stronger. They walked into her bathroom together.

She glimpsed herself in the mirror and cringed—black smears under her eyes, blotchy red skin, and no lipstick at all.

“Now ... makeup remover and cotton balls, please.”

“How do you know that?”

“My mum.”

She nodded and opened a drawer, handing over a bottle of makeup remover and a cotton ball. He moistened the cotton ball with the makeup remover and then moved in close. He smelled of cedar, bergamot, sandalwood, dirt, and out of doors.

He cupped her jawline with his left hand and tilted her head. Fire ran through her at his gentle touch and the searing look in his eyes. If he didn't love her, why was he here torturing her? Why would he look at her like that?

With his right hand, he swiped a moistened cotton ball carefully under each eye, threw them away, and looked over his work. “You look absolutely perfect,” he said. “I am an *artiste*.”

Much to her disappointment, he dropped the hand cupping her cheek. She wanted him to draw her close with it and kiss her.

She glanced at her makeup-free face. “I look horrible.”

“Never.”

They stared at each other. She could feel each beat that passed by the racing of her heart. She wanted to lean in and kiss him, but she refused to be the one to instigate another kiss. Besides, they had far too much that needed to be said before any kind of kissing could happen.

Instead of demanding to know if he loved her, she turned, took a washcloth off the stack on the counter, and ran it under hot water. She faced him again and rubbed the dirt off his cheek, then rinsed the washcloth again before wiping the blood from a cut near his eyebrow.

“Do I look horrible?” he quipped as she studied him.

“Never,” she admitted.

Brad’s brown-sugar eyes got serious. He took the washcloth, set it on the counter, and then took her hand in his. He walked her out of the bathroom and into the living area. Each step seemed loud, each moment impactful. She was terrified of what he was going to say and at the same time had to hear it.

Turning to her, he said, “I have to clear a few things up with you.”

“Okay.” Nerves were strung tight as she waited. Her stomach pitched and her palms were sweaty.

“I fought with Levi tonight. I apologized. He accepted it.”

“That’s good.” That was where he had to go. It made sense. Had making things right with Levi changed anything for them?

“It is. I went because Mason has been nagging me to go after you, and also to talk with Levi, and then I spoke to Faith. I knew the pain of losing Annabelle had hurt Levi worse than it had me. I had to make things right.”

“I’m glad you were able to.”

He looked her over. “Mason was very interested in you, but on the day of the wedding he said you were only interested in me. Was he right?”

“Are you *thick*?” She blinked up at him. “I told you I love you. What more do you want?”

“You never said you’d forgive me,” he admitted. “You slapped me after you kissed me and said me saving you changed nothing between us.”

“I did.”

“I realized after I fought Levi and told him to go for Faith that if I can be brave enough to trust that Jesus could help me make things right with him, I have to keep trusting in heaven’s help and be brave enough to tell you what’s in my heart. What’s been in my heart for eight years.” He drew his thumb across the back of her hand in tantalizing circles.

“Brave Brad,” she murmured, though she could hardly catch a breath.

He smiled. “I’m trying to forgive myself and turn everything over to the Lord.”

She nodded. That was essential for his healing.

“I need to spell out what happened for you better, so you can understand how I truly feel about you.”

“Okay,” she squeaked out.

“When you kissed me the night of Mum’s funeral, the darkest day of my life, I was absolutely blown away. It was the most incredible kiss I had ever experienced and a connection with a woman I never thought I’d find. In that moment, I knew you were much more than a close friend. You were the perfect fit for me.”

Her heart raced out of control. “You did?”

He nodded. “But I was such a mess and so full of guilt. I should never have pursued or touched Annabelle, and she was dead because of me. My mum was dead. I loathed myself and didn’t know that I could ever be forgiven by heaven, Levi, or you. So I ran.”

“For eight years. That’s a long time to run.”

“Yeah. Time goes fast when you’re fighting for other people’s lives, innocence, and freedom.” He rubbed at his jaw.

“You’re a good man, Brad.”

“It’s no excuse, though. After a week went by and I was settled in my first village, it felt like too much time had passed, and frankly, I was embarrassed. After a month, I felt like I had even more reason to stay hidden. When the first year was gone, I just thought it would be insulting to you. I treated you horribly when you were always there for me and wanted to help and lift me through that hard time.”

Brad took both of her hands in his. “I’ve waited way too long to say this, but I’m sorry, Ari. I’m sorry for how I treated you. I’m sorry for leaving without an explanation. And I’m sorry I wasn’t brave enough to fix my mistakes for all those

long years. I know Jesus has forgiven me, but can you please forgive me too?"

"I do. I forgive you." Saying the words, she knew they were true. "We were young, and you had been through something horrific. Of course I can forgive you for mistakes you made eight years ago."

"I love you." His brown-sugar eyes lit her up from the inside out. He was genuine, full of love for her, and still her hero.

"I love you back." She instinctively threw her arms around his neck and arched up on her heels.

"Oh, no." Brad wrapped her up tight but held his head back so she couldn't reach him. "It is *my* turn to instigate the kiss."

She laughed as joy rushed through her. That was exactly what she wanted to hear. "Don't want to get slapped again?"

"No, ma'am. I want to kiss you on my terms and for a very long time."

She grinned. "It's a Christmas miracle."

"You forgiving me? For certain. You are my Angel Ari. Thank you for forgiving me. For loving me."

