



THE
CROWN PRINCE

AND
THE

Traitor

Sweet Royal
Romance
Suspense #6

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CAMI CHECKETTS

THE CROWN PRINCE AND THE TRAITOR

SWEET ROYAL ROMANCE SUSPENSE #6

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FREE BOOK

Receive a free copy of *Only Her Undercover Spy: Mystical Lake Resort Romance #1* by signing up for Cami's newsletter at <https://BookHip.com/SXJRSLW>.

BOOKS AND CHARACTERS OF AUGUSTINE

There are a lot of different characters coming into these stories. I hope it helps to have the couples listed with their books and their 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 - Recently married in a quiet ceremony at the castle that was interrupted by the prime minister coming after Hattie Ballard.

#2 - The Brave Prince and the Teacher - Prince Curtis August and Aliya Drummond - Married in their cabin in the mountains

#3 - The Doctor Prince and the Outsider - Doctor Prince Steffan August and Hattie Ballard - Eloped in a remote village

#4 - The Ninja Prince and the Investigator - Prince Derek August and Ellery Monson - Their wedding is the first few chapters of this book

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

#6 - The Crown Prince and the Traitor - Crown Prince Tristan August and Jennifer Shule

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

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

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

Christmas in Augustine:

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

#2 The Royal Guard and the Royal Stylist - Braxton Mueller and Arianna Gunnell

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

Other Characters:

William and Naomi Rindlesbacher - On the run

Treven Rindlesbacher - In prison

Henry and Leslie Shule - Prime Minister and his wife, Jennifer's parents, Leslie is in William and Naomi's power

Lieutenant General Philippe Cordon

Sunny Pederson - Sophie's daughter

Holly Monson - Ellery's mom

Aunt Elise - Ellery's aunt

PROLOGUE

1 2 Years Ago

Jennifer Shule's stomach gave a happy lurch as Prince Tristan's blue gaze met hers across the crowded ballroom. He was the crown prince, a serious heartthrob and the greatest catch of the century, according to her friends and the entertainment news writers. She couldn't claim she disagreed.

He'd flirted with and teased Jennifer since they were young teens. At first she'd been annoyed at being just another target of the crown prince's famed charm and tried not to get caught up in his allure and hype. As they spent more time together through their parents' close association, she had seen past his veneer to the real Tristan. There was something in his eyes that only she saw. A depth and vulnerability that tugged at her heart.

Jennifer pretended not to notice as he made his way to her side, but her palms were sweating against the crystal glass of water in her grip. His brothers hadn't been forced to come to the fancy party tonight. Jennifer looked forward to this fall when she'd be away at college and the humanitarian missions she had planned for every break; then she'd have an excuse to miss these stuffy parties as well. She was finally eighteen and ready to make her way in the world. Her parents were great, and she adored them, but being the prime minister's only daughter was demanding. She couldn't imagine the demands on the crown prince.

"Seeing as you are the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on," Tristan said as his elbow brushed hers. "I think it is absolutely necessary for us to

escape this ballroom and spend the rest of our lives together.”

“The rest of our lives?” She let herself look at him, lost for a moment in those blue eyes. “Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what big plans you have.” For years she’d worn a well-loved, bright-red hooded sweatshirt. He loved to tease that she was Red Riding Hood and he was the Big Bad Wolf.

He chuckled. “All the better to secure your heart with, my dear.”

“Do you ...” She swallowed against her dry throat. “Want to secure my heart?”

“Oh yes. As the Big Bad Wolf of Augustine, I think it’s imperative that I teach you all about true love.”

True love? He was still teasing. Right? Tristan was a charming flirt, but he was so much more than that to her. The depth of their conversations, the significant and understanding looks they shared, the way he made her quiver from a simple touch, the way she felt like she was the only one who saw the real Prince Tristan. In her mind, it was certainly true love, but she couldn’t reveal that to him. Not yet.

He tilted his head. “Escape to the forest with the wolf, or stay here pretending to enjoy this party?”

“I think I’ll take my chances with the wolf.”

His face broke into an irresistible grin.

They made their way through the party. She didn’t dare touch him. Their mums were already trying to arrange a marriage. Not that she’d be opposed—after she obtained her master’s degree in speech pathology and helped children throughout the world.

Finally, they escaped the ballroom, grinning as they hurried down the hallway, the stairs, and burst outside. Tristan had to charm the guards into letting them take the trail to the forest. Thankfully, the kingdom of Augustine was safe. Jennifer had nothing to fear, especially with Tristan by her side.

He took her hand as they walked along the forest trail. His warm, strong palm against hers and their fingers interlaced warmed her in the cool forest air.

“Jenn,” he said. “Thank you for escaping with me.”

“Gladly.” She risked a glance at him in the dim light of the forest. The sun had gone down, and a full moon filtered through the trees. “It gets a bit stuffy as the prime minister’s daughter. I can’t even imagine being the crown prince.”

“I’ve been prepared for it my entire life, so it usually feels like a second skin, but sometimes it does get overwhelming.” He squeezed her hand. “Few people know or care who I am under that skin. Except my family and Chad and ... you. I feel like you know me so well. Like you see past the title and the handsome face and charming façade to the real me.”

Jennifer wanted to tease him about calling himself handsome and charming, but she imagined it did get old. He couldn’t escape to third world countries to help children like she was planning to.

“I know you so well?” she asked, only a little teasing in her voice.

“You do.” His voice went deep and husky. “But I’d love to know you even better.”

A thrill raced through her. Was this happening? Her and Tristan. He was so much more than the crown prince to her.

They walked out into a clearing, where a beautiful waterfall cascaded down a rock wall and into a deep pool below. Jennifer had been here before with him and his brothers, swimming and jumping off the rocks.

“Let’s see how well I know you.” She cocked her head to the side and studied his handsome face. Almost too perfect, but she wouldn’t complain. “If we were playing truth or dare, let’s see if I guess correctly what questions or dares you’d ask of me.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Interesting. Let’s do it.”

“Truth or dare,” she said.

“Truth.”

“Okay. You’d ask me if I could only love one man my entire life, who it would be.”

“And?” He was definitely daring her with those blue eyes.

“You,” she admitted.

“Jenn ...” His voice got deep and husky, and he edged closer. He was going to kiss her, but she had to tease him just a bit longer.

Dodging away, she said, “Truth or dare.”

“Dare.”

She’d dare him to kiss her. Soon.

“Any other boy would dare me to strip out of my dress and jump into the waterfall, but not you.”

“Oh no?” He gave her a smoldering look. “Why not?”

“Because you’re a good Christian and much too classy. You’d just ask me to jump in with you fully clothed.”

“I would,” he admitted. He tugged her toward the ledge. “Ready?”

“Let’s do it.”

“Three. Two. One!”

They jumped off the ledge together. After a quick plunge, cold water surrounded them. Tristan wrapped his arm around her waist and easily tugged her to where they could touch. He encircled her waist with his arms and pulled her in close, him in his suit and her in her dress. It was silly and crazy and exhilarating.

His gaze dropped to her mouth but lifted quickly. His blue eyes were warm in the moonlight. She should be shivering from the cold water, but in Tristan’s arms she was warm, filled with exhilaration.

“Truth or dare,” she whispered, afraid of breaking the spell.

“Truth,” he said.

She felt a sting of disappointment. She was ready to use the dare to get him to kiss her.

“You’d ask me what my loftiest dream is ... and at the risk of being too cheesy, because I know you’ll tease me, I’d admit that even more important than traveling the world to help children ...” She looked down, then dared to meet his gaze again. “You are my loftiest dream, T.”

“Jenn.” His voice sent thrills through her, but his look and touch were even more meaningful. “I feel the same. You’re my loftiest, most exhilarating, happiest dream. With you by my side, seeing me, faults and all, and still wanting to be with me, I can do anything. Be anything. A fair and benevolent king like my father.”

She loved that. She loved him.

“Truth or dare,” she managed.

“Dare.”

Her heart beat faster and faster.

“You’d dare me to kiss you long and slow, because we both know that’s the real reason you brought me to the waterfall pool tonight.”

He chuckled. “You know me so well.”

Tristan gently lifted her until their mouths were aligned and she was no longer touching the bottom of the pool. She slid her arms around his neck, anticipation thrumming through her.

“You’re the only woman for me, Jenn.” His breath was warm against her mouth. “Ever.”

“Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what beautiful lines you spout.”

“All the better to convince you with, my dear.” He smiled slightly, but then he said in a husky, irresistible voice, “It’s not a line, Jenn. I’ve known for years that you’re the only woman I want. Tonight is a dream come true for me.”

With those beautiful words, he captured her mouth with his. Joy and light exploded within her. Tristan kissed her long and slow, and it was absolutely perfect. She was the only woman he wanted, and they’d be together. True love.

Jennifer kissed him until the royal guards came to escort them home. She was in no rush. Tristan was hers, and she was his. She had always been his.

CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

Crown Prince Tristan August jogged along a thickly wooded trail, headed for his favorite waterfall. The waterfall where he'd first kissed his true love, Jennifer Shule, as an innocent eighteen-year-old with no clue how viciously life and love could turn on a person.

It was late morning on an early September day. He'd escaped from the endless meetings because it was his brother Derek's wedding day—the second brother to get married in the past two weeks.

Also because Prime Minister Henry Shule had to go 'meet' with someone who had information about his wife Leslie's whereabouts.

Tristan and his dad hadn't pried, as the meetings were getting more and more disappointing. They happened often and so far there had been no leads. His twin, General Ray, and Ray's best friend Chief Jensen also had people searching for Leslie and the Rindlesbachers around the clock. They'd sent notices throughout the world with Interpol, police departments, and military allies to find the criminals and rescue Leslie. They prayed for Leslie's safe return and that Henry was beyond William Rindlesbacher's devious manipulations.

Ray had been informed as soon as the prime minister walked out of the king's office. Two guards were trailing him—for Henry's safety as well as the royal family's peace of mind. They were ninety-nine percent sure the snake William Rindlesbacher had Leslie and that he'd use her to his

advantage when he struck again. It had been two peaceful weeks with no sightings of the man or his wife, but that meant little. The master manipulator could not be allowed to accomplish any more evil on their soil.

Tristan slowed his pace, tilted his head back, and let the dappled sunshine filtering through the trees soothe him. The day was plenty warm enough to take a dip in the chilly waterfall pool. He admired the gorgeous colors of fall that came early to their mountainous country sandwiched between Switzerland and Austria in the Alps, Germany their neighbor to the north and their southern tip touching northern Italy. Vibrant reds, oranges, yellows, and greens lit up the mountain landscape. Derek and Ellery's wedding this afternoon would be exceptionally beautiful.

Footsteps sounded behind him, but when he glanced over his shoulder, nobody was there. He upped his pace and touched the Ruger LCP on his hip. Preferring to run alone, he'd had to concede to the sidearm, a satellite phone, and a couple knives in his pocket to appease his twin brother. Ray took the protection of his country and his family seriously. Thank heavens for his new wife Macey's calming influence and two blissful weeks with no Rindlesbacher schemes, or Tristan would be running with a platoon of royal guards surrounding him.

Not that he could blame Ray. Their family had been through some vicious attacks lately. The ugly scars on the left side of Tristan's face, neck, and shoulder weren't decorations, conversation-starters, or his latest attempt to keep droves of female admirers at bay. The recovery from the bombing incident had been painful enough that sometimes he'd secretly wished he'd joined his mum up in heaven instead of surviving the attack.

He'd never admit that to anyone, especially his twin or his best friend Major Chad Prescott. Those two had enough to worry about with keeping the kingdom safe, Ray with his new wife, and Chad having recently experienced his first female rejection when Sophie Pederson had chosen Tristan's youngest brother Malik, the Charming Prince, over the suave Chad. It had stunned everyone, most of all Chad.

To keep everybody happy and the kingdom running smoothly, Tristan pasted a slightly sarcastic smile on his face and joked constantly that the scars were a blessing. He claimed he didn't care about the disfiguration and didn't want

women chasing him solely for his handsome face.

Now they pursued him solely for his fit body, his sense of humor, and his crown prince title.

Tristan smiled to himself. The title was likely his only true draw. Though he dated often to appease his dad, his best friend Chad, and everybody else who expected the crown prince to not only attend events but to find the next queen, he wondered if any woman could truly love his scarred face if it wasn't attached to a future crown. He still flinched if he glimpsed his reflection without preparing himself beforehand.

Jennifer would have still loved him. She'd seen past the veneer to him—the real him. She'd loved him for him—not his title, his status, his money, or his face, though she used to tease that she 'supposed she could put up with staring at his handsome face for the rest of her life.'

But she was gone now, without a single text or note to give him any hope of a future together. There was no sign of her ever returning. Apparently true love didn't matter to her any longer. If she loved him so much, how could she have left him?

Tristan had placed the beautiful two-karat princess cut diamond ring he'd bought in the safe next to his mum's four-karat, pink-hued, heirloom diamond. He'd planned to ask Jennifer to marry him before everything had imploded. Now he kept a smile on his face and went on meaningless dates to keep everyone from suspecting how devastated he was that she'd given up on their love and how empty his life was without her.

Footsteps. Again.

He spun and caught a glimpse of bronze curls disappearing behind a tree. Those curls were achingly familiar to him. The soft, springy curls he'd loved twisting around his fingers but hadn't had the pleasure of touching in nine lonely months.

Jenn?

It couldn't be. He'd been daydreaming about her again, and now he was imagining she'd come for him. Sadly, she wouldn't. Even her mum being kidnapped couldn't get her to leave whatever corner of the earth she was

helping with her impressive ability to improve children's speech.

The love of his life had written him off and dropped off the face of the civilized earth the day after his mum had died. She had only given him one last lingering kiss, a murmured apology that made little sense, and no forwarding address.

Tristan had been in a state of shock after losing his beloved mother, and Jennifer telling him she was 'leaving' hadn't sunk in for a while. She left all the time on month-long humanitarian trips, but that day apparently she'd meant she was leaving for good and with no plan on returning or letting him contact her. He hadn't fought properly for or with Jenn, or chased after her like he should have.

When he'd recovered enough to think straight, he'd begged her father, Prime Minister Henry Shule, for information—where she was, if she was safe, and if Tristan had the man's blessing to go find her and bring her home and marry her. With his mum gone, he'd needed Jennifer by his side more desperately than ever.

All he'd gotten out of Henry was the promise that she was safer not being in Augustine, whatever that meant, the man's sincere regret that Jennifer couldn't love Tristan any longer, and her father's deepest apologies for yet another loss for Tristan because Jennifer was *not* coming home.

Not coming home?

Didn't love him any longer?

Were those two things even possible?

After weeks of pleading with Henry, Tristan's hurt, anger, and pride had kicked in. He had turned to his usual defense mechanism to deal with the serious and heavy responsibility that was his life—joking and pretending nothing fazed him. His father had told him once that you had to develop thick skin to be the king. Tristan imagined his own skin was so thick it could rival any crocodile's, and he wasn't even king yet. Thank heavens.

Henry was the king of empty regrets and a frustrating lack of answers. Either he truly didn't have the answers, or he was impressively covering secrets to protect himself or someone else. His wife had been kidnapped by William

and Naomi Rindlesbacher. Tristan had to believe that was true. If Leslie was somehow in league with the pair and Henry was tied up in that mess, Tristan didn't know how they'd navigate such a nightmare.

He hated that he questioned the sweetheart Leslie, his mum's best friend, and that he now doubted the man he'd once looked up to as much as his own father. Henry had always seemed to understand Tristan and appreciate his attempts at humor, no matter if his jokes were ill-timed, aimed at Henry, or immature. Tristan had imagined Henry would be his father-in-law and had counted himself blessed they had such a fabulous relationship.

The joke was on the crown prince. The love of his life had ditched him, and her father was a mess. Losing Jennifer hurt worse than the burns from the bomb that he thought would never stop burning.

The nefarious Rindlesbachers had used Leslie Shule to blackmail Henry for months. They'd also tried different cunning schemes before attempting to force Tristan's youngest brother Malik to kill their dad, Tristan, and Henry with a bomb to protect his love Sophie Pederson and her daughter and parents. When William thankfully failed again, he, his wife, and Leslie had disappeared.

Tristan and his dad felt awful for Henry and were doing all in their power to ensure Leslie's safe return, but they still had no idea what to believe. The constant meetings Tristan had to attend as the crown prince used to be annoying and boring, except for his and Henry's constant jabs and banter. Now even discussing traffic patterns in the capital city seemed fraught with tension and hidden meanings. Tristan always used humor to deflect from the seriousness of his role and to keep himself sane, but lately even that had failed him. It wasn't much fun to joke when his target, Henry, and the two people who always at least smiled at his jokes, Henry and his dad, were now stiff and uncomfortable.

The only good news of late was that his brother Steffan and his wife Hattie had returned home. The world media finally knew the truth of Hattie's innocence and the Rindlesbachers' deceptions. For the first time in years, Hattie didn't have a target from the Rindlesbachers on her back. At least not a visible one.

Hattie had been framed for murder twice by the Rindlesbachers. There was no end to William, Naomi, and their son Treven's scheming plots, some of which seemed insane but were more impressive and brilliant than Tristan wanted to admit. He feared William would somehow twist fate in his favor again. The Rindlesbachers were masters at accomplishing evil and unforeseen twists.

Thankfully, the Rindlesbachers were the ones running scared now. It was a nice twist, and Tristan could only pray William and Naomi would be caught soon and join their son in prison and that Leslie Shule would come home safe.

If only her daughter would come home as well.

Tristan stared into the trees and saw a flash of a tanned arm. He should probably call Ray, get in a defensible position, and stay safe. He should probably not confront the person who may or may not be stalking him. But Tristan played cat and mouse games all day with political nonsense. He was tired of it.

He took off at a run down the trail, racing toward the person hiding behind the tree.

"Oh!" a female voice exclaimed, then she took off at a sprint, darting away from him.

That voice. That golden-brown hair with the long, soft curls trailing down her back. The fit body and lean, muscular legs. It couldn't be, but it had to be.

"Jenn!" he called out.

She darted a gaze over her shoulder at him.

The air was knocked from Tristan's lungs as surely as if Ray had punched him in the sternum. He almost faltered and fell to his knees to praise the Lord that she'd returned.

Instead of throwing herself into his arms, Jennifer picked up speed.

Tristan was baffled by her response. He couldn't falter or fall to his knees and pray. Not now. Jennifer was here, within his grasp. He wanted to talk to her,

touch her, look at her. He needed some answers about where she'd been, why she'd left when he needed her most, and how she could walk away and not love him any longer.

Tristan pushed his legs into an all-out sprint. His longer legs closed the distance between them.

He reached her, wrapped both hands around her upper arms, and tugged her to a stop.

“Help!” she screamed.

“Jenn.” Tristan whirled her to face him, out of breath and confused.

“No, please ... I'm not supposed to ...” Her eyes were wild, darting around as if someone would jump out of the bushes and tackle them. The thick lashes framing her dark eyes fluttered quickly as she refused to look at him and tried to pull away.

“Jenn ... it's me,” he said softly, releasing her and stepping back, putting his hands up in a non-threatening gesture, hurt that she either didn't recognize him or truly didn't know or love him any longer.

She blinked and then focused on him. Tristan braced himself. He didn't know if he could handle Jennifer looking at his scars, seeing the revulsion and shock in those deep-brown eyes that had always seen and loved him. All of him.

Jennifer's gaze held his, and she didn't even look at his scars. Their souls reconnected in that moment and she *saw* him, just as she always had. She saw him. She loved him. He wasn't his scars, wasn't the crown prince. He was the man Jennifer knew and loved—her Big Bad Wolf, her true love. The spark between them burned brighter than ever.

Hope filled his chest and made his heart race. It had to be her move as she was the one who'd left him, but it seemed a certainty that she would throw herself into his arms, they'd share the reconnection kiss of the century, and then she'd explain everything to him. There had to be a deep, dark reason she'd left. There must be a reason she'd been so terrified a moment ago.

They could fix all the agony of being apart. He'd keep her safe from

whatever was scaring her. She'd reassure him of her love with her words, her gaze, and her lips. He could easily reassure her of his. No one but Jennifer would ever be the right match for him. His one true love.

Their gazes got tangled up, and he took a step closer. "Did you not know it was me?"

With all the many, many questions he needed to ask her, he wasn't certain why he'd started there.

"No," she admitted. "I hoped, but I didn't know, and I have to be very careful ..." She trailed off and studied the trees behind him.

"Jenn ..." He couldn't take his eyes off her beautiful face, ravenous to be close to her, soak up her sparkling and consuming presence, feast on their love and connection.

Her gaze met his again, and a world that had been spinning out of control suddenly stabilized into a smooth and perfect rotation. His Jenn was back. Had she come for him, or for her mum? The details couldn't matter. She was here, and he would make the most of every moment he had with her. No. He'd do one better than that. He would never let her go again.

"What do you have to be careful about?" He'd protect her, stay by her side every minute. Well, every minute he wasn't in important meetings. But Ray's men could keep her safe then, if needed. Why had she been so afraid? Had someone dared hurt this caring and angelic woman?

She studied him, her dark eyes beguiling and captivating, and only focused on his eyes. His scars didn't bother her. She didn't even seem to notice them.

"It was good to see you," she murmured before turning away.

Tristan's eyes widened. No way was she murmuring that lame line and then turning away from him. Not now. Not when they'd finally found each other again.

He grasped her arm and turned her to face him. "No way are you walking away from me again. I won't have it, Jenn. I need answers."

He needed her—her love and understanding and light.

Her eyes narrowed. She yanked her arm free and folded both arms across her chest. She was defensive, closed-off, and the most glorious woman Tristan had ever laid eyes on.

“Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what a large ego you have.”

“All the better to keep you in line with, my dear,” he said.

She actually smiled. It was a welcoming smile, one he’d needed to see badly.

Tristan smiled in return, the scars on his cheek pulling tight and his gut churning with apprehension. Jenn was sweet, but she could sass and tease with him. She had once shared her secrets with him too—at least, she had done so before she’d left him eight months ago. Why had she left?

A sickening thought occurred to him. They’d all stewed about whether Henry was in league with William Rindlesbacher, or at least still his puppet because William had taken Leslie as his bargaining tool. What if Jennifer had returned to help her father get her mum back, and part of that plan involved duping the prince who she knew would do anything for her? She could be helping William succeed in his schemes.

Jennifer wouldn’t do that, would she? Could the beautiful woman he loved be a traitor?

“What answers would you like?” she asked while he stewed about her disappearance, her return, her intentions, and if she still loved him like he did her.

“Why did you leave?”

Because he wasn’t enough? Because he was too slow to get the two-karat ring he’d purchased a few weeks before her departure on her finger? Because she didn’t want to be the next queen of Augustine? With her, he could rule the country with benevolence, equality, and happiness. Their country would flourish. Without her ... emptiness.

“Not that question.” Her expression closed off.

She owed him a lot of answers. How could he convince her to open up?

“You used to tell me everything.” He eased closer but didn’t touch her. Her

pulse raced like mad in her throat. “Remember that night when you chose dare after dare—jumping off a forty-foot ledge into the lake, running through Greenville screaming that Voldemort was chasing you, singing the ‘you got any grapes’ song on the church steps, before finally, finally admitting the truth to me—that I was the best kisser you’ve ever been blessed to tangle lips with?” His voice got husky and far too telling. They’d been nineteen, so young and in love. That blissful and carefree night was also the first night he’d admitted out loud that he loved her. Even though he’d told her repeatedly that they had ‘true love.’

“I remember,” she whispered. A genuine smile decorated her already perfect face. She leaned closer, and he was certain she would let him prove he was still the best kisser.

She softly touched his cheek, trailing her fingers across his scars, and murmured, “I’m terribly sorry you were injured.”

In his mind, it was the first time she’d noticed the scars. She’d seen him all along; the way he looked literally changed nothing. It made him so happy, but he also felt the need to deflect. He hated the scars and didn’t want her dwelling on them.

“Makes me even more devastatingly handsome and I get sympathy attention from all the women, you see.” He was joking as he’d always done, an instinctive defense for him, especially about the scars. He expected her to come back with a tease about what a large ego he had. Instead, she withdrew her hand and her generous mouth tightened.

“I’m certain the crown prince doesn’t need to be any more handsome or get any more female attention.” She flipped her bronzed curls over her shoulder.

His eyebrows shot up. “If you’d be mine again, I wouldn’t need anyone’s attention but yours ... ever.” She had to know that was true and always had been.

Instead of agreeing, she glowered at him. “You’ve made it abundantly clear over the past eight months that isn’t true.”

“Pardon me?” Tristan’s neck got hot. “Do I need to remind you which one of us ditched the other with no forwarding address?”

“As if my address would’ve been so difficult to obtain.” She planted her hands on her hips, her dark eyes sparking fire at him. “You are in meetings with my father every day and you never once thought to casually ask, ‘Pardon me, sir, where is my former-girlfriend Jennifer residing currently?’”

Former girlfriend? That was a horrible phrase. But wait—she didn’t know the truth of what had happened between him and the prime minister. His anger flared to life, but not at her—at Henry.

“Jenn.” He kept his voice low and carefully restrained. “I asked, I begged, I pleaded with your father to give me your location. He wouldn’t breathe even a hint of where you’d gone. He said you couldn’t love me any longer and didn’t want me coming after you.”

She studied him, eyes narrowed as if checking for a lie.

He held her gaze evenly. “Have I ever lied to you, Jenn?”

“No,” she admitted. Her lower lip quivered. “But I don’t know you anymore.”

“What do you mean? I haven’t changed.” He touched his face and tried for a charming smile, but it felt as strained as it probably looked. “Besides some new decorations on my left side.”

“My data plan picked up the internet on occasion.” She arched an eyebrow, as if that was all she needed to say. She didn’t care about his scars, but something else he’d done had royally ticked her off.

“And ...?”

“You’re a player now, Prince Malik. Oh, excuse me, I mean Prince *Tristan*.”

Before reconnecting with Sophie Pederson, Tristan’s youngest brother had been a known flirt and proficient womanizer, spreading his charm across all of Europe.

“You call me T,” he reminded her. How dare she call him Malik? She didn’t know how deeply Malik, or he, had suffered. “And I am no player.”

“Social media calls your bluff. Beautiful women constantly decorate your arm. I’d bet you could give Major Chad lessons on charming the ladies now.”

“Social media loves to blow things out of proportion and make a scandal where there is none.”

She held up a hand. “Save it for a gullible female who cares. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to finish my run in peace and quiet.”

Jennifer was never rude, and she always saw the best in him. What had happened to her? To them?

“Jenn,” he pleaded. “You know me, the real me ...” He hung it out there, needing her to affirm that she did know him. That she saw him, loved him. That everything painful between them could be made right.

She stared at him, and for an instant he thought they connected, just as they’d done a few minutes ago. Then her eyes shuttered, and she shook her head. “Not anymore, I don’t. I thought we had true love, but I was wrong.” She tilted her chin up and delivered the final blow. “You aren’t the man I thought you were.”

With those devastating words, she pivoted and took off running up the trail.

Tristan was frozen. His legs were blocks of concrete melded to the forest floor as he watched the love of his life run away. He would’ve thought a platoon of Ray’s best soldiers couldn’t have separated them, but Jennifer saying she didn’t know him—that he wasn’t the man she thought—devastated him. She was the only woman besides his mum who truly knew him, truly saw him. He had always loved and adored every bit of her.

Despite his oath to never let her go again, he did nothing to stop her.

What had happened to his Jenn? Why didn’t she know or love him any longer? The sweetest angel he’d ever known, besides his own mum, had gone from focused on and seeing him to bitter, closed off, and not his Jenn at all.

He’d imagined if she ever returned they’d talk things out, she’d ask his forgiveness, he’d easily grant it, they’d hold each other until all the pain was healed, and then they’d never willingly separate again. For a brief moment, the beautiful fantasy had seemed to come true. Then reality had hit him like a pipe bomb under his bed.

He rubbed at his scars. Instead of his face, neck, and shoulder burning

painfully, his heart ached. No matter how painful it had been to have her gone, he'd held out some hope of a solid reason for her absence, that their true love could stand the test of time. Not even death could conquer true love, right?

Having her back and not loving him or knowing him any longer was somehow worse than her living across the world with no contact.

The pain was so great that he clutched his chest.

Jenn. He'd survived without her for eight long months. Now she was back, and he didn't know how he'd survive knowing she didn't see or love him anymore.

CHAPTER TWO

Jennifer made it all the way to the waterfall before she burst into tears. Just her luck that it had to be *their* waterfall. The spot of her first kiss with T—and many, many after that.

She couldn't blame it on luck as she'd been drawn straight here, wanting to bask in memories of Tristan. Then she'd run into him. For a brief and blessed moment, they'd teased and touched and an entire life had passed between their gazes. She'd forgotten all the pain and jealousy and the fact that he'd gotten engaged four months after she'd left.

