



# THE POLICE CHIEF

AND  
THE

# *Musician*

Sweet Royal  
Romance  
Suspense #7

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**CAMI CHECKETTS**

*The Police Chief and the Musician*

SWEET ROYAL ROMANCE SUSPENSE

BOOK SEVEN

# CAMI CHECKETTS



*Birch River*  
PUBLISHING

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*The Police Chief and the Musician: Sweet Royal Romance Suspense #7*

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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

Madeline Prescott - Chad's mum



# 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 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 talent—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 wife. When she was seventeen, she'd gotten a restraining order against Treven after he cornered her and told her she would marry him or he'd kill anyone she dated. Her parents had recognized he was a dangerous psycho and cut ties to the Rindlesbachers. She'd thought he and his family would realize she'd never marry him.

For the next ten excruciating years, Livvy had learned that Gabby wasn't the only one who refused to quit. Treven hounded her throughout her university training and building her portfolio as a musician while she lived in Traverse. While she was 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 in places he shouldn't have been. He'd always keep his distance but smirk and mouth the same thing every time: "I'm coming for you."

Finally, around the time she finished at the university, Treven was arrested as an accomplice to murder. She'd finally been free to live her life and pursue her dream. After countless hours of practice and lessons and sweat and prayers, she'd achieved the seemingly impossible—performing with symphonies all over Europe. It was a one in a million chance, and she'd accomplished it.

She assumed traveling and not being in Augustine very often, she'd finally be free of Treven's taunts. After every show, however, as they bowed and the lights panned the audience's standing ovation, someone in the crowd held 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 paper, saying it was for their girlfriend. The description of the person who paid them was always different and no connection to the Rindlesbachers was ever made.

It scared the people Livvy performed with, and she began to succumb to her anxiety and fear, trembling as she played and sometimes making mistakes. Soon, the requests to be a guest with the top symphonies, operas, and even some pop bands stopped coming in. She finally had no choice but to give up her own hard-earned accomplishment, buy a charming cottage in Traverse, ten minutes from her supportive and loving parents and brother, and teach 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 horrifying. Being back in Traverse, she also had the whispered, "Treven's coming," whenever she went anywhere.

To her surprise, Treven hadn't approached her during his brief release from prison, but he 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, he'd be as dead as this bird. Not much longer and your patience will be rewarded. 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, 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 lackeys.

Livvy shuddered, closed her eyes, and said a prayer for strength. Treven was back in prison and William and Naomi were on the run, having finally been exposed for the sadistic psychos they were. They might have the reach, money, and power to taunt or intimidate her, but she had to believe they could no longer do any real harm.

Today was the day Livvy would finally be brave again. Braver than fighting to be a top pianist and strutting onto stages throughout the world. She would confidently waltz into Prince Derek and Ellery Monson's wedding this afternoon and trust General Raymond's top-notch security. Maybe she'd even get the chance to prove she was stronger than anybody knew and flirt with one irresistible chief of Augustine's police force.

Chief Jensen Allendale.

The dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-skinned perfection in a human male form could make her entire body tingle with one

look from his intense and beautiful eyes.

What would it feel like if he touched her? Livvy had to lean against the piano as she let that thought percolate.

“Did you like it, Miss Livvy? Did I do all right?”

Her eyes flew open, and she stared down at her student. The upright piano was against the wall in her small living area. She loved to play the baby grand at her parents’ house, but there was no way she could’ve fit one in this space. “Oh, sweet child, it was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. You fought and worked and never gave up. You inspire me, and I am 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 as she walked into that crowded wedding and prayed nobody would whisper, *Treven’s coming*.

Young Gabby was brave and hard-working with her piano. Livvy would do the same by 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 was 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 occasionally, 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 hadn't committed 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 into 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 attended many weddings, but she 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. 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 week, trying to hide amongst the crowd. Her small stature helped her remain incognito, so she'd given up wearing her favorite heels.

Today was special. She was celebrating and wanted to look her very best. What would Chief Jensen think? Would he notice her? Would he come to her? What if he asked her to dance? A warm shiver traced through her at that beautiful thought.

Livvy followed the crowd through the open courtyard. The area was set up with tables, chairs, a dance floor, and flowers decorating or draping 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. She wasn't afraid of heights, but being exposed like this, she couldn't help but wonder if one of Treven's people was nearby and might push her over the railing or if Treven could've somehow paid somebody to plant a bomb and hurt the royals and her.

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 views of the gorgeous mountains and valley as the backdrop. 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 the one and only 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.

Drat. Livvy hid away in her house and feasted on each brief visit from Jensen, probably making more of their connection in her own mind due to her lack of interactions with the opposite sex. Especially interactions with the handsome alpha male who was an icon in their beautiful country.

Sadly, he wasn't a monk. The media loved to show that he dated a lot, but seeing 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, and admitting she was the woman he'd been waiting for.

Her shoulders slumped. The reason for conquering her fears and not only leaving her house but facing this huge

wedding party now seemed empty. Why had she come? She'd been so stupidly brave. Right now, she just felt stupid.

No! She wasn't stupid. She was an accomplished woman, or at she least used to be, and the fears she'd conquered to get here were worth it, even if Jensen didn't notice her. This was a huge step for her. She straightened her shoulders, tilted up her chin, and pasted on a smile.

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.

His lips curved in a generous and welcoming smile, and miracle of miracles, he walked around the redhead and started in her direction. Her stomach gave a happy flip-flop and her pulse raced. Were all her dreams about to come true?

Livvy 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. She was only a few inches shorter than Jensen's six feet, not over half a foot shorter like Livvy was. With Jensen's devastatingly dark good looks and the redhead's beauty, 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. “Is that we’re thrilled you are here to join in my brother’s happy day.”

“Smooth, Prince Malik,” Livvy said drily, dipping into a slight curtsy that he waved off. “No wonder they call you the charming prince. Do you cover up for her all the time?” She grinned at her friend to show there were no hard feelings. Sophie wasn’t a blunt or rude person. It did sting to think of them placing bets on whether 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.

Just the thought of that monster made her spine prickle with unease. What if Treven got 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 tortured and killed by his lackeys while he was still in prison. Even Treven locked away and his parents on the run was no guarantee of safety. Jensen was tough and brave, but Treven and his family were disgusting and underhanded and always seemed to prevail.

She snuck another glance. Jensen now had a group of women surrounding him. Her heart dropped. Worries about Jensen being tortured like Jonathon didn’t matter. Jensen would stay safe from Treven because he 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, and fun to tease with. Why wouldn’t women chase him? Disappointment tasted like castor oil coating her mouth and throat. No, worse. Like she’d performed with the 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 Princess Sunny," the child said, tilting her chin regally to Livvy. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Livvy."

Livvy grinned and bowed to her. "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."

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." Livvy pranced to the closest open seat and sat with the posture that had been drilled into her by every piano teacher since she was four years old.

Prince Malik smiled at her and escorted Sophie in the direction Arianna was asking them to go, seated up front with the rest of the royal family. Jensen settled 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 Augustinians 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 snuck 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 ended, and Livvy cheered along with everyone else as the gorgeous couple kissed. 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 dinner, with a reception and dancing to follow.

Livvy didn't know the bride or groom, so she waited for some of the crowd to greet them and then walked around the glass bridge with a group. She did better crossing the glass barrier this time, which was encouraging. Everything would get easier as she kept trying, and the Savior would strengthen her as He used to steady her fingers when she played professionally.

Jensen had disappeared. Was he checking on something for the police or had that redhead from earlier 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 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 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 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.

Jensen was seated with Major Chad and his date, Chad's mother Madeline Prescott, Lieutenant General Cordon and his wife, and other military personnel or members of parliament like Chad's mum.

Jensen caught Livvy's gaze. She lit up all the way through and gave him an inviting smile. His dark eyes sparkled at her, and his appealing lips curved up. The man next to him engaged him in conversation and she refocused on the mango cheesecake she'd chosen for dessert. At least he'd looked at her.

"Can you believe that fine-looking specimen is their *chief* of police?" Shelby asked, as if she'd noticed Livvy's gaze. "He was just 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 Shelby, 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 blonde 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 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 snapped, 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. 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 are as kind and gracious as they are beautiful and accomplished, they love their husbands, and they will be a great blessing to our country. What we Augustinians don’t need 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 women exchanged glances while others looked at her in shock, some in approval.

These women were all ultra-fit athletes. They could beat her up if they ganged up on her, but she’d put her self-defense skills against most people’s ability to hurt her. That thought gave her even more confidence. She was out in public, brave and standing up for Prince Tristan. It was as if she’d just finished a flawless performance of Handel’s Messiah. She could do this.

“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 only a little warm as she listened to the speeches and toasts. She could feel some animosity from 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. They were independently wealthy, lived in this insanely gorgeous castle, and were, well, royal without putting on airs. The August family was classy and put the people of Augustine first. She’d especially admired Queen Anne, who had drowned horrifically 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.

“Thank you for sitting with us,” Shelby said graciously.

“Thank you.” She nodded to her one ally.

She glanced around, wondering if 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, she wondered if the gorgeous redhead wasn’t like the American princesses—a breath of fresh air who would be 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 was ready to leave. It had been an enlightening and empowering evening, but it was time to go before she threw herself at Jensen and begged him to dance. She needed to get out of here. Holding her chin high, as if she were walking off the stage after a successful performance and an encore in the Philharmonie de Paris, she strolled through the tables. She’d been 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 lousy wedding guest wanted to run away before the dancing even started? Her, unfortunately. It was all right. She’d done well, but she had reached her limit with that snarky blonde.

Livvy made it to the massive open castle gates and glanced around. Shuttles were lined up, but the drivers were nowhere to be seen. 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,” but in spike heels it wouldn’t be enjoyable. At least the view was gorgeous.

Music sounded 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. She could win. Wouldn’t she be proud of herself then?

Livvy shook her head. Silly thoughts. She wouldn’t pick a fight with some woman, especially the one who’d been kind 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 had looked deeply at her as if interested. He was a classy, successful professional. He likely treated everyone that way.

“Livvy,” a male voice said from behind her.

She whirled around. 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 both a statement and a question. 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, knew she was damaged despite how successful she’d been.



How to respond? She had to show that she was strong and independent, not a hermit who had hidden from society for years, 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, her knees weakened and her stomach flip-flopped. 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 regarding the luscious Chief Jensen were about to come true.

## CHAPTER

## *Two*

**LIVVY'S HEART** raced as if she were about to perform a solo at the Palais Garnier in Paris. She stared at the ultra-handsome man of her every daydream. Coming to this wedding was completely worth it, and the smartest thing she'd ever done. *The* Chief Jensen Allendale wanted to dance with her. He'd followed her out of the gates. He wasn't with the gorgeous, voluptuous, sweetheart American redhead.

"I don't know." She put a teasing inflection in her voice and tried to remember how to flirt. It'd been a hot minute. "Dancing with *the* chief of police. That's a lot of pressure for a simple musician like me."

Jensen eased closer, a twinkle in his dark eyes that made her stomach swirl with happy butterflies. "Don't get caught up on my power, charisma, or confidence. You're the most intriguing, accomplished, and beautiful musician in the world. I'm in awe of all you've accomplished, and I'd be blessed to dance with you."

She smiled at his confidence and compliments. Normally she'd want to tease someone who said something like that, but his 'power, charisma, and confidence' were so alluring she didn't want to change one thing about him.

Before she could think of a proper reply, he lowered his voice and eased closer. Her heart thumped out of control. Was he going to bypass dancing and go straight to kissing? *Yes, please.* "I love seeing you out in public like this. I know it's

been a while and you are incredibly brave. The Rindlesbachers haven't made contact with you recently?"

She clutched her hands together and shook her head. His words registered fully and her heart and hopes both fell as flat as "Claire de Lune" played by a beginner.

He'd complimented her, but had he only come after her because of his job? When he'd visited her at her house, he'd been professional yet there'd been an underlying hint of interest in the depth of his dark gaze.

She'd never dared believe that anything could happen between her and the intriguing chief because of the nightmare with Treven and the fact that Jensen was completely out of her league.

"The emails still come in occasionally." She forwarded them on to the police department but expected nothing to come from it. "Naomi and William are wanted fugitives. They wouldn't waste their time with me."

"I'm afraid their schemes to claim the throne won't stop. They've always been fixated on you and your relation to Duke Burton. And we both know Treven has long been obsessed with you."

She shuddered. Obsessed. A psychotic murderer. As a teenager, she'd found Treven's interest flattering. He was a good-looking guy, and his parents had seemed impressive and successful. The more time she spent around him, however, the more she'd noticed inconsistencies in his moods, a cunning, almost evil look in his bluish-gray eyes, and bursts of bad temper that had scared her. She'd told her mum and dad she wanted nothing more to do with Treven and his parents. Her mum had initially been disappointed, but her dad admitted he'd recently overheard William saying that if only Elijah Moser wasn't a black man, then Livvy's royal blood would be untainted. Her dad hadn't wanted to upset either of them with the slight at his race, but he felt as uncomfortable as Livvy did around the man. As soon as she and her mum both heard that, they were more motivated to cut any ties to the Rindlesbachers.