"Forgiving was rough, but loving you ... I've never stopped."

He swallowed and his eyes looked lighter, golden and mesmerizing. "I love you. Now it's time for me to show you some Christmas magic."

He bent down, captured her lips with his, and turned her world upside down. Christmas magic? For certain.

The love of her life finally coming home to her? Finally returning her love?

The best Christmas gift she could ever ask for.

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I hope you loved Brad and Arianna's story! Please read on for an unedited excerpt of Princess Kiera and Captain Mason Henson's hilarious, intense, and romantic tale. I had to skip eight years in the future for this one so please forgive me if that causes any confusion.

Hugs and thanks for all the support,  
Cami

### **Christmas in Augustine**

*The Royal Captain and the Designer*

*The Wounded Guard and the Royal Stylist*

*The Impulsive Princess and the Soldier*

#### **Sweet Royal Romance Suspense**

*The General Prince and the Nerd*

*The Brave Prince and the Teacher*

*The Doctor Prince and the Outsider*

*The Ninja Prince and the Investigator*

*The Charming Prince and the Single Mum*

*The Crown Prince and the Traitor*

*The Police Chief and the Musician*

*The Royal Major and the Executive*

*The Grieving King and the Emissary*



# *The Impulsive Princess and the Soldier*

## 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 tease and not act affected. 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. 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 was all changing 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. He grinned to himself and rubbed his hands together.

He recognized that his older brothers and sister were blissfully married and simply wanted that joy to happen in his life. He 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 for him. 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 head.

His entire family was going to 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.

Mason had scoffed and joked it off. He hardly knew her. 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 the family. 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 Vienna and a romantic dinner at the romantic, exclusive, and crazily expensive Silvio Nickol would have Miriam begging to date him exclusively.

He smiled. 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 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.

He 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 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.

He 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. Last Christmas? 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." Mason closed the door and turned to face his military leader again.

"I'll get right to the point, Captain." General August faced him.

Mason had to hide another smile. The general had never wasted time in his life and always 'got right to the point'. With almost anybody else Mason would've risked a joking comment. He simply nodded, hoping his eyes didn't sparkle with the withheld humor.

"Princess Kiera is home from America until after the new year."

"That's wonderful, sir."

"I love my sister, but you know what she's like." General August lifted a hand and an eyebrow.

"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 four-man

private security detail. He'd seen her only briefly last Christmas.

“Well, her personality hasn't changed much but other facets ...” He blew out a heavy breath, looking like 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 and family for months on end. Possibly she'd found a nice American boy and was dating someone exclusively? She was far too young for anything serious. What would she be now ... twenty-one. He thought that was right. He'd heard she'd brought a ‘friend’ to Augustine with her. He'd simply assumed it was a female friend. He could imagine a boyfriend would upset the entire August family. They were ultra-protective of Princess Kiera. He pitied the poor fool who ever tried to secure her hand.

“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 different men that I implicitly trust. It hasn't been easy on them or their families.”

Mason nodded. He knew all of this. It had been difficult to keep a well-trained, irreproachable, and willing group of soldiers with the princess at all times. They were paid extremely well but all of the Augustine military was treated well and paid well 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 of the people Mason associated with. A fabulous guy whose 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." He planted his clenched fists in front of him on the desk. "She's brought her friend Sarah home and 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 Wengen Switzerland home as their base to ski the Jungfrau region."

"I see." He didn't really. So the friend was a female friend. Why was the general upset then? Did he want Mason's suggestions for the best men to protect his sister and her friend? Of course she'd need security.

"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 just 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. Mason excelled at extreme sports and related well to the Fearless Little Princess.

It should be a fun assignment. A weekend wouldn't cut into his committing to date Miriam plans. Ah, the smirks on his brother's faces turned to respect. He could just hear it, 'Dr. Miriam Cruz?' and 'Wow, little brother, she's accomplished and beautiful'. 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 asked, drawing his attention back from Mason’s future visions of gloating at his older siblings’ expense.

“Um ...” He racked his brain for some ideas. He could think 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,” he hurried to throw in.

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 might 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 we lose the little princess.” He smirked.

The general didn’t. He studied him and Mason lost his smile 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, Princess Sunny, 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?”

Mason racked his brain. “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 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.” He 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.” He 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 link to 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. Such as, Kiera’s 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, 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 and too quickly. He had over a hundred questions. First, as couples? They were

to act like they were on some date? Wouldn't that be awkward with Kiera and her friend being young college students and Mason and Sergeant Naples were 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. Maybe the general feared they'd hurt themselves trying to keep up? Mason didn't know about Sergeant Naples level of expertise, but personally he'd never met the man or woman who could best him on a pair of snow skis.

"Thank you," the general responded before he 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 a bright, innocent light and the entire country adored her. He'd keep her safe, but ... as couples? What if the media took pictures and it upset Miriam? Not that he and Miriam were exclusive, but he 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?

"Will you be ... considerate of Kiera's feelings and not ..."

He cleared his throat and studied Mason. "Lead her on."

Mason was confused. He 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 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 blew out the breath. “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 ... 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. There were no ... romantic feelings.

“Oh, sir, no.” He shook his head, his stomach heaving. “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.”

He blew out a breath. How awkward. He knew teenagers sometimes had crushes but got over them. He racked his brain to try 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. He and Kiera had so many different interactions throughout the years, but he couldn’t think of any red flags.