Four months! It was awful to leave the way she had, but how could he fall in love with another woman and cast aside true love so quickly? He hadn't asked Jennifer to marry him in twelve years of dating but he could ask Macey Clifton four months after Jenn disappeared? His engagement had decimated her.

Seeing him today had been tough and incredible at the same time. Instead of throwing herself into Tristan's defined, safe, perfect arms, she'd remained aloof and strong. Heaven's help or purgatory's curse? She couldn't riddle that one out right now.

She stared at the cascading water over emerald green overgrowth, the beauty of Augustine that she'd missed deeply. Not as deeply as she'd missed Prince Tristan, her very own big, bad wolf. He was big and strong and definitely an alpha, yet there was nothing bad about the incredible crown prince.

She'd longed to throw herself into his arms, kiss him desperately, and talk for

hours to make up for lost time, but she'd lied to him instead. As soon as she'd seen him running in front of her on the trail, she'd stalked him. Then she'd pretended she didn't know who he was so she could hide how psychotically she'd reacted. All she'd wanted was a few stolen moments to stare into his blue eyes and feel the excitement and safety of Tristan's love again.

She'd thrown dating other women in his face. She felt that pain deeply and had every time she'd stupidly Googled him and seen him with different gorgeous and accomplished women. The jealousy was like hot poker slicing through her heart.

When he'd been engaged to the beautiful American Macey Clifton, Jennifer had gone into a deep funk, broken—shattered, truly. Only the children's sweetness and need for help had dragged her out of bed each morning. Then the engagement had been broken and Macey had married Ray. Jennifer had been relieved yet still angry—at Tristan and at Macey. Had the woman played with his mind? Had Tristan realized Macey wasn't his true love and Jennifer was? Through all the confusion and angst, the thought of him getting engaged at all and seeing him kiss Macey on the talk show *Jessie* had been too much to bear.

Her dad had truly refused to tell Tristan where she was? She understood now why he had been so cautious, but couldn't he have given Tristan some hope? Maybe she shouldn't put all the blame on Tristan for dating; her dad clearly shared part of the blame. The fact that Tristan could so easily move on and get engaged made her feel despondent and as if they didn't have true love like they'd always claimed.

True love was stronger than a few months apart, which had made her wonder if their love was what she'd thought.

She'd originally left him with no good excuse the day after his sweet mum had died. All per her dad's frantic pleas. She'd never seen her dad like that. He'd had been certain she would be kidnapped or murdered if she didn't leave, and it would seem 'natural' for her to disappear to a humanitarian mission because she did it all the time. He'd wanted to send her mum with her, but that would have looked suspicious. He'd promised Jennifer could come back and be with Tristan when it was safe. She thought she'd be gone for a month like she usually was, but it had been eight.

It was far from safe now. The very people her dad had tried to protect her from had gone insane. Her dad should have sent her mum with her. Now her poor mother was in William and Naomi Rindlesbachers' power. She'd seen that with her own eyes. It was obvious the Rindlesbachers were the ones who had been blackmailing her dad these long months of exile. Jennifer was terrified for her mum. She loved her dad, but he had a lot to answer for, and he seemed to have no answers to give. It was as if he'd hidden the truth and trusted no one, carrying the burden by himself for so long, he didn't know how to bring the truth to light now or trust even those closest to him.

Her mind spun back to her lost love. Tristan had looked incredible. His blue eyes had captivated her like always. His body was strong, manly, and perfect. She'd seen his scars in pictures. Seeing them in person made her hurt for him, but they made him even more appealing—more the rugged hero than the regal crown prince. His face wasn't picture perfect any longer, but he was even more handsome, commanding, and inspiring. The love of her life was also thoughtful, witty, and charming.

Despite her jealousy of him getting engaged and all the other women he'd dated since she'd left, obviously not longing for her as she had for him, she couldn't imagine what he'd been going through not knowing where she was or why she'd left, losing his mum and then being viciously injured with the bombing.

She had no idea what to tell Tristan now. They were both pawns in a horrifyingly deadly game. With the deranged and too-smart William Rindlesbacher as the game leader.

She had a role to play, or she'd never see her mum alive again. William had made that very clear when he'd shown up a few days ago at an impoverished village in Mozambique with her mum and his wife Naomi.

William had allowed Jennifer to hug her mum, whose hands were bound, and then he'd smiled like the snake he was as he pulled them apart and sliced her mum's forearm with a knife. Her mum had cried out and Jennifer had lunged at him. He'd surprised her with his speed and strength, yanking her into his chest, ripping her shirt up, and making a small cut on her abdomen. She'd screamed in surprise and pain.

The villagers had surged forward, but Naomi pulled out a gun and pointed it at the closest child, promising she was a 'dead aim.' Jennifer begged her friends to stay back. Thankfully they'd understood, maybe not her English but her hand gestures, and had listened.

As hot blood trickled down to Jennifer's waist, Naomi explained Jennifer's role in their 'plan.' She must return home to Augustine, speak to no one but her father about this, and await instructions as to her 'usefulness.' William then explained if she talked to anyone, most importantly Prince Tristan, or failed to follow his instructions, he'd send her mum home one piece at a time.

He'd shoved Jennifer away and dragged her mum by her bound hands, while escorting Naomi as if she were a queen. Her mum's gaze begged Jennifer not to listen to him.

'Don't do anything he says,' her mum had called as he'd yanked her away. 'You can't trust this scum!'

William had backhanded her. Jennifer had cried out at his mistreatment of her mum, but she hadn't even reacted. How much abuse had she taken at that monster's hands? She'd been his captive for two weeks now.

'If she wants you to live, she'll comply happily,' William had snarled.

He had then shoved her mum into the back of a Jeep, loaded his wife in the passenger seat with all the grace of a chivalrous gentleman, saluted Jennifer with a smirk, climbed in, and drove away. The villagers looked at her with dark, sad eyes, obviously having no clue how to help. If only she knew how to help herself. She'd cried bitter tears watching her mum disappear with that depraved couple. Similar to the tears she shed now, mourning what she and Tristan would never have again.

Her father hadn't been happy to see her. The memory of the horror in his brown eyes still made her gut churn. Yesterday when she arrived, her dad had hugged her fiercely, then started making plans to hide her away again, stewing the entire time about how William could have found her and how to prevent him from finding her again. Her dad hadn't let her take a phone or anything that could track her, but maybe William had found the original plane tickets or had hired people to search for her.

Jennifer had begged her dad to let her stay and help rescue her mum. She knew he'd do anything to keep both of them safe, and the fear in his eyes told her he'd have to choose between keeping Jennifer or her mum alive. It was a precarious situation, and she had the feeling her father didn't dare tell the entire truth to anyone, including her. Was he playing both sides? No. Her dad was loyal to the crown and his closest friend, King Nolan. He couldn't possibly betray the king or have anything to do with the queen's death. Right?

Staring morosely at the beautiful waterfall for a few more minutes, Jennifer dried her tears, then slowly jogged to her parents' second home in Greenville. They had a lovely home along the river on the outskirts of Traverse, but her father spent so much time at the castle they'd acquired a beautiful two-story, four-bedroom cottage on the edge of the lake, sheltered by the trees from Greenville village and the castle but still close. Tragically, it was the very lake Tristan's mum had drowned in.

Pushing the button to open the blinds, she admired the view of the deep blue lake and the lush green mountains framing it. What would she do all afternoon waiting for her father to get home? He'd advised her not to let anyone see her. She'd taken the long route around the lake to avoid the village and then headed up the waterfall trail, needing a run and to be outside amidst Augustine's beauty.

What were the odds she'd run right into Tristan? If heaven or some other factor was involved, it didn't seem fair to force them together when they couldn't be together. Yet, she couldn't find it in her to regret seeing the love of her life. Having to lie to him irked her. Not being able to hug and kiss and love him bothered her even more. Wondering which gorgeous woman would be on his arm for his brother's wedding today galled her.

Her father would have to attend Prince Derek and Ellery Monson's wedding this afternoon. The exclusive invitation was sitting on the entry table. He'd come home from his meetings soon to dress, then leave her again to go to the wedding, dinner, and reception. She'd sit here alone waiting for him, wishing she was with him and with Tristan.

After the wedding, her dad promised he'd be home to figure out how to proceed. It didn't appear he had any solution, or that he felt he could turn to

the royal family as he would've previously done. Both terrified her. Her dad had always been a superhero to her, and with King Nolan and Tristan, they could find a solution to any problem.

The royal family were the most loyal and impressive people she'd met on her vast travels around the globe. If Tristan and his twin General Raymond couldn't conquer William and Naomi Rindlesbacher and rescue her mum, she didn't know who could. If only she could confide in Tristan, but her dad had said she couldn't talk to anyone or it could mean her mum's death sentence.

She shivered.

The doorbell rang. Rushing to the door, Jennifer peeked out the hole and saw no one. She cautiously opened the door. A blank piece of white cardstock lay on the step. She glanced around, but all was quiet, so she picked up the piece of paper and crept out onto the porch, seeing no one through the thick trees. Walking a little farther along the narrow road that led to the village, she peered around the foliage. A few tourists walked in the street by the shops not far away, and beyond that a couple guards were patrolling the barrier to the road that led to the castle. Would those guards have seen someone come up the path to their home? Did she dare ask?

Her father had instructed her to stay hidden in the house. She'd gone running and had run straight into the very man she needed to avoid if she wanted to keep her sanity. Her father would probably get upset if she asked some royal guards if they'd seen someone heading to or from this direction. They'd know this was her dad's cottage and they'd probably recognize her.

Jennifer eased back up the path and into the house and shut the door, clinging tightly to the thick paper. She flipped it over.

The breath rushed out of her.

There was a picture of her dad, with the evil and picture-perfect Naomi Rindlesbacher holding a pistol to his temple and smiling broadly. Her dad looked miserable and defiant at the same time. His usually impeccable Brioni suit was rumpled and ripped, smudges of dirt marred his face, and blood dripped from a cut on his cheek.

Anger and desperation filled her. Her mum kidnapped, and now her dad as

well. What could she possibly do to save them from the likes of the Rindlesbachers?

She forced herself to read the note.

I have your father in my possession now. Insurance, you see. Your job is very simple. Gain Prince Tristan's trust, but don't let anyone else see you or know what you're about. Play your role correctly, unless you want your beloved prince to be the next casualty.

When the time is right, I'll instruct you further with another note left at the cottage step. Don't think you can hide in the safety of the castle. I have eyes and ears everywhere.

If you tell anyone what is happening or Prince Tristan discovers your true purpose, I'll send pieces of your parents until they bleed to death, then one of my men will kill Prince Tristan, and you'll be left alone to mourn.

Kind regards,

William Rindlesbacher

Jennifer's breaths came in heaving gulps, and she sank to the wood floor in a heap. Her legs couldn't support her. That monster had kidnapped her father too. William would cut her parents, torture them, and eventually kill them. What could she possibly do to stop him? How could she gain Tristan's trust while not telling him what was happening and not letting anyone else see her?

She struggled to her knees, bowed her head, and prayed desperately for strength and some kind of inspiration. Nothing came to her, but as she opened her eyes, she was eye level with the wedding invitation for Prince Derek and his American bride, Ellery Monson.

It was at least a way into the castle, but she'd have to hide once she got in and then somehow get Tristan's attention.

Gain his trust but not tell him the truth? Could she do that? To Tristan?

Jennifer looked at the picture of her dad again and hot tears streamed down her face. She remembered her mum, cut from William's knife and in his

possession. It made her want to stay on the floor and sob.

Even as she had that thought, she knew she had to take action to protect herself and hopefully rescue her parents. Rushing around the cottage, she found a small rucksack, a can of bear spray, and a couple pocket knives. There was no gun, not even in the safe. It was probably for the best. She'd never shot a gun before.

Jennifer set the bag to the side. She couldn't take it into the wedding, but she wanted to be prepared when William sent her next instructions.

If she could sneak into the castle and somehow get Tristan alone, on his brother's wedding day no less, would she dare confide in him or would William somehow know? The man claimed he had eyes and ears everywhere, and she believed him. He could have people loyal to him in the police force or the royal guard.

But Tristan...

Despite him breaking her heart by moving on and getting engaged, she could trust him to help her. Unless he let something leak to Ray, his dad, Chad, or Jensen. They were all trustworthy men, but once something started leaking, it just kept leaking. She worried her lip and prayed harder.

Even if she walked William's precarious slackline, she didn't know that her parents would survive. If he truly killed them and Tristan, she wouldn't just mourn. She'd never recover.

CHAPTER THREE

T ristan sat through the beautiful and well-attended wedding of his second-youngest brother, Derek, the famed ‘Ninja Prince,’ and Ellery Monson, the top female ninja warrior in the world.

This gorgeous and well-attended wedding was a direct opposite of Ray and Macey’s quiet ceremony two weeks ago—a wedding Ellery had unwittingly ruined by listening to Naomi Rindlesbacher’s lies about Hattie being a murderer.

This wedding was on a stretch of grass next to the castle overlooking the gorgeous valley with the multi-colored mountain slopes as the perfect backdrop. Flower pots decorated any spare spot of ground, and wreaths and hanging flower sprays were draped everywhere. Steffan and Hattie were seated a few chairs away from him, beaming and in love, with no need to hide. Scores of friends, family, foreign and Augustine dignitaries, members of the local church and community, and media were in attendance. Almost two hundred was the count he’d heard had been invited, and they’d all appeared to come.

Finally, the royals of Augustine had nothing to hide, and they were free of William and Naomi Rindlesbacher. Ray had relaxed initially when the two had disappeared, focusing his men on finding the pair of criminals and Leslie, but security had been increased for this event. There were numerous guards openly armed and some masquerading as guests. Only those with an official invite had been allowed through the gates. An embedded security code on each invite had been scanned by the guards. Each guest had also been

searched with high-tech scanning equipment and only small purses for the ladies or camera bags for media members were allowed through the gates, after passing through a scanner better than any airport security.

They were safe; no bombs would get through today. The bride was radiantly gorgeous in a white satin dress that fit her simplistic beauty. The groom was properly smitten and handsome in his dark gray tux.

Besides the heartbreaking lack of his mum in attendance, it was a picture-perfect day. The only other person who wasn't in attendance ...

Tristan risked another glance around. Henry. How dare he miss this important event? Things were shaky enough between Henry and the king. Tristan had overheard some media questioning where the prime minister could be.

Jennifer, regrettably, wasn't here either.

Or was she?

Many people had sunglasses on to protect their eyes from the slanting late-afternoon sun and some women had fancy hats. One particular woman had both a hat and glasses on, her hair hidden by the large brim. She was seated near the back of the crowd in a white floral dress. Her fit body, the smooth line of her jaw, her deeply tanned skin, and those generous lips seemed like dead giveaways to him.

Why was she hiding behind the hat and sunglasses? Was it really her or was he imagining it was because he wanted to see her again?

It wouldn't do to have the crown prince craning his neck to stare at the crowd, so Tristan sat straight and tall, a slight smile on his face, his arm draped over the back of Kiera's chair as he teased that she had to be his date since he was 'dreadfully alone.'

Chad had brought a date, attempting to prove he'd recovered easily from Sophie Pederson's rejection. It was easy for Tristan to see that his close friend wasn't interested in the fake-looking blonde on his arm. Chad was partial to brunettes and had only brought her so he wouldn't be alone.

Jensen was alone. Misery should've loved company, but Tristan was happy his brothers had all found their ideal match; it would be great to see Chad and

Jensen do the same. Thankfully, darling and wild Kiera had at least a dozen years before she could even look at the opposite sex. Tristan smiled more genuinely, thinking what a sixteen-year-old Kiera would say to that when the time came. If only she could stay twelve forever.

Tristan focused on the beautiful ceremony. It rushed by far too quickly. The family would be the first to congratulate the bride and groom, then the crowd would take their turn before the guests would walk around the side of the castle, the path a temporary suspended glass bridge that led to the massive courtyard out front where the dinner, reception, dancing, and wedding celebration would be held. Hopefully none of the guests were afraid of heights.

He was one of the first to congratulate Derek and Ellery. He appreciated all of his sisters-in-law; they were each generous, kind, witty, and the right match for his brothers. Only Malik wasn't married yet. He and Sophie hadn't announced a date, but his youngest brother had put a huge princess-cut diamond ring on the accomplished chef's finger last night. Malik was begging her to elope tomorrow. As the 'Charming Prince,' Tristan imagined Malik would convince her soon.

The dramatic way the two had reconnected two weeks ago, barely escaping William Rindlesbacher's nightmare schemes with their lives, and the fact that they couldn't leave each other's sides now, Tristan imagined Sophie wouldn't make Malik wait long.

Sophie's five-year-old daughter Sunny leaped into Tristan's arms as the family waited for the well-wishers to taper off so they could walk in a royal procession with the bride and groom around front to continue the celebrations.

Tristan kept searching for Henry and checking on the woman he suspected was Jennifer. She wasn't surging forward with the crowd, anxious to greet the prince and his new princess. She held back. He could've sworn her gaze was on him, but it was impossible to tell with that hat and sunglasses covering her pretty face, curly hair, and intriguing brown eyes.

He wanted to storm to her, remove both the hat and the sunglasses, and sweep her into his arms. She'd been defensive and befuddling this morning.

Was she truly angry at him? She'd left him without even a simple text saying she'd someday return.

Now that she was back, he wished he hadn't agreed to any dates with other women, but he had to have dates to events as the crown prince, and he had also dated to appease his dad, his brothers, and so Chad wouldn't worry about him.

Was Jennifer a mess with her mum in the Rindlesbachers' power? Was she being forced to keep secrets from him? Tristan feared William's plots to overthrow the crown would never end, and it was sickening to think of Aunt Leslie in that man's power. To his knowledge, there had been no ransom note and no acknowledgment from William admitting to the kidnapping. What if William didn't have her? It was no wonder Henry had been so anxious to meet with any person who claimed to have news of his wife—this morning being no exception. Was that why he was missing?

Knowing how horrific it was to lose his own mum, and for his dad to lose his wife, Tristan ached for Henry and Jennifer. Neither seemed interested in confiding in him or trusting him to help.

“Prince Uncle Tristan?” Sunny fluttered her lashes at him. Though Sophie's five-year-old daughter had already taken to being part of the family, she was enamored with royalty and refused to drop the royal titles.

The little girl was absolutely adorable. Malik had confided in him and Derek, and asked him not to share with anyone, that Sunny was Treven Rindlesbacher's daughter. Treven had forced himself on Sophie six years ago.

One more sickening crime to chalk up to the Rindlesbacher family.

Sunny was sunshine and joy in a rambunctious little girl form. The entire family doted on her, especially his dad and Kiera. He'd never imagined the two of them could be so taken with a little one. It was delightful to see his dad carefree and loving his role of 'King Papa' as Sunny had taken to calling him.

“Yes, Princess Sunny?”

She grinned unabashedly. “Will you carry me to the dinner, since you have

no wife or girlfriend to hold hands with?”

Most of the time, the child spoke as if she were an adult. Probably the result of being raised by her grandparents and Sophie as a single mum.

Malik and Sophie were both laughing at his expense. Sophie tried harder to hide it, while Malik chortled openly.

“I’d be honored.” Tristan pointedly ignored his youngest brother.

“Thank you, kind prince.” She looked him over. “I don’t know why those girls don’t like you. They must be dumb. I think you’re very handsome, even with your ouchies.”

“Thank you. I think you’re very beautiful.” He hated his ‘ouchies,’ but he would never let on. Jennifer hadn’t even seemed to look at them this morning, besides telling him she was sorry he’d been hurt. Then he’d upset her by teasing about women. Dumb of him, as that seemed to be the main reason she was angry at him. He was defensive about the scars and often resorted to joking quickly when they were brought up.

“Well, duh.” She rolled her eyes and then gave him a dimpled grin. “Everybody thinks that.”

Everyone close by exploded with laughter.

Tristan used the distraction to cast a quick glance around to check Jennifer’s position. She was with a crowd walking to the suspended bridge. Shoot. He wanted to chase her, but she’d be at the dinner and reception. He’d pull her aside then and get some answers. Tell her why he’d dated and get past that obstacle.

Unless she disappeared. Tristan’s gut tightened at the thought. He’d stewed about her miraculous reappearance all day. And now Henry hadn’t shown up for the wedding. He needed answers, and he would pin her down until she gave him some—or kiss her until she conceded. Heat filled him at that brilliant idea.

“Don’t worry about T,” Malik told his future daughter. “He has women crawling all over him, despite his ‘ouchies’.”

Sunny wrinkled her delicate nose. “Crawling all over him? That sounds yucky, Daddy.”

Even though they all laughed, it touched Tristan deeply to hear this angel calling Malik ‘Daddy.’ Malik was the youngest and would be the first to have a child. Tristan didn’t begrudge his brother’s happiness. Those two had been to purgatory and back before they found their happily ever after. Still, Tristan longed to have Jennifer by his side, looking at him like he hung the moon, a baby on the way or their little one in his arms.

He chanced a glance. She’d disappeared in the crowd. He had to find her.

“I don’t think he’s complaining, love,” Malik said.

“Do you like women ‘crawling’ on you, Prince Uncle Tristan?” Sunny asked innocently. “It sounds like they’re creepy spiders or something. Gross.”

“No, sweetheart. Your daddy is being silly. Women aren’t creepy spiders; they’re simply drawn to me because I’m so charming.”

“Oh. But I thought you was the Charming Prince, Daddy?”

“Yes, I am.” Malik pushed his chest out. “Poor T is simply the Crown Prince. Very boring.”

“I don’t think you’re boring.” Sunny snuggled into him, and Tristan appreciated the confidence boost.

He needed to find Jennifer, though. It was past time they talked. The crowd had dissipated and headed around front for dinner. A dozen royal guards, led by Lieutenant General Philippe Cordon and including Major Chad Prescott, Lieutenant Mason Hensen, and Captain Levi Favor, were waiting respectfully to escort them. The family could finally proceed around front. Then he could confront Jennifer.

It wasn’t only that he needed to reconnect with the love of his life. Her father’s disappearance was worrisome. Henry might be in danger now too, unless he really was in league with William. If that were true, all of them were in danger.

He turned to walk to the bridge, but his dad’s voice stopped him.

“Finally, we’re all together,” the king said.

Tristan turned. His dad’s blue eyes were suspiciously bright.

“And Ellery promised not to wreck any irreplaceable supercars today,” Malik teased.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Ellery teased right back. “What are you driving, and can I borrow it for the honeymoon getaway vehicle?”

They all laughed, but then the laughter tapered and they looked to his dad. Even Sunny and Kiera seemed to recognize the significance of the moment.

“I love you all very, very much. You’re each more important to me than hundreds of supercars, than anything in this world,” King Nolan said, his voice thick. He cleared his throat. “The Lord has protected us through some hard times. We’re together now. I pray we can all savor these moments and that each of your marriages will be as happy and filled with love and light as mine was with Anne.” He paused again and looked up to heaven briefly before his gaze swept over his children. “Your mum would be so proud of each of you. I can feel her here with us.”

Tristan fought the sting of tears himself; he missed his mum’s bright light and sweet smile. Ray studied the ground, but Macey poked him in the side. He gave her a soft smile and clasped her hand. Malik pulled Sophie closer to his side. Steffan and Hattie exchanged a loving look. Derek kissed Ellery on her cheek and whispered something in her ear. Tears brightened Kiera’s blue eyes. Curt and Aliya were cuddled together, both looking reflective. Ellery’s mum was in a wheelchair with Aunt Elise standing next to her. Incredible women and already part of the family.

“I wish I could’ve met the queen,” Sunny said, breaking the moment. It was a relief. Tristan hadn’t wanted to be the jokester and make a quip, not this time, but any more seriousness in his life and he might implode.

“She would’ve loved you, darlin’,” Aliya said. “Right as rain, you’re the cutest little angel on the Lord’s green earth.”

“Thank you, Aunt Princess Aliya.” Sunny blew her a kiss.

Aliya dramatically caught it and held it to her heart.

King Nolan smiled and drew in a breath. “All right. On to eating and celebrating.” He gestured toward the guards and the bridge.

They all fell into step behind Derek and Ellery. The ecstatic newlyweds led the way and whispered sweet nothings to each other as they walked. From the way Ellery was blushing and giggling, maybe it wasn’t ‘nothings’ Derek was whispering.

Tristan wanted that. With Jennifer.

Soon. He’d find her, apologize for ever dating anyone else and hurting her, get some answers about why she’d left with no explanation, and then he’d hold her close.

“T ...” His dad’s voice interrupted his daydreaming.

He glanced back, and his dad tilted his head to the side. The message was clear. He needed to speak with him. Even on Derek’s wedding day, after that beautiful family speech, royal business still had to be attended to.

“Excuse me, Princess Sunny.” He handed the little angel off to Malik. “King Papa needs to speak to me.”

“All right.” Sunny waved. “Let’s dance later.”

He chuckled. “I’ll plan on it.”

Tristan eased to the back of his family group, getting a concerned look from Ray and a sympathetic one from Curtis. Curt was more of a mountain man, climber, and explorer than a prince. He only wore a suit on his or a family member’s wedding day and only wore a casual button-down to church.

Tristan, on the other hand, lived in a suit. He liked it—most of the time.

Edging in close to his dad, he hoped it wasn’t anything urgent.

“Have you seen Henry?” his dad questioned in a low voice.

“No,” he admitted, the word sour in his mouth. Where was the prime minister? The only acceptable excuse for his absence was death. Tristan winced and prayed Henry wasn’t in danger. “Do you know what happened with his meeting earlier?”

“No. It was an outside private investigator he’d hired to find Leslie. Ray just informed me that Henry hiked to meet the man in the mountains, but then he loaded into a Polaris Razor with a man in a baseball cap and glasses. They didn’t recognize the man and they weren’t able to follow him on foot. They tracked the Razor for kilometers but lost the trail on the Austrian side of the mountains.”

Tristan’s eyes widened. Henry must’ve known someone was tracking him and planned to effectively ditch them.

They reached the glass bridge and proceeded across. It was a cool effect, looking down a hundred meters to the trees below, their gorgeous valley stretching out beyond that. Kiera grasped the railing with both hands and looked mischievously at the drop-off.

“Don’t even think about it,” their dad called to her.

Macey was closest and grabbed Kiera’s arm. “Don’t worry. She’s not going over that edge unless she takes me and Ray along.”

They all laughed. Ray was probably triple Kiera’s weight, and none of it was fat.

“You don’t think ...” Tristan asked his dad in a whisper.

“If Henry or William ruin another of my son’s weddings...”

“They won’t. I won’t let them.” Tristan knew it was an empty promise, but his dad seemed to calm down. Sadly, it would be worse than a ruined wedding day if William and Henry were in cahoots. Henry had access to everything in the castle and the government. He could hurt them in ways William only dreamed about. “Ray has men searching his last known location?”

“Of course.”

Tristan nodded. He needed to tell him ...

Derek and Ellery exited the bridge. The open door leading into the courtyard was just ahead.

“Dad,” Tristan began. “I saw Jenn today.”

The king stopped walking and turned to him. “She’s here at the wedding.”

His dad knew Jennifer was at the wedding? Why hadn’t he said anything?

Tristan nodded. He wasn’t afraid of heights, but he didn’t love being on this bridge. Their lives had felt precariously perched over the edge of a cliff and even with all the security, he didn’t want anything to implode.

“I also saw her out running in the mountains,” he said. “I saw her here too. She had a hat and glasses on, and she slipped around the castle with the crowd rather than greeting Derek and Ellery.”

A cheer went up as Derek and Ellery exited the bridge and cleared the door.

“Ray said one of his guards called earlier to clear Jennifer using her dad’s invite to come in. I gave permission, and Ray agreed Jennifer wouldn’t be a threat. I thought the guard meant Jennifer coming in addition to Henry. I can’t imagine why Henry ...” His dad’s jaw worked. “Did she tell you anything when you saw her on the trail? The timing of her return can’t be a coincidence.”

“No, it isn’t; and no, she didn’t tell me anything. I’m afraid she and Henry are hiding a lot from us.”

“We need to know what’s going on, T. Especially if Ray’s men can’t find Henry.” His dad met his eyes. “I know she loved you deeply. Gain her trust and get some answers.”

“I’m on it,” Tristan said. Something about the request rankled him. His dad wasn’t saying to do something underhanded, but he had no desire to gain Jennifer’s trust for any other reason than he loved her and wanted her to trust and love him back. Unfortunately, he didn’t know if he could trust her or Henry right now. Whether that was because of their own choices or because they were William’s pawns remained to be seen.

“Dad?” Malik was waiting next to the door to the courtyard. Everyone else was gone.