Eight years ago, shortly after her family had decided to stay away from the Rindlesbachers, Treven had found her coming out of class late one evening. He had pinned her against a brick wall and told her she would be his and no one else's. His family needed her royal blood for their legitimate heirs and a strong alliance with Great Britain, and that was the only reason he hadn't taken advantage of her yet. He had to be married to her before they 'created ideal heirs.' It was absolutely terrifying to see the craze in his bluish-gray eyes. The man was spoiled and insane. He'd finally walked away after promising he'd kill anyone else she dated. She'd gotten a restraining order against him the next day.

"My apologies." Jensen's gaze traveled over her face like the most tender of caresses. Just like that, her pulse sped up and liquid fire raced through her bloodstream. "Now is not the time to waste talking about such people. Not in this beautiful setting with an even more beautiful lady. Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

She'd seen him in his detective and chief roles and thought he was incredibly appealing, but seeing him with his guard down, asking her to dance and staring at her as if he were sincerely interested in her as a woman made her heart race out of control.

"I would absolutely love to," she said softly.

His handsome face split into an irresistible grin. Livvy went *absolutely* weak in the knees. She'd never realized that wasn't simply a cliché phrase. She tilted to the side.

Luckily, Jensen was right there to catch her. He wrapped his hands around her hips and steadied her. "All right then?"

"I will be when we're dancing," she whispered back.

His answering grin made everything all right in her world.

Livvy had no clue if the bride and groom were still dancing or what was happening with the wedding party. She and Jensen were sheltered from the crowd and most of the noise by the high stone walls surrounding the castle and courtyard. The melodious strains of "Tales from Vienna

Woods” by Johann Strauss Jr floated out to them. It was the perfect waltz for a wedding dance.

Jensen cupped her waist firmly with one hand and clasped her other hand with his. His touch thrilled her—firm, yet tender. He pulled their joined hands to his firm chest as she wrapped her palm around the lovely muscles of his shoulder.

He slowly waltzed her further away from the gates and toward one of the trails leading up to the mountain. The music grew faint, but she didn’t care. Livvy’s entire life was music, but she found she didn’t need music right now. The very way Jensen moved and looked at her was musical and created a symphony in her mind. Their height discrepancy was less with her heels on, and she felt substantial, confident, and irreplaceable in his arms. She stared into Jensen’s mesmerizing dark gaze as the evening shadows deepened around them. She was in his arms and basically alone with the man she yearned for.

“Livvy ...” His voice was deep, husky, inspiring.

“Yes?” She moistened her lips. His gaze dropped and lingered there for a thrilling moment. Would he ask to kiss her? *Oh, yes please, and hurry up about it* would be her response.

“I haven’t wanted to cross any professional boundaries since you were in danger.”

Livvy nodded. She respected him for being professional, but the Rindlesbachers’ reign of terror was over. Right? She couldn’t help but believe Treven would never stop bothering her. Even with his parents gone, he still had friends who could get to her.

“But now that we’re hopefully past all of that, would you be interested in ...”

Livvy’s heart threatened to beat out of her chest. One of his strong arms encircled her, and their hands were clasped. She was touching his firm shoulder, gazing into his dark eyes, and catching a hint of his musky cologne. She’d be interested in pretty much anything he wanted to propose.

He glanced down at his pocket and up at her. His dark eyes filled with frustration. “I apologize. I have to check who this is.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t even felt his phone buzz. He was the chief of police; of course he had to check his phone if it buzzed. Of course he had to keep everyone safe. He and his best friend General Raymond August had the weight of Augustine’s safety and protection on their very capable shoulders. They were an impressive pair. Every time she glimpsed them together on the news or social media, she got lost focusing on Jensen. He was a superhero to her, and she was finally in his presence. In his arms.

He released her and stepped back, pulling his phone out. Disappointment surged inside her. He held up one finger to her and then clicked on his text icon. She studied the gorgeous mountains surrounding them to give him some privacy. She loved the beautiful city of Traverse, but this mountainous valley where Greenville and the castle and royal family resided was like an exquisite mystical painting. Jensen had said she was even more beautiful than the setting. Did he mean it?

“I apologize,” Jensen said, stepping up close to her again. “I have to rescue T.”

Prince Tristan.

“Is he in danger?” She’d hoped the danger would subside in Augustine now that the Rindlesbachers were gone.

“In a manner of speaking.” He smiled slightly, but it was tight. Something was wrong. “Scheming women are surrounding him.”

“Oh.” The ninja warrior crew she’d sat with at dinner? Livvy shuddered thinking of Jaylene getting her claws into the crown prince. Prince Tristan was a great guy and didn’t deserve that. Of course Jensen would rescue his friend and the crown prince. He was just that kind of guy.

“Will you save me a dance?” he asked, his gaze intense.

“I’ll try. My dance card will be so irrationally full.”

“I’m sure. The single men will be fighting over you. Stay away from Chad, will you?”

She smiled. Major Chad Prescott was quite the charmer, but she’d never been drawn to him like she was to Jensen, and Chad had a date on his arm. “Done. Hurry back, please.”

Did that sound too desperate? She should probably go back and blend in with the wedding party, but she felt safe here with guards at the lower gate and patrolling the wedding. She wanted to be alone while she waited for him.

“As fast as I can.” He took her hand, kissed the back of it, and made her tremble from hand to head to foot. With one last longing glance, he released her and hurried back through the gates.

Livvy crept after him, stopping just inside the gate, in the shadows and still dozens of feet from the dancing, celebrating throng. She saw Jensen and Prince Tristan surrounded by the group of women from America she’d sat with at dinner. The prince slipped away and Jensen took his place, flirting with all the women at once. It didn’t seem to be much of a hardship on him; on the contrary, it looked like he was thoroughly enjoying himself. Shelby was right at his elbow. Livvy had been impressed with that lady, but she still didn’t want to surrender Jensen to her.

Livvy eased over to the interior castle wall, standing in the shadows where no one could see her gawking at Jensen and the women, praying she was reading the situation wrong. He was helping Prince Tristan escape. But then why was he still entertaining that gaggle of beautiful women? He’d said he would hurry back ‘as fast as he could.’ Yeah, right.

She leaned against the wall for support. What did she really know about Chief Jensen besides the fact that his dark gaze held her captive and he kindly checked on her every so often? He dated gorgeous women nonstop. So he’d flirted with her and asked her for a dance. It wasn’t some lifelong commitment. How pathetic that she’d become such a recluse that one dance seemed like a wedding proposal to her. Dumb and immature and lame and ...

“I have a message for you,” a cultured male voice said, far too close to her ear.

Livvy jumped and pivoted to face him. Her stomach threatened to claw out of her throat when she realized who it was. Ramone Pitcher, a close friend of Treven’s. They’d all attended secondary school together in Traverse. Ramone was a junior member of their parliament, handsome and successful in business and politics, but something about the guy had always made her skin crawl. She hadn’t spoken to him in years and wouldn’t mind keeping it that way. She could only imagine what his ‘message’ would be.

“Pardon me,” she said haughtily. “I don’t care for any message.” She tried to walk around him, but he grasped her arm.

“Unfortunately, that isn’t an option.” He grabbed her chin with his other hand and forced her to look into his dark gaze. It was interesting that Jensen’s dark eyes could be so intense and appealing where Ramone’s were terrifying.

Livvy wished she hadn’t hidden in the shadows watching Jensen flirt with the Americans, giving this guy a chance to grab her. She should use the moves Cap had taught her and she’d practiced so often, but instead she froze.

“When Treven is released from prison, he’s going to come for you,” Ramone said. “You will be waiting and ready to be his bride.”

“I will never be that loser’s bride,” she hurled at him.

*Treven’s coming.*

No!

The shock and horror of his warning made her forget the need to scream for help or fight like she had practiced. All she wanted to do was run and hide in her little home, but she had to appear brave because every detail of this interaction would be reported back to Treven.

“Oh, you won’t?” His grip tightened on her chin.



Every cell in her body screamed for her to yank away from his vile touch and punch him in the throat. That was what Cap would tell her to do. She prayed for strength and had the feeling she should hold steady instead of fight. So she forced herself to maintain eye contact and act as if his touch didn't bother her. Ramone had to know she was serious in her defiance, that she would never back down to Treven or his friends.

Released from prison? No way was that happening. Treven couldn't get out of the secure prison in the mountains west of Traverse. He couldn't be coming for her like all those signs at concerts and all those murmurs she used to hear when she was out and about.

*Please help me. Please let Ramone be as insane and delusional as Treven,* she begged heaven above.

“If you aren't waiting for him, willing and ready...” He looked her over with a leer in his eyes. “He will kill your mum and your dad and hold your idiotic brother captive to ensure you perform to the best of your ability as his bride and the mother of a new royal line.” He gave her a shark-like grin, then released her and strode off, disappearing into the crowd of dancers.

Livvy wilted against the wall, suddenly chilled. If the Rindlesbachers had no power any longer, why would Ramone make threats? Did he simply enjoy scaring her? Treven was in prison and his parents were gone. None of those disgusting words could come true. Right?

She glanced over to where Jensen was still flirting with the group of women. Shelby was all but in his arms, pressed close and laughing at something he'd said. He grinned as if he'd won the prize of the century.

Jensen was an accomplished, desirable man, but she was nothing special to him as she'd let herself stupidly believe. Treven was more psychotic than ever and was now threatening her parents and sweet brother if she wasn't 'willing and ready' to marry him when he was released from prison.

Livvy prayed that day would never come. She should wait for Jensen, tell him about the threat, but she also had to guard her heart and dump her girlish dreams in the garbage. Jensen would have his men watch out for her and would never release Treven from prison, but he also showed no inclination to break away from the group of women or yearn for Livvy like she'd long done for him.

Shoulders rounded, Livvy stayed in the shadows and made it out of the gate. She crept down the road, hoping with every step that Jensen would appear, chase her down, and beg her to return to the wedding. They'd flirt some more and exchange interested glances. He'd put her fears of Treven ever getting out of prison to rest and talk her into that dance ...

Dreams had kept her going for a while now, but every step down the road hurt a little more, and not just because of the steep downhill in killer high heels.

Jensen wasn't coming for her. Unless it was on police business. She'd built up this event and Jensen much too high in her mind. She was proud of what she'd accomplished tonight, even with the awful threats from Ramone, but she definitely needed to get out of the house more and stop reading so many romance novels.

But with Ramone's threats lingering, the desire to be social and have a normal life seemed further away than ever. Her knight in shining armor wasn't a knight at all. He was just a normal guy, a devastatingly handsome, powerful, and enticing police chief who had women begging for his attention. Okay, he wasn't normal at all. He was exceptional. Except how much he seemed to enjoy all the women's attention. He hadn't held himself in reserve for Livvy as she used to dream. Why had she let herself believe she was special to him? That the twinkle in his dark eyes was for her and her alone? Stupid unfulfilled dreams anyway.

She had to go home. She'd be safe there, in her boring prison of a house, and somehow she'd forget about Jensen.

Remembering being in his arms for those brief moments of their dance made her stomach hop higher than the "Ballade

Pour Adeline's" high notes. Forgetting him would be harder than ever.

Curse her pathetic life and Treven Rindlesbacher all to heck and back.

## CHAPTER

## *Three*

**JENSEN'S PATIENCE** was being stretched as he distracted the American women for long enough to allow Tristan to make a solid escape. He kept discreetly trying to locate Livvy's position, but he wouldn't be able to see her if she'd waited outside the gates. She definitely wasn't dancing with anyone, selecting a refreshment, greeting the bride and groom, or seated at one of the many tables. Would she wait for him? What if some other smart man found her? As a rule, Jensen was fairly low-strung, but not knowing where Livvy was had him panicked.

To his knowledge she had rarely left her home the past couple of years, terrified of that snake Treven Rindlesbacher even though he was in a secure prison now. The Rindlesbachers had hired people all over Europe to play mind games with Livvy, but no one could prove it.

Livvy had been brave to come today, proving she was still the hard-working phenomenon who'd reached the top levels in a highly competitive career. She was musical royalty, a queen among women in his mind. Jensen wanted to be there for her as she put Treven's persecution behind her. He could show her how fun and exciting leaving her house could be.

Jensen had it bad for her. He loved to watch her performances on YouTube. Sadly he hadn't known her while she was still performing. He'd even bought a baby grand piano at a charity auction. He reasoned the purchase was for a good cause and the piano looked great in his open living room. He

doubted he'd ever tell her he'd bought it hoping she would play it some day.