“Are you certain ...” He shook his head. “Maybe I shouldn’t go on this assignment.” he finished. 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 but she hadn’t matured into a woman. 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 Princess Kiera but that didn’t mean that he’d ... 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 fact that you've rescued numerous members of the royal family and have our trust and respect."

"I appreciate all of that sir." He 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 taken 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 younger years, and who could blame any female for having a crush on him, surely Princess Kiera was far past such silliness now.

He drew in a breath and straightened. "I promise you that 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," he emphasized. "Not like that. I think of her as a young friend, a surrogate little sister of sorts."

General August studied him as if he thought he was lying. The man bragged him up, said the royal family trusted and respected him, and then acted like Mason was some foul ... teenage girl chaser. 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? He’d said that earlier but there was too much 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 wasn’t a mature woman, was what he’d meant but obviously couldn’t say to her brother and his general. 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.” He rolled his eyes. “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, just dating.”

“Oh, good. Perfect.”

Mason had never been so confused. Desired by the men world over? Most beautiful woman in the world? Had he missed a memo about the princess?

“Thank you. 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 and there’s no way she’d have a crush on you any longer.”

Mason supposed that should all make him feel better. The pretend 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 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. Mason knew that was his cue to leave. He was happy to escape at this point. He stood and

saluted. Turning to go, he thought of a very important question. “Sir. What dates are the detail?”

“Forgive me. I missed that minor detail. 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. It is Kiera ...” He drummed his clenched fist against his leg. “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 cancelled on him Friday night when she’d been called in to an emergency surgery.

It was only three and a half days he’d be gone. 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, he’d leave out the part of ‘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 he’d be doing any couple-type things with her. 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 lower hallway of the castle. 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 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 General Ray and had become surrogate parents and siblings to Kiera in America. Her eighteen-year old brother Drake was hilarious and the 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 for half of her life for a way to get Captain Mason Henson to finally notice her as a woman, not some cute little girl.

She'd thankfully hit a growth spurt the past year 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 on some website still made her laugh but she supposed as a princess people noticed her more.

The important thing was ... It was finally time to pursue Mason. She did a standing backflip and then rubbed her hands

together.

“You silly. You can’t backflip in a skirt,” Sarah teased her.

“Drat. Sorry.” 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 unrelated 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. 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, but 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 woman, as his woman. *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 an ice cream with a member of the opposite sex. Her guards trailed her on each and every date, experts at being intrusive and not even attempting to keep their distance. She loved her guards like brothers and appreciated safety.

It would've bothered her more that she could never be alone with a date, if any man could steal her heart from loving Mason. She'd thought he was the greatest unrelated man on earth, since she was thirteen. The crush had not dissipated as the two people she'd admitted it to—her mum and Macey—promised her it would 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. She knew 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 were planning to go back after the new year since the downhill ski season would be in full swing.

Those guards needed a break, needed to relax with their families for Christmas. Her closest friend Sarah needed to ski the 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 ski, 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 it. 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 back flip, 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, 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 that was 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 her heart took off at a gallop and felt like it slammed against her chest. It had been too long since she'd seen him in person. A year ago 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 beautiful 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.

She 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—what if he didn't even notice the changes like everyone else seemed to? What if he still thought of her as a child?

“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 cute-re-meet.

“He is *unbelievably* hot,” Sarah whispered to her.

She wanted to scream, ‘I know’. 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 approached as well, flanking him.

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

He bowed to her, his men following suit.

“Princess Kiera,” Mason breathed out in a husky tone she thought 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,” she shot back.

His gaze said he agreed.

“Excuse me?” Sarah huffed.

“No, pardon me,” Mason said smooth and charming as ever, gifting Sarah with his alluring grin. Sarah sighed beside her. “I meant no offense. 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 all grown up.” His blue eyes swept over Kiera, warm and full of appreciation. She was hot and cold from head to toe.

“Maybe 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?” He gaze was smoky hot on her, but his voice was that lilting tease she’d missed. She loved the husky tone from earlier but his charming accent was just as appealing.

“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 and connect like she’d dreamt 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.” He winked.

The man behind him chuckled.

“We’ll see who won’t be able to keep with whom, my brave bodyguard.”

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 sprang between them. 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. A pleasure to have you 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 his men. Kiera felt she should release her grip on him.

Bosh.

“Princess Kiera August, Miss Sarah Anderson. Allow me to introduce Sergeant Josiah Naples, Lieutenant Braxton Mueller, 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 getaway. Something about dissuading her stalker. She regularly had stalkers and didn't get too fussed about a new one, but this couple idea was fabulous.

The guards all 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 glance. 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.” Mason's voice was teasing.

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 a challenge and something else. He *had* finally noticed her.

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

She pulled the side of her bottom lip between her teeth, trying to hide a squeal of excitement. She’d do a standing back flip if she wasn’t wearing this bothersome dress. Mason’s gaze trailed to her lips, lingered there for half a beat and 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 are in trouble,” Sarah said.

Mason’s gaze grew a little apprehensive. “No pranks,” he said softly.

“Ah, Captain.” She patted his cheek, wishing she could cup it with her palm, trail her fingers through the short hair shadowing his cheek and jaw, draw him in close. “You know I’m your match in every way.”

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 the wrong direction.

She heard one of the guards shift behind Mason. All that mattered was Mason’s blue eyes. They were full of a 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.