“Apologies.” His dad smiled brightly, and they both rushed to Malik’s side, finally stepping off the glass bridge.

They strode through the door together, grinning and waving. Cameras flashed. Their countrymen cheered. Everybody loved the king and the crown prince. If only they knew the extent of the load weighing down both of their shoulders.

Thankfully, the attention transferred to the bride and groom as Derek and Ellery stood up at the head table and Derek gestured to everyone.

“Thank you for coming. I can’t properly express my love for Elle, but I’m sure you can all see the worship in my eyes.”

“Ahh,” women in the crowd cooed.

“Thank you for being part of our day. We love each of you and are grateful for the role you’ve had in our lives. I’ll give a more romantic and thorough speech later.” He winked at Ellery.

“You mean later as in the honeymoon or later as in after dinner?” she asked, then blushed instantly.

The crowd laughed and cheered.

When they settled, Derek grinned and winked. “Both, love. Both.”

Everybody loved that.

“Now settle down.” Derek gestured with both hands. “You’ll find your name cards are on the tables. If everyone can find their seats, we’ll have my dad offer a blessing over the food and our union and proceed with dinner. I know Malik has been begging Sophie to fix her famous coconut shrimp and steak skewers for him, but she saved that deliciousness for mine and Elle’s wedding day instead. You can tell who really is the ‘charming prince’.” He grinned. “Now please find your places and enjoy.”

Everyone laughed and started milling around looking for their names, assisted by the many staff on hand.

The king suddenly clasped his forearm and whispered harshly, “Jenn?”

Tristan followed his gaze. As the crowd milled around finding their seats, the woman in the hat, glasses, and white floral dress was being directed into the castle by Captain Levi Favor. Captain Levi was a devoted royal guard who’d

been instrumental in protecting Sophie from William's lackeys.

What were the two of them doing? *Was* Levi loyal to them, or was he helping Jennifer sneak in to do something at William's command? What if Jennifer was a traitor and here to hurt his family?

Not a traitor, not his Jenn, but she could easily be William's pawn. Her father had proven that.

Jealousy tightened his gut as Captain Levi put his hand on the small of her back, holding the door, and escorted her in.

"I'm going after her," he told his dad.

"I'll cover for you, but be quick. We can't start the dinner without you."

The fact that his dad, the king, was willing to cover for him during his brother's well-publicized royal wedding said a lot. The king was upset and worried about his friends Henry, Leslie, and Jennifer. He, like Tristan, wanted the Rindlesbachers caught and shut down.

Tristan shook hands, grinned, and charmed his way to the lower entrance. If anyone had brought a baby, he surely would've kissed it. He knew his role and played it well, but he had little time and hoped he didn't offend anyone with his brevity as he maneuvered through and worked the crowd.

Right now he was on assignment to figure out what Jennifer was doing, what she was hiding, and if she still loved him.

The last one wasn't an assignment from the king, but from his crown prince.

He finally entered the door and saw Captain Levi walking with Jennifer. He tracked them. Soon he'd have answers.

And only he would have the privilege of placing his hand on Jennifer's back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jennifer used the bathroom, washed her hands, and put her sunglasses and hat back on, tucking her curls under the wide-brimmed hat. If the handsome captain who'd offered to show her where the restroom was thought it was odd she'd worn them into the bathroom, he hadn't said anything. Very nice man.

There was also the very real possibility Captain Levi Favor had offered to escort her because she looked shady or because someone had instructed him to. They'd detained her at the gate and called General Raymond. Luckily, Tristan's twin had told his men to let her use her dad's invitation. Ray knew her well, and she had to believe he didn't consider her a threat to anyone's safety.

She'd made it through the beautiful ceremony with no one questioning her or paying much attention to her at all. Except for Tristan. As soon as his gaze had zeroed in on her, she'd known he would guess it was her. That was great. He was the one she was supposed to talk to and gain the trust of.

Except just him looking at her with those exceptional blue eyes of his and looking so exceptional in his dark-gray suit made her heart race out of control and her palms sweaty.

She had absolutely no idea what she was doing right now, or the best way to help her parents. But she had to at least be in a position of trust with Tristan so she could convince William to meet her when he reached out again. She'd rescue her parents or die trying. Hidden knives, the bear spray, a stun gun—

ooh, she liked that last idea. That was what she needed to find. She could stun William and she and her parents could run away. Then she could send Ray and his troops after William and Naomi.

Finally, she'd be free. To love Tristan.

Please help me, Heavenly Father, she pleaded silently. My mum and dad are good people and all I have.

She took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door.

Leaning casually against the wall, and looking for all the world like the hottest crown prince to ever grace the earth ...

"T," she breathed out, sagging against the door frame.

Tristan straightened away from the wall and strode up to her.

"Where's Captain Favor?" she asked weakly, clutching her throat in a vain attempt to get oxygen to keep moving through it. Tristan had always been the man who could make her pant for air, laugh until she cried, and forget any stress or responsibility.

Why did he have to be so devastatingly handsome and make her pulse race out of control? They'd been friends since they were young teens. She shouldn't continually react this strongly to him.

His scars gave him an edge of danger. Especially with the intense look in his blue eyes. That look usually meant he was going to kiss her until she couldn't stand on her own two feet, which didn't help her racing heart's intense thrumming.

Every cell was lit up and on fire for him as he leaned in and said roughly, "I'm Captain Favor's replacement."

It wasn't anything awe-inspiring, but the way he looked at her made her feel like he was claiming her.

"I guess the crown prince will do for my escort back to the wedding dinner." She tried to smile, but it was shaky. She needed to stay incognito. When she'd seen the place cards and realized hers would say 'Prime Minister Henry Shule,' she'd escaped into the bathroom to figure out how to proceed. It was

one thing to have Ray knowing she was here in her dad's place, but an entire table of people she may or may not know having questions about why she'd returned and where her dad was overwhelmed her. She wasn't prepared to evade their questions, and she didn't want to lie outright.

She'd been unsure if she could hide in plain sight while gaining Tristan's attention. Of course he had noticed her, followed her, and was here for her. She wanted to confide everything to him, but she didn't dare. He and his father were probably struggling to trust her dad, and Tristan would have to put his family and his country first.

She had to put her mum and dad first.

He smiled slightly and his eyes swept over her. Then he swept her hat off her head and her glasses off her face.

Jennifer let out a small gasp of surprise as her hair splayed down her back.

Tristan's smile grew, and he whispered huskily, "Ah, there you are. Why cover up those gorgeous deep-brown eyes and golden-brown curls?"

He rested his hand on the door frame by her head and leaned so close his body brushed against hers, sending off sparks of warmth throughout her body. His distinctive scent, the depth of warm cedar intermingling with the spice of mint, made every nerve tingle.

"Why the disguise, Little Red Riding Hood?"

She smiled at the silly nickname he'd given her when they were preteens. Her gaze was drawn to his perfectly intriguing lips. She'd missed the touch of those lips horribly and knew the power they had over her. Power to make her quiver, go weak-kneed, kiss him for far too long, and forget all her worries and pains.

If only she could indulge in such bliss right now.

"T ..." Her own voice came out too husky and full of longing.

Tristan's gaze sharpened and filled with desire. He pressed against her, gently cradling her jaw with his palm. His thumb traced along her lower lip.

Jennifer panted, but the oxygen in the room seemed to have disappeared. She

was faint, out of breath, and far too affected by him. It had been too long. Without Tristan, she'd been a fish without water, flopping around and knowing she'd shrivel and die.

She clung to his arm to steady herself, which was silly as she was already leaning against the doorjamb for support. The muscles in his biceps were flexed in a lovely show of hard work and dedication to good health and all things appealing in a man. In *her* man. If only he could be her man again.

“Your biceps are incredible,” she whispered.

“All the better to hold you with, my dear.”

She laughed, though him holding her was far from a joke. It was beautiful. “Somebody’s been busy in their exclusive home gym,” she tried to tease. “Wasting away the hours because you were pining for me?”

He smiled, but it flickered and was gone. “You know I have. I have little spare time, Jenn, but every free moment has been spent missing you.”

Was that true? What about all the pictures she'd seen online with other women? What about him getting engaged to Macey Clifton only four months after she'd left? She'd studied the beautiful Macey cuddled close to Ray at the wedding. Despite the lingering jealousy and anger Jennifer felt, Macey appeared sweet and very in love with Ray. What had happened? Had it broken Tristan's heart when Macey had chosen Ray over him?

She didn't want to think about any of that right now. Her brain was a mess and her body needed him close. She slid her arms around his neck and tugged his head down. She was going to kiss him, and nobody and nothing could pull them apart again.

Footsteps came down the hallway. A throat cleared.

Tristan sheltered her with his larger body, glancing over his shoulder at whoever had dared interrupt their reconnection kiss. It would've been an insanely good one, too.

“Pardon me, Prince Tristan.” The young man's voice had laughter in it. “But the king is waiting on you to pray and start dinner.”

“Forgive me. I’ll be right there.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The footsteps retreated.

Tristan stared down at her. The ache in his eyes dug at her heart, but the guilt over forgetting her purpose stabbed her. Her parents needed her to keep her head on straight, not waste away the hours kissing Tristan until she got another message from William. Yet she had been ordered to gain his trust. A thorough kissing session should get her back in his good graces.

Guilt stabbed her hot and quick at that thought. She wouldn’t use Tristan or manipulate him. She knew he’d help her if she could only figure out how to share what was happening.

“Come sit with me at the dinner,” he requested. “We can continue this after the dancing.”

Nothing had ever sounded better. “T, thank you. I’m honored, but... I can’t.”

His eyes reflected a deep disappointment. She’d wounded him. Would he walk away? Would she lose him all over again? She wanted to beg him for his help, but she didn’t know how or even what to tell him.

He studied her, beseeching her to give him something, to at least promise she wouldn’t leave again.

She shook her head, helpless to promise anything with her parents in such danger.

“I can’t ruin Derek and Ellery’s day,” he murmured.

“I know.” She swallowed against the thickness in her throat.

Tristan took a step back and then turned to go.

“They have my mum,” she whispered. “And now my dad.”

He turned back to her.

She wanted to tell him how deeply she loved him, but instead she said, “You’re the only one I trust.”

Maybe she shouldn't have let it spill, but if she couldn't turn to Tristan as she always had, she was in deep trouble.

He studied her. They both knew there was no time to hash this out right now.

"Please don't disappear on me again." Tristan's exquisite blue eyes beseeched her to never leave his side. Her heart raced, and hope and happiness she didn't know she'd feel again filled her. "Can you wait in my suite? I'll slip away as soon as I can."

"I don't want you to miss out on your brother's wedding celebration."

"And I don't want to miss out on you."

Jennifer quivered from his words and the depth of his blue gaze. Could he still love her? Did those other women mean nothing to him and had only been a distraction because she was gone? Getting engaged to the incredible Macey couldn't have meant nothing.

She didn't know. But Tristan would help her. Together, they could figure out how to beat William and rescue her mum and dad. With a lot of miracles, they could keep everyone else safe from William's machinations. She had to push her desire and love for him to the back of her mind and focus on her parents.

"I'll be waiting in your suite," she promised.

Tristan smiled. His genuine, unique, perfectly T smile. His cheeks crinkled and his smile made his lips even more appealing. How she had missed that smile.

Sweeping her glasses and hat off the ground, he handed them to her. Then he gave her one more longing look before he turned and strode down the hall. Jennifer watched him go, admiring everything from his powerful body to his kindness and patience with her. She wilted against the wall. That man was too enticing for her own good.

How long would she have to wait for him?

It didn't matter. Tristan was her only hope to beat William and Naomi. Tristan was also the only person besides her parents who would do anything

in the world for her.

If only she knew what power William wielded over her father. Yes, he'd kidnapped her mum, so obviously her dad would do anything to save her, but even when her dad sent her away eight months ago, he'd been terrified and in William's powerful clutches. Her smart dad wouldn't stupidly go meet with William and get kidnapped himself. Right?

For her mum, he would.

She prayed as she hurried to the nearest set of stairs. Just knowing Tristan was on her side made her shoulders not feel so burdened and her step lighter. Her parents were still in mortal danger, but Tristan would help them. Of course he would. It was one reason she fell in love with him. He was brave, impressive, connected, and determined.

Jennifer made it to the fifth floor and hurried down the hall to his suite. Thankfully she didn't see any guards; they were all probably out at the wedding. What about the cameras? Would guards descend on her, capture her, and haul her away before Tristan could come for her? Her pulse sped up, and she upped her pace. She'd lock herself in Tristan's suite and only open the door for him. Did the guards have keys that overrode the locks?

Finally, she reached his door and twisted the knob, slipping inside. Resting her back against the door, she took some slow breaths. Mint and cedar. So familiar, so safe. She was here, and Tristan was only minutes behind her.

Turning the lock, she stumbled the few steps to a couch and sank onto it. Tears pricked at her eyelids. Normally she wasn't so emotional, but who could blame her with her parents both kidnapped by a masochist and wanting to reunite with the love of her life?

Trusting Tristan was instinctive, but she was terrified of doing or saying the wrong thing and somehow having it get back to William. They'd have to watch their backs, and somehow she'd have to convince him to not tell his dad or Ray.

The tightrope she needed to walk and the danger of a knife at her parents' throats made it hard to relax, but Tristan's scent and being in his space wrapped around her. No matter what, he'd never let anything bad happen to

her. She felt safe for the first time in a long time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tristan wondered if he would ever fully enjoy one of his brother's weddings. Maybe Malik and Sophie's nuptials would be a day with no extra drama. Steffan and Hattie had married in some jungle in South America with only her cousin, Sadie, and her husband Wolf attending, the ceremony performed by a church missionary. Ray and Macey's wedding had been a nightmare because of William's scheming, Ellery mistakenly trusting Naomi, and Henry acting as William's puppet. Curt and Aliya's wedding had been nice, quiet, in the mountains with some of the family there. He had relaxed and enjoyed that day.

Everyone but Mum was here now, and Tristan was so worried about Jennifer and aching to get to her that he couldn't relax or enjoy this special time. He didn't blame Jennifer. All the blame lay at William and Naomi Rindlesbachers' feet. As usual.

He and Jennifer hadn't had enough time to talk it all out, but she'd said her dad was gone and 'they' had her mum. It had to be William and Naomi. Jennifer needed to tell him all, and then they had to make a plan to rescue Henry and Leslie.

Could he spend some time comforting and kissing her during that planning session?

Tristan wiped a hand across his eyes. He had to focus. As much as he yearned for Jennifer in his arms, her parents' safe return and the end of the Rindlesbachers' plots had to come first. That meant the planning would have

to be done with Ray, Jensen, his dad, and maybe even Lieutenant General Cordon and Chad. No kissing would happen with all of them around.

The dinner continued with speeches and toasts, lots of laughter, and too much delicious food. Sophie was an incredible chef, and she and her staff had outdone themselves.

After dinner and dessert, an informal reception line formed to hug and talk with the bride and groom and the other royals. Dancing would begin soon. Their crew would clear some tables and set up refreshments. Never enough food, apparently.

Could he escape yet?

He noticed Ray giving him the stare down. What did his brother know, and what was he thinking? He'd cleared Jennifer at the gate earlier. His twin was exceptionally protective of his wife Macey and their dad and siblings. He was also especially observant at knowing what Tristan needed or what dangers might be approaching.

Why always the danger with their family? Before Mum was murdered, they'd had an idyllic life. Had the Rindlesbachers simply been plotting and biding their time to create the perfect storm and dethrone the August family?

How much longer until he could sneak out of here and get to Jennifer? The thought of her in his suite had his skin prickling. Not that either of them would do anything out of line, but she belonged with him and in his life. If only he could talk her into eloping after they rescued her parents. Sadly, the crown prince would have to have a bigger wedding day than even this one. Dang. Even more sadly, Jennifer seemed far from loving him as she used to. Except outside the bathroom when he'd leaned in and she'd given every indication she would willingly return his kiss. Dang the interruption.

Lieutenant General Phillipe Cordon stopped in front of him and bowed respectfully. "Prince Tristan."

Tristan used to shake the man's hand or clasp his arm, but it made Phillipe obviously uncomfortable. He was a career military man and all but worshipped the royal family. Sometimes he went overboard and came across as simpering, but Tristan respected the man and was grateful for his

dedication to the royal family—especially now, as they were questioning who might be secretly working with the Rindlesbachers.

The only royals Philippe seemed relaxed around were Curt and Aliya. The three of them had gotten ‘thick as thieves’ as Aliya would say the past couple months, patrolling the mountains above Curt and Aliya’s cabin that bordered Austria. They also researched and searched for the elusive ‘cure’ to the ‘curse’ that had plagued the women who married into the August family throughout the seventeen- and eighteen-hundreds. Supposedly the queen’s wedding ring, which a revered priest had blessed hundreds of years ago, had stopped the curse and protected the women.

Until his mum.

Stuff and nonsense. He thought highly of Curt and Aliya, but he couldn’t understand their fascination with finding something that wasn’t real. There was no curse, no cure. His mum had been murdered, drowned in the lake. He suspected the other royals in the past had been murdered and their murderers had conveniently blamed it on the ‘curse’ as well.

“Lieutenant General.” Tristan nodded. “Enjoying the party?”

“Yes, sir, thank you. Everything is perfect. Kind of you to ask.” He took a quick breath. “Sir ...” He edged closer, which was unusual for Phillippe. “Prince Curtis and Princess Aliya have given me the honor of informing you that we had a breakthrough early this morning.”

“A breakthrough?” He rubbed at the condensation on his glass and wondered once again how soon he could sneak away to be with Jennifer. The draw to be close to her was insane, and that she needed his help made that need even more compelling.

“About the cure, sir.”

Oh, boy. Tristan didn’t want to dismiss a man as accomplished and dedicated as the lieutenant general, but the cure was the last thing he cared about right now.

“Oh. Well ... You and Curt and Aliya can focus on that, I’m sure.” He forced a smile he didn’t feel.

“Sir. We have the coordinates. We found a map and a message in a cave we were exploring on a morning hike. But as we decoded the message—centuries old, mind you—we realized that the king and the crown prince are needed to unlock the cure.” His voice dropped even further. “With the queen’s wedding ring as the key, you see.”

Tristan stared at the man. It felt like Indiana Jones had taken over the lieutenant general’s body. Did one of their top military leaders really believe all of this? The zeal in his hazel eyes said he definitely did. What about Tristan’s level-headed brother Curt? Aliya was adorable but also sassy and a bit zany. He could easily see her getting caught up in the fervor, but not Curt.

“Interesting,” Tristan managed. He gestured around. “But tonight is obviously not the night.”

“Oh, yes. Of course, sir.” Philippe stepped back and crisply saluted. Tristan sometimes tried to tease him that he only needed to salute Ray, but Philippe rarely smiled at his joke.

He felt another pang for Henry. When Jennifer had said her dad was gone, did she mean kidnapped? He hoped not. Gone could mean he was chasing after Leslie and had a lead that was more important than appearing at the wedding.

Dang having to stand here and socialize when he needed to move, help Henry and Jennifer, look into her deep-brown eyes and see if she still loved him. How could they lose a love as deep as theirs had been?

“I’ll wait for you to plan a time with your father at your earliest convenience.” The words were respectful, but Philippe’s eyes pleaded to make it a very early convenience.

With all that was going on, Tristan wasn’t certain how searching for an elusive ‘cure’ could be a top priority for him or his father.

“Thank you. I’ll speak with him.” Tristan would speak with his father and try to make the treasure hunt happen for Philippe, Curt, and Aliya’s sakes, but they’d all agree that rescuing Henry and Leslie and reuniting with Jennifer took precedence. Well, maybe nobody else would see hours of uninterrupted talking and kissing as of utmost importance. All that mattered was that

Jennifer agreed. After her parents were safe and the Rindlesbachers were arrested.

Philippe seemed reluctant to move on, but suddenly he straightened and saluted crisply. “General August, sir.” His voice went military stiff as Tristan’s twin approached.

“Lieutenant General Cordon.” Ray dipped his head deferentially. “All is well with security for the wedding?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your diligence.” Ray gave a half of a smile. Only Macey and Kiera got full smiles out of him, but sometimes Malik could make him laugh. “If you’ll pardon us, I need a word with my twin.”

“Of course, sir.”

Ray edged in and directed Tristan away from the crowd, close to a water feature that would mask their voices. His too-serious twin maintained his partial smile. The press would be snapping photos the entire night. Another reason Tristan shouldn’t be sneaking away, but he needed to be with Jennifer and try to help her.

“Jennifer’s still here?” Ray murmured, his eyes on Macey chatting with Steffan and Hattie.

“We have to keep it quiet,” Tristan said, taking a sip of his drink. “She was scared, Ray.”

“If William has her mum and now her dad’s disappeared, I can imagine she’d be terrified. I can’t believe Henry slipped away from my men. Stupid of him.”

“I’m sure William, or whoever he was meeting with, demanded it. You’ve got men searching?”

Ray nodded. “Through the entire country and the surrounding mountains. Every man I could spare who wasn’t here at the wedding, on border patrol, or guarding the military facility. Jensen and his people are helping as well.”

“Thank you. I’m planning to slip away as soon as the dancing gets going and

return before the big sendoff. Hopefully I'll have some answers from Jenn and we can hash it out privately after the wedding."

"Okay. Where is she?"

"In my suite."

Ray's eyebrows rose, but in typical Ray fashion, he said nothing about it.

The music changed from soft and in the background to louder and with a fun beat. The DJ announced the bride and groom would be 'performing' with Princess Kiera. Oh, boy. American Ninja Warrior and parkour moves in a wedding dress, tux, and bridesmaid dress. That should be interesting.

"Be safe," Ray cautioned, leaning close so he could be heard over the music. "I know you loved her once, but she may be working with her dad and Rindlesbacher to take down you and Dad."

"She wouldn't do that," Tristan protested.

Ray only shrugged. "I'm not saying Jenn could be a traitor, but she won't be thinking straight. She's emotional and worried about her parents. Think how you'd act if Mum had been kidnapped by Rindlesbacher. Just be careful."

"I will," Tristan promised. Ray was right. If their beloved mother had been in William's power, they'd all be going insane. It would almost be worse than her dying, not knowing where she was but knowing she was being mistreated, belittled, and William would kill her when she no longer furthered his diabolical plans.

Ray nodded and strode to his wife's side. Macey was clapping her hands to the beat and cheering for Derek, Ellery, and Kiera's 'dance.' Tricks, flips, and showing-off craziness was a better description.

Everyone went crazy as they finished, cheering and clapping. The bride and groom dance was next. After Derek danced with Ellery's mum and Ellery with his dad, Tristan could probably safely slip away for a couple hours and come back for the eight forty-five p.m. planned cutting of the cake and send off of the bride and groom.

Tristan slowly made his way toward the closest entrance to the castle. He was

so distracted thinking of Jennifer waiting for him that he didn't notice until too late the swarm of at least ten young ladies hedging off his exit. They didn't draw his attention until the first one, a blonde, wrapped her hand around his arm and cooed, "May I please have the first dance?"

Tristan kept the smile on his face as his gaze darted around. Who invited this many single women? He was not only the last single prince but the crown prince, and despite a couple of them flinching when their eyes traveled over his mottled skin, they were all obviously interested.

"While that would be an incredible honor," Tristan said smoothly, "I must excuse myself ..."

The blonde gripped his arm more firmly. "I won't take no for an answer."

Tristan searched for help. All of his brothers were with their wives or fiancée and Chad was occupied. Only Jensen would be any help—if he could find the police chief. He couldn't see Jensen in the throng.

"I get the next dance," a redhead insisted.

"Then me," said a brunette.

Tristan realized in his panic why he didn't recognize these women. They were American. Friends of Ellery and Derek from their ninja warrior circuit?

Had Ellery set him up?

He glanced her direction. She and Derek waltzed by, and she grinned. "You can thank me later, T."

Tristan's stomach tightened even as he grinned at his new sister-in-law. He didn't blame Ellery. She had no idea the love of his life was within reach for the first time in eight months.

He needed to escape, and without offending Ellery or her friends.

Smiling at the blonde, he prayed for some logical excuse. He pulled his phone out of his coat pocket. "Pardon me." Then he tapped out a quick text to Jensen. *I need help quick. Come claim I'm needed in the castle and you can have your pick of a bunch of beautiful women.*

He slid the phone back in his pocket and smiled congenially. Jensen would come. If he checked his phone that was most likely on 'do not disturb.' If not, Tristan would fake a bathroom emergency.

Time ticked by as the women flirted with him, and panic made his chest constrict.

He had to get to Jennifer.

CHAPTER SIX

Jennifer grew tired of waiting fairly quickly. The anxiousness over both of her parents missing and knowing that William and Naomi would hurt and abuse them made her itchy and jumpy.

She wandered around Tristan's luxurious and clean suite. According to the online articles she'd read, they'd had to rebuild it completely after a homemade pipe bomb was set off under his bed last May. She shuddered, sick for the pain that Tristan must have gone through and grateful he had survived. She wondered if William Rindlesbacher had been behind that nightmare as well. Most likely.

Tristan had a photo of him and his family, one of his mum and dad, some scenic pictures, and two pictures of the two of them, their arms around each other, bright smiles on their faces. The photos had been taken a couple years ago, but it felt like a decade. The couple in those photos had responsibilities and purpose, but life had still felt carefree and their future bright with every happy possibility in store for them.

She had to look away or she would cry for all they'd lost. It touched her that he had these pictures. Did it mean he hadn't replaced her or forgotten about her? What about all the women he'd dated and getting engaged to the woman who was now his sister-in-law?

She had to push those ugly and hurtful images from her mind. Her dad had told Tristan she couldn't love him any longer and wasn't returning. Still, he could've waited a little longer than four months before falling in love and

planning to marry someone else, especially if he'd loved Jennifer as desperately as she'd always loved him.

Jennifer used his bathroom and took a long inhale of his delicious Dr. Vranjes Firenze cologne bottle. Mint, cedar, maybe something floral ... It smelled incredible, but mixed with Tristan's chemistry, it was even more irresistible.

Everything was in its place in his rooms. Not a dirty sock on the floor, a water bottle sitting on a side table, or even a suit coat hung over a chair. His suite was too clean. Was that due to the maids, or had Tristan changed that much in the past eight months? He'd never been dirty, but fastidiously clean wasn't him either. Maybe he was so busy he rarely spent time here. She inhaled again. The scent of him was everywhere, shooting down that theory.

She walked to the patio doors and pushed them open. Standing on his patio, she looked at the view of the majestic mountains and greenery. The wedding was on the other side of the castle. If she snuck across the hall and through somebody else's suite, could she see him?

She could swear she'd been waiting for hours. It would be hard for the crown prince to sneak away from the wedding, but the way he'd leaned down and almost kissed her outside the bathroom, and that sincere and smoldering look in his blue eyes, made her assume he would come as soon as the dinner was over.

She needed to tell him her parents were in mortal danger and she had information he must hear before they concocted the rescue plan of the century. A rescue plan with no way of knowing where her parents were, what William would demand when he contacted her, and no ability to call in the troops to help.

Creeping back through his suite and to the door, she listened but heard no one. She hurried out and straight across the wide hallway, twisting the doorknob of the suite opposite Tristan's as she looked around. No one. She hoped the guards weren't looking at this particular hall camera. With everybody at the wedding, the guards were probably concentrated on the camera angles closer to the reception.

The door swung open, and she hurried inside. The suite looked unoccupied.

That was good. She rushed to the balcony door, opened it, and was instantly inundated with music and the joyful sounds of a party. Inching to the edge of the balcony, she glanced over. Couples danced around, and the bride and groom were easy to pick out. Her gaze swept over the dancers, men in suits and women in gorgeous dresses. She wished she was amongst them and in Tristan's arms. How would it be to simply enjoy carefree dancing without the stress of losing both of her parents hanging over her head and the hurt of her and Tristan's love being shattered, maybe irrevocably?

Jennifer's gaze zeroed in on him. A charming smile decorated his face as he interacted with the crowd surrounding him. A crowd of beautiful women. A blonde had her hand threaded through his arm, leaning against his side. A brunette and a redhead eased close, obviously teasing and flirting with him as the rest of the women impatiently waited their turn to seduce the handsome crown prince.

Hot jealousy flared in her gut. She'd confided in him, taken a huge risk opening up, impatiently waited for him, and what was he doing? Flirting with a gaggle of single women. No desire to rush to her. No urgency to help her and her parents.

Jennifer clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from yelling at him. She'd seen so many pictures of him online with other women, and she'd seen the shocking video of him kissing his fiancée Macey, but seeing him flirt and be surrounded by gorgeous women in person was even more awful. She couldn't watch any longer.