Throughout the years, since he'd been made aware of the Rindlesbachers weird manipulations of her, Treven's threat before she got the restraining order, the emails, and the mutilated dove and note Treven had left on her porch during his brief stint out of prison, he'd focused on helping her feel safe and confident.

The thorn in Jensen's side, Treven Rindlesbacher, and the sadistic jerk's awful parents William and Naomi, had tried to control her and mess with her mental and emotional well-being, but she was a resilient woman. Seeing her at this wedding—confident, beautiful, and brave—had been the answer to a lot of prayers. It had felt like the green light to finally reveal his interest in her. To forget about being professional around her, at least for tonight.

But now he was being waylaid by these women. They all were over-the-top friendly and beautiful. Tristan had texted that Jensen could have his pick if he rescued him.

The thing Tristan didn't know was Jensen had already picked Livvy Moser. She was the only one for him. If he didn't have Livvy filling his every free thought, he would be interested in at least flirting with and dancing with several of these American ladies. Especially the beautiful and flirtatious redhead, Shelby. Not now. Not with Livvy at this wedding.

"If you'll excuse me," he said to Shelby, who was pushing closer and closer to him.

"No, I won't excuse you, *Chief* Jensen," she drawled out his title as if he were a hot fudge sundae. "You came to us, remember? Now you get to dance with all of us. But please ... me first." She winked and slowly drew her tongue across her lower lip.

Where was Chad when he needed him? Who had allowed the major to bring a date to the wedding? Chad could handle all these women, flirting and charming them, and easily distract them from Jensen and Tristan. Chad would also enjoy it.

“One dance,” she begged.

How could he explain that the woman he was gone over had left her home for the first time in years, was at this royal wedding, and he could not let her disappear or get snatched up by somebody else?

“I apologize, but you’ll have to pardon me,” he said to the redhead. “I’m needed at the gates, you see.” It wasn’t really lying as he’d left Livvy by those gates and he prayed she did need him, not just for protection but to hold, love, and heal her.

Nodding to the group, he hurried away from them, ignoring a few mutters about ‘hard-to-get Augustinian hotties.’

He and Tristan were not entertaining Princess Ellery’s American friends properly. He’d be a horrible politician, but politics and entertaining groups of women weren’t his focus. Police work was. He wanted Livvy Moser to be. If he could find her.

He did a quick scan of the dance area, the refreshment table, and the seating areas around the open courtyard as he made his way toward the gates where he’d left Livvy. He saw a photographer focused on him and hoped his fake smile looked good. As the chief of police and General Ray’s best friend, he had to deal with the press at times. He hurried on, hoping they wouldn’t ask for a statement.

Where was Livvy? He knew she was safe with the heightened security, clearance requirements, and advanced imagining technology scans Ray had installed for the wedding, but he still felt uneasy. Was that only selfishness on his part, or was Livvy in trouble?

“What’s the rush, Chief-y Chief?” A man swayed in front of him, wineglass in hand. Ramone Pitcher looked and sounded like he’d already had a few too many.

“I’m meeting someone. Excuse me.” He brushed by him.

“The all-important police chief,” Ramone hurled at his back and suddenly he sounded very sober. “If you weren’t the puppet of the royal family, you’d see that all their lies and

secret deals are about to be exposed. You might not be so high and mighty for much longer.”

Jensen spun to face the weasel. He strode back to the man. Ramone cowered, scuttled backward, and ran into a chair. He looked very, very sober with his eyes round with fear.

“What do you know?” Jensen asked, steel in his tone and the look in his eyes that told a criminal not to mess with him. Maybe not the most advisable look to use on a junior member of parliament, but this guy bothered him. Ramone seemed to relish any bit of power he could get his paws on.

“Nothing,” Ramone murmured.

“Nothing?” Jensen stared him down. The man wisely looked away. “You stepped in front of me, threatened the royal family, and you know ‘nothing’?”

As the prime minister’s wife had been kidnapped by William and Naomi Rindlesbacher two weeks ago with no sightings yet, and the prime minister hadn’t shown up at the wedding, Jensen couldn’t afford to dismiss any jerk’s words. Even if Ramone had let himself have one too many drinks. He wasn’t someone Jensen could underestimate. He wanted to throw him in a cell for the night, but that would cause an issue with Parliament, and Jensen hadn’t recorded the threats.

“The Rindlesbachers are still at large.” Ramone dared meet his gaze again.

“Are you in league with them, Ramone?” Jensen loomed over the shorter man, hoping the guy felt threatened.

“No. I wouldn’t do that.” He jutted out his chin, rubbing at the condensation on his wine glass with soft fingers. This man was a politician to the core and soft physically, but he was still a dangerous adversary. “I’m only saying you need to keep your eyes open so you can keep the royal family and our beautiful country safe.”

“Your first line sounded nothing like that.”

Ramone gave a nervous laugh and held up the crystal goblet. “Fourth glass.”

Jensen rolled his eyes. Was the guy a pompous annoyance like Jensen had always assumed, was he actually tipsy and that had made him brasher than usual, or was there any truth to his statements?

“I’m watching you,” he finally said.

Ramone’s eyes widened. For the first time, he didn’t flap his jaw. He nodded, downed the rest of his drink, then mumbled something about a refill as he took a nervous step backward.

Jensen made a mental note to check into Ramone’s associations, voting on policies, and background.

Only not right now. Right now, he had to find Livvy.

He gave Ramone one more pointed stare. The man quivered and then staggered away. He was a tool. Jensen hated when people like that got into Parliament. Ramone could talk a good show to get appointed, but Jensen would bet he was swayed or bought by anyone who wanted his vote. Hopefully he wasn’t on the Rindlesbachers’ payroll. Impressive how well those people hid their bribes and money trail and how well they worked their manipulation, intimidation, and threats. Jensen wanted to rescue Leslie Shule from their ugly hands, but it had been blessedly quiet the past couple weeks without a Rindlesbacher scheme to fight against. Was something stirring again? The rest of the world and the media finally knew how horrible William and Naomi were, and many police forces and international crime organizations had them on their radar. Would they dare make another play for the crown?

Striding away from the wedding crowd, he finally made it to the gate.

“Who are you chasing after?” Princess Macey, his best friend Ray’s new wife, said from behind him.

He turned and saw Macey and Ray approach, Macey with a teasing grin and Ray not quite as serious as usual.

“Only the most beautiful and talented woman in the kingdom,” he teased back.



Ray shook his head and said solemnly, “You can’t chase Macey, so don’t even think about it.”

Jensen chuckled and bowed slightly. “Forgive me. The most beautiful and talented woman in the kingdom to *me*.”

“Yes!” Macey did a fist pump. “You finally fell in love. Who is she? When can I meet her? Why aren’t you dancing with her? Is she outside the gates?” She peered through the gates, but sadly for Macey’s curiosity and Jensen’s peace of mind, Livvy wasn’t standing there waiting for him. Where had she gone?

“Give me a few minutes to make certain she returns my feelings.” He winked at Macey, afraid it would take much more than a few minutes. He’d been patiently waiting for Livvy for years. Would he be old and gray before she was finally free of Treven? “I need to find her.”

“Go.” Macey pushed at him, clearly sensing his urgency.

Ray eased closer before Jensen could walk away. Ray didn’t usually get ... close. “Jennifer Shule is back and waiting in T’s suite for him. She has news about the prime minister. Answer your phone, even if you’re kissing this perfect woman.” He looked Jensen over with a hint of a smile. “Livvy Moser?”

Jensen nodded, reeling and stunned by the info dump. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t be kissing Livvy. He’d be lucky to get her to dance with him—if he could find her before Tristan and Ray needed him.

Jennifer Shule was back. It couldn’t be coincidence that she arrived on the same day her father Prime Minister Shule had disappeared.

Jensen had a bad feeling about this.

*Rindlesbachers*. He wanted to growl the name. Or use it as a curse word. Treven and William’s devious schemes had resulted in Jensen compromising his unflinching moral compass to protect Hattie Ballard, now Princess Hattie August. He loathed them and all they’d done to the August family and Livvy, those he cared about the most. Those

conniving and sadly brilliant people couldn't terrify Livvy—not again—and they wouldn't hurt the royal family. Not on his watch.

He turned his phone ringer back on, nodded to Ray, saluted Macey, and hurried through the gates. Livvy was nowhere to be seen. The evening shadows were long. The shuttles weren't running yet, as who would want to leave a royal wedding party early? Apparently Livvy would. Unless he'd missed her and she was somewhere in the wedding crowd. Maybe she was in the restroom?

He said a quick prayer and then instinctively started jogging down the road that curved outside the castle and down to the village. He'd only gone a hundred feet when he saw her long dark hair and the beautiful floral dress that showed off her smooth curves.

"Livvy," he called, whispering a prayer of gratitude. He'd found her.

She whirled to face him.

Jensen jogged the rest of the distance to her. Her dark gaze didn't look happy to see him, ready to flirt and tease like she had earlier. She looked ... upset.

"What happened?" he demanded. The words came out a little too chief of police-y. Definitely not romantic like he wanted to be. Who was he kidding? He didn't know romance.

"Nothing," she said, her expression closed off. "I need to get home."

Jensen eased closer, studying her. "Livvy." He softened his voice. "Something or someone has upset you. What can I do to help?"

She stared at him, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Ramone. He said I needed to be ready to be Treven's bride." She visibly shuddered.

Jensen's eyes widened. Treven wasn't getting out of his prison and making Livvy his bride. It was ludicrous. But no wonder she was upset. What a creepy thing to say. He needed to question her and Ramone further. There were procedures to

follow, a police report to file. Procedures were clear in this case, starting with bringing in one of his detectives to corroborate everything.

Instead, he did something the opposite of his usual instincts. He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her.

Livvy froze for half a second. Then she quivered, leaned into him, and let him hold her. Jensen cradled her against his chest, savoring this connection to her. She slipped her arms around his back and held on. The sensation was beautiful and spoke of a lasting commitment. He hoped she could feel that he would protect her, fight for her, right her every wrong.

As quickly as she'd cuddled into him, she released him and stepped back. "I need to go."

"Go?" he asked stupidly. "Where?"

"Home." She folded her arms across her abdomen and hugged herself.

"I'll accompany you."

"I'm fine. It was weird what he said, but you're needed here at the wedding. Treven is in prison and his parents are gone from Augustine. Correct?" She pulled the edge of her bottom lip between her teeth. The move was so enticing it was hard for Jensen to focus.

"Yes," he managed. "His parents are running scared, and no way is Treven escaping from my prison."

Yet he had this ugly knot in his gut. Something was coming. Something wasn't right. He had to be on his toes every second, and he didn't want Livvy going home alone.

"I'll be fine then," she said. "Ramone was just being ... his weird self."

Jensen could agree. Ramone had said odd things to him tonight too, but with Jennifer Shule waiting in Tristan's suite ready to share information, most likely about her parents and the Rindlesbachers, the odd lines from a junior member of parliament felt ominous.

“I’ll escort you to your car,” he said, not giving her a chance to argue. He’d deal with Ramone later. He wrapped his arm around her waist, intent on escorting her down the hill. He didn’t have time to drive her to Traverse, but he could have men waiting for her when she got there.

She leaned into him for a brief and beautiful moment. Then, just as quickly, she pulled away and glared up at him. “No thank you, Chief Jensen. I’ll be just fine. The guard station isn’t too much farther. One of General Raymond’s guards will escort me to my car, and I have a great security system at home.”

He stared down at her, brushing his hand over his short hair. “Please call me Jensen,” was the only thing he could think to say.

“No thank you, Chief.” Her eyes sparked at him.

What had happened? Ramone had upset her but Jensen got the feeling he had as well. How had he upset her? They’d been dancing and flirting not an hour ago. Was he being too pushy? He only wanted her safe.

They studied each other. Jensen couldn’t think of a worse standoff. Why wouldn’t she let him protect her?

“Livvy, please ...” He softened his voice and stared deeply into her eyes, trying to convey his desire to keep her safe but also his sincere interest in her. He wanted her to understand that he’d kept his distance because of how damaged she’d seemed to be from Treven. Her coming tonight had been a sign that she was strong enough to conquer those demons and let Jensen pursue her. Maybe the timing still wasn’t right. Maybe she wasn’t ready.

His phone rang. He wanted to curse and shut it off, but he had to be there for Ray, Tristan, Jennifer, the king, whoever might need him in this nonstop battle with the Rindlesbachers. He detested those people. Most especially Treven. He’d call the guy his nemesis, but he didn’t want to give Treven that much space in his head.

“Excuse me.” He pulled the phone out. It was Ray.

“No, excuse me.” She forced a smile, then stalked down the road and away from him.

He groaned, slid the phone on, and trailed behind her. “Yeah?”

“We’re going to need you,” Ray said.

“Okay.”