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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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## *His Perfect Match for Christmas*

Captain Zeke Hendrickson, elite Navy SEAL, the warrior no man could best and no intuitive person dared touch, balled his hands into fists to hide the fact that they were shaking. He could storm through any insurgents' camp, take a bullet without flinching, breach a door that had dozens of unfriendlies with machine guns behind it, and stay calm and focused. Not since escaping from home the day he turned eighteen had he noticed his hands shaking.

Coming back to the Delta family's valley high in the beautiful Colorado mountains to discuss "helping Holly Delta protect a young woman," and "Of course you're staying for Christmas, you're one of the family," had him experiencing nerves he didn't know he had. One of the family? That was a laugh.

Why, then, did it make him strangely happy?

He rubbed at the back of his neck as he wavered on Joseph and Holly's front porch for far too long. All seemed quiet, but there were eyes, and possibly a scope, on him. He casually catalogued the scenery while looking for the source of his impression.

The valley was vastly different from when he'd left it in late September. First, it was covered with thick white snow, the lake a slushy grayish-blue and the pine trees loaded with blankets of fluff. He couldn't wait to take a dip in that freezing lake. It had been cold when he'd done his therapy in the middle of the night in September. It would be an iceberg now. The sun was slanting down from the southwest. It would set

soon. The house was decked out for Christmas—lights strung, greenery dotted with red berries wrapped around the porch poles and railings, and holiday decorations on the small porch table between two rocking chairs with red snowflake pillows. Of course Holly would do Christmas right.

The second thing he instantly noticed was the silence. Last time he'd been here as part of the Delta Protection Detail, the valley had been teeming with troops and Delta family members, his own men, and the local sheriff's department.

Where was everybody, and why did he sense they had security watching him when the Delta secret weapon was no more? He rubbed at the back of his neck again. He could really use Preach, Chaos, and Wolf watching his back, the goofball cowboy Thor teasing him about something, or his good friend Zander Povey giving him that big smile and quietly protecting him from anyone inadvertently touching him. His team were enjoying their own leave. Zander was an EOD and on assignment but preparing to marry Jessie Delta this Christmas. Everybody else was apparently working or busy on this bright December day.

Except whoever had eyes, or the crossbars of a scope, centered on his back.

A slight movement and sound and he pinpointed the man's location near Papa's front porch, the house next door. He focused in on it, issuing the challenge for the man to show himself or Zeke would come for him.

A security guard he didn't recognize stepped out from the cover of Papa's front porch, answering his question about who was watching him but creating a whole new list of questions.

They studied each other for a few beats. Zeke's mind did its normal cataloguing: former military, early thirties, blond, blue eyes, six-two, two-thirty, built but Zeke could easily take him, high-quality clothing and gear, comfortable with the L129A1 sharpshooter rifle in his hands. Possibly British? If not, it was an interesting choice of weapon for an American.

The man simply glared at him and then stalked off around the back of the house. Hmm. What was that all about? The guy

wasn't a threat to him and he was obviously a hired security guard, but Zeke could sense the guard's animosity from here and he instinctively didn't like him. Lieutenant Van "Chaos" Udy would say the guy had a very punchable face. Zeke smiled thinking of his teammate and friend. He didn't mind the idea of punching the security guard.

He could go after the guy for information and maybe a decent fight, or he could knock on the door and probably get the entire spiel from people he trusted and was excited to see. Well, excited was stretching it. Zeke didn't let himself get excited about much. Emotion and excitement were not a soldier's friend. Either could get a man killed.

Answers and a warm hug that he'd neither initiate or ask for, but somehow appreciated and didn't hate, would happen as soon as he lifted his fist and rapped. It was easy. He just had to knock on this door. He was semi-surprised Holly Delta hadn't been watching for him to pull into their quaint valley and run to meet him as he exited the rented Accord. Was she simply focused on whatever woman they wanted him to help? With anybody else he might presume they were icing him or testing him, but with Holly ... the older woman was tough, brave, but too kind and warm for his comfort level.

Zeke flexed and released his fists, rolled his shoulders back, and prepared for battle. He wanted to laugh at himself. This wasn't battle. Yes, Holly would give him a "mama" hug when she saw him. The contact always made him extremely uncomfortable as "hugs" throughout his childhood and teenage years had meant his dad or mom wrapping their arms around his chest from behind and squeezing until ribs sometimes broke. At the same time, he craved the human connection and the feeling of unconditional love Holly somehow bestowed upon him with the warm, soft hugs she insisted on.

Besides the hug that was coming, he couldn't put a finger on what else was making him nervous. That bothered him. Zeke was always in control of the situation and his men. Nerves got men killed quicker than emotions did.

He could blame the security guard for putting him on edge, but he'd felt it before the guy showed his ugly face, even

before he arrived in the valley. It might be the fact Holly was asking for help when she was surrounded by impressive Delta family members. These men and women were exceptionally trained and could protect the lady in danger from any threat. Why Zeke? He was one of the best-trained, highly-decorated, and able-to-execute special ops soldiers in the world, but he didn't know if that was the reason Holly wanted him here or if it was an excuse to get him to come for Christmas.

It was also uncanny how Holly knew he had leave and that unless something huge broke, another assignment for him and his four-man SEAL unit wouldn't be coming until January. He'd planned to custom-make a bunch of new axe-handles to sell on his website, under an identity nobody would ever know about, and spend a lot of time in the gym during the Christmas holidays. Instead ...