Jennifer hurried back into the unoccupied suite, closing the balcony door and walking through the room. Should she go back to Tristan's suite and wait for him like some overeager, needy former girlfriend? This entire mess was bigger than her desires for Tristan to still love and need her, but she was angry, embarrassed, and sickeningly jealous. For the past few hours, she'd let herself forget that the man she loved had fallen in love with another woman and then when Macey chose his twin brother, Tristan had turned into the player of the century. Even Malik had settled down to one woman and she'd seen Chad with a date on his arm.

The crown prince apparently had to make up for their slack.

Walking out into the hallway, she looked around. She'd been so certain Tristan was the answer, that he would help her rescue her parents and then they could be reunited. But no ... he was flirting away, having a great time. Probably barely remembered she was waiting in his suite. How many women did he ask to wait in his suite? Her neck prickled with heat and her stomach turned over.

“I'll slip away as soon as I can’,” she muttered. “I don't want to miss out on you.”

His words had impacted her deeply. She'd trusted him with her secrets. Was the man she loved truly a philanderer now like she'd thrown at him early today? He'd claimed the media blew things out of proportion, but no media had shown her that clear picture of him happily flirting, looking confident, delighted with the female attention, and in his element.

Her shoulders rounded. She should go to her parents' cottage and await another message from William. She'd have to pray she could somehow overtake William by herself. Could she surprise him with her knives and bear spray? If only she could find a stun gun. She didn't want to kill anybody, and a stun gun seemed a lot easier method to hit and incapacitate a target. William wouldn't expect her to be armed or to fight. The element of surprise was the only real weapon she'd have.

Jennifer trudged down the hallway toward the back stairs. She'd take the castle entrance she came in with Captain Levi earlier and slip quietly through the wedding party. Tristan wouldn't even notice her, surrounded as he was.

Hopefully one of the shuttles was running to take people back to Greenville.

Oh, shoot. Her hat and sunglasses.

Turning, she headed for Tristan's suite when footsteps came from the main staircase. Determined footsteps.

She upped her pace, hoping to slide into Tristan's suite and hide until whoever it was went away. Then she'd have to make her escape. Disappointment at not being able to rely on Tristan weighed heavily on her chest. He used to be her hero, her everything, her Big Bad Wolf crown prince. Now he was a ladies' man. Ugh!

She reached his door and grasped the doorknob.

What if it was Tristan finally coming for her? Could he have rushed the stairs that quickly? Her heart gave a traitorous leap at the thought.

“Stop right there, miss,” a man said from down the hall.

Not Tristan. Disappointment stung like a wasp.

Turning, she swallowed hard as she looked between two royal guards, neither of which seemed happy to see her. She didn't recognize either of them.

“Pardon me.” She drew herself up and made her voice haughty. “I've been asked by Prince Tristan to wait for him in his suite. I don't believe you'll want to go against his instructions.”

“We've been watching you on the camera,” the same man said as they both advanced. They didn't have weapons pointed at her. Yet. “You snuck out of Prince Tristan's suite to the unoccupied suite across the hall. We unfortunately missed seeing you sneak up here a couple hours ago. Joseph will stand guard over you in the hallway while I search the prince's suite for anything amiss.”

“I am Jennifer Shule, Prime Minister Henry Shule's daughter,” she threw at him. So much for staying incognito.

The men's faces both registered surprise, then recognition.

“I am also Prince Tristan's girlfriend, and he asked me to wait in his suite for reasons that are none of your business.” She tilted her chin up. She didn't want to insinuate anything or stain either of their reputations, but she had to get these guards to leave her alone so she could sneak out of here and deal with William and protect her parents. Alone. She'd been alone for the past eight months. She didn't know why she'd let herself hope for anything different now. The visions of Tristan by her side had been too tantalizing. It wounded her to have them ripped away.

“If you're the crown prince's girlfriend, why is Prince Tristan currently dancing with a gorgeous blonde? Why aren't you with him at the wedding dance, and why did you sneak across the hall?”

Jennifer's heart sank. The man she'd always thought she could trust, the man who loved her and only her ... letting her sit in his suite waiting for him, and now she was being interrogated by guards while he danced with a 'gorgeous blonde'...

She wouldn't have called the woman gorgeous. Mildly attractive, maybe borderline pretty.

"He had to make an appearance at the dinner and dancing," she said, though she hardly believed it herself. "My father asked me not to be seen because of my mum's disappearance, which is why I've been waiting in Tristan's rooms. I got bored, so I snuck across to see what was keeping him." Her shoulders slumped. "There was a blonde clinging to him."

The speaking guard's face registered compassion. He looked her over. "I'm sorry, miss. Even though you're the prime minister's daughter, I still need to search the suite and detain you until we have answers or confirmation from the crown prince."

"Confirmation from me about what?" Tristan strode up from the back staircase. Jennifer hadn't even heard him coming, so focused on explaining herself and her own heartbreak.

"Prince Tristan." The guards both bowed. "Miss Shule claims you asked her to wait in your suite."

"I did, and I need you to keep her presence here quiet. Thank you." He nodded to each of them, then strode around them and put his arm around her waist. "If you'll excuse us, please."

"Of course, sir."

Tristan escorted her into his rooms. Jennifer felt a mixture of relief at him coming for her, desire to never have him release his arm around her waist, and anger at him for making her wait so long while he flirted and danced with the 'gorgeous blonde.'

He shut the door behind them, and she pulled away and spun to face him, folding her arms across her chest. "How was the dancing?"

"Luckily, I escaped before I had to dance."

“That’s not what the guard said.” She arched an eyebrow, her stomach churning uncomfortably.

Tristan eased closer, and instantly Jennifer was overwhelmed by his magnetic presence, his blue eyes, his delicious scent. “What did the guard say?”

“That you were busy dancing with a ‘gorgeous blonde’ while I waited up here. My parents are probably being tortured and murdered by William as we waste time.”

“Jenn, I didn’t dance with anyone. Some women from America surrounded me. With Jensen’s help, I extracted myself as quickly as I could. I only want you.”

Jennifer held up a hand. She didn’t know what to believe right now, and it wasn’t the time anyway. “Can you help me rescue my parents? That needs to be the focus right now.” Not her unrealistic desires to have the crown prince love her and only her.

He nodded tightly, though he looked far from done proclaiming his innocence. She’d seen that blonde clinging to him. He tilted his head to the couch. She walked over and sank into it, crossing her legs. Tristan sat down, far too close with as out of sorts as she was feeling. He rested his arm along the back of the couch, his fingertips brushing the bare skin of her neck. She straightened away from him.

She had to trust him to help her parents, but she couldn’t trust him with her aching heart.

“A few days ago,” she started, before he could touch her again and mess up her focus completely, “William, Naomi, and my mum showed up at the village I was volunteering at.”

His eyes widened.

“My mum was tied up. William cut her arm and then he grabbed me and cut me on the abdomen.”

“I’ll kill him,” Tristan growled. The protectiveness in his voice and fierce look in his blue eyes made her heart skip a beat.

“We have to find him first.”

He gritted his teeth. “What did he say?”

“He told me to go home and play my part or he’d send my mum to us a piece at a time.”

“Jenn ... I’m sorry.” He wrapped his hand around hers. She drew strength from his strength and could almost believe he could right every wrong, could almost forget about him and the blonde, him falling in love with Macey. Almost.

“He told me to talk to no one,” she continued, “especially you, and await his instructions.”

“Yet you still came to me.” His blue gaze begged her to say that she had come for him and him alone, but this was no time for lies.

“No, I came to help my dad.” She pulled her hand free and clasped them together.

“Oh.” His disappointment was palpable.

“My dad wasn’t happy to see me. He told me to stay in the cottage until he got home from Prince Derek’s wedding. Then he’d figure out where to send me that was safe, where William couldn’t find me again, so he could focus on finding my mum without me in danger as well.”

“But then your dad disappeared ...” Tristan steepled his fingers under his chin, a move so Tristan it made her pause.

She shook her head and focused on the details he needed. “Someone knocked on the cottage door this afternoon. There was a piece of cardstock, blank on one side...” She swallowed hard. “On the other side was a picture of my dad and Naomi with her gun to his head and a note telling me William had my father and I was to gain your trust but not let anyone else see me or let you know what I was about.”

Tristan nodded. “I’m glad you didn’t listen.”

She shrugged, not sure if she was glad or not. Anger still pulsed through her at seeing him with that blonde, then having the guard confirm her fears.

“He said I was to await more instructions at the cottage, not hide out at the castle.” Which she was kind of doing, but how was she to gain Tristan’s trust if she wasn’t here? Sadly, now all she could picture was that blonde clinging to Tristan. She could trust him to help her rescue her parents, but could she trust him with her heart any longer? “If I revealed my purpose to you or anyone else, he threatened to kill you and to send pieces of my parents to me until they bled to death.”

Tristan stared at her for a beat, then wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close to his side.

Jennifer blinked in surprise, stunned by his bold move and how perfect it felt to be held by him again. She shouldn’t have, but she leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his firm waist. She was tired of being strong, alone, and missing him.

Brushing his lips across her temple, Tristan whispered, “He won’t hurt your parents. I promise.”

She shuddered and cuddled closer to him, discouraged, terrified, and needing this man desperately. She pushed away the images of him with other women in the face of something much more important.

“How can you promise that? He’s the devil reincarnated, and he’s got them both in his control now. He’s killed before.”

Tristan nodded. “He has. But we’ve been able to thwart most of his schemes. We’ll just have to work with Ray and Jensen and figure out how to beat him this time. It’s always about power with him. He thinks he should rule Augustine.”

“That would be horrific.”

“It would,” Tristan agreed.

“I’m afraid if we work with Ray and Jensen, they’ll bring in the entire army and police force and William will figure out I told them and hurt my parents.”

“I understand. It’s terrifying to have them in his control. We’ll be discreet but we’ll need their help to prevail against William. On his last scheme, he had a dozen well-trained mercenaries with him.”

Her pulse raced. Her bear spray wouldn't protect her or her parents against a dozen well-trained mercenaries. She had to trust Tristan, Ray, and Jensen. She had to.

“He almost succeeded in forcing Malik to plant a bomb that would've killed my dad, your dad, and me.”

“What?” she exclaimed, pulling away and staring at him. Fear made her gut knot. She'd known William was a murderer and capable of a lot of evil but for him to believe Malik would kill his dad, her dad, and Tristan? He must be truly insane. “Malik would never do that.”

“I know, and luckily, with a lot of prayer and miracles, Malik was brilliant. He was able to warn us and get us away from the bomb, but still make William believe he'd blown us up. William held Sophie and Sunny captive, so it was a horrifying situation for all of us, but most especially for Malik. A man will move mountains for the woman he loves.”

Jennifer could only stare at him. She wanted to be the woman he loved, wanted it desperately. The look in his blue eyes said she was that woman. If that was true, why did he date every beautiful lady that crossed his path?

Now was not the time to worry about that. They had to rescue her parents from that madman. It was the only thing that could matter right now.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tristan knew he had to leave Jennifer to take part in the celebratory send off for his brother and his bride to their honeymoon, but he worried she'd disappear again.

"Stay here and I'll bring Jensen and Ray back as soon as is feasible," he instructed.

"What if William leaves instructions at the cottage while I'm gone? He said I couldn't hide out in the castle."

"But he also said you should gain my trust," Tristan reminded her. "I'm sure he wants me in a vulnerable position. After we set up a plan with Ray and Jensen, I'll take you back to your cottage and stay with you until he makes contact."

"You don't need to do that," she insisted, her dark eyes piercing him. Why did it seem like she didn't trust him any longer? He still wanted to prove he hadn't been leaving her up here alone while he danced with some blonde, but it was hardly the most important matter of the moment.

"I am going to do that." He gave her a look that everyone but his father and Ray would obey.

"Oh my, Mr. Alpha Wolf, what a large ego you have."

"All the better to keep you in line with, my dear."

She pushed out a disgruntled breath, but her eyes sparkled at him, a challenge

he'd missed seeing. They'd always teased like this. Maybe they could get back to the two almost-kisses they'd had earlier.

"I'm not one of your empty-headed, admiring flock of females, Crown Prince Tristan, and I won't do what you say." Her words were feisty, but at least she was teasing him, not claiming he was dancing with that blonde.

He eased in close enough that his chest brushed her arm and slowly looked her over. "You're right, Jenn. You're not empty-headed; you're brilliant and the only admirer I want. I will keep you safe. I won't leave your side again."

She held his gaze, her eyes questioning if he was sincere. How could he prove she was the only woman he had ever wanted and would ever want?

"Well, you need to leave my side right now, so get going." She pushed at his chest.

Tristan groaned. He did need to go. He could only pray he'd be back with her soon, and then he could demonstrate once and for all that she was the only woman he wanted to be with. He wrapped up her hand on his chest with his hand and pulled it to his lips.

She quivered slightly as he brushed his lips across her knuckles.

"Oh my, what lovely lips you have," she murmured.

Tristan's grin grew. He knew his next line by heart, had used it on her many times before. He wrapped his arm around her lower back and pulled her in tight. He had at least a minute to confirm she had his undying devotion.

"All the better to kiss you with, my dear."

She let out a telling, sweet sigh and arched up toward him. Tristan bent to meet her, eagerness and anticipation making his head light. Nine long, lonely months were over. Jennifer was finally in his arms.

His phone rang, bringing him back to the reality that the entire wedding party was probably waiting for him to cut the cake.

He cursed, and she actually smiled.

Holding her close, he took his time looking over her gorgeous face, lingering

on her lips before meeting her gaze again. He saw the hope of every good dream in her deep-brown eyes.

“Hold that thought,” he murmured huskily.

Her eyelashes fluttered, her lips softened, and her throat bobbed as she swallowed.

Yanking himself away from her was a concerted effort. He did it. Only because he was the crown prince who knew his duties, and he knew he’d be back soon.

“Please stay here,” he cautioned.

She studied him but nodded her head.

His phone finally stopped buzzing.

“Do you need anything?”

“No. I noticed you stock your mini fridge with my favorite seltzer water. I stole one.”

“To remind me of you,” he said softly. “You can have anything of mine, Jenn.”

Her dark gaze was still uncertain. He hated that.

His phone started ringing again. “Twenty minutes,” he promised, planning on fifteen.

She raised her eyebrows as if she’d believe it when she saw it. He forced himself to hurry out the door, shut it behind him, and jog down the hall. Answering his phone as he ran, he muttered, “Yeah?”

“T.” It was Ray’s voice. “Hurry.”

“I’m almost there.” He dropped his phone back in his pocket and pounded down the stairs, his Ferragamo dress shoes making the noise even louder.

Bursting out onto the courtyard, he pulled in a quick breath to calm his racing heart and pasted his crown prince smile on. He waved to Derek and Ellery, who were indeed waiting on him to cut the cake. Derek gave him a

questioning look but focused back on his bride, and the festivities continued with the cutting of the cake.

The group of beautiful Americans edged toward him again. His and Jensen's flimsy excuse of 'crown prince business' probably wouldn't work again, and he did not want to risk Jennifer seeing him with them a second time. He beelined for Ray and Macey.

"What does she know?" Ray muttered when he got close.

"Both her parents are in danger," he said quietly, then cheered with the rest of the crowd when Ellery smashed cake in Derek's face and Derek kissed her with his cake-covered lips before flipping her over and dipping her long hair and veil in the nearby water fountain. Those two and water fountains.

"As soon as the send-off is done, get Jensen and meet in my suite," he instructed his twin.

"What about Dad, Chad, and Phillippe?"

Tristan shrugged. "Maybe just Dad. I don't want to overwhelm her, and she's terrified of what William might do if it somehow gets out that she talked. He's threatening to send her parents to her in pieces."

"I hate that guy," Ray muttered.

The newlyweds made their way to the temporary monkey bar obstacle where they would swing across to the honeymoon getaway car, the king's brand-new silver Lamborghini Veneno Roadster. Derek claimed he was going to let Ellery drive. She'd completed numerous driving lessons in the ugly Kia Soul she'd asked Derek to buy for her. It had been comical to see that car amidst the beautiful vehicles in their well-stocked garage and to see Derek squished into the tiny vehicle as he instructed Ellery. Tristan wasn't certain how wise the ecstatic new bride driving the luxury supercar was, but he bit his tongue. Ellery knowing they trusted and loved her was more important than an eight-million-dollar car. That was what his dad kept saying.

Tristan cheered and shot confetti along with everyone else as the talented couple completed the obstacle. Ellery swung around onto Derek's chest, clinging to him like a monkey as he completed a dozen pull-ups to show off, then kissed her while they were suspended in the air. They were crazily

talented, and the crowd and media representatives obviously loved the display.

Derek finally dropped to the ground, still holding his bride in his arms. He carried Ellery to the car, loaded her into the driver's seat, carefully arranging her beautiful dress and stealing one more kiss. He jogged around to the passenger side, waving jauntily to the crowd. They drove very, very slowly out of the castle gates and started down the narrow road.

"If she drives that slow, maybe the Veneno will survive," Ray murmured.

Macey slugged him. "She'll do fine. She's nervous and doesn't need your bad vibes."

"Forgive me, love." Ray took her hand and kissed it.

Nobody but Macey would get that kind of response after reprimanding Ray. Tristan smiled. Macey was great.

"I'm slipping away. I'll meet you up in my suite," he told Ray quietly. "See you, Macey."

"Watch out for your fan club," Macey cautioned.

"I will." He searched around, then carefully eased toward the castle entrance. There were land mines everywhere as the crown prince, and he'd learned one of them was women trying to trap him into a date, a kiss, or a photo op. He didn't blame the women wanting to become the future queen, but his heart had been Jennifer's for years.

He pulled the door open just as arms wrapped around him from behind.

"There you are." The blonde from earlier beamed up at him.

He stepped away and her arms fell to her sides. "It was a pleasure to meet you. Jaylene, wasn't it?"

She nodded, obviously pleased he'd remembered her name.

"I need to retire for the night. Pardon me."

"You're going to bed?" she asked, her nose wrinkled. "It's so early. Come to the bar with us." She winked at him. "Unless you want me to 'retire for the

night' with you."

Tristan's stomach churned. What would this woman do if she knew he already had a woman waiting in his suite for him? Thankfully with Jennifer, though they savored each kiss, their relationship had never been about lust. They'd both committed to waiting for marriage to be intimate. No matter how delicious her kisses were and how she consumed him, he stayed in control because of his respect for her and for God.

"No thank you." His voice was cold, stiff. "Goodnight." He turned and strode through the door.

"Stuffy royal," she muttered to his back.

Tristan was sure he'd been called worse when he had to reject a woman. He didn't care. He rushed to the stairs and pumped up them two at a time. Jennifer was waiting for him. That knowledge made his steps light.

He might only have a few minutes before Ray, Jensen, and his dad arrived, but he would make sure those minutes were well spent, showing her what lovely lips he had and savoring her generous mouth against his.

He rapped softly on his own door, not wanting to surprise her.

The door opened a crack and then Jennifer opened it fully, blinking up at him with her large, dark eyes.

"You stayed," he breathed out, uncertain if she'd disappear on him again.

"I had nowhere else to be for a minute." Her beautiful lips curved into a smile.

She was intoxicating.

Was his Jennifer really back? She hadn't come home for him, he still had no idea why she'd left for over eight months like she had, and she had some misperceptions about him happily dating other women. None of that meant they couldn't work things out and create their future together. After they saved her parents and locked up William and Naomi for good.

Tristan swept her off her feet and against his chest. She let out a small gasp of surprise. It was as intoxicating as she was. He smiled as he carried her to the

closest couch. He was done messing around, and somebody could interrupt them at any moment. Someday soon, they could talk out their separation and heal together. He needed a lot of healing after losing his mum and the bombing incident and, most of all, losing her for the past eight months with no knowledge of whether they'd ever be together again. Hopefully they could rescue her parents so she wouldn't have to heal from losing one of them. He'd do anything to help her.

They were together again, and right now ... He was kissing her.

"Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what a strong chest you have." She placed her hand over his racing heart, making his muscles tighten and his poor heart speed up even faster.

"All the better to cuddle you with, my dear." He gave her a smoldering look, hoping it was still as effective with his face disfigured.

"Oh my, Big Bad Wolf, what enticing blue eyes you have."

"All the better to captivate you with, my dear."

He sank onto the couch with her cuddled close, held her tightly to him with one arm and used the other to frame her smooth jaw.

She blinked up at him. "Oh my, Big Bad Wolf, what decisive and alluring moves you have."

"All the better to capture a few stolen moments with you, my dear."

The teasing of the moment disappeared like a puff of smoke, and Jennifer was suddenly studying him very, very seriously. "Is that all we'll ever have, T? Stolen moments? Do you use decisive and alluring moves on all the girls?"

"No." He shook his head, determined to show her she was the only one for him and they had a bright future in store. "You are the only woman I want, and we will have a beautiful future together, Jenn. We'll get your parents safe, capture William and Naomi, and talk through why you left, how committed I am to you and only you, and how you're never going to leave me again."

“Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince. What big plans you have.” She didn’t sound certain she believed them.

“All the better to convince you that you’re the only woman I have and will ever want, my dear.”

Her eyes got bright, and she slid her hands up his chest and encircled his neck. He loved her. He always had and always would. If only he could say those three words and hear her say them back, but he could easily read her devotion in her eyes despite the fear and uncertainty that lingered there. The loving words and lifelong plans would come soon.

The moment was slow and perfect as centimeter by centimeter they edged closer together.

A hard rap shook the door, and then it flung open. Jennifer startled and straightened away from him. Tristan groaned and tasted disappointment instead of her lips as Ray stormed in. He should’ve thought to lock the door.

“Oh.” Ray stopped in his tracks, but he swung the door closed, very much interrupting the moment. “Pardon me.” He nodded respectfully. “Pleasure to see you, Jennifer.”

“You as well,” she said in response, but Tristan hoped she didn’t mean it. It couldn’t possibly be a pleasure for their kiss to be interrupted. Again. How many times in the past few hours?

“Jensen’s right behind me. Dad’s on his way.” He drew up a chair, ignoring the fact that Jennifer was still on his brother’s lap.

Jennifer unfortunately slid off of Tristan’s lap. Curse his twin. Tristan had all but shoved his fake fiancée Macey into Ray’s arms, lips, and heart when he knew the two were gone over each other. Would it kill Ray to return the favor and help a brother out now?

But no. His twin had interrupted and didn’t even have the courtesy to say, ‘I’ll wait outside and give you a moment.’

“Jennifer, I am terribly sorry about your mum and dad,” Ray said.

Reality snapped at his face like the branch of a willow tree. Her mum and dad

were in mortal danger. Tristan had to shelve the intense need for Jennifer in his arms, tangling lips with him, for the moment. They had to beat William once and for all. Kissing Jennifer would be a long-awaited reward after victory was won.

Unless she slipped away from him again.

Or believed he was a player.

Or they didn't beat William.

Or her parents got hurt or killed.

Or a hundred other things that could go wrong.

He should just kiss her and savor the moment. Who knew what might come at them next?

CHAPTER EIGHT

If only Jennifer and Tristan hadn't been interrupted. Again. But her parents' safety had to be her priority, followed by the safety of her own heart. He'd shoved her defenses and safety net out of the way with his tender look and touch and flirtations. She had to be stronger.

The general, the police chief, and the king all came into Tristan's suite and pulled up chairs facing the couch she and Tristan were sitting on. The king gave her a brief, fatherly hug, making her miss her dad more than ever. Jensen greeted her warmly with a handshake and a side hug. As Ray's best friend, Jensen had spent as much time at the castle as teenagers and young adults as she had. They'd all been close friends at one point. Tristan's best friend, the suave Major Chad, had been a constant in her life as well. Now everything felt less stable or easygoing, as she'd expect with the danger her parents were in and Tristan's family had been in for a while now.

Jennifer recounted everything that had happened since her mum, William, and Naomi had come to the village. She finished by describing the note and the picture left on the doorstep earlier today, and anything else she could think of that might be helpful. They listened and then asked questions, trying to surmise what William was up to now.

"Why did you leave in the first place?" Ray asked.

Jennifer exchanged a look with Tristan, wishing she could talk this through with him alone. She'd refused to tell him this morning, but now everything was coming out. The secrets needed to be exposed so they could move past

them and deal with the Rindlesbachers.

She swallowed and then admitted, “My dad forced me to. He said I was in mortal danger and promised I could come back when he ‘fixed’ it. He made me say goodbye to Tristan the day after the queen died and didn’t let me take my phone with me. I thought it would just be a short humanitarian trip like my others, but then the months stretched on and my dad kept saying ‘soon’ but soon never came.”

Tristan nodded to her, obviously wanting to talk through the pain of their separation. What would he say when she told him after she found out he was engaged she had no desire to come home any longer?

“Why the day after Mum died?” Ray asked King Nolan.

The king’s blue eyes looked troubled and full of pain. That hurt Jennifer. The king and Queen Anne had been loving and accepting of her. Neither of them had ever acted uppity or privileged. She’d never wanted to hurt either of them.

“The timing is definitely suspicious,” Jensen inserted.

“What do you mean?” she asked. Nobody responded for a beat, and her mind spun to worst-case accusations from these accomplished men. “No matter what you’re thinking, my father is not in league with William, or a traitor, and he definitely didn’t kill the queen.”

The king’s eyes widened. “None of us ever said Henry killed Anne.”

His loyalty touched her, but she could see he was concerned for her dad and maybe didn’t trust him any longer.

“I’m eighty percent certain it was William,” Jensen said.

“Who would you accuse with the other twenty percent?” Tristan asked.

“Naomi.” Jensen smirked at them.

Jennifer felt reassured that the impressive chief of police wasn’t pointing fingers at her dad, but she couldn’t help but look at Ray. She wanted to know his thoughts on the matter.

Ray shrugged and lifted both hands, palms up. “Macey and I did a lot of research into Mum’s murder. William is brilliant, but we’ve looked into every angle of him or Naomi being the murderer. I don’t know that even he could cover his tracks that well.”

Jennifer’s neck tightened and her cheeks went hot. King Nolan was loyal to his close friend and seemed to not have even thought of foul play with his prime minister. Jensen blamed William and Naomi. Ray was level-headed and research minded, but sometimes you had to go with your gut, not the cold, hard facts.

Was it only her devotion to her parents screaming they were innocent? No! Her mum and dad had both loved Queen Anne like a sister. Her dad had dated Anne in college and as she thought about it, her mum had made some snarky comments to her dad about the queen’s beauty or sweetness. But ... no. It wasn’t possible.

Tristan reached over and wrapped his hand around hers. “Nobody thinks your dad would hurt my mum. We all love him like family. There are just too many questions and not enough answers.”

His show of support and his logical answer, so similar to what she hoped was true, calmed her.

“Thank you,” she managed, her throat thick.

“My men are scouring the cities, villages, and mountains for William, Naomi, Henry, and Leslie,” Ray said. “Interpol, the European Union, and other organizations are on high alert as well. We’ll find them, or William will send instructions for you and we’ll find him that way. Let’s get you back to your cottage and wait for a message from William.”

“I’ll stay with her at the cottage,” Tristan said. “I want your most trusted men guarding it.”

He was so appealing, especially when he went all alpha male wolf slash crown prince on everybody. If only they were alone so she could tease him about it. But what if the man she loved was a player like every picture had revealed when she’d Googled him the past eight months? How could he possibly have fallen in love and gotten engaged four months after she left if

he loved her like he'd always claimed? She'd seen the talk show Jessie when he kissed Macey Clifton and it had about destroyed her.

“Officers Ollie and Braxton proved their loyalty watching over Derek for months in America,” Ray said carefully, deliberate and Ray-like as ever. “Lieutenant Mason and Captain Favor risked their lives rescuing Malik and Sophie two weeks ago. We’ll rotate the four of them in pairs. They will monitor outside without being seen so they can trail anyone who might leave a note. They’ll also keep you both safe. If they have to trail someone, Chad or I will be ready to take their place guarding the cottage. If this goes on too long, we’ll bring in Jensen’s most trusted men, but I believe William will act decisively and not waste much time. He has to know we’re searching for him and he’ll want to strike first.”

“I agree,” the king said. “Thank you, Ray.” He stood and everyone took that as their signal to stand. “Give Ray some time to get his men in place and then take one of the side-by-sides down to Henry’s villa in case you need to head to the mountains when William gives you instructions with the next note. If you need to stay on the paved roads, one of Henry’s vehicles will be in his detached garage,” he said to Tristan. “Even if William has men watching for Jennifer, he told her to gain your trust. Nothing would prove that more than the two of you waltzing into her parents’ cottage together, correct?”

Tristan nodded and gave her a warm smile. Through the midst of all this trouble and worry, it was very welcome to focus on the butterflies that smile created in her stomach.

“I’m fine with that,” Ray said. “I’ll call when we’re ready.” He nodded to each of them, then strode out the door.