Jensen listened as Ray explained and walked down the road after Livvy. He’d at least make certain she got to the guard station safely. One of the guards could escort her to her car, and Jensen would have another guard run him up the hill in a side-by-side.

Dang that he couldn’t drive her home. Double dang that Treven could still scare her through Ramone, email, and other means. Triple dang that she didn’t even seem to want Jensen in her life.

## CHAPTER

## *Four*

**LIVVY IGNORED** Jensen as he followed her down the road to the guard station. It was not easy. The guards immediately noticed him. How could anyone not notice his commanding and arresting stature? She loved how decisive he was and despite her telling him to get lost, she appreciated his protective nature.

Jensen instructed the men to escort her to her car. She glanced at him one last time before walking away with a guard. He was on the phone, but the police chief appeared completely focused on her. His dark gaze begged her to smile at him, flirt with him, be his ...

No. She was being silly.

Thoughts about the night and Jensen battled in her head as she drove the half an hour to Traverse.

Finally, she made it home. She loved her ‘cracker box palace’ as her dad liked to call it. The home was old, the exterior beautiful granite that sparkled in the sunshine, the interior small rooms with amazing classic details like squares of stained glass lining the top of each window. She’d painted and updated some electrical and plumbing but had mostly kept it the same.

Over the next few days, and especially when two detectives instead of their chief arrived to get her statement about Ramone, she second-guessed why she’d had to walk away from Jensen. He might’ve been interested, if she’d only stayed and danced and not surrendered him to a beautiful and

kind American. Was it her jealousy over seeing him with the redhead or her fear of Treven that had made her walk away?

Livvy busied herself with teaching, playing the piano, cooking, cleaning, reading, practicing her self-defense, walks with her dad and brother David, and a chance to go to the shooting range with her dad.

She was stunned to see on the news that the Rindlesbachers had tried to kill the king and crown prince. Yet again.

William Rindlesbacher falling off a cliff and dying was a tragic end, but a huge relief as well. She couldn't think of one redeeming characteristic that man had, unless it was commitment to his own family. Sadly, Naomi had escaped and was still at large.

Every day she prayed for Jensen to stop by, even if it was only to talk more about Ramone's weird lines and reassure her Treven was in prison.

Nothing.

He was busy cleaning up from William's attack and death. She was certain of that.

She was not his priority or a woman he was interested in. That was more certain.

A week after the wedding, she was relaxing in the claw-foot tub that took up most of the small bathroom, reading the latest Jennifer Youngblood romantic suspense novel, when the power went out.

She froze. The warm water suddenly had a distinct chill to it. Blinking in the dark, she set her Kindle down on the nearby counter, grabbed her phone, and turned on her flashlight. She climbed out of the tub and locked the bathroom door, then hurried to slide into underwear, a T-shirt, and some sweats. The light on her phone danced eerily off the shadows. She clutched it while she dressed, refusing to set it down.

A noise outside her window made her freeze yet again. Was it just the neighbor's dog sneaking under the fence?

Her fingers trembled as she pushed on the recent calls and her dad's number.

"Hey, sweetie," he greeted her. "Everything okay?"

"My power just went off."

"Okay." His voice sounded only mildly concerned. She hadn't told her parents about Ramone's weird threats. They'd been so proud of her for going to the wedding, and she'd tried to act like it was all wonderful and focused on how beautiful everything was, Sophie's engagement, and her new American 'friends.' She hadn't wanted to worry them.

"Are your neighbors' lights out?" her dad asked.

She hurried to her bedroom window and pulled up the blind. The neighbor's house was lit up. She put the phone on speaker so she could use the flashlight. "Just a second." Rushing through her bedroom and out into the main living area, she peered across the street and in the other direction. "No. They're all lit up."

"I don't like that. Your doors are all dead bolted?"

"Yes."

"Stay put and I'll be right there."

"Okay." She hung up and paced the living room. Her light bobbed around the room as she walked, setting her even more on edge.

Her parents only lived ten minutes away. She'd be fine. It was probably a breaker situation or something.

She shouldn't call Jensen. She definitely shouldn't call Jensen.

But he had given her his cell phone number in case of emergencies.

He also hadn't contacted her since the wedding.

A loud rap on the door startled her. She stifled a scream and eased toward it. Without power, her security wouldn't be armed and the camera her dad had set up wouldn't work either. She felt exposed, vulnerable, and terrified.



Peeking out the peephole, she couldn't see anyone. The porch was dark, but with the neighbor's lights she should be able to see a shadow blocking her view or whoever knocked walking away.

She stared for a few seconds. How could somebody have knocked and disappeared that quickly?

A couple strolled into view on the sidewalk. The Cortezes. They lived just down the street, a nice middle-aged couple with a bunch of teenagers. They were constantly feeding and entertaining a crowd of young people. They were enjoying a crisp late-evening walk, probably escaping another loud party at their house.

Yanking open the door, the chilly air stung her cheeks, fingers, and bare toes. "Hi!" She called out and waved to them. "Have you seen anyone else out and about?" Her voice pitched up with fear.

"No," Mr. Cortez called back. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?" She clutched at her neck.

"You just seem stressed and ... no lights on besides your phone's flashlight."

"My power's out," she admitted.

The couple crossed the street and came up her walk. She didn't even know their first names, but they were just the type of people who would check on a neighbor. Thank heavens for good people.

"My dad's on his way to figure it out," she explained. "Probably a breaker—"

Her lights turned back on. The alarm screeched through the night air, but Mrs. Cortez's scream was louder.

Livvy dodged inside and quickly typed in the code next to the door, silencing the alarm.

Mrs. Cortez clutched her husband's arm. "Jeffrey ... Jeffrey!"

“Andrea,” her husband admonished her. “It’s all right. Livvy’s power came back on and probably triggered her house alarm because she had the door open.”

“Jeffrey!” The woman pointed to the porch step, her face pale and pinched with horror. Her husband followed her finger and let out a low curse. Livvy didn’t want to look. She didn’t. But she forced her gaze to drop, and cold chills danced across her bare arms.

A bloody white collared dove. The note underneath was printed in block letters.

*NO MORE WAITING. I’M COMING FOR YOU NOW.*

Livvy was going to be sick.

“Stay here and call the police,” Mr. Cortez commanded. “The sicko who did this can’t be far. Where’s your breaker box?”

“Garage,” she managed. Her stomach tumbled.

‘The sicko who did this?’ Treven couldn’t be here. He couldn’t. He was in prison. It was one of his friends or someone he’d paid.

That didn’t make her feel much better.

Mr. Cortez slid past her and raced through her house and into the garage entry.

Livvy should’ve called 911, but she wanted Jensen. He might prefer busty redheads, but he represented safety, protection, and solid strength to her.

She held her phone button down and said, “Call Chief Jensen.”

Mrs. Cortez’s eyebrows lifted as she stared at her. Livvy didn’t care to explain. Her neighbors probably thought she was odd enough, only leaving her house when her dad was around. If she told the lady she had a huge crush on the chief of police and he kindly came by to check on her, she couldn’t imagine what she’d think or say.

The call connected.

“Livvy.” Jensen’s voice was soft and husky. Just the way he said her name made warmth and safety flow through her. He put so much inflection in her name, it made her feel as if she’d called him at nine-thirty at night to beg him to come snuggle through a movie.

“My power got turned off. There’s a dead dove and a note saying, ‘No more waiting. I’m coming for you now’.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll get officers en route.” Jensen became very businesslike, and she could hear him moving. “Are your doors locked? Are you alone?”

“I’m on the porch, but my neighbors are here with me. The power came back on, so Mr. Cortez chased after whoever must’ve been messing with it. My dad’s on his way.”

“Okay. Officers are in your area; they’ll be right there.” The speaker switched, and she heard a motor start.

Sirens split the night air around her house. Mrs. Cortez’s brows went up again. “That was quick. Special privileges, eh?”

Mr. Cortez came through the gate from the backyard, gasping for air and shaking his head. “The guy went over two fences. I’m sorry.” He drew in a ragged breath. “I couldn’t catch him.”

There had been a guy, though. That made her fear ramp up again. How had he gotten into her garage? She always kept it locked. And why hadn’t he left as soon as the alarm went off?

She nodded to him and said to Jensen, “My neighbor chased somebody, but he got away. Treven isn’t ...”

“He’s still in prison.”

“Thank heavens.” She walked on wobbly legs to her porch swing and sank into it.

Police cars raced up to her house, her dad pulling in at the same time. Neighbors poked their heads out their doors. Livvy clutched the phone to her ear. She didn’t want to talk to anyone but Jensen. Not even her dad. That thought startled her. Her dad was always here for her.

“I’ll make a call and check on Treven,” Jensen said. “You’ll be all right until I get there?”

“Yes, thank you. The police and my dad are here.”

“All right. See you soon.”

The call disconnected. Livvy stood on the porch. She watched the police bustle around, searching her house, yard, and garage but finding nothing. They put the dove and note in an evidence bag. Her dad stayed close by her side. He asked some questions, but she had no answers.

A dark gray Volvo sport utility pulled behind the police cars parked on the street. Livvy was speechless as she watched Jensen slide out and stride up the sidewalk. He was dressed more casually than she usually saw him—a gray T-shirt and black joggers. He looked ... absolutely incredible, from the intense concern in his dark gaze to the smooth bicep and triceps muscles revealed by that T-shirt. She’d seen the outline of those muscles in the button-down shirt and slacks he usually wore, but to see them exposed ... he was fit and mesmerizing.

He pumped up the steps, stopping in front of her and her dad. His gaze never left her face. “Livvy ... are you okay?”

“Yes,” she managed, but her voice quivered.

He looked as if he would step forward and take her in his arms. Her body warmed at the thought of it.

“Chief Jensen?” Her dad’s voice was awed and confused at the same time. He stuck his hand out. She’d told her dad before that the chief had stopped by occasionally to check on her and he’d been stunned by Chief Jensen’s dedication to his people. It was obviously a shock to see the chief of police showing up after hours on his daughter’s porch. “We’re ... honored. Thank you for coming yourself.”

“Of course.” Jensen shook her dad’s hand then turned back to her. “Livvy is very important to me.”

Livvy jolted. That was bold of him, especially with her dad right here. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from Jensen’s dark gaze.

“Oh,” her dad said, and there was a lot of speculation in the word. She was in for a grilling later. She’d take it to hear she was ‘very important’ to Jensen.

“Sir.” One of the officers waited just inside her front door. “Can we speak inside?”

“Yes, thank you.” Jensen gestured for Livvy and her dad to precede them. Livvy felt his eyes on her back as they walked into her small living room.

“Livvy?” he asked. “Are you comfortable with us sitting down? Sergeant Laramie can share what he’s found. We’ll have some questions for you, and then we can make a plan to go forward from here. To keep you safe and catch the perp.”

“Please.” She gestured to the two decorative chairs. She and her dad sat side by side on the leather couch.

Jensen nodded to the man to proceed. “Sergeant Laramie.”

“We found no evidence of a break-in, sir, and Miss Moser said her alarms did not engage until the power was turned back on. We’ve lifted prints off the breaker box and the door handle leading into the garage from outside. We’ll examine the bird and the note, of course, but ...”

“Any criminal who could break in without damaging the locks and bypass her alarms would be wearing gloves, and the prints are probably Livvy’s or her dad’s,” Jensen filled in for him.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Unless ...” Jensen leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs, clasping his hands together, and focused on Livvy as if she were the only person in the room. “Did you drive anywhere today, Livvy?”

“Yes. I went to the grocery store.”

“The person could’ve climbed into your car and hidden while you were in the store, or he could’ve snuck into the garage while your door was up.”

Livvy’s eyes widened as she replayed the trip. “I locked my car doors at the store, but my garage is too small to shut

the door while the rear hatch of my car is open and I had to make two trips into the house to get all the groceries in.”

Jensen straightened, and he and the officer exchanged a look. “That might explain why the security didn’t go off initially and how he got into the garage without signs of forcible entry.”

Livvy shivered. That man had been waiting in her garage since late afternoon? Had he come into her house? While she was in the bath? She hugged herself for warmth. No. She’d locked the door from the garage into the house, but only the exterior doors had the alarm set on them.

“Have there been any other odd occurrences, notes, or anything else you want to share with us since I saw you at the wedding? Has Ramone bothered you again?” Jensen asked.

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s been quiet and normal.”

“Okay.” He studied her as if waiting for more.

“How have you been since the wedding?” she asked.

“Insanely busy with everything that’s happened with William and Naomi Rindlesbacher,” he said in a very serious tone, his gaze sweeping over her. “If not, I would’ve been here checking in on you.”

Their gazes locked and his dark eyes smoldered at her. His eyelashes and brows framed his eyes so beautifully that she couldn’t swallow past her suddenly dry throat. He would’ve come for her? Simply to check on her and make sure she was safe, or for something more fun like to ask her on a date, take her for a long hike in the mountains where she’d be safe because he would be with her, hold hands and kiss, talk for hours as they snuggled ...