Lifting his fist, Zeke rapped hard on the glass front door before he could second-guess it, or twenty-two guess it, as the case may be.

Footsteps came much too quickly and he could see the beautiful fifty-something Delta mom coming into the foyer. Her face broke into a radiant, welcoming smile, as if Zeke were the person she had been waiting to see for weeks. He knew that wasn't accurate. Holly made everybody feel special. He was nothing special, unless you needed a tried and proven soldier.

He shook his head, blew out a breath, and steeled himself. His own mother had controlled, bruised, and belittled him more than his father. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Witherspoon—thankfully he didn't share their name any longer—had both put on a persona for the church and community that they were pious, kind people. He had seen his dad treat his older sister kindly on occasion, and he'd heard other soldiers claim their parents were loving and kind. But he had never experienced a mother in her own private sphere, where no one else was watching, who was as welcoming, accepting, and loving as Holly Delta.

The door flew open and Holly rushed at him. He instinctively edged to the right, his body already moving to

incapacitate her with one quick hit to the back of the neck. No! He forced himself to stop, clenched his fists and his teeth, and impressively didn't react at all as she flung her arms around his neck and hugged him.

At least, he didn't react physically.

"You're here! Yay!" She kept right on hugging him. Despite his lack of movement, Zeke closed his eyes, cataloguing the moment for future reference. Nothing was as comforting and like the home he'd never known than Holly's "mama" hugs. Somehow soft but firm at the same time, they conveyed that he was enough. That he was wanted here. "Now hug me back," she encouraged. "You can do it, cute boy."

Cute boy? Zeke had broken men's arms for much less, but from Holly it wasn't demeaning. She saw something in him that he doubted was actually there. She somehow saw him—hardened, battle-tested, emotionless, untouchable Captain Zeke Hendrickson—as "cute" and as if he had warmth, depth, and ... worth. Worth beyond being a fearless weapon and brilliant and tactical leader of the best SEALs in the world. In his not-humble-at-all opinion.

He shook off the introspection and forced himself to lean into her hug and clasped his hands together at her mid-back. He hadn't been able to release his hands and place them palms down yet. That was a step in the hugging process he wasn't sure he'd ever get to. He kept his eyes closed, savoring the solace of her touch. All the hidden anger, remorse, and pain didn't matter when Holly held him tight.

"Good job, my sweet boy," she said softly.

Zeke should've laughed out loud. He didn't. He'd been through more advanced trainings than anyone he knew, received commendations and praise constantly, and had been awarded many distinguished awards, including the Navy Cross and most recently the Medal of Honor. But somehow, Holly Delta telling him he did a good job hugging her and intoning he was her sweet boy, a part of the family, seemed like the best reward he could imagine.

“And there he is, the elite Navy SEAL captain, hugging my wife again,” Joseph Delta’s voice came from the foyer.

Immediately, Zeke released her and drew back. Holly smiled up at him and kept her hand on his arm as he extended his hand and shook Joseph’s.

“Nice to see you, sir.”

“You too, Cap. You too.” Joseph luckily didn’t touch him beyond the handshake and released his grasp quick. He somehow instinctively knew Zeke’s hugs with his wife were unique and nobody else in the world would get away with touching him like Holly did. Or maybe his future son-in-law, Demo, had explained to him. Nobody knew much about Zeke’s past, but Demo was instinctive and, like his men, shielded him from people inadvertently touching him. They had his back on and off the battlefield.

Joseph gestured into the house. “Come in. It’s bitter cold out here.”

Zeke shrugged. He was wearing a long-sleeved black shirt and black cargo pants. He didn’t notice extremes in temperature much, trained to perform in extreme hot or cold situations, and used cold therapy whenever he could to stay in top physical condition and heal some of the strain his constant physical training brought on.

“You have a bag?” Holly asked.

“In the car.”

She gave him a look, seeming to sense immediately that he wasn’t a hundred percent committed to staying. Captain Zeke having a holly jolly Christmas with a bunch of warm, friendly Christian believers was more than a bit of a stretch. Now if this young lady they’d mentioned had a vicious killer after her, that would be more up his alley.

“We’ll get it soon,” Holly said.

He actually wanted his duffel within reach. He’d forced himself to leave everything but his knife and utility tool in his bag and in the rental car. It was unsettling not to be armed with at least his Sauger. Especially with the security guard out

there. He looked again, but the man wasn't in sight. It rankled at him that he'd forgotten about the guy while he hugged Holly. The man obviously was employed by the Deltas, so it shouldn't have bothered him, but he didn't let his guard down. Ever. And he just had.

The family and this valley should be safe and at peace. The danger to the Deltas was gone now that the youngest, Jessie, and his friend Demo, the best EOD he'd ever worked with, had blown up the Delta weapon most of the world had been after. They had lost their patriarch, the impressive and renowned Admiral Davidson Delta. It still pained Jessie and he was sure the rest of them, too. It was impossible to fill the hole of losing a great man like their "Papa Delta."

So why the unfamiliar guard? Something to do with the woman they wanted Zeke to help?

"Thanks for coming," Joseph said.