Jensen held up a hand as well. “I’ll be on standby with my most trusted men for when William sends another note. We’ll trail him and trap him this time.” His dark eyes were fiery with determination.

“Thank you, Jensen,” the king said.

The chief shook the king and Tristan’s hands and gave Jennifer a quick side hug, then strode from the room.

The king closed the door behind them and turned back. “Jennifer, I’m terribly

sorry for what you're going through. Please believe you have the full weight of the crown, the army, the royal guard, and the police force ready and willing to rescue your parents and put William and Naomi Rindlesbacher away for good."

"Thank you." She hugged him again, her throat thick and her eyes stinging with unshed tears. "Thank you so much, King Nolan."

"It's Nolan to you." His blue eyes twinkled. "Or you can go with King Papa like Sunny does."

Jennifer smiled. She'd seen the adorable little girl interacting with the family from a distance during the wedding. She'd especially loved seeing the child in Tristan's arms.

"Nolan," she said. "Thank you."

"Of course. Henry is my best friend." He paused, cleared his throat, and continued, "And Leslie was Anne's 'soul sister.' We'll find them and bring them home safe." He turned to go as if the emotion was too much, but then he paused again. "T ... I almost forgot. I promised Philippe you and I would go on an early morning hike with him, Curt, and Aliya. They believe they've found the cure for the curse."

Tristan grimaced.

What cure? What curse?

So many questions right now.

"Can't it wait?" Tristan asked. "With all that's going on?"

"I suppose it could. Only ... those three rarely ask anything of me and they were ecstatic when I agreed."

"I imagine they were. Maybe in a couple days?" He looked at Jennifer. Everything was up in the air right now. They didn't know if William would contact her tonight or in two weeks.

"I'd love to go on an early morning hike," Jennifer said, meaning it. She'd also love to get to know Curtis's new wife, the spunky Southern beauty.

The two men exchanged a look. Tristan gestured to his dad as if it was his decision. The king nodded. “We’d love to have you come with us. I’ll talk to Philippe and Curt and plan a time, but we can put it off if we see anything from William.”

“All right.”

“Goodnight.” The king nodded to both of them and let himself out.

Tristan turned to her. Jennifer’s heart picked up its beat at the meaningful look in his blue eyes. She wanted to flirt and tease with him, but the timing wasn’t right.

He looked her over carefully and murmured, “I can’t imagine what you’re going through. I’m terribly sorry, Jenn.”

She bit at her lip to keep from crying. His thoughtful concern brought all the repressed emotion to the surface. Despite how much she loved the little ones she helped in third-world countries around the world, she’d dealt with extreme loneliness the past eight months. She’d missed him, her parents, her home, and her friends. The pictures online of him with Macey and different women had made it even worse. Then to see her mum, abused and in that monster William’s power, and now to lose her dad and not know what awful things William and Naomi were doing to them, if they were even alive ... It was devastating.

Sniffling, she was afraid she’d start sobbing if she tried to speak.

“Ah, Jenn.” As usual, Tristan didn’t need any words to know what she needed. He gathered her close, tugging her onto the couch, easily lifting her onto his lap, and wrapping his arms around her.

Jennifer forgot all the resistance she was supposed to be clinging to. She laid her head on his shoulder and let the tears fall, wetting his neck. He held her as she cried.

After a few tender minutes of snuggling into his strength, his delicious scent, and the peace he gifted her with, he gently tilted her chin up and searched her face. His blue gaze begged her permission to kiss her and take away all the pain and loneliness she’d dealt with. She’d been alone for far too long.

Shouldn't she take this slow, make sure he was committed to her and only her, focus on her parents? Instead, she found herself nodding to him, anticipation swirling in her abdomen.

His lips quirked into an alluring smile, but he got serious more quickly than she'd ever seen him. Apparently knowing that someone would bust back through that door any moment and interrupt another kiss took away his natural playfulness.

Tristan tenderly kissed the wetness on her cheek, and Jennifer sucked in a breath. The warm touch of his lips filled her with heat. When he tilted her face toward his, all reluctance was shoved away as she eagerly drew him closer.

A loud rap on the door announced yet another interruption.

The door swung open. Jennifer glanced over to see Chad standing there. Tristan's best friend. It should have been awkward, but she liked Chad too much.

"There she is. I hear tell the most beautiful woman in the world has returned to Augustine's fair soil, but she didn't feel it important or urgent enough to come give me a hello hug and kiss. Hmm?"

"If you kiss my girl, I'll thump you," Tristan growled at his friend.

Chad only smiled, but Jennifer's stomach flip-flopped. Tristan calling her 'his girl' and the possessiveness in his tone thrilled her. Was she only *one* of his girls, or was she his *only* girl?

Jennifer slid off his lap to greet Chad. Tristan caught her hand. "This will be continued very soon," he promised.

"Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what determination you have," she said, far too breathless.

"All the better to kiss you senseless with, my dear," he responded.

Chad laughed. "You two and your Big Bad Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood obsession. Come give your long-lost and most captivating male *friend* a hug."

Jennifer went to oblige Chad, but her mind swirled with all things Tristan.

She needed perspective and distance or she'd throw herself into his arms and kiss him for far too long.

Their relationship and how she'd longed for him should be the least important worry of the moment. But for some reason, it seemed the most important.

CHAPTER NINE

Tristan packed some clothes and toiletries in a bag and then he and Jennifer drove a Can-Am Maverick to the village, Chad and Ray following them. They parked the vehicles next to the bakery, then climbed into the back of the Porsche Ray was driving and waited with him. Meanwhile, Chad snuck up the path to the prime minister's villa. He was to sneak into the back door of the cottage using the security code for the alarms Jennifer had given him and check it thoroughly for sensors, recording devices, cameras, or unwanted visitors.

He returned about fifteen minutes later and informed them there were recording devices in every room, but luckily no cameras or 'unfriendlies.' He disabled the recording device in the upper east bedroom so they could pretend they were going to sleep but could actually talk freely in there. Everywhere else in the house they needed to monitor what they said or, even better, plant false seeds for William to chew on. Ray reassured them two guards would monitor outside constantly but would not be seen by William's men.

"Do either of you have a Taser or stun gun I could borrow?" Jennifer asked.

Ray and Chad exchanged a look, then glanced back at her. "Why?" Ray asked.

"I just want to have something to protect myself when William does instruct us how to retrieve my parents from him."

Both men looked at Tristan.

“I’m always carrying.” He said the words like a promise to his brother.

“But he might not be able to stay by my side,” Jennifer said.

Tristan’s entire body felt tight as every muscle seemed to engage, ready to defend her. “Let William try to pry me from your side.”

Jennifer’s eyes were warmer than they’d been since she supposedly saw him with the ‘gorgeous blonde.’ “Oh my, Big Bad Wolf, how lofty your determination is.”

“All the better to protect you with, my dear,” Tristan said.

Chad whistled. “I like it, friend.”

“I’ll bring you a stun gun,” Ray told her.

“Ray,” Tristan shot at his brother.

Ray shrugged. “We’ve seen what this snake is capable of. I don’t think we can have too many layers of protection.”

“Thank you.” Jennifer arched an eyebrow at Tristan.

He shrugged, conceding. Ray was right, and he wanted Jennifer safe more than he wanted to assuage his ego of being able to protect her.

Thanking them both, Tristan promised to call at even the hint of trouble. He escorted Jennifer out of the car. They strolled up to the cottage, flirting with each other as if she’d done as William instructed and gained his trust, but it felt fake. He and Jennifer were never fake. Would she let him talk to her and kiss her and work everything out between them?

They entered the cottage, and Tristan wondered if it was odd or unnerving for her to guard what she was saying. He was so used to it from the political spheres of his life that he could flip the switch easily.

But Jenn ... He certainly noticed her. The swish of her bronzed curls over her smooth shoulder. The alluring but unfortunately cautious smile she granted him with. The brush of her soft fingers against his arm.

They went into the kitchen, each grabbed a bottle of water, her with gas, him without, and talked about some old friends as they sipped. When Tristan

thought it had been long enough, he said, "I'm exhausted from the long day with the wedding. Would you mind showing me where I'm to sleep?"

They knew William wouldn't believe they were sleeping together. Thankfully he didn't have cameras, just the recording devices.

"Of course. Thank you for staying with me tonight," she said.

His heart raced at the thought of staying with her. Would she go with him into the bedroom without the recording device and finally be able to talk through so many things? Would they have time to kiss? Without interruptions?

They walked up the stairs and into the bedroom. Nerves assaulted him. They hadn't discussed it, but he wanted her to come into his room, talk without William monitoring what they were saying, and never leave him.

"Goodnight," Jennifer said brightly. She darted at him, planted a loud kiss on his cheek, and then pulled away.

"Jenn," he moaned, reaching for her.

She scurried back and hit the opposite wall of the hallway.

"Come stay with me," he murmured, following her, easing close, and brushing his fingers gently down her cheek. He meant the line innocently. He wanted her to come talk with him and work everything out, hopefully snuggle and kiss, but nothing inappropriate.

Jennifer leaned into his touch, her dark eyes intense and full of him.

Suddenly she straightened and ducked away from him. "I'd better rest in my own room. If my dad caught us together..." She made a cutting noise and pretended to cut her own throat.

He nodded, though he wanted to protest. She was overwrought, tired, and stressed. Her parents in that maniac's power was taxing and terrifying. Hopefully she wasn't also thinking Tristan had willingly danced with some blonde while she sat waiting for him in his suite at the castle.

"Goodnight." She walked across the hall and shut the door.

Tristan had no other option but to go to bed. He slept fitfully, wanting to sneak into her room and carry her into his so they could finally talk. There were so many missed days and misunderstandings they needed to work through.

He felt off the next morning as he showered and got dressed in casual clothes. No morning weight training or trail run, no suit to wear or meetings to deal with. Without Henry, the focus had to be on getting him and Leslie back.

Today he wanted to drag Jennifer into the bedroom free of recording devices and into his arms. They needed to talk freely and kiss even more freely.

Unfortunately, neither talking nor kissing would happen any time soon. Her door was ajar, so he went down to the main level. She was in the kitchen chopping vegetables. “Omelets?” she asked brightly, but her dark eyes were red-rimmed.

“Yes, please.” Tristan was once again reminded of the recording devices. Suddenly, being trapped in a villa with the love of his life wasn’t so appealing. He didn’t know what to say that would keep William from hurting Henry and Leslie. The guy was so unstable it was hard to know what to do.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, striding around the kitchen bar to help. His arm brushed hers and made him warm all over. She startled and glanced at him, but stepped away.

“Yes. You?”

It was such a lie. Her face and entire being looked worn out.

“Great. Thanks,” he lied back. All he’d wanted was to be with her. Sleep could wait.

They set about making breakfast, exchanging small talk but not much else. They ate on the patio overlooking the lake. Chad hadn’t said if there were recording devices out here, so they didn’t talk about anything substantial.

After breakfast, Tristan realized this would be a very, very long day. If he and Jennifer couldn’t talk, and she was keeping her distance from him because she either thought he was a player or was too worried about her parents, it was almost as miserable as being apart from her. He had her right here, and

he couldn't do anything about it.

They cleaned up breakfast and looked at each other. What to do that wouldn't tip William off? He was hopeful for a knock on the door and a note telling them what William wanted next. The anticipation was always worse than the action.

"Thank you for being with me," Jennifer said sweetly. If only he knew if it was for William's recording devices or genuine.

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," he said.

"Oh ... it seemed you quite enjoyed the *dancing* last night." Her eyes sparked a warning at him.

"I didn't, actually." He eased in closer. "It's much more exciting to be here with you."

"I can imagine." She folded her arms across her chest. "Let's do something really exciting, then."

"Oh?" His nerves thrummed with excitement. They couldn't talk through deep issues right now, but they could certainly kiss the time away while they waited for that note.

"Phase 10," she declared.

"Phase 10?" His forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"The card game." She gave him an impertinent glare and tossed her golden-brown curls as she stomped to the cupboard, grabbed the game, and returned to the table.

"Phase 10," he muttered.

It was a very poor substitute for kissing, but they did relax a fraction and laugh and tease while they played. Their hands brushed often and set off tingly warmth on his flesh. He also caught her gazing longingly at him often. She still cared deeply for him. He could see it in her eyes. They were in a weird limbo today, but he had to believe they could work everything out.

Between William listening in and the unresolved issues between them, there

was an underlying edge to everything they said. How long would they have to keep this farce up? What did William expect of her? Tristan wouldn't put it past him to be toying with both of them.

Time passed slowly as they played card games and then made sandwiches for lunch. After lunch, he wanted to get outside, maybe walk around the lake and talk freely. He didn't dare suggest it if she wanted to be here waiting for that note and instructions from William.

They agreed to watch a show after lunch. Tristan couldn't think of the last time he'd wasted time like this. He would've been thrilled to waste time with Jennifer, if it wasn't for the recording devices and awkward tension between them. How could he convince her he wasn't a player and wouldn't have looked once at any other woman if she hadn't left him? He knew now that wasn't her fault, but the fact that he'd gone on some shallow dates for events, after her dad had said she couldn't love him any longer and wasn't returning, in no way meant he didn't still love her. Maybe she thought so, though. They'd had true love and now it felt like she'd given up on that.

As they tried to look through the myriad of channels for an interesting movie, entertainment news was playing on a small screen in the corner. Tristan stealthily edged closer to her on the couch, wondering if the movie would be a good excuse to turn the volume up loud, snuggle close, and whisper to each other.

“And the dashing Prince Tristan August is, of course, surrounded by women at Prince Derek and the Adorkable Boston Beauty's lavish and well-attended wedding.”

Tristan froze as he stared at the screen, his gut turning over. There were pics of him with the crowd of women surrounding him, the blonde glued to his side, different angles that made it look like he relished the attention. Then it switched to a pic of the blond woman's arms around him from behind. It definitely looked like he was enjoying her touch as he'd truly been trying to get into the castle and to Jenn. He felt a smidgeon of pride for how good he was at acting the crown prince part, but mostly sick dread at how Jennifer was going to react to those pictures.

“Jenn,” he began.

“I think I’ll lie down in my room and have a nap,” she burst out, jumping from the couch and running up the stairs.

Tristan had to explain. He dashed up the stairs after her.

Jennifer hurried into her room and swung the door closed. He caught it before it latched and pushed it back open.

“Jenn, please—”

She shook her head, her dark eyes bright with unshed tears and yet cold, far too cold as she looked at him. Was all the love she’d felt for him buried underneath eight months of separation and her misguided jealousy?

“I need to rest.”

Tristan pushed out a breath and let her close the door in his face. He walked back downstairs with heavy steps. He spent some time pacing and texting on his phone with most of his family members—no answers, just philosophizing about William and his plan. He lay down for a bit but couldn’t sleep.

When evening arrived, he went to the kitchen and cooked. He was not a great cook—hadn’t had much opportunity to practice—but he found one of Leslie’s recipe books for chicken broccoli casserole and they had all the ingredients in the fridge and pantry, so he assembled the casserole and put it in the oven. Then he chopped up veggies and got out some ranch dressing, snacking on cauliflower, celery, carrots, and snap peas while he waited for Jennifer to come down the stairs or the casserole timer to beep.

He was going a bit nuts. He was a doer by nature and his busy role as crown prince had his schedule booked morning to night.

His dad texted. *Anything?*

Nope.

Philippe is making me insane about hiking to find the cure. We could be waiting for days or weeks for William to leave a note. Do you think Jennifer would mind if you slipped away in the morning for a bit? Ray could up the guards around the villa.

Doubt she’d mind, he texted back. Jennifer would probably be relieved to be

away from the tension surrounding them.

Okay. I'll text you details.

Tristan sent a thumbs up emoji.

The timer beeped on the casserole. He looked around the empty kitchen and living area. Would Jennifer hide in her room the rest of the evening? How could he convince her they had true love, that she was the only woman for him? His options and chances for success seemed very, very bleak.

CHAPTER TEN

A distant buzzing alarm woke Jennifer. She was surprised she'd slept with all the angst going through her. She was upset about her parents and about Tristan. Seeing him with that gorgeous blonde on the television had only added to her jealousy. She wanted to tell him how he'd broken her by falling in love with someone else and getting engaged. What if he excused it away? He'd only been filling the hole with her gone or something equally lame.

True love. They'd had true love, and he'd forgotten about her and fallen in love with someone else. Fallen so hard and fast he'd asked Macey to marry him. It still gouged at her heart, even though Macey was now married to Ray.

Jennifer glanced at the clock. It was six-ten p.m. She'd slept a long time. What was that buzzing? Jumping to her feet, she hurried into the attached bath and freshened her makeup, wishing she didn't care what she looked like.

As she opened her bedroom door, a delicious, savory scent wafted to her. She crept down the stairs. Tristan met her at the bottom, a welcoming smile on his lips. Her stomach hopped happily and her legs went weak. She clung to the stairway banister. "You ... cook?" she asked. His bedroom was clean. He cooked. What other changes had happened since they'd been apart? Her shoulders sagged. He'd fallen in love with someone else and dated hundreds of gorgeous women.

"I used a cookbook." He grinned. "Here's hoping it's not a fail."

"It smells delicious," she admitted.

He extended his hand. She should've just walked by him, but she couldn't do it. She put her hand in his, feeling the rightness of their clasped fingers all the way through. He escorted her to the table and pulled out her chair. "You sit. I've got it all ready."

She was impressed. He had the table set with cut veggies and ranch dip out. Water in the glasses and salt and pepper at the ready. He brought over a casserole dish.

She longed to talk openly with him about so many things, but those recording devices were a thorn in her side. Tristan prayed and then made small talk as they ate. It was delicious. They cleaned up together and then she got brave and asked, "Would you like to go on a walk around the lake?"

Maybe it wasn't smart to be away from the villa, but she needed to get outside and move, talk without the worry of William listening in.

"I would love to," he said.

They walked out of the cottage, arming the security system. There was no note on the step, not that she'd expected one as there had been no knock on the door or notice from their security guards. The anxiety of when that note would come and what William would demand of her weighed heavily on her shoulders. She'd be a mess without Tristan here. Even with all the angst of their separation and destroyed love and dreams she appreciated his solid and uplifting presence.

They walked about twenty meters away until they were covered by the trees with only a peek of the lake and the evening shadows on the beautiful blue water.

"Let me text Ray," he said.

She waited while he texted and waited for a response. He took her hand, and they meandered along the lake trail. Should she let him so casually hold her hand? He acted like they'd never lost their love. But his strong hand around hers was warm and reassuring, and she didn't have it in her to pull away.

His phone beeped. "One of Ray's guys is going to stay close to us and the other one will watch the cottage in case William or his people drop a note."

“All right.”

It was a beautiful fall night, a crisp feeling to the air that woke her up, but just being with T made her plenty warm.

“How are you holding up?” he asked, squeezing her hand gently.

“I’m a mess,” she admitted. “It’s awful worrying about my parents and not being able to talk about it or have any clue what role William expects me to play.”

“You’re doing amazing.”

“Thank you.”

The sun disappeared behind the trees. They had beautiful views of the lake and the mountains in the twilight.

“Jenn, I’ve been wanting to say so many things to you,” Tristan said finally. He stopped walking and turned her toward him.

“Oh?” She tugged her hand from his and rubbed her suddenly clammy palms on her pants. Was it time to finally face the past eight months?

“I promise you, despite how it looked on television, I wasn’t dancing with or interested in that blonde. I went on dates while you were gone because it was expected of me but I never moved on from you.”

“The blonde?” She was sick and tired of the blonde, of all her insecurities, but the blonde was just one of many women, the most important one being his former fiancée.

“Jenn, you’re the only one for me. You always have been, and you always will be.” His blue eyes were earnest and begged her to believe him.

“*Really?*” She spit out the word.

“You have to believe me.” He tried to reach for her, but she backed away.

“How can I believe you? When we were together, I knew what we had was one of a kind. Nothing could have made me doubt it. I hated leaving you, but my dad was terrified of the Rindlesbachers, and for good reason. I wrongly held on to the hope that true love could overcome a few months apart.”

“Of course it can.”

“You spit in the face of true love?” She felt like the witch from *The Princess Bride*, but she was only getting started. “How could you fall in love with someone else and get engaged after only four months? Four months, T! Engaged. Planning to marry and love someone else, knowing you could move on so easily. You must have been desperately in love with Macey to ask her to marry you so quickly.”

His eyes were wide and his mouth slack.

“Jenn,” he began.

She held up a hand. She wasn’t finished. “You ripped me apart. Devastated me. I could barely function. You made me doubt everything we had, everything I believed.”

“Jenn ...” He looked tortured, contrite, as sick as she’d felt when she heard that awful news.

“How could I have been so stupid?” Tristan shook his head. “I should have told you yesterday on the trail, but there’s been so much upheaval and secrecy, I forgot you didn’t know. But of course you wouldn’t. We kept it so quiet.”

“What are you talking about?” Anger and confusion fought inside her. This wasn’t contrite. He couldn’t claim he hadn’t been engaged. The whole world had seen him kiss Macey Clifton like she was his one true love on that talk show. Of course she’d also seen Macey kiss Ray in that first press release, claiming it was Tristan. She’d known instantly it wasn’t Tristan and wondered what twisted game that woman had played with both of their minds.

“Ah, Jenn, I’m so sorry. My engagement with Macey was a farce. A hundred percent. Purely a scheme to bring an expert into the inner circle to help us with security. I was being threatened, and we were investigating my mum’s death. The engagement meant so little to me that I didn’t consider how it would look to you. That must have hurt you, and I completely understand you’d be upset and questioning how I could possibly move on like that. I am very sorry.”

Jennifer felt like somebody had slammed something into her forehead. She staggered.

Tristan reached for her and this time she let him rest his hands on her waist and steady her.

She just stared at him. “You weren’t really engaged?”

“No.” He smiled slightly. “Ray fell for Macey from the moment they met. He tried to be all noble about it, but I could see it and I pushed them together.”

They studied each other for a few beats. It was a lot to digest. She took a deep breath, but she didn’t quite know what to say. Macey wasn’t some scheming woman and Tristan had never loved his now sister-in-law or betrayed Jennifer by asking someone else to marry him. It was insane. If only she’d known.

“Your dad insisted you had left me and didn’t want me to come for you, and that you couldn’t love me any longer. I didn’t want to believe it but as months dragged on and not even a simple text from you ...” His voice was sad, but his gaze was still intense. “I know how broken feels, Jenn.”

Her heart went out to him. That had been horrible of her father to do. In his mind, he’d been protecting her from William Rindlesbacher, not letting anybody know where Jennifer was. But couldn’t he have quietly given Tristan some hope?

Jennifer eased closer to him. She slid her hands up his chest and framed his strong jaw with her palms, liking the feel of the scars on one side. “You promise it’s only me for you?”

“I swear it, Jenn.” His voice was earnest, intense, and beautiful.

He bent down closer, and she arched up.

“Prince Tristan,” a deep voice said from off the trail on the wooded side.

Jennifer tasted disappointment instead of his lips yet again. Despite the interruption and the yearning to kiss him, though, she felt light and happy. Tristan was still hers. He hadn’t fallen in love and been engaged. He loved her.

“Forgive me, sir.” A man edged closer to them. “But it’s going to be dark soon and General Ray does not want you two exposed with only one guard.”

“We understand.” Tristan nodded to the man.

He turned her with his arm, took her hand, and they walked back toward the cottage. The guard stayed hidden, but Jennifer knew he was there. It brought back the worries about William and her parents.

“My dad asked me to go on a hike in the morning,” he told her. “With Curt, Aliya, and Philippe.”

“I’d love to go. If that’s okay,” she hastened to add. She’d love to meet Prince Curt’s sassy American bride and she loved hiking, especially with Tristan.

“We’ll make the arrangements to keep you safe.” He squeezed her hand and smiled at her.

They reached the villa far too quickly, and darkness crept in around them.

“Do you want to go in my room and ... talk?” Tristan asked, leaning down to be closer to her.

“Yes, please.” Her heart hammered at what ‘talking’ might involve. His room was the only one Chad had removed the recording devices from.

They walked up to the door, typed in the code, and then went inside. One of the guards silently appeared in the doorframe and held up a hand to them. Tristan nodded.

Tristan told her stories about Sunny, Sophie’s daughter, as they walked into the main living area and tried to act casual. The guard returned and gave them another nod. He quietly let himself out and Tristan armed the security again.

They headed up to his room, and Jennifer’s nerves and anticipation ramped up. Her hand trembled slightly as he escorted her in and closed the door behind her.

“Would you like to sit and talk through ... everything?” he asked, gesturing to a small love seat in the corner.

They could get cozy and chat and kiss. “Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what little discernment you have,” she teased, relieved to talk more openly and to realize she did trust him and believed that he hadn’t spit on true love.

His brow furrowed as if he wasn’t sure how to reply to that. “All the better to ... misunderstand you with, my dear.”

Jennifer smiled and placed her palms on his chest. She could feel his heart racing out of control, and her smile broadened. This was her Big Bad Wolf. Hers alone. His heart raced for her. He declared fervently that he was hers and hers alone. She loved him.

“We are finally alone,” she said softly. “No one will interrupt us until at least six a.m. for the hike, and you owe me six failed kisses as far as I can count. There will be no talking until you remedy those failures.”

“Failed?” He looked put-out. “Interrupted, my dear. I have never failed at anything, and I especially won’t fail at kissing you very, very thoroughly.”

“Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what lovely intentions you have.”

He grinned and pulled her flush to him. “I have unimaginable and fabulous plans for you, Little Red Riding Hood.”

“Do these plans include kissing me for a scandalously long time?”

“Yes, my dear.”

“You really are the Big Bad Wolf.” She fluttered her eyelashes at him.

“I may be big, but I’m not bad, not at kissing my true love. I am in fact very, very good.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Tristan let out a throaty growl befitting a wolf and not a crown prince at all. Then he bent close and captured her lips with his.

The kiss was everything she’d remembered about her Big Bad Wolf. His lips were still as persuasive and captivating, he still tasted of mint and happiness, and he still loved her. She swore she could feel it in their kiss.

This kiss, unlike their previous ones, also had a reconnection, a depth, a

healing from their shared pain, and a longing born of so many dreary nights spent apart. They were finally together again. Jennifer would make the most of it. She was in her version of heaven. Tristan's arms held her close to him while his lips tenderly manipulated hers. So much time lost and so much to make up for.

The kisses intensified and her legs threatened to give out. She was weak with love and yearning for Tristan, the only man who could capture and love her completely.

As if sensing how overcome she was, Tristan swept her off her feet and against his strong chest. She was safe and protected and loved.

"Oh my, what strong arms you have," she whispered against his lips.

"All the better to carry, protect, and love you with, my dear."

She kissed him ardently. He sank into the loveseat, returning her kisses as he cradled her on his lap and against his chest.

"Do you?" She framed his face with her hands. She loved him, all of him, and had to hear the words. To undisputedly know he still loved her back.

"Do I ...?" He kissed her lips, her cheek, her jawline, her neck. Every kiss made her quiver and filled her with love and desire for him. He paused to glance up at her, waiting for her answer.

"Still love me?" she squeaked out. Why was she still uncertain? This was Tristan. Her love. Her Big Bad Wolf. Her crown prince. But they'd been apart for eight months. She'd jealously watched as he'd been engaged to the incredible Macey and then dated a lot of beautiful and accomplished women during that time. She'd left him with no explanation and apparently no way to contact her. Could he really let her drop back into his life, throw all kinds of danger at him and his family, and still love her as he had? Deeply committed to their true love story?

"Ah, Jenn ..." He cradled her cheeks with his large palms. "I don't just love you."

Her heart raced and cold chills swept over her. Her entire body sagged with disappointment.

“I like you ...” He kissed her forehead, then pulled back to meet her gaze. “I belong with you ...” He softly kissed one cheek, then grazed his lips over hers in a motion that left her breathless and wanting more. “I adore you ...”

Jennifer’s heart raced for a completely different reason than fear that he didn’t love her. He did. He adored her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely. “Ah, Tristan ... what beautiful lines you have.”

“All the better to woo you with, my dear.” He kissed her intensely, deepening the kiss and making her body and heart soar with love for him. He pulled back sooner than she would’ve liked and stared deeply into her eyes as the night settled around them. “Jenn ... those are no lines. It’s the truth. You’ve always captured me completely and are the only woman for me. I love you now and always, no matter what.”

Jennifer let out a happy cry and kissed him again.

Much, much later, she knew they should separate and rest, but there was still so much kissing to give and receive and a lot to talk through. “Can you tell me about everything that’s happened with you and your family since I left?” she asked finally. She was content and safe in his strong arms, but she really wanted to hear about the bombing and how he was dealing with it. Plus the amazing events that had led to him faking an engagement and every one of his brothers finding the loves of their lives.

“We might have to settle for cliff’s note versions, unless you don’t want to sleep tonight.”