Her dad cleared his throat, and she caught a too-interested glance from the officer.

“We’ll study the evidence we’ve found and review anything your cameras may have caught,” Jensen said, suddenly very businesslike. “We need to make a plan for relocation or protective custody.”

“What?” Livvy was stunned back to reality. She did not want to leave her house. This was her safe space. Yet that man had gotten inside her garage. She prayed desperately for help, strength, and insight. The Spirit usually guided her, but she wasn’t hearing any insight or feeling any promptings right now.

“You’re not safe here,” Jensen stated simply.

“You claim Treven is still in prison.” She glared at him, suddenly angry and uncomfortable. She had to be safe here. She just had to be. If not, she might lose the fragile anchor she had to her own sanity and peace of mind. She prayed for help and strength, hoping heaven wasn’t sick of her constant entreaties. “The man didn’t override my security. I made a mistake leaving my garage open. It won’t happen again.”

“Treven is still in prison,” he reaffirmed. “I just had a guard go check and he was asleep in his cell. But we don’t know that the perp didn’t override your security. He most likely slipped into the garage while your door was open, but I’m not a hundred percent on that.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“I think it is probably what happened, but I also thought it would be reassuring for you to have an answer to how he got in.”

“Don’t give me fluff to reassure me,” she yelled, surprising even herself. Livvy wasn’t a yeller, and she especially didn’t want to yell at the man she was enthralled with.

The men all froze. She hated the way Jensen looked at her—as if she were unstable, damaged, volatile, a pity case, as if she’d already lost that thin anchor to her sanity.

If she’d ever built it up in her mind that Jensen was interested in her as a woman, she had been living in a dream world. Those dreams had gotten her through some dreary days, but she could see clearly now. He only saw her as an endangered woman he needed to protect.

Livvy drew in a breath and then stood, clinging to a shard of pride. How far she’d fallen from renowned concert pianist

to a criminal's target who refused to leave her safe space. A safe space that had been invaded. Her neck tightened with fear but she had to be brave.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “Please let me know the results of the fingerprint testing and if you find the man.” She gave Jensen and the officer a pointed look that she hoped conveyed they were free to go, and she hoped the door did hit Jensen in his finely shaped backside on his way out.

Jensen stood, and the officer followed suit. Thank heavens.

Why, then, was disappointment choking her? He was going to walk away. He'd allow his sergeant to take care of this situation from here on out. Would she see him again? Maybe at Sophie and Prince Malik's wedding.

“Sir?” the officer questioned. Was he surprised Jensen would take her cue to leave, or questioning what else he needed to do? The last thing she wanted was Jensen walking out her door and knowing he thought of her as a delicate and broken woman. Her dreams of him were shattering one by one. She was sick and tired of being alone. More than anything in the world, she needed Jensen by her side, not showing up occasionally on a professional level.

Yet she had just dismissed him and sentenced herself to solitary confinement all over again.

Jensen strode right up to her and got in her space. Livvy sucked in a breath. He smelled incredible—clean, musky, a fresh pine like the mountains she longed to explore again, and all man.

“Livvy.” His voice was gravelly, low, and still commanding. “I am *not* leaving you here alone.”

Livvy tipped her head back to stare at him, narrowing her eyes when she wanted to melt at the concern in his dark gaze. The concern wasn't for her as his love; it was for her as a victim. She hated that word.

“I am not a victim,” she snapped, balling her hands into fists and pushing them against his chest.



Saying those words and standing up to the most impressive and enticing man she knew was empowering and heady.

“I am *done* being a victim and letting those people terrify me,” she said in a more level tone. “I know how to fight. I know how to use a gun. I will stand up for myself. I will pray hard, and God will help me. I refuse to run from Treven’s pawns.” She punched both fists against his very firm chest to reaffirm her words.

Jensen wrapped his hands around hers and gently held them. His warm touch threatened to break down all her walls. “Livvy,” he said softly. “You are an impressive woman. I love how brave you are, and I can see you’re too strong to let them control you any longer. It’s admirable of you. I’m not trying to discount your ability to defend yourself, but the Rindlesbachers have proven to be resourceful, connected, and underhanded. I only want to keep you safe. I would go to these lengths for anyone in your situation.”

Livvy hadn’t felt brave or strong. Not for a very long time. Right now, she did. Maybe she’d been wrong about how Jensen looked at her. He didn’t see her as a victim. He admired her. Or was he only trying to placate her so she didn’t have a breakdown? If he would go these lengths for anyone, she was definitely just another case to him.

She wanted to prove to Jensen that she wouldn’t cower and play Treven’s victimized obsession. That she was a woman who could stand by Jensen’s side. Would he ever see her as that woman?

The warmth in his dark eyes currently boded well for her.

But she didn’t know that she could ever be a match for a man this powerful and captivating. Accomplished and gorgeous women lined up for Chief Jensen. She’d seen that on social media and firsthand at Prince Derek’s wedding. In her former life, she would’ve confidently dated him. Currently she had to factor in not only how broken she’d become these past years, but also Treven’s threats to hurt anyone she dated.

Would she ever have a chance with Jensen?

Not unless she proved she was brave, strong, independent, and not in Treven's power any longer. She didn't know quite how to accomplish all of that, but she tilted her chin up and gave him a sassy and challenging look.

## CHAPTER

## *Five*

**JENSEN STARED** in awe at the incredible Livvy Moser. She was glorious. He'd happily let her bang her small fists against his chest over and over again. If only they were alone and he could pull her in tight and convince her he wasn't trying to undermine her bravery or make her into a victim; he only wanted to protect and love her.

Would that convincing all be done with words, or could mouth to mouth contact improve their communication?

He schooled that thought or he'd lose all professionalism. And with her dad and one of his top sergeants looking on. They'd been suspiciously quiet during his and Livvy's interaction.

Would he ever have a chance to date Livvy properly? Show her exactly how interested and invested he was in her? And not because she was in danger, but because she was independent, brave, and accomplished despite the danger that surrounded her.

A normal yet thrilling date with Livvy seemed next to impossible with Treven Rindlesbacher intent on terrorizing her. Jensen needed to keep his distance and not let his emotions get entangled with a target on a case.

But Livvy was so much more than a target.

He forced himself to release her hands. It was worse than a toddler giving up their favorite toy and being forced to go to sleep. Had he really just compared himself to a toddler? He

wanted to throw a toddler-worthy tantrum about being denied Livvy in his life.

He stepped back, catching an interested glance from her dad. He looked to Sergeant Laramie. “Check our file of Treven Rindlesbacher’s known associates and find out where they were tonight. Include the list of friends from school and from prison, and pay special attention to any who’ve recently been released. I want you to add Ramone Pitcher to that list and then go deeper. Double check the lists of William and Naomi Rindlesbachers’ associates, friends, neighbors, and extended family as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If you’ll wrap up with the officers here, Livvy and I will talk with Mr. Moser to form a plan to ensure her safety. Leave two officers watching over her house and two more doing rounds of the surrounding area.”

Laramie nodded and then walked out of the living area and to the garage.

Jensen focused back on Livvy. Would she allow him to protect her? How out of line would it be to suggest she stay with him at all times for protection? What if he admitted he simply wanted to be near her? Would that take down her defenses, or did she not feel the same? He definitely couldn’t ask her with her dad sitting right here, and he was letting his desires run rampant once again.

“Can we talk about how to proceed from here?” he asked, gesturing back to the couch.

She nodded and sat next to her dad. Jensen sat in the stiff upholstered chair.

Her dad’s gaze swiveled between the two of them. “Livvy, why don’t you come stay with us while Chief Jensen and his men figure out who’s bothering you?”

“You don’t have a security system or cameras,” she said.

“I could install them.”

“I’m not putting you, Mom, or David in danger.”

Livvy's older brother was a nice guy who seemed a little socially awkward. He was a computer genius who had never moved out of his parents' home.

"I'm not letting you be in danger," her dad insisted.

"I can protect myself," she told him, just as she'd told Jensen.

Elijah met Jensen's gaze, his own dark eyes frustrated. How to reassure the man that Jensen would protect his daughter without angering the beautiful daughter he longed to date when this mess was finally behind them? It often felt as if Treven was the source of every frustration in Jensen's life, starting with the mess with Hattie Ballard and culminating with Treven refusing to leave Livvy alone.

"Livvy," Jensen began. "Who taught you how to fight and shoot?"

He suspected she'd say her dad and then maybe he could lead into them having two lines of defense if she stayed with her parents. He could easily get security and cameras set up there. He'd feel a lot better if she wasn't alone. It would be amazing if he could assign himself as her personal bodyguard.

"Captain Zeke Hendrickson, a retired Navy SEAL from America and my cousin Mia's husband."

"Oh." He didn't quite know what to say to that. He remembered her uncle was a powerful duke in England.

She knew how to fight? He wanted to challenge her to a wrestling match and if he pinned her, she had to stay with him, but that entire idea was flawed and selfish. Her father wouldn't likely appreciate it either. Jensen felt decidedly unsteady, and his thoughts raced to areas he never indulged in as Livvy's presence and captivating dark eyes consumed him.

Her dad seemed to respect him and was looking to him to protect Livvy. Jensen needed to focus on her protection.

"Where is your gun?" he asked.

"In my safe." She tilted her chin. "I'll load it and put it next to my bed tonight. Will that make you feel better?"

Jensen nodded, but her not being alone would make him feel best. “You’re determined to stay here?”

“I am. I have students coming early in the morning before their school starts. Besides, this is just another one of Treven’s scare and control tactics. You keep reassuring me he’s still in prison. He wants me for his wife. He’ll keep trying to manipulate and scare me, but do you realize he’s never let any of his people hurt me? I wonder if he isn’t protecting me so he can marry me.”

*Wants me for his wife.* He’d heard that before, and it made him sick every time. Treven Rindlesbacher would never force himself on Livvy like he had on other women. Not on Jensen’s watch.

Jensen didn’t know what to think about her claim that Treven wouldn’t have his friends hurt her. The Rindlesbachers had proven they’d hurt anyone who stood in their way. It was a relief William was finally dead, but Jensen feared Naomi was just as smart and devious and still had connections. Treven obviously had a network even from prison. The man had no access to email and Jensen had cut off any visitation rights, yet Livvy continued to get those stupid emails and now this had happened.

“I won’t force you into protective custody,” he told her. The challenging look in her eyes said that was a smart move on his part. “But I would like to station men outside your house until we figure out who turned off your power and left the note and dead bird.”

He waited. If she told him no, he would have to respect that. He’d have quiet patrols come by regardless.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay,” he repeated. He wanted to stay, wanted to be alone with her, wanted to talk to her and see if she was really okay emotionally, or just incredibly brave and filled with faith.

They studied each other for a few beats, then her dad stood and put out his hand. “Thank you for coming yourself, Chief

Allendale. It means a lot that you would take Livvy's case seriously and help protect her."

Jensen stood and shook the man's hand. "I am serious about protecting her."

Livvy popped up as well and walked briskly through the living area and into the entryway. Jensen exchanged a look with her dad, but there wasn't much to say until they had some answers.

"Thank you," Elijah said again.

Jensen nodded, released his hand, and followed Livvy into the entryway. Curiously, her dad stayed in the living room, giving them a measure of privacy.

Livvy opened the front door, a clear message it was time for him to go. Jensen stared down at her. She wasn't much taller than five feet, but she was fearless. Why did she have to be so confusing and so appealing at the same time?

"I'll keep you informed about the prints and other research," he said.

"Thank you." Her lower lip trembled.

If she cried, he would have no choice but to hold her. Right?

"I really do appreciate you being so diligent," she said. "I just ... can't cower to my fears any longer."

"You are extremely impressive and brave." His gaze swept over her beautiful face, and he couldn't resist reaching for her hand. She was being overly brave. Keeping her safe had to be the most important thing right now.

Livvy's eyes widened slightly, but she let him take her hand in his. Her hands were delicate and feminine. There were YouTube recordings of her performances. He'd watched them far too often, fascinated by her talent and the way these hands danced with the piano keys, creating music that transported him to a different world.

"Please call if you have any uneasy feelings, hear anything, or if you want to talk. I want to be there for you,

Livvy.”

“As the chief of police?” she asked in a breathy voice that made his heartbeat quicken.

“As a man who is captivated by you.” Maybe he shouldn’t have gone there, but that might be almost as good of a romantic line as Chad or Malik could come up with. Charm had never been his strong suit, though, and he meant his words sincerely. She captivated him, entranced him, enthralled him. He’d dated other women, but she was the only one he’d been truly interested in for most of his adult life.

The smile that grew on her beautiful face was radiant. He must’ve done all right with his response.