"Of course." He would do almost anything for the Deltas. These people were as unselfish, cohesive, and extraordinary as any family he'd ever met. The American public at large had no idea, but the Deltas keeping their weapon safe from King Frederick had stayed the man from raining nuclear weapons down on America. While the Delta family had held down the home front, the elite special ops Delta Force had taken out Frederick and things had somewhat calmed on the international front. For the moment. There was always some terrorist or insurgent ready to stir up trouble. Weirdly, Zeke liked trouble. Trouble kept him busy and not thinking.

Thinking got men killed.

Holly kept her hand on his arm. He didn't know if she was aware it was making him uncomfortable. She had some theory that she could acclimatize him to touch. He almost smiled at the thought. Maybe if Holly had been around a few years ago, his fiancée Rachel wouldn't have dumped him while he was on a mission with no outside comms. By the time he'd seen his phone again, she'd blocked his number, relocated from Virginia Beach, and left no forwarding address. Rachel had a lot of concerns with his lack of emotion or "romance," and she



had hated his phobia of touch. Who could blame her? Being engaged to a man who never instigated and barely tolerated kissing and flinched every time they hugged. His only question was why she'd stayed around for two years.

Anybody who'd known about the relationship and his lack of dating since then would think he was heartbroken. Zeke thought it was more that he'd learned a lesson. Romantic relationships weren't in the cards for a tough old frogman like him. Women came onto him constantly, wanting to be the one to break through his tough veneer. He wished he could tattoo "not worth pursuing" on his forehead. A relationship with him wasn't fair to any woman, and Rachel deserved much better. He hoped she'd found it.

"Come back and meet our darling Mia." Holly finally lifted her hand and gestured him through the entry. The sweeping staircase had decorative greenery wrapped around the railing and a variety of tall, skinny, decorated with silver balls and other unidentifiable-to-him ornaments, pine trees arched almost the height of the two-story entry. Nice.

Darling Mia?

He glanced sharply at Holly. "You said this was a mission." It was a good thing his bag was still in the car. If she dared try to matchmake him with some girl, he'd bug out quick.

She smiled at him. "It is." Her smile disappeared. "I'll let her tell you about the mission, or rather nightmare, for our angel girl. Come on." She reached out as if to grab his hand, but seemed to think better of it.

Zeke's shoulders relaxed a fraction. He'd had about as much touch today as he could handle. When he'd been here fighting with the Deltas to protect the secret weapon, Holly had forced him into one hug a day. He hoped she wouldn't try for more than that now, since they weren't all busy saving the world.

He followed Joseph and Holly through the entryway and into the sunny open living area with two-story windows overlooking the picturesque lake and mountains beyond. He

remembered the scenic view. Now snow-covered, it was just as quaint. They had a huge, gorgeous pine tree all decked out in the corner, Christmas-y stuff on any shelf, mantle, or wall that could be decorated, and a fire going. Most people would say the home and view were beautiful, perfect, and appealing.

Zeke stopped walking and felt his jaw go slack as he took in a view more beautiful, perfect, and appealing than anything he'd seen in his vast world travels.

A woman stood from the couch as they walked in. Five-foot-four. Athletic. Civilian. Blue fitted sweater dress with high-quality leather boots. Definitely wealthy. But there his usual analysis failed him. He somehow forgot analyzing and simply focused on the radiance of the woman herself. She had shoulder-length blonde hair that framed the sweetest-looking face he'd ever encountered. Her smooth skin and rosebud lips were appealing, but it was the mixture of purity and happiness in her brown-sugar eyes that stunned him. Their gazes met and held and time froze.

Then she smiled at him. Warmth immediately filled his body, and it felt like Chaos had gotten a lucky hit and slammed his powerful fist into Zeke's sternum.

*Push out a breath. Okay. Pull it in. Now back away slowly.*

He backed up. He needed to get away from this woman. Double time.

"Zeke ..." Holly was beaming at the woman and hadn't noticed his signs of retreat. "This is Mia Burton. Mia ... Captain Zeke Hendrickson, elite and accomplished Navy SEAL and pretty much the toughest, most highly-decorated and experienced soldier on the planet."

Zeke should pull his gaze from Mia to tell Holly to tamp down on the bragging, but he couldn't make himself do it.

"Sorry, Cap," Joseph said. "You know she loves to brag about you like you're one of her own."

At least Joseph got it. Zeke had no idea how to respond to the introduction. What was he supposed to say to this captivating and stunning woman? He couldn't think of another

option besides escape. This was not a good situation. Beautiful women didn't affect him. Emotions like warm flashes in his body and needing to breathe from a pretty lady's smile couldn't happen to him. He felt like he was soaring on some emotional high just having her smile at him. He couldn't complete whatever mission they had in mind if this woman was involved.

Mia bounced across the space toward him, and he should've either run or taken her out. But he froze. Zeke never froze. It was as if she'd captured him in a snare he'd never been trained to defend against.

She was pint-sized, but there was energy and power in that small frame that intimidated him.

Intimidated? Yeah, right. Suicidal insurgents in Afghanistan hadn't intimidated him. This miniscule blonde was no match for his strength or skills. She couldn't capture or incapacitate him.

Not physically. But what about emotionally?

He pushed that away. There was no time to deal with it anyway, as she was right in his space. Close. Far too close. She smelled like lemon candy. He absolutely loved lemon candy. Old-fashioned lemon drops. Pretty much the only good memory from his childhood. A grandma at his church had given him one every week if he sat still during the children's class. She had kept giving them to him even as a teenager. Grandma Hendrickson, she'd asked him to call her. He'd stolen her surname for his last name. He'd thought she was the nicest woman he'd ever met. Until Holly Delta.