“Who needs sleep when you have the Big Bad Wolf, alpha male, crown prince holding you?” She fluttered her eyelashes at him.

He grinned wolfishly, then proceeded to kiss her just like an alpha wolf or crown prince might do. Thankfully he kept things chaste, but he captured her completely.

After far too short of a time, he settled back and started talking. He started with Ray and Macey’s love story, including his fake engagement to Macey and the bombing that scarred his left side. The engagement that had once gouged her apart was fascinating to hear from the true perspective.

Trailing her fingertips across the bumpy, uneven flesh of his jawline and

down his neck, she took her time looking at his scars and letting him see they didn't change who he was to her. She accepted and loved them as they were now part of her love.

“Are you healed?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “It was miserably painful, but my dad hired the best burn specialists and we got through it.”

“I'm not just talking about your physical healing.” She placed her hand on his heart. “Emotionally.”

He wrinkled his nose at her. “I'm a guy, Jenn. We don't do emotion.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn't help but laugh. “I'm sure that's mostly true, but it had to be hard to have part of your cheek, jaw, and neck scarred.”

“It got my shoulder, too.” He pulled his collar over so she could glimpse his muscular shoulder and the singed flesh there as well.

Jennifer lightly traced the ridges of the scars on his shoulder with one finger. “I'm so sorry. You're doing ... all right?”

“I can't claim it wasn't an adjustment.” He met her gaze steadily. He might be hiding his pain, but he seemed pretty transparent. “Three of the thousands of women chasing me were put off by it.”

“Ah!” she gasped, smacking her palm against his chest. “What a massive ego you have.”

He laughed and cradled her closer. “All the better to impress you with, my dear.”

“I'm not impressed,” she insisted.

He smiled but suddenly got serious. “Jenn, do the scars bother you?”

“No.” She held his gaze. “T, look who you're talking to. I know and love you so much deeper than what's here on your skin. I'd still love you if you lost your hair, gained a hundred pounds, or grew a questionable mustache. And besides, I don't trust any woman who doesn't like a few good scars ... I think they make you even more enticing, more rugged and manly.”

His brows lifted. He pressed her against him and kissed her very, very thoroughly. When he pulled back, he said in a husky voice, “I haven’t liked the scars. They kind of shock me every time I see them, but if you think I’m enticing with the scars, then all the pain was worth it and I’ll love them.”

“I don’t like that they shock you to see them, or that you went through pain.”

“You didn’t cause the pain, and I know you wouldn’t want me to go through it, but you should know, Jenn…” His blue eyes captured her. “I’d go through anything for you.”

She kissed him this time. It was so intense and all-encompassing she was swept away.

Tristan pulled back, and they were both breathing far too quickly. “We’d better ease up on the kissing or go to our own bedrooms.”

She smiled, loving how she affected him, but she wasn’t ready to let him go just yet. “Tell me about each of your brothers’ stories instead. I can’t stand to be away from you.”

He grinned. “No one can blame you for that.”

She laughed, but instead of kissing him like she wanted to, she rested her head on his shoulder and said, “Tell me stories.”

“All right.” He talked through each of his brothers’ adventures while falling in love. All were intriguing and intense, yet romantic and happy. Most of their troubles originated from one disturbed family—the Rindlesbachers.

It was after midnight, and they were still chatting. He wanted to hear everything she’d been up to. It was hard to condense all the volunteer work and friends she’d made into a quick story, and she was tiring quickly. It had been a long and emotional day, and they were going hiking at six.

“You’re exhausted,” Tristan said, cradling her close as he stretched out on the loveseat as best he could. “Let’s rest for a few hours.”

“We could lay on the bed,” she suggested, cuddling into him.

“Absolutely not. You might have enough self-control for that, but I am only masquerading as a crown prince. The Big Bad Wolf would definitely come

out and I would kiss you far too intensely if we were snuggled on that bed.”

She smiled—loving that he was so drawn to her, loving how they teased, loving everything about this perfect man. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Cradled close to him, Jennifer felt more content, safe, and loved than she’d been in eight months. Her Big Bad Wolf was back in her life, and he loved her and only her. He’d rescue her parents, keep her safe, and they’d live happily ever after.

Nothing could go wrong now. Not with Tristan back in her life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The alarm jarred Tristan awake at five-fifty a.m. He somehow silenced the buzzing while not releasing his mesmerizing love, who'd fallen asleep in his arms. He was tangled up with Jennifer on the too-small couch, his arm asleep, his back aching, and all he could think as he looked down at her beautiful face was that he didn't want to move.

"Time to hike?" she asked blearily, blinking up at him.

He groaned. "Who agreed to this?"

"You. But I love hiking and I'm dying to meet Aliya. It sounded like a fabulous idea until I stayed up kissing and snuggling the Big Bad Wolf all night."

"You'd better not regret that."

"Never."

Tristan wanted to kiss her all over again, but he had morning breath and he needed to get changed and ready to go. Hopefully after their hike to find the 'cure' they could snuggle and kiss and talk some more. Would William get suspicious if they hid out in this room where the recording device had been disabled? Who knew how long they'd wait here for William to make a move.

Her parents were still in William's power, and that cast a pall over everything. He couldn't imagine anything worse and wanted Henry and Leslie home safe. He could go back to teasing Henry, after he was on his best behavior for long enough to ask for the prime minister's daughter's hand in

marriage. It was past time he put the two-karat diamond he'd bought for her before she left and his mum's wedding ring on each of her ring fingers.

Jennifer smiled and disentangled herself, sliding off of him.

"Back to monitoring what we say." He tilted his head to the hallway.

She nodded. "I'll go change into hiking clothes and meet you downstairs."

"All right." He hated to watch her go, but he hurried to use the bathroom, brush his teeth, and put on a T-shirt, shorts, socks, and trail runners.

Jennifer was waiting for him downstairs with a small pack slung over her shoulder. She handed over a water bottle. "I can't wait to go on a hike with Curt and Aliya," she said for the benefit of the microphones, if anybody was listening at six a.m.

"You'll love Aliya. She's hilarious." He escorted her out of the house, and they walked in the predawn dark through the edge of the village and then up the third mountain trail. About a hundred yards up, he saw headlights in the trees. His dad and Lieutenant General Cordon were waiting in a blue and gray Kawasaki Teryx. A red Polaris Razor with two guards was parked behind them.

"No," he groaned, opening the rear door and helping Jennifer in. "I have to ride in this piece of junk?"

His dad chuckled. "It's a quick ride in my favorite all-terrain off-road vehicle."

Philippe smiled, accustomed to their banter about everything—the best off-road vehicle brand and model was a subject they never agreed on.

"Oh my, what a spoiled prince you are," Jennifer teased as he climbed in the other side and did up the five-point harness.

"All the better for you to have to humble me, my dear."

"I am fabulous at that."

"Yes, you are."

They were back to their teasing and devoted love. All was right in the world,

or it soon would be. Tristan was ecstatic and felt more like himself than he had in eight months.

He caught his dad's pleased smile as they pulled onto the trail. Despite the danger Henry and Leslie were still in, Jennifer back and loving Tristan was definitely something to smile about.

Everything became a blur of darkness and speed after that smile. Tristan would've teased he didn't know a Kawasaki could move that fast, but nobody would've heard him over the roar of the engine. His dad pushed the Teryx to its highest RPMs. The usually twenty-minute drive to Curt and Aliya's seemed to last moments, but they were vicious and uncomfortable moments as the forest and trail rushed past them and cold wind whipped their hair and stung their eyes. The lights of the other vehicle barely kept pace with them.

His dad loved fast vehicles, as evidenced by the eight million dollars he'd recently spent on his new Lamborghini. The king was a fabulous driver in whatever vehicle he chose, but Jennifer and Philippe were white-knuckling the safety bars and had to uncurl their grip when they finally stopped at the clearing in front of Curt and Aliya's large cabin, where light spilled from the huge windows. Dawn was approaching, the sky tinged bluish pink and the trees and surroundings visible now, but the sun's full appearance through those trees was at least an hour away.

"I forgot about the king's insane driving ability," Jennifer muttered.

"Is 'ability' the word you meant to use?" Tristan asked.

"Okay, you got me. Insane driving."

His dad only laughed. He knew they were teasing and he was one of the best drivers Tristan had ever ridden with.

"I quite enjoyed the ride, sir," Philippe lied.

Tristan had to hide his smile now. Philippe was a dedicated leader in their military, but quite the kiss-up with the king and Ray.

Curt and Aliya walked onto their porch. Aliya clapped her hands together. "Oh, yay! T's lost love has come home and soon I'll have another fabulous sister-in-law."

Everybody's eyebrows shot up. "Hold your horses," Tristan teased Aliya. "You're puttin' the cart before the horse."

Aliya giggled at that. "I'm rubbin' off on you like the rust of a redneck's truck bumper onto your favorite white blouse."

"What language are you both speaking?" Jennifer asked him in an undertone.

He grinned.

"Don't unload," Curt said. "We'll take the side-by-sides to the Austrian side of the mountain and hike from there."

Jennifer gripped the bar again and murmured, "Please, I'd prefer the extra miles hiking."

The king smiled knowingly. "Curt will have to lead the way, so it will be a more sedate pace."

"Prayers answered," Jennifer said.

They all laughed.

Curt kept a decent pace, but they thankfully didn't hurtle through the trees. With the sky getting lighter, they could actually look at the beautiful multi-colored leaves and talk. Jennifer asked questions about the curse and the cure and Philippe eagerly shared about the numerous queens in the past who had drowned in the lake, supposedly a suicide curse. He wisely said nothing about Tristan's mum having committed suicide. Tristan hated that theory and knew his dad did as well. Horrifically, no murderer had been found in eight months. Unless William had masterfully killed his mum and hid the evidence, Tristan had no idea who could've done it. Maybe she had committed suicide. Maybe it was simply a horrific accident they'd never have any answers for.

Even Philippe admitted that nobody had any idea what the cure might be. Was it a token that protected the royals, a blessed chalice that could make water holy, an herb that healed a royal female body and soul? Philippe became more animated as he talked. It was obvious he believed in the curse and the cure and had every expectation that they would find it today.

Tristan had never believed in any of it and didn't think his father did either,

but it was telling that they'd both come on the adventure on this cool fall morning, especially with William and Naomi kidnapping Henry only two days ago.

Had his dad only agreed to indulge Philippe, Curt, and Aliya, or did he hold some hope that the cure might be real? The fabled cure could no longer save his wife, but his dad loved each of his daughters-in-law. If Jennifer became queen, maybe it could protect her. That thought changed this outing from a mild curiosity and chance to hike with Jennifer to an interest in what they might find.

They passed a patrol of Ray's guards in a Polaris Razor. The men saluted and slowed, but the king waved them on and didn't stop.

Twenty minutes later, they parked the side-by-sides off the trail as best they could. Everyone but Tristan strapped on small backpacks and they set off to the Austrian side of the mountains.

"What do you have in the backpack?" he asked Jennifer.

"Oh, you know, just some fruit snacks, water bottles, a knife or two, bear spray." She smiled sweetly up at him as they navigated the steep trail.

His brows shot up. "Fruit snacks. Very practical."

"Thank you."

"I wasn't aware we had a bear problem in Augustine."

Her eyes darkened. "I'm hoping to meet up with a rat sometime soon and give him a face full of it."

"Glad you're prepared."

Aliya edged up to chat with Jennifer and soon the two were laughing and talking like old friends. Tristan loved listening to the complimentary tones of Jennifer's cultured, lilting voice and Aliya's hilarious 'southern sass' as she liked to call it. He caught Curt smiling at the two of them and then exchanged a smile with his brother.

Would Tristan finally join his brothers in marital bliss? His path with Jennifer had seemed as difficult to climb as the rugged mountains surrounding them,

sometimes even impossible. Maybe they'd finally found a passable trail and his Little Red Riding Hood could soothe the Big Bad Wolf once and for all.

The trail became more rugged, with a sharp drop-off to the right, at least seventy meters down. Then it gradually became more and more narrow and dangerous. They clung to roots and tree branches and Tristan became concerned one of them would slip and fall to their deaths. Was some unknown and probably unreal cure worth this?

Then the trail disappeared altogether.

They each leaned toward the mountainside, holding on to whatever stable tree, root, or boulder they could while Philippe and Curt conferred. Philippe studied the map they'd found, pointed excitedly, and then they started clearing the thick growth in front of them. Searching for a path or some kind of cave?

The king looked at Tristan and raised his free hand. Tristan thought this was getting a little out of control. Jennifer was holding tightly to a root and appeared safe. Hopefully they'd give up this nonsense and head back soon. He and Jennifer could hike all the way back to Traverse with the guards trailing them in the side-by-side. They'd cook together in her parents' cottage, snuggle, talk, and plan while they waited for William to make his move.

An opening appeared in the mountainside, interrupting Tristan's plans. His eyes widened as the brush was pulled away enough to reveal a cave entrance.

Aliya clapped happily. "Yay! I knew this was it! I've been searchin' for this like a squirrel tryin' to find his acorn!"

Tristan leaned forward, definitely interested now. "You've never seen this opening or cave before?" he asked Curt.

"No." His brother moved more underbrush out of the way. "I haven't explored on the Austrian side like I have the Augustine, but we think the borders may have been different back when they placed the cure here."

Tristan was still skeptical about a cure, but it was definitely intriguing to find a cave opening and supposedly they'd found it from some centuries-old map. His interest was piqued, at least. They could explore the cave. Maybe they'd

find some cool relic people thought was the cure. Then he and Jennifer could have a leisurely hike back and snuggle and kiss and talk.

Curt pulled a flashlight out of his bag and Philippe pulled one off his utility belt. They turned the powerful lights on.

“Stay out here and guard the trail and the opening,” Philippe instructed the guards.

They both nodded and moved to the most comfortable position they could on the mountainside.

Philippe led the way. Curt escorted Aliya next. His dad gestured for Tristan and Jennifer to go, and the king took up the rear.

It wasn't easy to see, but it appeared to be an abandoned tunnel, definitely created by human hands. They walked single file, following the flashlights' beams cutting through spider webs. Tristan felt like Indiana Jones. Everyone was quiet, and the apprehension in the air was thick. What would they find?

After about fifteen minutes, the path opened into a large cavern with mining shafts, a wooden door across the way, and some broken-down equipment. They all stopped and looked around. An old salt mine, but not old enough to contain the cure.

“This isn't right,” Curt murmured, his voice full of disappointment.

“I'm sorry, lover.” Aliya also sounded let down. “I had such high hopes.”

“Why isn't it right?” Tristan asked.

“This mine is probably only a hundred and fifty years old.” Curt gazed around.

“Maybe the cure was hidden here before they started mining,” Philippe said.

“If it was, they probably ruined it.”

A wooden door swung open straight across the cave and overhead lights flicked on. Tristan blinked against the sudden brightness and stared as four men walked through the door. Three walked and one was shoved into the cave.

Two large men in black clothing each carried the Steyr AUG, the Austrian bullpup assault rifle. They were flanked by William Rindlesbacher. The despicable man was pushing the prime minister with the butt of a gun. Henry's hands were tied behind his back, his suit was ripped, blood matted on his brow and at his hairline, and bruises marred his face. Tristan's gut lurched seeing his respected friend and mentor in such a state.

His first thought was how to keep Jennifer safe from those guns. His second thought was they shouldn't have left the guards to guard the opening. Cold chills prickled his skin.

They were in desperate trouble.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Dad!” Jennifer cried out, rushing across the cave toward her father.

“Jenn, wait!” Tristan made a grab for her but missed. He had no desire to see her anywhere near William.

“Jennifer, come.” William beamed at her. “You’re exactly the beautiful woman I want by my side.”

Jennifer faltered, clearly realizing she was running straight into William’s power, but wanting to get to her dad’s side. Her eyes darted around, and she shifted her weight back and forth. Her worry, fear, and indecision were palpable.

Philippe yanked out his sidearm. Curt, Tristan, and the king all followed suit. Curt ushered Aliya behind him with his free hand. How could they get Henry away from William’s gun and keep everyone safe? The sheer amount of bullets William’s men could unload in this small space was terrifying.

“Jenn, come back,” Tristan said softly.

Jennifer eased her way back toward them. Surprisingly, William let her. He watched her like a falcon eyeing a mouse, but he didn’t move. Every step Jennifer took away from William, Tristan’s shoulders relaxed a centimeter.

Philippe suddenly leaped at her, jabbed his pistol in her temple, wrapped his other arm around her waist, and yanked her across the space toward William, Henry, and William’s mercenaries.

“Jenn!” Tristan hollered, starting toward them with his Ruger pointed straight at Philippe’s head. What was their lieutenant general doing?

“No!” Aliya cried out.

“Philippe!” the king yelled.

“Please stop moving forward, sir,” Philippe demanded of Tristan in his usual simpering tone. “Unless you want her death on your hands. I respect and admire you, Prince Tristan, but her life means little to me.”

“No.” Tristan stopped moving. “Don’t hurt her.”

“How much pain we inflict on the beautiful and long-lost lady all depends on your next move, Prince Tristan.” William grinned at him, looking like a contented pit viper.

Tristan’s gut clenched, and it was all he could do to not shoot Philippe in the head or rush across the space and pummel the man. He was afraid if he loosed a bullet, it would quickly become a bloodbath.

“Or should I even call you prince?” William asked, all smiles and benevolence. “Once you four royals are dead, and I use the term ‘royal’ very loosely regarding Princess Aliya.” He sneered at her. “A backwoods hick from America elevated to a princess. Despicable.”

“What is in a person’s heart matters much more than their wealth or blood, you disgustin’ fool,” Aliya shot at him.

Curt held her firmly behind him.

William rolled his eyes. “Princess Macey and Princess Ellery are almost as bad. Hattie Ballard being given the title of ‘princess’ is a stain upon the royal house. At least Prince Malik had the common decency to fall in love with an Augustinian.” He waved a hand. “Of course the common people of Augustine agree with me that the August family has befouled the throne by marrying beneath their station. The other princes and princesses will be executed soon after you all die. Thankfully, Lieutenant General Cordon, Prime Minister Shule, and I will be there to help Augustine pick up the pieces. The military will turn to the lieutenant general, naturally, and I’ve got two loyal followers in the police department simply awaiting their moment to assassinate Chief

Jensen and take his place.”

“Philippe and Henry would never betray the crown,” the king said, standing straight and giving Philippe a look that made him squirm.

“My apologies, sir.” Philippe actually sounded apologetic. “I couldn’t resist the pay raise, and future-King William offered a retirement package complete with dental coverage. You understand.”

It sounded like a joke Tristan might have made with Henry or his father. How many times had Philippe listened in, smiling indulgently at them as they’d teased? Now he looked uncomfortable but resolute in his choice.

“How long have you been a traitor?” Tristan asked.

“Not long, only a few days actually, and I thoroughly enjoyed working with both of you.” He tilted his head respectfully to Tristan and the king in turn. “But I am getting ready to retire, you see. Once the new regime is installed in Augustine and the people trust their new leaders, I will transition to living full time in Bora Bora with my wife. Giselle and I will live quite comfortably with what we’ve invested over the years and the additional ten million dollar bonus the new king has promised me.”

“You can’t trust William,” King Nolan said.

Philippe simply shrugged, pushing the gun harder into Jennifer’s temple. She winced.

Every muscle in Tristan’s body tensed. He couldn’t stand seeing Jennifer in their power.

“It’s a better offer than you’ve ever given me, King Nolan, and the money’s already been transferred. I do apologize. I was happy working with you, and I truly wanted to find the cure, but plans had to change. Now if you’ll indulge me, I need the queen’s wedding ring.”

King Nolan glared at Phillippe, but he pulled the four-karat diamond out of his pocket. Tristan hadn’t even realized his dad had removed it from the safe and brought it along. He remembered now Philippe saying the queen’s wedding ring and he and his dad were all needed. It made complete sense now. Needed to betray them to William.

His dad hurled the ring at Philippe. It bounced off the traitor's arm and landed on the cave floor. Philippe calmly said to Jennifer, "Pick the ring up, please."

She scooped low and picked it up. For some reason, Tristan felt better with his mum's ring in her hands.

"Put it on," William instructed her.

She frowned at him, but obeyed. As Jennifer turned her hand, the overhead lights caught the sparkling pink-hued diamond and reflected it. Tristan could feel the rightness of her wearing that ring even from here. Could it somehow protect her like the ring was fabled to have done for other royal women in the past? Jennifer wasn't in the family yet, but he wanted her to be.

Sadly, the ring had not protected his mum.

"Beautiful," William said. "Keep it on for safekeeping. Wouldn't want to lose that heirloom and my proof that King Nolan turned the kingdom over to me, the rightful successor, before he was killed in a cave explosion. Tragic."

Tristan and his brothers had philosophized whether William was growing more insane after his crazy stunt trying to force Malik to kill Tristan, the king, and Henry with a bomb several weeks ago. This confirmed it. The man was an international criminal and thought he could take over Augustine without any repercussions from the United Nations, Interpol, the European Union, or their other allies.

"You pretended to be interested in the cure to set this all up?" Aliya asked Philippe.

"The cure has been a fascination of mine for some time, and I thought it might also bring me great wealth. I hate to let that dream go, but I think living on a tropical island will be a healing balm. I've enjoyed my time exploring with you, but yes, I did forge the map and the message." Phillippe smiled, obviously very proud of himself.

"And this was much easier than leaving another note and instructions for Jennifer and having General Raymond and all his trusted troops lurking in the shadows," William added. Then he cackled like a hyena. "Though of course I could have outwitted them, as I did when we framed Hattie Ballard for that

weasel Franz Wengreen's murder.”

“Henry will never support you,” the king said, his head tilted regally, his pistol pointed at William. Tristan felt a burst of pride for his father. King Nolan looked every bit the king and in charge of the situation. Though Tristan had no idea how they'd prevail against William this time.

Their guards were too far away to hear them and he doubted very much they could send an SOS on their phones from this cave. He was a fabulous shot. His dad and Curt were great too, but they would have to be perfect to take out Philippe, William, and William's cronies, and they'd need a plan for who would shoot who. With Henry and Jennifer straight in harm's way with guns to their heads, and Aliya in danger also, their odds of success and keeping everyone safe were close to zero.

Henry looked at King Nolan. These two men were lifelong friends and had worked so well together to help and lift the people of Augustine, creating an almost utopian society before William and Naomi had disrupted everything.

William had lied, cheated, manipulated, bribed, and killed to accomplish his diabolical plans. He'd come between the king and the prime minister for his own selfish purposes.

Henry looked absolutely miserable, but he said nothing.

“And neither will my people,” the king continued.

“Well, people are fickle, you know that, but it won't matter much when Philippe's well-disciplined troops, trained admirably by General Raymond—I have to give him credit there—are patrolling the streets and villages, slaughtering any rebellious parties on the spot.”

Tristan's stomach turned over. This man would kill his own countrymen to achieve his evil purposes. Would Ray's troops really perform such tasks?

“As for Henry supporting us, we not only have his wife and daughter in our possession, but Henry has a little secret he's been hiding for eight months now. He's proven to be reasonably compliant to keep his family safe and his wife from being prosecuted. Leslie is terrified of prison, and Henry is terrified of his wife or daughter being cut into little pieces. Pathetic.”

“Dad?” Jennifer squeaked. “Mum?”

Tristan’s neck burned. What could Leslie have done?

Eight months?

His mum.

“Henry?” The king’s voice was commanding but now filled with concern. His blue eyes were a mixture of steel and compassion that reminded Tristan of being a child and knowing he was in trouble.

Henry looked even more miserable. “Jenn,” he said softly, turning to look at her. “If only I’d sent your mum with you the day I sent you away. If only you’d never returned. Then William couldn’t have manipulated me for so long and everyone I care about wouldn’t be butchered by this monster.”

Tristan’s palms grew clammy.

Henry locked gazes with him and then with his dad. He murmured, “I’m terribly sorry. I should’ve chosen a different path. Nothing was clear to me at the time. I was a mess and Leslie was worse. But now I can see nothing is worth bending to William’s demands. If this maniac becomes king and hurts our people, I’ll never forgive myself.”

What had Henry done? Could he or Leslie possibly have ... killed Tristan’s mum? Nausea threatened to choke him, and he had no clue what to say. His dad didn’t seem to, either.

“*Brilliant genius,*” William corrected. “I will keep Jennifer and Leslie alive, at least until Henry tries to betray me again, or any of them outlive their usefulness. Prime Minister Shule will be a necessary figure for the transition of power. It’s enough for the Augustinians to get used to a new royal family. I want them to have a familiar face with their prime minister.” William’s voice was benevolent, as if he were doing the entire country a favor. “I might even allow Jennifer to still become a princess.” His gaze raked over her. “Treven needs a well-connected and gorgeous bride to produce me legitimate royal heirs.”

“No,” Tristan roared as Jennifer cried out in dismay, her beautiful face pinched in horror. Tristan’s hand shook as he pointed his Ruger at William.

He was a crack shot, trained by his incredible twin. He could kill the man and end all of this.

As if William guessed how close he was to pulling the trigger, he stepped behind Jennifer.

“Now.” William grinned. “Let’s get back to the big reveal so we can leave the royals here to die. The entire cave is wired to blow. I’ll take Jennifer and Henry back home, where Philippe and my trusted men will quietly kill the unsuspecting Raymond, Steffan, Derek, Malik, Chief Jensen, Major Chad, and the unworthy American princesses. We’ll keep Princess Sophie and my rightful granddaughter Sunny alive. I do so love comforting grieving widows. When Naomi isn’t watching.” His smile was creepy. “That bratty Kiera we’ll ship off to boarding school in Siberia.”

At least he wouldn’t outright murder Kiera. Tristan’s muscles tightened. He wouldn’t let William get away with any of it. They all still held their pistols, but with Henry and Jennifer in William and Philippe’s grasp and their silent, muscle-bound flunkies holding automatic guns, it was difficult to think how to fight their way free without risking Jennifer or Aliya’s safety.

“I apologize, Aliya, that you have to die. I usually don’t murder beautiful women, but with the big reveal Henry is about to give us, and the fact you tried to elevate yourself from white trash to Augustine princess, of course you understand why you must be silenced.”

“Oh, you’re quite the quintessential gentleman, aren’t you, you lily-livered rattlesnake.”

William only smiled at Aliya’s insults. “Time to get it all off your chest, eh, Henry? I want the former king to die knowing his closest friend started his downfall and betrayed him.”

Henry glowered at him. Tristan couldn’t imagine his friend and Jennifer’s dad would say anything because of William’s goading, but maybe he did need to get it all off his chest. He immediately started talking in a low, mournful rumble, studying the king. “Nolan, I can’t express how deeply sorry I am. Leslie never meant for Anne to get hurt. You know how she loved her, but Leslie became irrationally jealous and emotionally unstable. Naomi manipulated her expertly, pretending to be her only loyal friend ...” He hung

his head.

“Henry.” The king’s voice was soft. Resigned. “What happened?”

“Yes, Henry,” William mocked. “Tell him what happened. How Leslie killed Queen Anne in a fit of jealous rage because you and the queen were sleeping together.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from everyone. Tristan knew the snake was lying, but even saying such filth out loud stained his mum’s memory.

“Dad?” Jennifer asked. “No ...”

“That is a lie,” King Nolan said. “Henry would never betray Leslie, and Anne would never betray me.”

“Are you certain?” William asked. “They were young lovers, after all. Young love is so romantic and full of sparkle and shine. It’s hard to forget those feelings. Ask Prince Tristan. He’d move heaven and earth for the love of his youth.” He touched Jennifer’s shoulder. She flinched away from him. He looked her over with a lustful sneer. “So beautiful. Hard to blame him.”

Tristan was ready to shut William’s disgusting mouth and get the loser far away from Jennifer.

“Henry?” The king ignored William and tilted his head to the prime minister with all the grace of a king. Tristan was always proud of his father and today more than ever.

“I also would never betray you,” Henry said, standing as straight as his injuries would allow. “Naomi poisoned Leslie’s mind to Anne and me. She convinced Leslie we were having an affair. At a lunch outing the day of Anne’s murder, Leslie persuaded Anne to meet in the middle of the lake on the ice at two a.m. Some sort of silly dare they’d done in college reenacted. I believe Anne was hoping to salvage their friendship.” He took a breath.

Tristan was sick to his stomach and didn’t want to hear the rest, but it made sense now. Naomi and William had been behind his mum’s murder. Of course they had.

“I woke to Leslie sneaking out of the cottage. I followed her across the frozen

lake. When I approached, she and Anne were arguing. Anne kept claiming she would never cheat on Nolan and I wouldn't cheat on Leslie. Sadly, Leslie was not thinking rationally, fed on Naomi's steady diet of lies and manipulation. She shoved Anne." He stared at the king. "Now I am certain that William and Naomi must've planned it all out and broken up the ice. I don't think they cared if Anne or Leslie fell and died, but there was no way the queen could have slipped through the frozen lake without a hole being made."