“Thank you, Jensen.” She lifted onto tiptoes and brushed her soft lips across his cheek.

Jensen’s heart threatened to beat out of his chest. If her lips on his cheek felt that incredible, what would it be like to kiss her?

Before he could act on that impulse, she stepped back. That was for the best. Professionalism was incredibly hard to come by tonight, and kissing her right now would be out of line.

He released her hand and inclined his head to his officers parked across the street. “My men will be right there. Two others will patrol your neighborhood. Please arm your security system after your dad leaves, and please sleep with that gun and your phone close at hand. With my number on the screen.”

“I will.” She smiled.

Jensen knew it was time to go. He hated leaving her. Tilting his chin up, he said, “I’ll check in tomorrow.”

She only nodded, lifted a hand, and watched him go.

He walked slowly to his Volvo XC90. He was walking a thin line between focusing on her case, keeping a clear head, and making progress toward his dreams of dating her. At least she knew he was interested and might reciprocate those feelings—if she weren’t in such a dangerous and ugly



situation. He hated Treven Rindlesbacher and all the ugliness and pain the criminal and his family had created for him and for the August family. The royals were Jensen's close friends and he took their attacks personally.

He had to keep Livvy safe and eliminate the threat. He wanted to stop being professional and start dating her seriously. Would that ever happen, or was it just a pipe dream? He remembered her lips on his cheek. That simple touch had felt better than a full-blown kiss with other women.

Livvy was brave and resilient. Even though she had sequestered herself to her house because of Treven's taunts, she refused to quit, learning self-defense and how to shoot. Her accomplishments with music showed she was a woman who would work until she was an expert in whatever she focused on.

He loved that pluck and determination. She was the only woman for him.

Now to somehow convince her of that ... after he had a good, long talk with Treven Rindlesbacher.

It was after eleven p.m. He considered waking Treven up, but it would be smarter to wait until morning. He was out of sorts and ticked off at Treven for sending someone to threaten and terrify Livvy.

Jensen would get some rest and deal with the man after his morning workout and sparring session with Steffan. The doctor prince might have some extra bruises tomorrow. Hattie would give him a tongue-lashing for that, but Steffan wouldn't care. Unless he knew he was preventing Jensen from using Treven as a punching bag. Steffan despised the man almost as much as Jensen did.

## CHAPTER

## *Six*

**LIVVY PRESSED** her fingertips to her lips, savoring the memory of touching the smooth skin of Jensen's cheek with them.

*As a man who is captivated by you. As a man who is captivated by you.*

Ah—those words. She could still feel his hand around hers and see the intensity and desire in his dark eyes.

He was interested in her.

“Yes!” she cried out.

“Livvy?”

“Oh, crap,” she muttered.

Her dad appeared in the entryway. His dark eyes were an interesting combination of serious and mischievous. “What happened with the chief of police?”

“Were you listening in?”

“No. I'm not your mother.” He winked.

“I really like him,” she admitted.

“He's an impressive man. I admire him, and I might allow you to date him.”

She laughed at that. “I'm twenty-six years old, live on my own, and support myself. How would you stop me from dating him?”

“I am still your father. I can ground you.”

She grinned and hugged him. “I love you. Thanks for being here for me. Now go home and get some rest.”

All teasing evaporated. He studied her. “Livvy, you’ve had a bad scare tonight. Why don’t I sleep in your guest room?”

It sounded wonderful to have her dad stay, but she had experienced two empowering lightbulb moments tonight. First was knowing she would not allow herself to be victimized by Treven. Not any longer. She was rising above that identifier and reclaiming her life. She thought she’d done that living alone and when Cap had taught her how to fight and how to shoot. Now it was time to put her newfound bravery into action.

The second epiphany was that Treven wanted her alive and unharmed for his weird obsession with marrying her for her royal blood. That he hadn’t raped her years ago when he’d had her alone confirmed that theory. His weirdo friends or random strangers he paid would keep taunting her, but Treven wouldn’t let them hurt her.

Sadly, he could and would hurt those around her. Another reason it was better for her dad not to be here and for her not to stay at her parents’ home.

Livvy would fight. She would be strong, brave, and independent. Someday, this would be behind her and she would ask Chief Jensen on a date. That made her feel light and happy, but a little queasy. Would he want to go out with her?

*As a man who is captivated by you.*

He had said those words while looking deeply into her eyes. She wasn’t imagining it. He was interested in her.

There was also the comforting fact that Jensen had police watching her house tonight, camping out across the street, and they would make rounds through her yard and neighborhood. That helped her bravery immensely.

“I’ve got officers across the street watching my house. I promise I’ll keep my gun and my phone within reach, arm my security, and deadbolt all the doors, even the one leading into

the garage. I'll also push my dresser against my bedroom door if it makes you feel better."

Her dad smiled and shook his head. "I'll feel better when Treven leaves you alone. I'm tempted to go visit him in prison and explain what happens when you poke the daddy bull."

She would've smiled at the memory of her dad playing 'daddy bull,' chasing her and David around the living room on his hands and knees. But the thought of him putting a target on his back with Treven turned her stomach inside out. "I love you, Dad, but please don't. Treven's friends won't hurt me, but they would hurt you, Mum, or David if you threaten him."

They might go after her family simply to control her. Treven had used that terrifying tactic with immense success on Sophie, keeping her away from Prince Malik for six years to protect the man she loved.

At the frustration on her dad's face, Livvy added, "Please. I'm brave and tough. I'll be okay."

"You are very brave and tough, my girl."

"Thanks. Go home and take care of Mum and David." Her brother wasn't slow—in fact, he was very smart—but he struggled socially and in some ways was very childlike.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes." She hugged him and then swung open the door, waving to the police officers across the street. They waved back. They weren't hiding that they were watching out for her. "See? Diligent officers."

"Instructed by their chief to keep you safe." Her dad pumped his eyebrows.

It was nice to know her dad was as impressed with Jensen as she was.

"Goodnight, Dad."

He grinned and walked through the door, turning to point at her. "Alarms on, deadbolts secured, gun and phone by your side, dresser in front of your bedroom door."

She saluted him. Then she shut the door, turned the deadbolt, and armed the system.

“Good girl,” he called through the door.

Livvy smiled to herself as she checked the back patio door and the garage door, securing the garage door deadbolt. She made sure all her windows were locked, got a drink of water, and then went into her bedroom. Pushing a dresser in front of her door made her feel a little silly, but it would help her sleep.

She opened her safe, pulled out her gun and loaded the clip before setting it by her bed. She’d worked hard to be a good shot; a skill that was not easy for her. She didn’t always hit the bullseye, but she was close.

Livvy washed her face and brushed her teeth, said her prayers, and then lay down in her comfortable bed with her phone plugged in on her dresser and her gun lying next to it. She pulled up the recent calls; Jensen’s name was at the top of the list.

Sleepy but still fantasizing about Jensen, she closed her eyes and imagined him touching her again, hugging her, someday kissing her. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so empowered and full of hope. Treven wouldn’t control her any longer, and she finally had a future in front of her. God was good and it would all work out.

She drifted off to sleep with a half-smile on her face.

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Something roused Livvy from a beautiful dream. She blinked her eyes open and fumbled for her phone. Three-fourteen a.m. What had woken her?

Light tapping sounded from her window. Her pulse quickened, and she automatically reached for her gun, sliding off the bed on the opposite side of the window. Should she call Jensen, the police, or her dad? What if she had imagined the noise?

Her window and part of her wall exploded.

Livvy screamed and ducked behind the bed, debris raining down on her. The house alarm ripped through the night air. It sounded far away compared to the ringing in her ears.

She peeked over the mattress and caught the rough outline of two men launching themselves through the hole in her wall and into her bedroom. Double vision and tricky colors burned into her retinas made it hard to get a clear idea of their position.

Shaking, Livvy took the safety off the gun, aimed through the dust and smoke, and fired.

The bullet hit the wall between the two men. The report of the gun was as loud as the alarm and made the shell shock even worse.

Instead of fleeing the way they'd come, both outlines turned to face her. The gunshot had only alerted them to her position. Like jungle predators, they both lunged across the bed toward her.

Livvy focused on one shape, trying to aim, but the bright purple negative image of the blast made him disappear. She pulled the trigger, heard a cry of pain, and turned the gun toward the other attacker.

Not fast enough.

A hand slammed down on her wrists, and the gun flew from her hands.

With no gun and an attacker at close range, it was time to fight. She wanted to go for the eyes but couldn't see well enough, so she aimed at throat level and stepped into a punch.

The assailant brushed it aside and grabbed her arm, spinning her around and wrapping her up tight. Instep and groin were her next targets, but as she lifted a leg to crush her assailant's foot, the other man stepped in front of her, swept her legs out from under her, and lifted her into the air.

"You hit?" the guy behind her called over the house alarm.

"My arm. I'll live."

The men hurried around the bed as she writhed and tried to pull an arm or leg free, but they were too strong. Neither of them said a word.

They made it to the hole in the wall where her picture window used to be. The man holding her feet let go and leaped out. The other guy shifted quickly and wrapped his arms tightly around her, pinning her arms to the side. Livvy dug her fingernails into her captor's arms and slammed her heel against his shin.

"Stop it, Livvy," the man growled in her ear. The voice was empty and echoey, but the ringing was subsiding. "I'm finally here for you. We will marry and make babies."

"Treven?" The horror of his awful voice and his body pressed against hers made her temporarily weak. It couldn't be him. It wasn't possible. He was in prison.

A banging at her front door was louder than the alarms. Shots followed, then pounding footsteps. Hope spiked. The officers would come for her.

But her dresser was in front of her door.

"Go out back," she screamed, but she had no idea if they heard her over the alarm. She prayed desperately for help.

"Let's go, love." Treven lifted her off her feet and shoved her through the hole in the wall and into the other man's waiting arms.

Livvy punched and kicked him, aiming for his arms, not sure which one she'd hit with the bullet. The man cursed and relaxed his grip on her. Her vision cleared a little more from the blast and adjusted to the darkness. She dug her fingernail into his eye, and he screeched and grabbed for it. Livvy used the opportunity to yank free and run for the backyard gate.

Treven dove out of the blasted wall and tackled her.

Livvy screamed as she hit the grass. More lights flashed in front of her eyes, and she couldn't shake the feeling that she was in the middle of a war zone.

Treven ripped her to her feet. The neighbor's backyard light flicked on, and she could clearly see Treven's bluish-gray eyes and the face she'd once thought was attractive but now made her nauseous.

It was *him*.

Treven had escaped. It seemed impossible, yet he was right here in front of her. Cold chills racked her body. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. She thought she'd been terrified before, but none of the threats had anything on this surreal moment.

"Don't fight me," he said. "I don't want to hurt the mother of my children."

"Never!" she screamed.

Livvy would fight. She wouldn't be a victim anymore.

Treven didn't want to hurt her, but that was little consolation when two strong men were trying to kidnap her, one of them the depraved psycho who'd made her life a living purgatory for so many years. He was even smarter and stronger than she'd given him credit for to trick Jensen and somehow escape from prison.

"You'll love every minute of it," Treven growled in her ear. "The chief thought he could protect you with a couple lame officers, but I'm always a step ahead of him."

The other man approached them.

The back patio door burst open, and a police officer raced down the patio stairs toward them.

Livvy elbowed Treven in the gut. He cried out in surprise and loosened his grip enough for her to chop both hands down hard on his forearms. He released her. She dodged away from him, racing for the police officer.

The man had his gun out and commanded from only a few feet away, "Get your hands up!"

Livvy dodged to the officer's side so she wouldn't get in the way if he had to shoot.



Treven lifted his hands. Then he grabbed the guy next to him and threw him at the officer. The man knocked into the officer and the gun went off.

Livvy screamed and ran for her house. She had to get away from Treven.

Treven sprinted the opposite direction, vaulting over a fence and calling to her, "I'll be back for you!"

Livvy reached the back patio as the other officer came out.

"You're all right?" he asked.

"Yes ... but help ..." She couldn't catch a breath. She pointed at the officer and criminal on the ground.

"Don't move, please."

She nodded. She'd stay as close to these officers as she could. She glanced around at the hole in her bedroom wall and the men on the ground.

Her beautiful house, her safe space, had been invaded, vandalized, and destroyed. Shock filled her. All her faith and bravery had been for nothing.

The officer helped his friend push the other guy off him. The criminal wasn't moving, and blood covered his chest.

Livvy's body shook. Her vision had cleared, but her head spun and her ears continued to ring.

The adrenaline wore off, but the horror hit her full force. Treven had somehow escaped from prison. He'd blown a hole in her house to get to her, unafraid of Jensen's men, and he and this man had almost kidnapped her.

Livvy leaned against the door frame, revolted and dazed. Her bravery and independence dwindled in the face of ominous reality. Treven would keep coming until he kidnapped her and somehow forced her to marry him.