The delicious-smelling woman standing in front of him stuck out her hand and used that smile on him. It made him feel strangely weak. He'd never felt weak before in his life. At least not since he'd escaped from his parents' house, changed his name so they couldn't find him and so he could have his own identity, and joined the military. He'd had so many drill sergeants try to break him, but their belittlement and abuse was nothing compared to what he'd lived with throughout

childhood and teenage years. He'd absolutely excelled in the military.

He looked down at the woman's hand and then back into those golden-brown eyes. Were those long lashes real? They were pretty; that was all he knew. Not many blondes had brown eyes, but maybe her hair was dyed. His throat was dry and his pulse thrummed far too fast. He was trying to catalogue, but the draw of her made everything off, and his head felt too big for his body.

"Zeke," Holly said. "You can shake her hand."

That broke his concentration on the woman, and he glanced quickly at Holly. He wanted to ask if he had to, but he could only imagine the answer, and asking would make him look weak in front of this beauty. He never wanted to look weak in front of anyone, but the thought of this *Mia* thinking he was weak when he wanted her to listen to Holly's bragging about him and think he was a superhero had him sticking out his hand. Shaking hands was no big deal. He'd learned to do that as an adult and could get through it without making a fuss or obviously cringing and offending the other person.

Her hand slid along his so slowly he felt like the entire world had stopped, except for his heart that was thundering out of control and the delicious tingling filling his stomach.

First her fingertips caressed his, for far longer than was probably necessary, but who was he to complain? Then their fingers glided across each other, and finally the soft palm slid along his fingers and palms until they were aligned. She gently wrapped her fingers around the back of his hand and held on. Her small, soft, tantalizing hand fit in his better than any gun ever had.

His breath shortened, and he had absolutely no clue what he was feeling. This was new, and he'd never felt anything like it. He appreciated Holly's mama hugs, and they gave him that odd comfort that he somewhat liked. Accepting hugs should be a positive thing; he recognized that.

But holding this woman's hand had nothing to do with comfort. Her palm and fingers were warm, and it felt like his

hand had found the spot it'd been searching for all his life. He didn't move as she held his hand and blinked up at him with those intriguing brown eyes of hers, but he realized something in that moment ...

He *liked* her touching him.

That shocked him enough to pull away and clench his hand into a fist at his side. Crazy enough, he could still feel the warmth and feminine softness of her much smaller hand. He hadn't really liked it, right? He'd just imagined he had because she was so pretty and seemed nice and soft and feminine and innocent ...

Zeke took a step back. He had no choice. It was either that or he would touch her again, and Captain Zeke Hendrickson never voluntarily touched anyone. Unless he was fighting them.

"Blimey," Mia said, shocking him yet again, blinking up at him with those big brown eyes and grinning invitingly. "You're a right big and tough one, aren't you now?"

She was British. That shouldn't have surprised him with the security guard's choice of weapon, but everything was surprising him today. Her accent was adorable.

Adorable. Really?

If Chaos could get ahold of his thoughts right now, he'd never stop laughing. And then Zeke could pummel him. Chaos always put up a good fight. That'd be fun. A lot more fun than the discomfort of this moment.

Zeke only raised his eyebrows. She'd probably think he was a mute, but he didn't really care what she thought. He didn't care what anyone thought. Caring what people thought only brought either pride or pain.

Both could disable a man. Both could get him killed.

"He is big and tough," Holly said. "And more importantly, he's experienced in all kinds of weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and defense. Zeke will keep you safe."

“Safe sounds ... lovely,” Mia said, but her voice quavered, and her big brown eyes looked ... terrified. “Thank you, Auntie.”

“Safe from who?” Zeke demanded, ripping his gaze from her to pin it on Holly. Auntie? They’d get into the relationship later. He needed to know who would dare endanger an innocent beauty like the one within a hand’s reach. Honestly, it wouldn’t take much effort at all just to reach out and touch her again. Just to see if it had truly been pleasant or if her appealing looks and smile had influenced him into thinking it was pleasant. He absolutely needed to do the research. Then he recoiled inside. Had he just wanted to ... touch someone?

Joseph stepped up and put an arm around Mia’s shoulders. She looked even smaller next to the tall, well-built Delta man, and it thankfully distracted Zeke from thinking about the unthinkable, willingly touching someone. Research or not, it was a stupid idea.

“Cap ...” Joseph said. “We asked you here hoping you could protect Mia from a vicious stalker. He’s recently set his sights on Mia and promised to kidnap her and sell her to the highest bidder on the dark web. The terrifying thing is, we believe he’s done the same thing to nine other women now.”

If Joseph was hoping to coerce him into being invested, he’d done it. Sell this sparkling sweetheart on the dark web? Not on Zeke’s watch.

He nodded to Joseph. “Thank you for the opportunity. What details and information do you have for me? The past cases. The notes, threats, and contact the man has had with Mia, or anything else that will help. Do you want to text or email me? That might be more ideal so I can have the notes to refer to and not waste time talking about it right now. I’ll hunt him down and have him to the authorities soon.” He looked at Mia and nodded. Yes, he’d capture the refuse of humanity who’d kidnapped and enslaved other women and dared make this woman his next target. Zeke would make sure she was safe, and he’d avenge the other women. Turning the spineless scum over to the authorities would be the hard part. Vigilante

justice sounded just right in situations like this. “Don’t worry, Mia,” he said. “You’ll be safe.”