Tristan's heart thumped heavily in his chest.

Henry passed a hand over his face. "It was all such a blur that night. Before Leslie or I could reach for Anne, she was gone, and Naomi and William were suddenly there. William had a pistol and Naomi had a camera. They explained that we would now do whatever they needed us to do, unless we wanted the truth of the queen's death revealed. Leslie would rot in a prison cell the rest of her life, and Jennifer would be murdered."

Silence filled the cavern. Even William seemed to realize they all needed time to process this awful truth.

All the pain of his mum's death resurfaced. Tristan's breath came in quick pants and his free fist clenched. His beautiful, kind mother, slipped through the ice, gone ... Had she come up in a different spot and been trapped under the ice? He couldn't think about it or he'd be sick.

"I sent Jennifer away to keep her safe," Henry continued, "thinking it was easy to come up with an excuse for her leaving as she left on humanitarian missions all the time. Looking back, I should've sent Leslie with her and taken the wrath for the death myself. Prison would've been so much better than being William's tool." He shot a wrathful look at William.

"Sadly, you can't change the past," William said cheerfully. "You can only change the future. Let's focus on my future now. We're going to tie you all up. My men and I will leave with Jennifer and Henry, and you'll have almost fifteen minutes to contemplate your pathetic lives and your miserable deaths before you explode." He grinned. "I would rather watch my men shoot each of you, but Naomi and I feel that the people of Augustine will respond better to you dying in an explosion. Very tragic and something for them to rally

around as I sweep in and benevolently take over my rightful kingdom.”

Tristan wanted to roll his eyes. William was so demented it would be comical ... if he didn't have the advantage over them with weapons and no one he loved having a gun pointed at their head.

“I'm through being manipulated by you,” Henry yelled, the words echoing off the cave walls.

It startled Tristan. His finger twitched on the trigger. Would Henry do something crazy? The wild look in his eyes said he would.

Tristan prepared to defend Jennifer first, then his dad. Curt would protect Aliya.

“You do have another option, Henry,” William said placidly. “I'll kill you with the king. High-level officials will clamor to be your replacement and I'm sure the people will adapt.”

“I'll take it,” Henry said.

“No, Dad,” Jennifer begged.

It was too late.

Henry leaped at William. His hands were tied behind his back, but he launched himself with enough power to slam his shoulder into William's chest and knock him to the ground and away from Jennifer. William's head hit the cave wall with the hollow thud of a skull crumpling. Tristan could hope.

Philippe instantly ducked behind Jennifer, keeping the gun pressed to her temple.

Tristan wanted to take out Philippe and check on Henry and William, but he didn't have time. He shot the guard on the right. His dad and Curt shot at the same time and took out the guard on the left. Both of the guards went down and didn't move.

Tristan drew in a steadying breath. They needed to disable Philippe and rescue Jennifer, then find the detonator to the bomb.

“Let her go,” he demanded of Philippe.

“And allow you to shoot me?” Philippe asked. “No thank you, sir.”

He yanked Jennifer down to a crouch beside him, ripped William’s bag from his shoulder, and stood. “I’ve got the detonator here. Jennifer and I will back up slowly to the exit. If you don’t follow me, I’ll let her go at the cave exit and I won’t blow the cave. If I hear any sounds of pursuit, I’ll shoot her and detonate the bomb immediately.”

“Philippe, don’t,” the king commanded. “Let her go.”

“I can’t let go of my only insurance, sir. My apologies for betraying you.” He dragged Jennifer toward the door. She struggled against him. “Stop fighting me or I’ll shoot you, then Tristan and his family.” He said everything in the same respectful tone he’d always used. No sneering or mocking like William would have done.

Jennifer instantly stilled, allowing him to drag her toward the door.

“Best wishes to all of you in the next life,” Philippe said in a congenial tone.

Tristan’s heart raced and his body broke out in cold chills. His stomach threatened to turn itself inside out.

Jennifer. He met her gaze. Her deep-brown eyes looked terrified but determined. How could he rescue her with Philippe shoving his gun into her temple? Even if Tristan killed him on the first shot, his finger could reflexively pull the trigger and kill Jenn.

Please help, he begged heaven above.

But he hesitated too long, and the woman he loved was hauled out the door.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jennifer stared into Tristan's blue eyes. She hoped he could see how deeply she loved him and how much she didn't want to die.

Her heart threatened to pound right out of her chest as Philippe tugged her through the door, scratching her shoulder against the doorframe.

She didn't believe for one second that Philippe wouldn't shoot her and push that detonator button as soon as he thought he was far enough away to survive. She couldn't let Tristan, her dad, the king, Curt, or Aliya die.

Saying a prayer for help and strength, she screamed as loud as she could, "I love you, Big Bad Wolf!"

Philippe glanced at her as if she'd lost her mind. His grip slackened.

Jennifer dropped to the floor, ripping herself from his grasp and getting her head blessedly away from his gun. She planted her feet, launched off the rock wall, and drove her shoulder into his knees. He screeched and toppled to the ground.

"I'll kill you," he yowled, reaching for her.

She scrambled away and yanked her drawstring bag open, fishing around and praying desperately. Her fingers closed around the bear spray. Philippe came ever closer. She cried out in horror, yanked the spray out of the bag, and pointed it at Philippe, who was less than a foot away. She turned her own head, closed her eyes, held her breath, and held down the trigger.

A hissing sound filled the tunnel.

Philippe cursed and spluttered and screamed. A crash followed as he dodged away from her and hit the wall. She feared a retaliatory bullet. Hopefully his aim was off. Hopefully he couldn't see from the effects of the bear spray, but they were in an enclosed space.

Scuttling backward away from him, she threw the empty canister in his direction.

“You must die now, Miss Shule,” Philippe said in a ragged voice, coughing.

She heard footsteps and then a gun discharge. She ducked and waited for the agony of the bullet ripping through her body.

A body slammed into the wall and slid to the floor. An instant later, arms wrapped around her and lifted her into the air.

Tristan's arms. She heard him cough from the bear spray fumes. She pulled in a breath too soon and coughed as well.

He carried her back into the cavern. Jennifer blinked her eyes open. Tristan had tears streaming down his face. She managed a smile up at him, her own eyes watery—bear spray or emotion. Who cared?

“Oh my, what strong arms you have,” she managed, coughing again.

He cracked a smile. “All the better to hold you with, my dear.”

She clung to his strength, his goodness, his safety. “Are those tears for me or the fumes of the bear spray?”

“Both.” He cradled her close, and she cuddled into him.

King Nolan was helping her dad to his feet, and Curt was cutting his restraints off. The two burly guards were definitely dead.

“William?” she asked Tristan.

“I don't know. Knocked out or dead.” He looked at his brother. “Curt, when the fumes settle in the hallway, will you grab that detonator? We'll hike to coverage and have Ray's men come diffuse the bombs and deal with the dead bodies.”

“Sounds good.”

As soon as Henry’s hands were free, he wrapped his arms around the king. “I’m so terribly sorry about Anne, about hiding the truth, about all of it. I was terrified for my family’s safety, weighed down with guilt for your loss, trying to keep William from executing all his awful plans, and such a mess.”

The two men held each other and everyone held their breath, waiting for Nolan’s response. It was a lot to forgive. Jennifer loved her father, but she wished he could’ve found a different path eight months ago.

The king pulled back, his blue eyes bright. “I forgive you. We know how smart and devilish William can be, and I understand you were trying to protect Leslie and Jennifer. I know you and Leslie would never have willingly hurt Anne.”

“Thank you, Nolan,” her dad said in a thick, emotion-filled voice.

Nolan glanced down at the man slumped on the floor.

Jennifer hoped he was dead.

“Leslie was horrified of prison and I was terrified of the threats William continually made against her or Jennifer if I refused him.”

“I can imagine,” the king said. He paused and then nodded. “Let’s go find Leslie. It’s time to end this.”

Jennifer’s throat tightened at the thought of her mum, still in danger. “Naomi has her?” she asked her dad.

“Yes.”

“Any idea where?”

“No.” Her dad moved toward her.

Tristan let her feet slide to the ground. She embraced her dad, relief that they’d both survived so strong she felt weak. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement.

“Nolan!” Aliya screamed.

The king whipped around as William lifted his arm, the gleaming metal of a gun evident in his hand, and pointed straight at the king. Nolan dropped onto William, driving his elbow into the man's hand and his body weight onto him.

William screamed in protest as the gun clattered away.

Nolan yanked him to his feet and growled, "You're going to finally pay for a myriad of crimes. If you're lucky, you'll get the death penalty."

"No," William whimpered. "I was only trying to help the Augustine people."

"Save it." Nolan's voice was like a whip. "We'll drag him down the mountain. I'm not leaving him here and chancing him escaping."

"Okay." Tristan nodded to his dad.

"If it was me, I'd lock his ugly carcass in here and set the bomb off," Aliya piped up.

"How dare—" William cut off at the glower on each of the men's faces. He studied the cave floor.

"Lucky for you, these fine gentlemen are much more gracious than the 'white trash' princess."

"You are the furthest thing from white trash, love," Curt said.

Aliya hugged him tightly. "Oh, I know that, lover lips. I'm just quotin' that lame loser cowering on the ground like the scaredy-cat wuss he is."

Nolan smiled at his daughter-in-law and then gestured to the rest of them. "You all go first. Henry and I will bring along the garbage."

"Gladly." Her dad grabbed William's other arm none too gently.

Tristan escorted Jennifer down the tunnel, Aliya and Curt behind them. She could hardly believe it was over.

They pushed the growth out of the way of the opening and climbed out. The sun had risen, and it was glorious outside. They were coming out of the darkness and ugly confrontation in the cave and of their past. The new morning tasted fresh and clean and made Jennifer believe she and Tristan

could start their life together.

It was also a very precarious landing. She and Tristan carefully slid to the side and made their way down to where the trail was a bit wider. The guards eased back to give them room.

The drop was still over fifty meters on her left side. She found herself leaning into the mountain and praying. Prayers of gratitude that they'd escaped and her dad was free. Prayers that they could find and rescue her mum. Prayers that they wouldn't slide off the cliff.

"Everything all right, Prince Tristan?" one of the guards asked, looking them over.

"No."

Aliya and Curt joined them on the trail as Henry, then William, and then the king emerged from the opening.

"Sir?" The guard's voice was full of confusion. "The lieutenant general?"

"Gone," Tristan said tersely.

"How can I help the king?" he asked.

"Please head down the trail so we can get everyone off the ledge."

"Yes, sir." It was obvious the man wanted to go help the king, but there wasn't any extra room. He obeyed Tristan.

They all teetered on the edge. Jennifer's stomach dropped as she glanced back and glimpsed the darkness, insanity, and rage in William's gaze.

"Dad," she cautioned, chills pricking at her skin.

William shoved her dad. Henry clung to the other man's arm, and they both lost their footing. For a long, drawn-out moment, they both teetered on the brink of losing their balance. But their momentum could not be stopped, and they slid over the cliff's edge.

Jennifer and Aliya screamed in horror as Curt and Tristan both cried out, "Henry!"

King Nolan grabbed on to her dad's free hand. William whipped out over the chasm, hanging on to Henry and screaming in high-pitched cries that echoed in the vastness below.

The king clung to a tree root, but he and her dad both slipped closer to the precipice.

Tristan and Curt scrambled back up the incline. The guards edged around Jennifer and Aliya to help. Jennifer was frozen with horror.

"Dad!" She didn't know what to do to keep all three men from falling.

Tristan reached them first. He grabbed on to a solid tree limb with one hand and grasped her dad's belt with the other. Her heart raced out of control as she prayed desperately for all of them to survive. Even William.

"Please, good Lord above. Please, please, please," Aliya murmured next to her.

Curt reached them, lodged one of his hands into a crevice of rock, and lowered himself closer to Henry and William. He was an expert rock climber, but even Curt would be dead if he went over that cliff face.

The guards edged closer, reaching out but unable to get close enough without pushing Curt and Tristan over the edge. One guard was able to hold on to Curt's arm and hopefully give him some sort of anchor if his hand pulled free of where he'd wedged it.

"William," Curt said. "Reach out for me as Henry swings you toward me."

William's dark gaze that had been so malevolent was now full of terror. That Curt would risk his life to save this man was admirable and horrifying at the same time.

"Please, Lord," Aliya muttered. "Please."

Jennifer prayed desperately in her mind.

William nodded. He reached out his free hand as he clung to Henry with the other. Henry tried to swing toward Curt. The king and Tristan attempted to help the swinging motion of her dad's body.

William's grasp on her dad's arm slipped. He screamed. Her dad released his grip on the king and tried to grab William with his other hand. Tristan clung to her dad's belt as her dad was swung violently upside down, his only anchor Tristan's grasp on him.

Her dad missed, and William slid out of his grasp. William screamed as he slammed into the cliff wall, then spiraled into the chasm below.

Jennifer and Aliya both cried out in horror. It looked like her dad would follow, and Tristan as well if he didn't let him go.

Curt grabbed on to her dad and yanked him in. Her dad clung to Curt's arm with both hands. The guard released his grip on Curt and clamped on to her dad as well.

"We've got him, T," Curt said. "Let him go."

Jennifer's heart was in her throat as she clasped her hands together and prayed desperately that Curt really did have her dad.

Tristan slowly released him and lay back against the mountain. Curt and the guard helped her dad onto the trail. Nobody moved or spoke. Except for Aliya. The only sound was their heavy breathing and Aliya's unsteady whispers, "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Father above. Thank you to all the saints and angels and Queen Anne especially. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"I tried to hold on," her dad said, his voice weary and defeated.

"You did all you could to save him," the king said. "This is not your fault, Henry. This came about from William's choices. Let him and the pain go."

Jennifer's heart lurched again as she studied her dad. A sob wrenched from his throat and tears traced down his face. William was dead and her dad was free. It was over.

Or would be when they somehow rescued her mum. And somehow let go of all this pain. It heaped on her just like her dad's sob, full of agony, regret, and despair.

Would things ever be set right again? Could Tristan forgive as easily as the

king had? They loved each other but her mum and dad being responsible for his mum's death and then hiding it for so long was horrific. How could she heal this new rift between them?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tristan felt drained emotionally and physically as they slowly hiked back to the side-by-side vehicles. Curt had a satellite phone and more of Ray's men had been dispatched and met them on the main trail. The Austrian authorities had been alerted to what had happened on their soil, and Ray and Chad were on their way in a helicopter.

The king asked Ray to organize his best men to diffuse the bomb and remove the bodies, but he wanted everyone, including Ray and Chad, searching for Leslie and Naomi. Even with William dead, this calamity wasn't finished.

The Teryx led the way, with the king driving as fast as the machine would go. Henry sat where Philippe had been a couple hours ago.

Tristan had shot and killed Philippe. With everything that had happened, he was just now processing that. Guilt pressed at him like a heavy weight on his chest, but it had been the only path to protect Jennifer. When Tristan had cleared that doorway Philippe had been aiming his gun right at Jennifer and he'd instinctively shot the man to protect her.

He'd have to deal with the sorrow over killing a man that he'd liked and respected; the pain of knowing the details of his mum's death and Henry covering it up to protect his family; and the all-encompassing need to hold Jennifer for hours.

Right now, they had to find Leslie.

The speed ride through narrow mountain paths, sometimes with steep drop-

offs on one side, was terrifying, but Tristan understood the urgency. Henry had some injuries that needed to be attended to, but Leslie needed to be rescued and Naomi imprisoned. Leslie had been manipulated and controlled emotionally and mentally by Naomi and William. Was she in her right mind now? He prayed Jennifer wouldn't lose her mum as surely as he'd lost his.

He held Jennifer's hand in the side-by-side. She clung to it but had spoken little. Was she in shock? Terrified for her mum's safety? Worried about her dad's health and state of mind? Seeing Henry cry and hearing that sob had ripped Tristan apart. He'd been carrying this burden for a long time. Almost losing Henry over that cliff had been horrific. For years, Tristan had respected and loved the man like a father and close friend. It was impressive how his dad had granted forgiveness, but it would take some time to come to grips with all of this pain and regret, for all of them. Someday, maybe all this ugliness and pain could be behind them.

They waved goodbye to Curt and Aliya at their cabin. Curt was going to help search the mountains for any sign of Leslie and Naomi, but he didn't want Aliya in any more danger. Aliya surprisingly hadn't fought him on it.

The guards followed them, and finally they reached Greenville. There was a lot of activity at the lower gates that led to the castle, men getting assigned to search throughout the country for Leslie and Naomi.

"Henry, you need a doctor," the king said. "Steffan is at the castle. Let's have him look at you and see if you need to go to the hospital in Traverse."

"But Leslie," Henry protested.

"Ray and Jensen have men scouring the country just as they've done since Leslie disappeared. The Austrian, Swiss, German, and Italian governments have been put on alert, as well as Interpol. Ray has also contacted Sutton Smith, and he promised to have his ops stationed throughout the world keep an eye out and their ears open. He's also volunteered several of his people who aren't currently on assignment to start searching. They'll find her."

Jennifer clung to Tristan's hand. He gave her a reassuring smile.

"Let's take care of you," his dad told Henry.

"Thank you," Henry managed, his voice thick with emotion. He nodded to

the king, then looked back to Jennifer. “Are you all right, love?”

Jennifer only shook her head. She looked drained and hurting and far from all right.

“I think she needs to lie down for a bit,” Tristan said. “I’ll stay with her at the cottage.”

Henry arched his brows. “As long as you don’t lie down with her.”

“Dad!” Jennifer gasped out.

“Don’t worry, old chap. I’ll keep everything moral and squeaky clean.”

Henry chuckled. It warmed Tristan clear through and felt like old times. Maybe there was hope that things could return to normal between them someday.

“See that you do. Your dad might have five replacements for you, but I’ve only got one daughter.” He lifted his hands, then shifted uncomfortably, as if not sure if he should tease like they used to.

“True,” the king said. “I’ve already lost my Lamborghini Aventador. The only thing worse than losing the crown prince would be crashing my new Lamborghini Veneno.”

“I think Ellery will take care of that for you,” Tristan threw in.

Henry, the king, and Tristan all smiled at that. Henry still looked decidedly uncomfortable, but at least his initial reaction had been to tease.

Jennifer looked at all of them as if they’d lost it.

“Apologies.” Tristan raised their clasped hands and kissed her knuckles. “We tease like this all the time.” They weren’t teasing like normal, and who knew what their relationship would be from here on out, but hopefully they could someday be comfortable and bantering again.

His lips brushed the massive diamond on her ring finger. He wanted it there, but he needed to put it there properly. Holding her gaze, he slowly slid the ring off and then kissed her now-naked finger. “You mean too much to me to not do this the right way. The next time you wear it will be for real.”

Her dark eyes filled with warmth for the first time since the cave.

A throat cleared, reminding him both of their fathers were watching. He handed the ring to his dad. The king took it solemnly and pocketed it, not saying anything, though his blue eyes were bright.

Tristan climbed out of the Kawasaki and rushed around to assist Jennifer.

The king turned to him. “Wait for the guards to clear the cottage before you enter. William might be gone, but Naomi is just as lethal and possibly smarter.”

Tristan nodded. Their dads waved and drove away together. His dad spoke to a guard at the gate. The well-built guard rushed to them and bowed slightly. “Please allow me to escort you. I’ll check the cottage and watch over you.”

“Thank you, Ollie.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

They walked up the sheltered path to the cottage and waited outside while Ollie went through it, disabling all the recording devices. Finally, they were allowed in. Ollie promised to stand guard outside until he was relieved that evening. They thanked him and walked in.

Jennifer was withdrawn and not herself. He knew she was exhausted, and everything they’d gone through weighed heavily in the air between them. He called the castle, and they sent down some clothes for him and a load of food. They each showered and then sat and ate. Well, Tristan ate. Jennifer just pushed food around her plate.

Halfway through the meal, he met Jennifer’s gaze and saw that her chin was quivering. “Jenn?”

She burst into tears.

Tristan stood and hurried to pull her up and into his arms. “Jenn.”

“I’m so sorry,” she sobbed. “Everything is such a mess. My mum’s probably dead or being tortured by Naomi. Your mum’s dead because of my mum. My dad helped William and hid this awful secret to protect us. I watched Philippe and William die today. I don’t even know Philippe and I despised William,

but I ...”

Tristan held her as she cried. It was a mess. He’d shot Philippe and felt regret for taking his life, but he’d protected Jennifer. He didn’t know how to make things right about her mum and dad. It would take time.

“I’m sorry ...” he began.

“No,” she snapped. “Don’t you apologize. You protected me and saved my dad.” She shook her head, her dark eyes bright with tears. “How are you and your dad both so incredible? He simply forgave my dad. For all that pain. All that time hiding and lying. You were joking with my dad when you should despise him for being part of the queen’s death, for being so weak and allowing William to manipulate him.”

“Oh, Jenn.” He escorted her to the couches and sat down, wrapping her up and holding her close. “Love. It’s going to take some time to heal, truly forgive, and put it behind us. But despising your dad won’t bring my mum back. I wish it had been different, but William was insanely brilliant in all his manipulations. Your dad was trying to stop his schemes and protect you and your mum.”

“Why couldn’t he have found a different path?” she asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know. But there’s no way to change it now, just to learn from it and heal and move forward. I don’t want to know how I’d react if you and our children were in a similar situation.”

She blinked up at him. “Our children?”

Just her looking at him like that healed so much of his pain. They could get past this. Together. A fire burned inside his chest as her dark gaze consumed him. He wanted children with her. He wanted her. All of her. “Yes, ma’am. Our children.” He slid her legs over his lap and pulled her closer.

“Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what huge plans you have.”

He smiled. “All the better to plan our future with, my dear.”

She returned his smile, but it quickly faltered. “You think your dad truly forgives mine? I’m afraid the king will come to his senses and throw him into

prison.”

“All of us have suffered long enough with my mum’s death and the uncertainty of how she died hanging over us. Making your dad suffer any longer when he’s already obviously been through pain, guilt, and to purgatory and back is not in my dad’s nature.” Henry would probably have to step down. Tristan didn’t know how it would all play out, but his dad wouldn’t be vindictive about it.

“Thank you.” She studied him and whispered, “And you don’t think how your mum died will cast a pall over our relationship? Cause a rift between us?”

“Jenn, you know how you see me deeply? You see past the crown prince, and you hardly noticed my scars?”

She nodded, but her eyes questioned how this related.

“I see you. I know you. You aren’t your father or the choices he’s made. You are the woman I love.”

“I love you.” She leaned up and softly kissed him. Tristan returned the kiss, and soon she was clinging to him and kissing him desperately.

The pain and the regrets and everything else would work out. They loved each other, and true love could overcome anything.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jennifer startled awake. She was cuddled against Tristan on the couch, and they must've slept for a while, as it was dark outside the cottage windows.

Maybe they shouldn't have fallen asleep but they hadn't slept well the past two nights, and today had been insanely stressful and emotionally grueling. She was surprised no one had come into the cottage or called them. That probably meant there'd been no progress in finding her mum. Her stomach knotted with worry. She cuddled into Tristan, loving the reassurance and strength he gave her. He was benevolent, forgiving, and loved her completely. He could heal the shock and pain of what they'd all been through. Would he really put that gorgeous diamond ring back on her finger? They'd of course talked about marriage throughout the years but with all her travel and missions and his heavy demands they hadn't ever settled on a date. She was more than ready to take that step with him now.

She felt a cool breeze and glanced up. The patio door was slightly ajar. Was that what had woken her? The back patio had a small stretch of grass that led down to the lake. It was awful to imagine her mum sneaking out those doors to confront Queen Anne, shoving her friend into the icy lake, and inadvertently killing her. She shivered.

Tristan stirred, then straightened. In the murky dark, she couldn't see his glorious blue eyes, but she could make out his facial shape and features. She knew him so well and loved every bit of him, scars and all.

"Hey, beautiful. Did you rest?"

“No,” she teased. “I just watched you drool and listened to you snore for hours.”

He laughed. “Very attractive drool and snoring, I’m sure.”

“Very,” she agreed drily. The patio door creaked open wider with a chilly breeze.

Tristan moved quickly. He lifted her off his lap and onto the next cushion, then stood and hurried to the door. He latched it and twisted the lock, then armed the security on the wall.

“I thought I’d armed that earlier,” he muttered, drawing out his sidearm.

Prickles of unease made Jennifer’s hair stand on end. She eased up from the couch.

Movement in the shadows confirmed her fears. Two large men appeared with huge rifles pointed at Tristan’s head.

“Make a move with that gun or call for help and it’ll be the last thing you do,” Naomi Rindlesbacher threatened Tristan.

Naomi and her mum stepped into the room.

Naomi had a pistol against her mum’s head. Her mum looked bruised and battered. Blood was matted at her temple and dried against her lip. Her mouth was covered with duct tape and her hands were bound in front of her.

“Mum!” Jennifer sprang to her feet.

“Don’t move unless you want her dead,” Naomi said coldly.

Jennifer had no doubt this woman would shoot. She wanted to scream for the guard that was supposed to be out front. Had they come in through the lake? A boat?

“How did you get in?” Tristan asked, echoing her thoughts.

“A very quiet motorboat.” Naomi attempted a fake smile, but her lips and cheeks didn’t cooperate very well. “Leslie told us the code to disarm the cottage security and to get in the back door during one of her ‘therapy’ sessions.”

Jennifer's neck tightened at the thought of her mum being tortured into revealing that information.

Naomi looked around the cottage. "Where is William? Why aren't you dead?" Naomi's face no longer shifted in traditional facial expressions, but her eyes actually looked afraid. "When he didn't arrive at our rendezvous point or respond to calls and texts, we came to the second rendezvous point, where we're supposed to claim our castle and throne."

"You're delusional, and William is dead," Tristan said in a level tone, as if he was telling her the weather.

"No!" Naomi shrieked. "No!" She pulled the pistol from Leslie's head and pointed it shakily at Tristan. "I'll kill you!"

Tristan smiled. Smiled! What was he thinking, taunting this crazy lady?

"Good luck," he said.

Then he dropped low and kicked one of the assailant's legs out from under him. The man toppled and knocked into the other man. They both went down on top of Tristan.

"Tristan!" Jennifer cried out.

Her mum raised her bound hands and brought them down on Naomi's outstretched hand. Naomi's pistol discharged. Jennifer screamed. The bullet lodged into the back of the couch. Her mum hit Naomi's hands again and thankfully the gun clattered to the floor. Naomi shoved her mum hard. Her mum knocked into the men brawling on the floor and splayed on top of them. One of the massive men turned from hitting at Tristan to shove her mum off.

Jennifer rushed to help her. She pulled her away and to her feet, expecting Naomi to come at her any minute, but she didn't.

"Go to the front door and get the guard," Jennifer begged her mum. She had to help Tristan.

Jennifer wrapped her arms around one of the brute's necks and clamped down hard. He tried to rip her arms off, but she refused to let go.

The distraction was what Tristan needed. He pummeled the other man with a

series of hard jabs and uppercuts, then grabbed the enormous gun lying on the floor and slammed it into the man's head. The man blessedly went unconscious.

The brute Jennifer was clinging to ripped her arms free and tossed her like a rag doll. Jennifer slammed into the couch.

“Jenn!” Tristan roared.

“I’m okay,” she panted. “Get that guy!”

Tristan smiled at her and then went to work pummeling the other guy. Jennifer wanted to watch her tough prince in action, but she hurried to follow her mum to the front door. Her mum was trying to unlock it and open it, but with her hands bound so tightly, she wasn't having much luck.

Jennifer gently pushed her mum to the side. She turned the deadbolt and ripped the door open. The alarm didn't go off. Why? She'd watched Tristan punch in the code right a few minutes ago.

Their guard, a different one than earlier, rushed toward her.

“You okay?” the guard pushed out as he ran.

“No.” She flicked on the front porch and entryway light, showing her mum bound and gagged. “Prince Tristan is fighting two thugs.” She pointed.

The guard rushed past her and into the living area.

Jennifer took her mum's arm and escorted her back in. Tristan had the second man pinned against the wall, trading hit for hit, but Tristan was winning. Of course he was. What a guy. Her Big Bad Wolf.

She hurried her mum to the kitchen, pulled out a knife, and sliced her hands free. Then she held onto her face and yanked off the duct tape. She expected her mum to at least groan in pain, but she didn't. She just flung her arms around Jennifer.

“Oh, my angel. You're all right?”

“Yes, Mum. You?”

Leslie shrugged and then nodded and then shook her head. “Henry?” she

croaked out.

“He’s okay. He’s with King Nolan up at the castle. Steffan was going to treat him for his injuries. Every military and police officer in the country has been dispatched to find you.”