Would she ever be safe from that monster?

## CHAPTER

## *Seven*

**JENSEN SPED** through Livvy's quiet neighborhood, slamming on his brakes and parking the Volvo in her driveway. He'd been awakened twenty minutes ago by a call from one of his officers. Two men had blown a hole in Livvy's bedroom wall and tried to kidnap her. She believed one of them was Treven Rindlesbacher.

He'd never want to doubt or discount Livvy but it couldn't be Treven. There had been no prison breaks. Someone had to be impersonating Treven to terrify her.

Livvy had been so brave when he left. What if she'd had a breakdown with the attack and near-kidnapping and somehow in her mind believed it was Treven who'd come after her?

He sprinted onto her porch and into her house. Officers turned to look at him. Some started toward him, but he could only focus on one person.

"Livvy."

She was on her couch, her legs tucked up under her, with her arms wrapped around her legs. Her beautiful brown skin was tear stained. She looked tiny, much younger and not as independent, but still devastatingly beautiful. Her gaze met his, and Jensen was sick at the devastation in her eyes.

She was looking at him, but she probably didn't even know he was here. He'd seen that look when helping those suffering from abuse. Livvy refused to label herself a victim and was braver than anyone he knew, but everyone had a breaking point. She'd worked so hard to be independent and

thought she was safe in her beautiful home, and she had gotten hit exactly where it would hurt to strip away her confidence.

He'd felt the same way when he'd listened to his respected partner, Peter, and protected Hattie Ballard from Treven framing her with murder years ago. He'd known it was the right thing to do, despite how hard it had been to not follow the law to exactness. They had to protect that innocent young lady from Treven's schemes. Then Hattie had returned and the Rindlesbachers had struck again, killing again and making a nightmare out of everything. They knew exactly how to set someone up and devastate them. Even with William dead and Treven in Jensen's secure prison, it felt like they were one step ahead of him.

Sergeant Laramie came from the bedrooms and toward him. "Chief Jensen."

"Give us a moment," Jensen said.

The man nodded, glanced at Livvy, then motioned to the other officers.

Jensen slowly approached, afraid to spook her. He sank onto his knees so they were eye level with each other. He didn't touch her, though he longed to hold her, comfort her, and reassure her.

"Livvy?"

Her gaze was vacant.

Jensen gently touched her arm. "Livvy?"

Tears squeezed past her thick, dark lashes and down her cheeks. Even still, she didn't look at him and her voice sounded despondent, almost robotic. "I was so stupidly brave and independent, thinking I'd be fine here on my own. I fought and used my skills, but it wasn't enough. He almost took me. He almost ..."

She shuddered and finally looked at him, staring deeply into his eyes. Her gaze implored him to never let Treven get near her again. He wouldn't. Was there a possibility it had been Treven tonight? He couldn't have gotten out of prison.

She released her grip on her legs and plowed into Jensen.

Jensen rocked back but steadied himself and cradled her close.

Her tears wet his shirt. “Why won’t he leave me alone? Why can’t I keep my brave?”

She likely didn’t want to know the answer to the first question. Treven Rindlesbacher was an entitled psycho, and Jensen couldn’t underestimate him. He and his parents were after the throne and would stop at nothing to gain what they thought was their right.

Treven hadn’t come for her himself. He couldn’t have. Jensen would have someone wake the prisoner and make certain, move him to a more secure cell and assign twenty-four hour guards to him.

After he helped Livvy.

The second question was easier. Jensen pushed to his feet and held her close to his side. Escorting her to the couch, he helped her sit but held her against him. He wanted to hold her until she felt safe again. His concern about maintaining his professionalism had vacated the scene with Livvy having been in such intense danger, and now to see her crying and terrified made all his walls crumble.

“We all get scared sometimes, Livvy.”

“Not you.” She glanced up at him, admiration clear in her brown eyes. “You’re tough, smart, brave. I bet you aren’t even afraid of General Raymond besting you.”

He smiled briefly at that, but the seriousness of the situation yanked any levity away. “Sometimes he does best me,” he admitted. “He has fifty pounds on me, but that just means I have to fight smarter. And truly, I still have to conquer fears.”

She studied him as if she didn’t quite believe he had any fears.

He paused and admitted, “You’ve probably heard about Princess Hattie Ballard August and all the scandal surrounding

her in the media.”

“Of course.”

“Years ago, I had to face my fears and go against my training and even what I felt was ethical to protect her from Treven. Then just this summer she was targeted again, but this time by William. I was terrified that I wouldn’t be able to protect her and the royal family, and that William would succeed in his schemes.” It was a lot to admit, more than he’d shared with anyone else, but if it would help Livvy he’d humbly share all of his fears and mistakes.

“I’m glad he’s dead,” she said. “I wish Treven was.”

Jensen’s eyes widened at that admission, but he quickly schooled his expression. “You didn’t give up your brave. I heard you fought two men off, and the list of injuries you gave them ... Impressive. You think most women would even attempt that, sweetheart?”

The term of endearment was out before he could recall it. At the moment, he didn’t care. She needed him and his reassurance. And he needed her, even if he could never admit it.

“Thank you.” She sniffled and then laid her head against his chest again. “I was trying to be so independent. But ...”

She looked up at him, bit her lip, and looked down.

He waited.

Drawing in a long breath, she whispered, “I don’t want to be alone. I can’t handle it if he comes for me again.”

It was a breakthrough. She was brave, but she recognized Treven’s men would come at them with everything they had.

“That’s fighting smart, like I have to do with Ray sometimes.” Like he had to do constantly with the Rindlesbachers. Sometimes even going against the grain as he’d done with Hattie’s case. Still they’d bested him and Ray and it grated on him. The worst was William somehow hiding the gloves he’d worn to stab Franz Wengreen and only Hattie’s prints being on the dead man and the weapon.

He forced himself to not think about his insecurities and instead focus on a game plan to keep Livvy safe. “Will you go into protective custody, or do you want to stay with your parents? We could install security and cameras and have my people stay with you there.”

“No.” She shook her head quickly and glanced around. His men were securing the scene and holding back neighbors with cell phone cameras out front, but thankfully the small living room was quiet and the media hadn’t caught wind of another Rindlesbacher attack. Yet.

“I have to keep them out of this,” she said quietly. “I’m surprised he hasn’t gone after them yet. If he thinks he can’t get to me, he’ll use them against me like he did Prince Malik against Sophie.”

Jensen knew she and Sophie were friends, but few people knew the extent of Malik and Sophie’s years of tragedy before finally reuniting only a few weeks ago. “You didn’t call your dad?”

“No.” She sat up straighter. “I want to be strong and independent and keep them far from Treven’s grasp or even on his radar.” She looked down. “Even though I’m not proving my bravery right now.”

Jensen didn’t want her to leave his arms. “You can be a strong and independent woman and still trust the men in your life. I’ve seen that with the royal family and the women they’ve fallen in love with. I’m sure you’ve seen that with your parents and other couples you respect.” He longed to be one of the men in her life. The man she loved, trusted, and laughed with.

Sadly, until she wasn’t under attack by Treven Rindlesbachers’ friends, that couldn’t happen. If he let himself get emotionally involved right now, it would cloud his mind and risk Livvy. With the danger she was in, it was the wrong time to form an attachment and unfair to her until she was safe and healed. He had to put his focus where it was needed—shutting down Treven Rindlesbacher and his friends and capturing Naomi.

“I understand what you’re saying,” she said slowly. “But I also want to be strong on my own.”

With those words, she slid off his lap and onto the cushion next to him. Disappointment washed through him, but he respected her independence and knew she was right. He needed to understand what being strong on her own meant to her, because she’d also said she didn’t want to be alone. A dead bird and a note was one thing; a hole blown through her wall and attempted kidnapping was quite another. He’d underestimated Treven’s determination once again and it had almost cost Livvy her freedom and possibly her life. As the police chief and the man who quietly loved her, he had to insist on protective custody at this point.

She wrung her hands together. “How did Treven escape from prison?”

He studied her. Was she confused or simply so terrified she’d been deluded? Nobody would blame her for either. “He didn’t.”

Livvy straightened so quick, her back slammed against the cushion. “Yes, he did. It was him. I know his voice, his shape, his face, and his bluish-gray eyes are unique. It was definitely Treven.”

“Livvy.” Jensen swallowed hard. He didn’t want to tell her she was imagining things, but it wasn’t possible for Treven to be out of prison. With the explosion and all the stress and fear, her vision and thinking would’ve been cloudy. “I checked with the prison on my drive home earlier and again on my drive over here. Treven Rindlesbacher is sleeping in his cell. They sent me a picture the second time I asked them to check.”

“You’re wrong. Somebody switched him places or something.” She jutted out her chin.

Jensen blew out a breath, not sure what to say. He couldn’t discount what she’d seen, and he hadn’t been here tonight. Still, it was impossible for Treven to have escaped. “I’ll have the top-ranking official at the prison tonight wake Treven up and determine it’s him in the cell. As soon as you’re in a safe spot, I’ll go to the jail and talk to Treven myself.”

She studied him, her dark eyes clearly frustrated that he didn't believe Treven had escaped. He wanted to believe her but what she was saying was impossible.

Finally, she nodded.

“Are you comfortable with protective custody?”

“What other options do I have?”

Jensen shrugged. “Hiring private security or going to stay in the military facility.” He didn't like either option. He shouldn't have even brought up the military facility. Major Chad Prescott was a fabulous guy, but he'd be all too happy to charm and guard the beautiful, talented, sweet, and enticing Livvy Moser.

“What would protective custody look like?” she asked.

“I'd take you to a secure location and my most trusted officers would stay with you.”

“Not you?”

Jensen's heart raced at the idea. After he talked to Treven at the prison, he could stay with her. This case and finding Naomi Rindlesbacher were his top priorities right now, and Ray had his own men, Interpol, and Sutton Smith's men helping him with the second task.

“I could go there and stay with you after I talk to Treven, if it would make you feel better.”

She blinked up at him, mesmerizing him with a single glance. “It would.” She looked at her coffee table. “But I don't want you to see me as the victim. I don't want to be the victim. I'm done with that life.”

“Livvy ... you have proven how brave you are. Reaching the top level of your career, traveling and performing all over the world, living on your own even after Treven's nonstop threats, learning how to fight and use a gun, fighting those men off tonight. You don't act like someone who is victimized, and I don't see you as a victim.”

He saw her as the woman for him. Could he ever tell her that?



“Thank you, Jensen,” she whispered.

His name on her lips was delicious. The only thing better would be his lips on her lips. He nodded to her and stood so he wouldn't act on that impulse. Holding out his hand to help her up, he was filled with a surge of protectiveness as she placed her smaller hand in his.

She pulled her hand free too quickly. “I'll go pack some things.”

“I'll get everything set up.”

Nodding, she walked out of the living room. Jensen watched her go. She wanted him to stay at the safehouse with her. It wasn't procedure. Far from it. But what good was it being chief of police if you couldn't give extra attention to the most important case on your desk?

Would he be able to maintain his distance if he was right there with her?

He had no idea. But he couldn't stew about it right now. Livvy's safety was the most important thing. Any relationship between them would have to be discussed after her safety was assured.

They'd seized the Rindlesbachers' funds and assets weeks ago. Of course, they could have off-shore accounts and businesses in other names. Was Naomi orchestrating everything? Even without her sadistic husband by her side, she still seemed intent on overthrowing the throne. She had to be buying help and loyalty. Jensen needed to figure that out and shut her down, capture her.

First, he would talk to Treven and then put him in solitary confinement. Somehow, the man was communicating with the outside world and terrifying Livvy. That would stop now.

Pulling out his phone, Jensen started making some calls.

## CHAPTER

## *Eight*

### LIVVY SHOULD'VE FELT WIMPIER

than ever, having thrown herself at Jensen and cried in his arms, but somehow he empowered her and inspired her. His strength and belief in her made her feel brave and strong again. She'd been devastated and doubted herself after the attack, but Jensen never doubted her.

What had he said? *A woman can be strong and independent and still trust the men in her life.* Did he want to be her man?

She shook her head. There was too much weighing down on her to let her mind escape and become obsessed with visions of her and Jensen together like she often did. She gave her phone to an officer who would ensure there were no bugs and then contact her students' parents and her own parents in the morning. Apparently where she was going, she wouldn't have a phone. She loved her parents and trusted them, but she wanted it out of their hands and didn't want them involved in any way that made Treven think he could manipulate and threaten them. The officer also promised they would watch over her parents' house and help her dad install the best security possible. Treven hadn't threatened them, but nobody would put it past him.

It was unsettling to think about sitting in some safehouse with nothing to do. If Jensen was there, she'd have something to do—flirt with him, talk to him, kiss him.

Her face flamed just thinking about it. Thank heavens for her darker skin that wouldn't show a blush.