He turned to go.

“Zeke!” Holly called to him.

“Cap!” Joseph joined her.

“What?” He turned back.

“The National Crime Agency in the UK and the FBI here are working together to track the guy down,” Joseph explained. “There are two suspects, but they’ve both completely disappeared. We don’t have enough information to send you off hunting for either of them, or whoever it might be, and that’s not what we’re asking of you. We’d like you to stay here with Mia. Actually, at Papa’s house where her two security guards are staying. They, and the rest of our family, will keep eyes on the cameras, sensors, and monitor the property. The man has found and taken each of the other women he’s targeted no matter what protection the police have provided or the victims have hired on their own. We can’t have that happen to Mia. We want you to protect her, stick to her like glue, until the man is captured. Or until your leave is up, at which point we’ll have to reevaluate the situation.”

Zeke stared at Joseph, then he looked at Holly and finally, his gaze swiveled to Mia. For Joseph and Holly’s parts, they looked absolutely serious. Mia was biting nervously at her lower lip. Why was she doing that? He liked to understand why people had nervous ticks. Demo ran his hand through his hair, Chaos thumped his fist against his leg, and Zeke’s own was rubbing at his neck. He was surrounded by men most of the time and no man he knew bit at his lower lip like that. It was highly distracting. It made her look ... appealing.

A protectiveness filled him that he had no choice but to act on. He had to keep Mia safe, but he could do that best by tracking the guy down. He couldn’t ... hole up in a beautiful house in a beautiful valley with a beautiful woman. He had to look at this mission objectively and unselfishly, but he’d go absolutely insane not acting and not moving and ... being trapped with a woman as enticing as this one.

“You want me ...” he began slowly, still focused on Mia. For some reason, those three words made her dark eyes light up in the most beguiling way he’d ever seen.

She wanted him.

Unfamiliar sensations of light, joy, and warmth seemed to crash into each other inside his chest. *She* wanted *him*? He’d met a lot of women who wanted him physically. Because of his hatred of human touch, he’d never been tempted to reciprocate. Rachel had broken down his walls, somewhat, but it had taken her years, and then she’d decided she absolutely didn’t want him. But Mia seemed to want him, all of him.

He blinked to clear his vision and realized how ludicrous his thoughts were at the moment. He cleared his throat and pivoted to Joseph. “You want me to stay here and protect her like a glorified bodyguard?”

Joseph nodded. “I can’t think of anyone I’d trust more.”

“But she already has security with her. And what about all your with-it and qualified nephews, niece, daughters, and son?”

Joseph barely knew him. Sure, they’d worked extremely well together those few weeks in September, but if this man had any idea how messed-up Zeke was on the inside, he’d never want him alone in a house with his niece.

“Remember what you asked me to do with Zander and Jessie?” Joseph fired back. Kind of hitting below the belt, honestly. Zeke knew exactly what he’d asked of this overprotective father, and he didn’t want to have to reciprocate the trust Joseph had granted Zander. “Despite how hard it was as a father to allow any man to be so close to my daughter, we both knew that Zander was the ideal choice to protect Jessie because he would stay by her side around the clock and he had a vested interest in her. Holly and I felt this situation could be just as ... ideal.”

Ideal for who?

“But ... but ...” Zeke gritted his teeth. He hated stammering. He used to do it as a child because he’d been



afraid. As an adult, he acted like everything was radio communication, which meant thinking through his words before opening his mouth. Either that, or he didn't speak. Stammering was for wimps. He rubbed at the back of his neck. He was feeling backed into a corner.

He *had* asked Joseph to allow his friend and Chief Petty Officer, Zander Povey, Master EOD "Demo" to be Jessie's bodyguard because Jessie was the Secret Keeper, in extreme danger, and Demo had been head over heels for her.

"Demo liked Jessie," he tried to explain. "I don't like ..."

His eyes widened as he realized what he'd just said. He spun back to Mia and held his hands up. "Apologies, ma'am. It's not that I don't like you, but I don't like anybody. Please don't take it personally."

For the first time, her warm brown eyes weren't sparkling invitingly at him. They were flashing fire. He had the feeling he was about to hear an earful of British slang that would curl a proper Brit's toenails. He didn't like that he'd hurt her feelings, but this situation would not work out. It was better she knew now that he was cold and not interested in her as a woman. That always ticked women off, so he found it was easier to get it out right up front.

He should probably back toward the door. One glance at Joseph and Holly said he'd upset everybody now.

He was a soldier. A human weapon. A man of action. He was not a stay by the beautiful woman's side type, or a bodyguard of appealing British blondes.

If he could only escape this situation and go find Thor or Greer or one of the Delta men. He'd love a good fist fight about now. Then he'd get back to the Air Force Academy and coerce some gung-ho, honored-to-meet-him pilot to fly him out of Colorado as soon as possible. He hated to let down Joseph and Holly, but they could find someone to do bodyguard duty for a gorgeous woman in danger. Most single warriors in the world would jump at the chance. Not him.

The dangerous part? Hooyah.

But being alone with a beautiful woman? Not acceptable.

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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](#).

[cami@camichecketts.com](mailto:cami@camichecketts.com)

[www.camichecketts.com](http://www.camichecketts.com)