Her mum looked at her and then burst into tears.

More guards ran into the house.

Jennifer gathered her mum close and clung to her. She could hear Tristan’s voice instructing the royal guards, but then she heard words that chilled her clear through. “Where’s Naomi?”

She looked around. The patio door was slightly ajar again. That was why the alarm never went off. Naomi knew the code, had disabled it, and then disappeared in the midst of the fighting and confusion.

Would this nightmare ever end?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It had been a few days and things seemed to finally be calming down in Augustine. Naomi had disappeared. Hopefully she'd be found or at least never dare show her fake face again. Her dad had stepped down as prime minister, possibly facing prison time for aiding a criminal and covering up the queen's death. Tristan and his family were compassionate, but the courts would have to rule on that. Her mum was in intense therapy for causing the death of her best friend and the mental and physical torture she'd experienced at the Rindlesbachers' hands. Jennifer's family was a mess, but she had hope they could heal and move past the pain someday. At least they were alive and no longer in the Rindlesbachers' grasp.

Jennifer clung to Tristan's hand as they walked up the trail to their waterfall. It was chilly this September morning, but she was warm with Tristan close by. Her parents would eventually get through this pain and heal. Augustine was safe. And Tristan was incredible.

She gazed at his profile and the scars decorating his cheek.

He smiled down at her. "You like my artwork, do you?"

"I think you're pretty much perfect, Prince Tristan."

"Don't I know it." He winked and brought their clasped hands to his lips, kissing her knuckles.

She sighed, just wanting to kiss him, but she had to tease. "Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, how overly confident you are."

“All the better to keep you on your toes, my dear.”

“Ha! Good luck,” she teased back.

They arrived at the waterfall pool and for a few moments simply stared at the array of fall colors—orange, red, yellow, and green decorating the mountain and forest around them, mossy rock under the waterfall, and the blue water of a chilly mountain lake underneath.

“Truth or dare?” Tristan asked, his blue eyes twinkling.

“Dare.”

“I dare you to jump in the pool with me.”

Her eyes widened. Just like the first night they fell in love, but it would be freezing cold.

“Dare accepted.”

She ran for the water. Tristan kept pace with her and then they both leaped off a small ledge they knew was a deep part of the pool.

Bitter cold water surrounded her, and she gasped. She came up sputtering and coughing. Tristan hauled her close, swam with her to where he could touch, and held her as her coughing settled and she caught her breath.

Her body trembled with cold.

“You’re very brave,” Tristan said. “I think you are worthy to be a princess and someday a queen.”

She stared at him and then laughed. “Well, thank you for the commendation. I think I have to marry a crown prince to have such a future.” She gave him a daring look.

Tristan arched an eyebrow and then entangled one hand in her hair. The other pressed into her lower back, pulling her flush against him. He kissed her then. It was deep and all-encompassing, and she forgot all about how cold she was.

The unmistakable sound of helicopter rotors sliced through the quiet forest. Tristan released Jennifer from the kiss and they both glanced up as a helicopter swooped over the lake, sending ripples out. Jennifer shivered and

then started to shake.

Tristan escorted her out of the water as the helicopter landed in the small clearing. Chad saluted them both while Lieutenant Mason Henson and another man she didn't recognize quickly set up a folding table and two chairs, covering the table with a white linen cloth. They set covered platters on the table, candles in the middle, and a small box of matches. Then they laid blankets across each chair, saluted crisply, and climbed into the helicopter. Chad grinned at them and lifted off, soaring above the trees.

"T?" Jennifer questioned.

Tristan walked her over to the table, picked up the blanket, and wrapped it around her. The blanket was fleece and felt like it had been recently warmed. He wrapped her up tight with his strong arms. She was instantly warm and in the perfect spot for her.

"A crown prince is expected to have a certain level of originality and appropriateness to our true love story."

"You're a crown prince? I thought you were my Big Bad Wolf."

"I'm both." The heat in his blue eyes made her catch fire. Her teeth stopped chattering, and she leaned into him, staring up into his alluring gaze.

"Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what big plans you have."

"All the better to woo you with, my dear." He grinned and dropped to one knee, taking her hand from inside the blanket and grasping it with his. "Truth or dare."

She debated. "Truth."

"Do you love your Big Bad Wolf with every fiber of your being?" he asked. "Is this true love, Jenn?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Truth or dare?"

"Dare," she said, happiness making her entire body light up.

"I dare you to marry me and make me the happiest man on earth."

Jennifer tugged him up and kissed him long and hard, the blanket falling off her shoulders. She didn't need it anymore. Her clothes might be wet, but she was plenty warm.

"Dare accepted," she said breathlessly.

He whooped and kissed her again. When he pulled back, he released her for a moment and pulled two absolutely gorgeous rings out of a zippered part of his pants pocket. She recognized one as the queen mother's ring that William had forced her to wear in the cave. Was this the moment he'd ask her to wear it properly? She'd loved the way he'd looked at her as he'd huskily said that line a few days ago.

"When my mum was alive, I bought this ring." He held up a beautiful square diamond that sparkled in the autumn sun. "I didn't plan on you wearing this ring until much later." He held up the queen's massive pink-hued round diamond. "I know it's a lot to ask, but would you wear both for me, love, and would you promise to love and cherish me forever? Jenn ... will you marry me?"

"I will," she said solemnly. She held up her right hand, and he slid the queen's diamond on her ring finger.

"This ring will always remind us of my mum and your future as queen. It's a heavy responsibility, but I know you can handle it with grace, beauty, kindness, and faith."

She drew in a breath. It was heavy, but the ring felt right there. She held up her left hand, and he gently slid the ring he'd bought her on her left ring finger.

"This ring will always remind us of the depth of my love for you and the beauty of our relationship that will soon be sealed for all time."

Jennifer took a moment to let the significance of wearing both rings seep in. Then she slid her hands up around his neck. "Truth or dare?"

"Truth," he said.

"Do you love the future queen with every fiber of your being? Is this true love?" She was semi-teasing, but it was terrifying to think of being queen.

With Tristan by her side, she could do anything, and with God on their side, they could do all things.

“I do.” He kissed her long and slow and deep. “I love you, Jenn.”

She smiled. “Truth or dare.”

“Dare.” His scars crinkled as he smiled.

“I dare you to kiss me until our food grows cold and our clothes are no longer wet.”

He chuckled. “Dare accepted.” He drew her close, and his lips lit her up from the inside out.

“Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, what lovely lips you have,” she murmured against his mouth.

“All the better to kiss you with, my dear.”

And kiss her he did. The sun set and Jennifer was still kissing the future king, the love of her life, her Big Bad Wolf. Food would have to wait.

They finally pulled apart and ate a delicious but lukewarm salmon and steak dinner. The roar of an engine announced General Ray himself had come for them. Jennifer and Tristan shared a smile as the general gruffly reminded them Naomi was still at large and their safety had to come first.

Safety was important, but Jennifer’s love for Tristan topped everything. She saw him deeply, and he knew her just as well.

True love would stand the test of time because it was her Big Bad Wolf’s love.

THE POLICE CHIEF AND THE MUSICIAN - 1ST CHAPTER

Chapter One

Livvy Moser, Alivinia to only her mother, listened to twelve-year old Gabby play the closing notes of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto with tears in her eyes. Gabby did not have the natural talent of many of Livvy's students and that made this almost flawless performance in Livvy's living room all the more beautiful. Gabby had a don't quit attitude and this child knew how to work hard. She'd taken lessons since she was five, the past two years from Livvy, and she'd overcome her lack of natural intuitiveness and talents, the child couldn't even hear pitch and had very little rhythm, to succeed as a pianist.

Her student was Livvy's motivation to do the scariest thing she'd done since Naomi and Treven Rindlesbacher refused to give up on their decade-long quest for her to become Treven's future wife. When she was seventeen she'd gotten a restraining order against him after he cornered her and told her she would marry him and he'd kill anyone she dated. Her parents recognized he was a depraved psycho and cut ties to the Rindlesbachers. She thought he and his family would realize she'd never marry him.

Instead he tormented her. Throughout her university training and building her portfolio as a musician, she lived in Traverse. When she'd be out running errands, on campus, or walking by the river random men would pass her and whisper, "Treven's coming." It was never the same person and she shared description after description with the police but they never found them. She often saw Treven and he'd always keep his distance but smirk and mouth to

her, “I’m coming for you.”

Finally about the time she finished at the university Treven was arrested as an accomplice to murder and Livvy achieved her dreams of performing with symphonies all over Europe. She thought not being in Traverse she’d finally be free of Treven. After every show, as they were taking bows and the lights panned the audience’s standing ovation, someone in the crowd would hold up a piece of paper that said, *Treven’s Coming*. Security only caught a few of the sign holders and the story was always the same—somebody had given them twenty bucks to hold up the sign saying it was for their girlfriend. The description of the person was always different and no positive identification ever made.

It started scaring the people she performed with and made her a mess. She gave into her fears, trembled as she played, made mistakes, and the requests to be a guest with the top symphonies, operas, and even some pop bands stopped coming in. She gave up her own hard-earned accomplishment, bought a home in Traverse ten minutes from her supportive and loving parents and brother, and taught children. Then the random emails started coming in, never from a traceable address and always, *I’m coming for you*. She wanted to be strong and brave but it was terrifying. Being back in Traverse she also had the whispered, “Treven’s coming” whenever she went anywhere.

When Treven had briefly been released from prison he thankfully hadn’t approached her, but he’d left a gruesome reminder of his intentions on her porch. A dead collared dove, because he knew how much she loved them, with a note, *Thank you for waiting for me, beautiful. If you would’ve dared marry any other man, they’d be as dead as this bird. Not much longer and your patience will be rewarded and we’ll finally be together.*

She’d called the police, wishing she’d dare call Chief Jensen personally as he’d asked her to each time he’d stopped by to briefly check on her and her case throughout the years. The two officers who’d come by took the evidence and wrote down everything she said but then they both whispered to her as they walked away, “Treven’s coming.”

Of course Officers Bradford and Palmer both denied saying any such thing but Chief Jensen reassured her they were being watched carefully and

wouldn't come near her again.

After that her cousin Mia Burton's husband, former Navy SEAL Captain Zeke Hendrickson had taught her basic self defense, how to use a pistol and knife, and installed her security system. She practiced her self defense moves every day. Still she was afraid to leave home and risk running into Naomi or William Rindlesbacher or one of Treven's lackies.

She shuddered, closed her eyes, and said a prayer for strength. Treven was in prison and William and Naomi were on the run having finally been exposed for the sadistic psychos they were. Today she was going to be brave. She would confidently waltz into Prince Derek and Ellery Monson's wedding this afternoon, not be afraid as General Raymond would have insane security even with the Rindlesbachers gone, and she might even get the chance to prove she was stronger than her fears and flirt with one irresistible chief of Augustine's police force.

Chief Jensen Allendale. Whew ... The dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-skinned perfection in a human male form could make her entire body tingle with one look from those intense and beautiful eyes of his.

What would it feel like if he touched her? She leaned against the piano at the thought.

"Did you like it, Miss Livvy? Did I do all right?"

Her eyes flew open and she stared down at her student. "Oh, sweet child, it was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you." Gabby smiled proudly. As she should. "What are we conquering next?"

Livvy laughed and searched through her stacks of sheet music. Beethoven's Piano Concerto Number Five might be the ticket. She adored this girl and she would remember today how brave and hard-working Gabby was with her piano. Livvy was going to do that with facing the world again, and she wouldn't even look over her shoulder for one of the Rindlesbachers to somehow be shadowing her. They were running scared or in prison. That gave her comfort and strength.

Four hours later, she was dressed in her favorite pale blue eyelet dress and in

a shuttle traversing the narrow road that ascended to the castle of Augustine. The royal family were impressive, noble, and had made their country flourish. Livvy didn't know any of the royals personally, but she knew General Raymond was close friends with Chief Jensen and her good friend Sophie Pederson had loved Prince Malik for years. Sophie and Prince Malik had reconnected at General Raymond's wedding, through a series of crazy and terrifying events, of course involving the devilish William Rindlesbacher. At least the man had been exposed and was in hiding. She'd prefer him in prison.

Sophie and Prince Malik would surely be engaged soon. It made Livvy seriously happy. She wasn't certain if Sophie was the reason she'd been invited to Prince Derek's wedding or if Chief Jensen might have had some influence. The beautiful man came to visit her on occasion, checking in to see if Treven's parents or friends had bothered her. She didn't think she'd revealed the massive crush she had on him, but maybe he could read it in her eyes. She counted it a blessing every night that he didn't commit to one of the many women chasing him.

A royal guard helped her out of the van. She murmured her thanks, clutching her small purse, that had been thoroughly searched at the lower gate before she'd been allowed in a transport. It only contained lip gloss, her phone, and some eyeliner in case hers ran when she cried at the wedding. She hadn't been to many weddings but imagined she'd cry. Happy tears for the couple's joy and sad tears for the fact she'd never be there. Not unless she agreed to marry the masochist Treven Rindlesbacher or he miraculously got killed. Now that was a cheery thought.

She teetered on her heels. They took her from five-two to five-five and she needed the confidence boost of a few extra inches today. Years ago she'd strutted onto stages the world over in formal gowns and heels to perform and hear the crowd's praise through applause. Currently she didn't even wear heels when she forced herself to sneak into the local church for Sunday worship every few weeks, trying to hide amongst the crowd and being short helped. Today was special and she was celebrating and hoping to look her best.

She followed the crowd through the open courtyard. The area was set up with tables, chairs, a dance floor, and flowers decorating or draping from anything

they could cling to. The wedding guests were directed through a side door and onto a glass walkway. Her eyes widened as she looked down hundreds of feet to the greenery below. Stomach hopping, she swallowed and focused on the couple walking in front of her. *Don't look down*, she begged herself, clinging to the railing with sweaty palms.

Finally clearing the terrifying bridge she gawked at the beauty of the royal wedding—flowers everywhere, an unreal setting with the towering granite castle on one side and the views of the gorgeous mountains and valley that were typical of their country. Every part of the scene looked even more beautiful on this early fall day with the colors of the deciduous trees already changed to vibrant red, orange, and yellows. The stately pines added their deep green to the contrast and the bright blue lakes throughout the small valley were picture perfect.

Her gaze swept around the wedding party and snagged on the exquisite frame and face of Chief Jensen Allendale. His dark gray suit fit his lean form perfectly, making her mouth go dry. He was talking to a breathtaking redhead in a low cut dress. Dang. Livvy hid away in her house and feasted on each brief visit from Jensen. He'd apparently made it his personal quest to check in on her and her case since she'd moved back to Traverse.

Sadly she knew he wasn't a monk and the media loved to show that he dated, a lot. To see him flirting with her own eyes was a gut punch. She'd envisioned their gazes meeting and him rushing to her side, teasing with and tempting her, admitting she was the woman he'd been waiting for.

Her shoulders slumped and all her preparation and reasons for conquering her fears and not only leaving her house but facing this huge wedding party seemed to be a waste. Why had she come? She'd been so stupidly brave. Right now she just felt stupid.

Jensen suddenly looked away from the woman and straight at her. Livvy sucked in a breath as the world around them disappeared. There was only Jensen's intense, dark gaze, the slight smile curving his intriguing lips, and the knowledge that this was the only man in the world who could keep her safe from Treven Rindlesbacher and love her like she'd always fantasized about.

He tilted up his chin to her, and miracle of miracles, he walked around the redhead and started her direction. Her stomach gave a happy flip flop and her pulse raced with anticipation. Were all her dreams about to come true? She licked her lips and automatically reached for the lip gloss in her clutch. She should meet him halfway, but her legs were too wobbly and she'd probably face plant in these three-inch heels.

The redhead darted in front of Jensen, pressing her red-painted fingernails against his chest and her tall, well-formed body against him. The redhead was only a few inches shorter than Jensen's six feet. Not over half a foot shorter like Livvy was. They looked incredible together.

Livvy sucked in a breath of disappointment. Jensen's gaze looked frustrated, or maybe she was only hoping to see that.

"Livvy!" Sophie Pederson rushed up to her and threw her arms around her neck. "You came! Malik and I were placing bets and I won." Her eyes widened and her mouth formed an O. "I mean ..."

"What my beautiful sweetheart is trying to say," Prince Malik said as he shifted Sophie's daughter Sunny to his left arm and wrapped his right around Sophie. "We are thrilled you are here to join in my brother's happy day."

"Smooth, Prince Malik," Livvy said drily. "No wonder they call you the charming prince. Do you cover up for her all the time?" She grinned at her friend to show her there were no hard feelings and she was teasing. Sophie wasn't a blunt or rude person. It did sting to think of them placing bets on if she'd show, but she wouldn't have bet on herself. Only the strength of the Lord and Gabby's example of perseverance and bravery had brought her teetering on her heels to this moment.

Oh, and an insane desire to see Chief Jensen and somehow show him she wasn't a cowering victim of Treven's threats. Fear suddenly coated her throat. What if Treven did get out of prison and come for her like he'd always promised. What if he killed Jensen like he'd threatened to kill any man she dated? He'd had Sophie's fiancé Jonathon killed from prison. Jensen was tough and brave but Treven and his lackies were disgusting and underhanded and always seemed to prevail.

She snuck another glance and saw that Jensen now had a group of women

surrounding him. Her heart dropped. Her worries over Jensen didn't matter. Jensen would stay safe from Treven because he sadly wasn't interested in Livvy and had far too many women after him already. She wasn't surprised to see that with her own eyes, the man was irresistible—handsome, confident, accomplished, fun to tease with. Why wouldn't women chase him? Disappointment tasted like bitter castor oil coating her mouth and throat. No worse. Like she'd performed with Vienna Philharmonic and hit every note wrong.

"I'm happy to cover for her," Prince Malik pulled Sophie closer. "Anything to be close to this angel."

Sophie melted against him. Livvy was thrilled for her friend's happiness, she certainly deserved it after being raped by Treven Rindlesbacher, her fiancé being violently murdered by the man's henchmen, and raising her darling daughter by herself.

"Sophie and Sunny are both angels," Livvy agreed, smiling at the little girl. She adored children.

"I am now the Princess Sunny," the child spoke up, tilting her chin regally to Livvy. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Livvy."

Livvy grinned. "You as well Princess Sunny."

"I wasn't a princess when you saw me last," Sunny informed her as if giving her an excuse for forgetting her royal title earlier. "But I am now."

All the adults grinned at each other. Sophie brushed her hair from her face and Livvy's eyes widened. She grasped her friend's left hand.

"I knew you two wouldn't take long but wowzers! That is a gorgeous ring. Congrats!"

Prince Malik grinned.

"Malik did well." Sophie hugged Livvy then leaned into her fiancé's side.

"I did," Prince Malik agreed. "Being blessed with these two in my life."

Ushers and royal guards were breaking groups up and escorting them to their seats.

“Please, Prince Malik, Miss Pederson, this way,” a beautiful and classy-looking brunette requested.

“Thank you, Arianna,” Prince Malik said.

“Do you have a seat?” Sophie fretted.

“Oh, goodness, don’t worry about me. Go with your handsome and charming fiancé. I’ll sit right here.” She tottered over to the closest open seat and sank down to prove that Sophie didn’t need to be worrying about her.

Prince Malik smiled at her and escorted Sophie the direction Arianna was asking them to go, seated up front with the rest of the royal family. She noticed Jensen settling in the row behind the royal family next to Major Chad Prescott and his date. Jensen didn’t appear to have a date but with all the single women flocking to him he also didn’t appear to have time to come speak to her.

Livvy focused on the beautiful wedding of Prince Derek and the American Ellery Monson. She’d heard from some of her students that certain Augustinian’s weren’t thrilled with several of the princes marrying not only Americans but women of far lower social standing than them. Livvy thought it was incredible. Love should always win the day, not social status, and Augustine was a beautiful and successful country. They were blessed and should welcome everyone in, not be snotty exclusionists.

She kept sneaking peeks at Jensen throughout the wedding. Several times their gazes caught and held. Heat flushed through her every time and she was grateful for her caramel-colored skin that wouldn’t show how he made her blush from one intriguing glance of those dark eyes.

The wedding finished and she cheered along with everyone else as the gorgeous couple kissed. The family and close friends greeted the couple first. The rest of the crowd was instructed to form a line to greet the couple and then take the glass bridge around front for the dinner, with a reception and dancing to follow.

Livvy didn’t know the bride or groom so she waited for some of the main crowd to greet them and then walked around the glass bridge with a group. Jensen had disappeared. Was he checking on something for the police or had

that redhead from earlier grasped him and pulled him away?

She forced smiles and responded to greetings from a few people she knew and some she didn't. Her status as a concert pianist didn't make her famous but some people had watched her perform and knew her.

She found her place card for the dinner and tried to contribute to the conversation at her table. She sat with a group of American women, members of the American Ninja Warrior circuit that Ellery Monson and Prince Derek had met competing on. The voluptuous redhead was one of them. She was a very friendly girl named Shelby and Livvy was reminded once again that she shouldn't judge based on her own jealousies. This woman was genuine, fun to talk to, exceptionally fit and beautiful. If Jensen was interested in her, Livvy could hardly blame him. All of the women were friendly and tried to include her in the conversation but they had a lot in common and she was definitely the outsider.

She noticed Jensen was seated with Major Chad and his date, Chad's mother, Lieutenant General Cordon and his wife, and other military personnel or members of parliament like Chad's mum. Madeline Prescott was an impressive, elegant, classically-beautiful, and slightly-intimidating lady. Livvy had no desire to get on her bad side.

Jensen caught her gaze and she gave a slight smile before refocusing on the mango cheesecake she'd chosen for her dessert.

"Can you believe that fine-looking specimen is their chief of police?" Shelby asked as if she'd noticed Livvy's gaze. "He's looking our way. Whew!" She fanned herself. "Makes you want to move to Augustine and break a law and beg to have him interrogate and frisk you."

Her friends laughed as Livvy stiffened.

"I doubt the chief of police is going to interrogate or frisk you," a brunette named Hazel teased her, "but you keep working your magic flirtations on him. He'll cave to you. They always do my gorgeous friend."

Livvy's shoulders rounded. She could've guessed men always caved to Shelby. How could anyone blame them? She wanted to beg the woman to have mercy on her. Jensen might just be a challenge and a vacation fling for

her, but he was Livvy's dream man.

"I, for one, am going after the crown prince," a beautiful blonde named Jaylene declared.

"Not a bad option either," a brunette agreed. "Though I don't really like my men all scarred up. Could you beg him to always keep his right side turned to you?"

They all laughed at that. Except for Livvy and Shelby.

"It's disappointing to be sure. He was so tantalizingly hot before the bombing," Jaylene agreed.

Livvy's stomach twisted. Prince Tristan had been scarred by a senseless bombing. He was a selfless and witty man, still incredibly handsome despite the scarring. He did not deserve to be disparaged.

"Still, he's the last unclaimed prince, and to be queen someday," Jaylene licked her lips and tossed her long, blond hair. "And if the 'Adorkable Boston Beauty' can land a handsome, younger prince. I'm sure I can easily get the deformed Crown Prince to fall for me. I'll force him to get plastic surgery so he's as pretty as me."

Several of the women laughed but a few others, including Shelby seemed to be growing uncomfortable with Jaylene taking shots at not only the crown prince but their friend Ellery.

"He is not deformed, he's an impressive and kind prince," Livvy exploded with the words, unable to remain quiet any longer.

Shelby gave her an approving glance.

"You just don't want another American stealing another one of your hot princes," Jaylene shot back at her.

The other women's eyes widened. Livvy recognized that Jaylene had put on a nice face at first, but she was definitely the snarky one of the bunch. She'd made fun of Ellery, who was supposedly her friend and the crown prince in the same sentence.

"That's far from true," Livvy countered. "Princess Ellery, Princess Aliya,

Princess Macey, and Princess Hattie are all very welcome. They each are as kind and gracious as they are beautiful and accomplished, they love their husbands, and will be a great blessing to our country. What we Augustinians don't want is a snarky, underhanded, self-serving American *deceiving* one of our 'hot princes' and only being interested in his title not in what type of man he is. A great man, my future king, who has my allegiance and deserves your respect."

The table went quiet. Some of the women exchanged glances, some of them looked at her in shock, some in approval.

"Well spoken." Shelby nodded to her.

"Well I never." Jaylene glowered and folded her arms across her chest. Amazingly she didn't counter but looked down at her untouched dessert.

A clinking of silver on crystal drew everyone's attention to the head table. Livvy sat with her hands folded in her lap, her back straight, her head held high, and her cheeks on fire as she listened to the speeches and toasts and tried not to feel the animosity of some of the women she'd offended at this table. She was out of practice in social situations, this being her first experience in years, but she felt justified sticking up for Prince Tristan and all the royals. She was proud of her country and the royal family. Though they were independently wealthy, lived in this insanely gorgeous castle, and were well, royal, they didn't put on airs. The August family were classy and put the people of Augustine first. She'd especially admired Queen Anne, who horrifically had drowned in the lake last January.

As soon as the toasts, kissing, and cheering were done and the dancing announced she quietly excused herself and pushed away from the table. The women were quietly talking amongst themselves.

"Pardon me," she murmured.

"Thank you for sitting with us," Shelby said graciously.

"Thank you." She nodded to her one ally.

She glanced around, maybe she should just disappear. She'd sort-of accomplished what she'd come to do—getting out into public and not being afraid, talking to Sophie, bravely standing up for Prince Tristan, and ... okay,

she hadn't spoken to Jensen and that had been priority number one.

But all in all she'd done pretty well. She couldn't see Jensen anyway and after getting to know Shelby a little bit she wondered if the gorgeous redhead wasn't like the American princesses—a breath of fresh air and a great addition to Augustine.

Disappointment filled her, thinking of Jensen with anyone but her. That was selfish. She needed to act and think better. She also needed to get out of here. Holding her chin high, as if she were walking onto the stage to perform in the Philharmonie de Paris, she walked slowly through the tables. She'd a lauded success once upon a time, she could exit a wedding without breaking down into tears at the missed opportunity to talk to Jensen.

Easing away from the wedding crowd as everyone lined up to watch the first dances she doubted the shuttles would be taking people down to their cars right now. What kind of a lousy wedding guest wanted to run away before the dancing even started? Her unfortunately. She'd reached her limit with that snarky blonde. Maybe in a few more years she'd try another event.

She made it to the massive open gates to the castle and glanced around. Shuttles were lined up but the drivers weren't in them. Shoot. She'd have to walk down the steep, narrow road. Normally she liked walking as she rarely allowed herself the luxury unless her dad or brother went with her to scare away any man who wanted to whisper, "Treven's coming" to her, but in spike heels it wouldn't be too enjoyable. At least the view was gorgeous.

The dancing and music was going on behind her as the scheduled wedding dances started. Soon everyone would be able to dance. Disappointment tasted bitter on her tongue. Should she go back? Ask Jensen to dance? Fight that kind and beautiful American redhead for him? If the woman was a ninja warrior she was probably tough, but Livvy had been trained by 'Cap' and he was an incredible fighter. She worked on her fighting moves every day. Maybe she could win.

She shook her head. Silly thoughts. She wasn't going to pick a fight with some woman. Especially the woman who'd been her friend and agreed with her at the table. If Jensen wasn't interested in Livvy, she'd have to deal with that. It seemed that was a high probability. Why had she tricked herself into

believing he cared? The times he'd come to check on her he'd been caring and looked deeply at her, as if he were interested. He probably treated everyone that way.

"Livvy," the male voice came from behind her.

She whirled around and anticipation shot through her, a surge of endorphins stronger than the applause of thousands of people.

"Jensen," she breathed out, wishing there was something to lean against. It would be telling if she eased over to the castle wall or one of the shuttle vans for support.

His handsome face split in a welcoming smile. "You're not leaving. Not without dancing with me first."

It was a statement and a question combined. He confidently didn't think she'd leave and knew she'd longed to dance with him. Yet he was asking, making certain she'd give him a dance or two, because he was a gentleman and knew what she'd been through.

How to respond? She had to show that she was strong and independent, not the wuss who cowered in her own home, but it wouldn't be out of line to let him know how very interested she was in him. Shelby was great, but that didn't mean Livvy had to turn her dream man over to the lady.

Looking him over, she felt her knees weaken and her stomach flip flop. He was too enticing for her to resist, and he'd come for her. She barely resisted clapping her hands in joy. Maybe all her long-held dreams about Chief Jensen were about to come true.

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Cami is a part-time author, part-time exercise consultant, part-time housekeeper, full-time wife, and overtime mother of four adorable boys. Sleep and relaxation are fond memories. She's never been happier.

Join Cami's VIP list to find out about special deals, giveaways and new releases and receive a free copy of *Rescued by Love: Park City Firefighter Romance* by clicking [here](#).

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