She loved how Jensen built her up and made her feel brave. The only thing she didn't love was that he obviously didn't believe Treven himself had come for her. He'd promised to go to the prison after he got her settled. Could Treven have a clone in his cell? It seemed ludicrous and made no sense, but Treven had come for her tonight. Those eyes, his voice, and his stocky build haunted her nightmares.

Jensen walked into her bedroom as she finished packing a small suitcase. He wasn't a thick man like his best friend General Raymond, but he was tall and strong and seemed to fill up her doorway. She liked that he'd told her he had to fight smart to beat 'Ray' and her turning to him and not being alone was 'smart' not wimpy.

He focused on her before even looking at the devastation. "I'm sorry they destroyed your room."

"I was due to remodel anyway," she tried to tease, but she was heartsick. She doubted she could even find the stone used on her exterior walls in the early nineteen-hundreds and the row of stained glass above her bedroom window was irreplaceable.

He smiled at her attempt to tease and looked at the hole where her window and part of her wall used to be. "Now's the time." Then he stepped over to the wall opposite the bed and his gaze sharpened on her. "Is this bullet from tonight? My men said your pistol was on your floor."

"I got two shots off," she admitted. "I was disoriented from being woken up and the explosion."

"It's impressive you got a shot off. I can't believe it didn't scare them away."

"Sadly not." She had fought them, and she had been rocked by that explosion, but she wanted to keep working on her training and shooting skills. She didn't foresee Treven ever not being a problem in her life. Even from prison, he could taunt and torment her. His dad was finally dead, but his mum

was at large and she was more brilliant and evil than even William or Treven.

“At the safehouse, could we work on broadening my fighting skills and improving my shooting?” she asked.

“Sure. We’ll need something to do to pass the time.” The intensity of his dark gaze made her hope they’d find lots to do to pass the time. “Unfortunately, I’ll have to keep up on my workload too.”

“That is unfortunate,” she said, giving him what she hoped was a flirtatious smile. She was still off kilter from the bombing, the attempted kidnapping, her house being destroyed, and having no choice but to leave her safe space.

His eyes widened slightly, and he walked toward her until he was close enough she could smell that intriguing mix of musk and pine trees. He was clean, fresh, and all man. She wanted to grab him by the shirt and yank him closer. Him holding her close earlier had helped comfort and strengthen her more than he probably knew.

“I can delegate.” His voice was husky and perfect, and those three words seemed like a promise. He would delegate his responsibilities ... for more time with her. A warm tremor raced through her.

“Who could you delegate to?”

“My assistant is very competent. She asks me all the time what else she can do.”

She blinked up at him. “Don’t you ever take vacation time, Chief Jensen? Turn everything over to your ‘very competent’ assistant?”

He shook his head, smiling slightly. “Married to my job.”

“That is very sad.” She got as brave as he’d convinced her she was and placed her hands on his broad shoulders.

His mouth softened and his gaze grew even deeper. She was certain he’d wrap her up tight and take her mind far from Treven Rindlesbacher’s kidnapping attempt.

Footsteps approached. “Chief Jensen.”

Livvy pulled back, hating the interruption. The timing was horrible, but it was a relief to focus on Jensen and the overwhelming desire to be close to him and push away the horror of Treven Rindlesbacher being out of prison and pursuing her.

“We’re ready to head out, sir.”

“All right.” Jensen looked at her. “Do you have what you need?”

“Yes.” She closed her suitcase, zipped it, and hauled it off the bed.

He took it from her, his fingers grazing hers and sending a wave of warmth from her fingertips up her arm. The simple touch reminded her of their connection. She’d never felt anything like what she felt from a simple touch or look from Jensen. He had deepened that bond as he built her up and respected her.

Jensen gifted her with his perfect smile and placed his hand on her lower back to direct her out of the house.

Livvy longed to melt into him. What a man. She wanted him to be her man as much as she’d wanted to succeed with her music career. She’d spent hours practicing every day since she was a small child to accomplish that goal. What kind of time or energy would she need to direct at him to get him to fall for her?

The chief of all of Augustine’s police force was going to take part in her personal protection. Stay with her at the safehouse. Delegate his responsibilities to spend time with her and teach her to fight. Their time together would be a far cry from a vacation, but being near him felt like a safe and warm paradise to her.

They walked out into the chilly night, police officers escorting them. Her neighbors appeared to have given up on watching the mayhem because of the cold or their own exhaustion. Livvy hated to leave her home. Despite Treven finding her house and leaving a note and a dead dove when he’d escaped from prison a month ago, she’d always felt safe

and comfortable here. She wasn't safe here any longer and she'd miss her house and especially her piano.

Jensen opened the passenger side door of his dark gray Volvo and escorted her in. She smiled up at him. She was safe with him. Comfortable? In some ways, but not completely. He was too thrilling, mesmerizing, and exciting to be completely comfortable.

He put her suitcase in the back of the vehicle and then talked to the sergeant outside for a bit. Then he climbed into the driver's seat, pushed the start button, and slid the car into gear.

He gave her a reassuring smile as he drove away from her neighborhood. "Is it hard to leave?"

"Yes." She didn't want to dwell on being thrust out of her safe space and comfort zone. "Especially knowing I have a hole in my wall and spiders, mice, and snakes are going to creep in. What if they get inside my piano?" She shuddered.

He chuckled. "The incident control crew will cover the hole and tape it off securely. I'll make certain they do a thorough job and keep your house and piano safe."

"Thank you." She angled toward him, studying his profile illuminated by the soft lights of the dash while he drove through the dark night. "Where are we going?"

"Well, if you aren't opposed, we'll use my house."

"Your house?" Her stomach pitched at the idea. All alone at his house? Just the two of them?

He glanced at her, then focused on the road. "The safehouse that we usually use is occupied by one of Sutton Smith's men guarding a famous lady who needed to escape a stalker. Sutton has been helping us look for William and Naomi with his ops who are spread all over the world. Now just for Naomi. We wanted to repay the favor."

"Sutton Smith." She nodded. The billionaire philanthropist was very well known and provided security for many high-profile people. "I guess we can get trumped by his guy."

“Do you mind going to my house? My security is top-notch and we’ll have officers stationed inside and out at all times.” There went her idea of being blissfully alone with him. “And I can more easily get work done from my home office.”

“It sounds great.” Though she wished he’d protect her by himself. That was silly, though. He had work to do, and it would be smarter to have more officers around, as long as it wasn’t the two who’d stopped by after the first dead bird and murmured, ‘Treven’s coming,’ as they left. Though when she confronted them, neither would admit to saying it and acted like she was crazy and paranoid. She shuddered at the memory. “It won’t be Officers Bradford and Palmer?”

“No. Those two are on a very short leash.” He smiled slightly, though there was little humor in it. “I assigned them to prison duty after they bothered you the last time. Nobody likes prison duty.” His smile became more genuine. Possibly an inside joke?

Livvy had no desire to smile. She blinked at him, and a hard, cold knot formed in her gut. “Prison duty? That’s the worst spot those two could be! They could have helped Treven escape.”

“No.” Jensen shook his head decisively. “Our prison is top-notch, and those two don’t have any kind of security clearance or contact with the prisoners. They are on exterior duty only. The shift commander, who is the highest-ranking officer at the prison tonight, woke Treven up and saw him with his own eyes. I’m sorry to doubt you, but it’s impossible that Treven was at your house tonight.”

Livvy folded her arms across her chest. She didn’t want to be at odds with the man who was helping her, the man she was fascinated with, but she knew what she’d seen. Jensen didn’t believe Treven could be free. She didn’t blame him as all the facts showed he was right, but he’d know soon enough she hadn’t been disillusioned.

“I promise you it was him,” she insisted. “I’ve only seen eyes like his on him, his dad, and Sophie’s daughter Sunny.”

“Excuse me?” Jensen stared at her. Luckily his car was high-tech enough it basically drove itself. “Sophie’s daughter is Treven’s? But she was engaged to Jonathon Latham. I thought he was Sunny’s father.”

“Oh.” Livvy’s gut churned. She hadn’t meant to betray her friend’s confidence. “I thought you knew ... You’re so close to the August family and all the princes.”

He shook his head and focused on the road. “I know Treven was obsessed with her and William tried to use her and Sunny to manipulate Malik, but I had no idea she’d dated Treven.”

“She didn’t. The scumball raped her and then threatened to torture and kill Malik and her parents just like his men had done to Jonathon if she breathed a word of who Sunny’s real father was or what he’d done to her.” Livvy grimaced. “I thought you knew. Please don’t say anything. Sophie obviously wants that to stay quiet. Probably for Sunny’s sake.”

Jensen nodded. “Treven Rindlesbacher is the vilest scum I’ve ever met.”

“I agree.” She paused, then said, “I try to be Christian and not hate, but I hate him. What he’s done to me, to Sophie, to so many others...”

“I try not to let him have too much headspace either, but he and his family seem to be at the root of most problems in Augustine.”

They rode in silence for a few beats and then she asked, “Can you tell me more about what happened with him and Hattie Ballard?”

Jensen darted a gaze at her. “You’ve heard the media’s version?”

“Yes.”

He gripped the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. “When Treven killed Jane Presley, he knocked Hattie Ballard out and thought he could frame an innocent female tourist for the murder.”



It sounded exactly like what Treven would do.

“Peter, my partner at the time, had a son who had been beaten near to death by Treven, and the jerk had never even served time for it. Peter was as straight and good as anyone I’d ever known. Honestly, I struggled with wiping a crime scene, but Peter convinced me the only option was to help Hattie escape from Augustine and wipe her prints off the knife, the body, and the crime scene. Luckily Treven didn’t know her name at the time, but he learned it later and became almost as obsessed with her as he was with Sophie and still is with you.”

Livvy shuddered. Poor Hattie Ballard.

“Then later, William killed Franz Wengreen and framed Hattie for it. That’s how Treven got released from prison.”

She’d heard some of that.

“Peter, Ray, and I acted quickly to fake Hattie’s death. Steffan got her out of Augustine. Thankfully the Rindlesbachers were finally exposed for the filth they are and Hattie and Steffan could return home.” He gripped the wheel, and the muscles in his arms popped. “I hate Treven and William for so many things—threatening you, hurting Sophie, killing and lying and manipulating to try to take the crown, and putting me in that situation, for making me compromise my principles. It cost me deeply as an idealistic young detective. But if I had to do it all over again, I’m sure I’d choose to protect an innocent woman.”

“You’re a great man, Jensen.”

“I wondered for a while. Doing the right thing doesn’t always feel or look like doing the right thing. Sometimes I feel like you can’t do the right thing without doing the wrong thing at the same time.”

Silence fell in the car. She could tell the ordeal had hurt Jensen deeply. He navigated out of the city, along the river, and toward the mountains. Even though he agreed about how awful Treven was, it was obvious he didn’t believe her that Treven had been there tonight. Livvy would be happy to be wrong about this, but she wasn’t. She knew Treven.

## CHAPTER

## *Nine*

**LIVVY CLASPED** her hands in her lap. Exhaustion should be pulling her lids closed but she was too full of anxiety about Treven coming after her again, adrenaline being this close to Jensen and frustration that he wouldn't accept that Treven was roaming free.

A vehicle followed close behind them.

“Is that your people behind us?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She had no clue where the venerable chief lived. She was thrilled to have the chance to see his home, to stay close to him. Jensen revealing his concerns about Treven and what had happened with Princess Hattie made her feel closer to him. She could understand why he didn't believe Treven had escaped and why he didn't want to believe her—it would mean his prison was compromised or his people had been bought off by the Rindlesbachers. That family's tentacles and financial means were deep and vast. She hoped the royal family and Jensen hadn't relaxed with William dead. Naomi wouldn't stop until everyone suffered and her beloved son seized the crown from King Nolan and Prince Tristan.

“As soon as I get you settled and assignments for my people to protect you, I'll go to the prison myself. All right?” Jensen interrupted her stewing. He'd somehow known her mind was dwelling on that monster.

“All right,” she agreed. She had no idea how Treven could've escaped. All she knew was it was him that had come

for her. Just as he'd always promised.

*Treven's coming.*

And he'd keep coming.

She wrapped her arms around herself.

They pulled off the road and drove through thick trees. Stopping at a high gate, Jensen rolled down his window and typed in a code. The gate slowly swung open.

He pulled through, and the car followed him. They drove a hundred more yards, then a large rock and stucco house with thick timbered beams and columns decorating the front porch appeared. Livvy's eyes widened. The house was recently built, over a hundred years newer than her little home. It was much different and larger than the typical Augustine villas and cottages built around the turn of the nineteenth century and updated throughout the years.

"This is your house?" she asked Jensen.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you live alone?"

"Who else would I live with?"

"Your parents, a buddy, a wife."

His smile grew. "My parents live in Traverse on the river. I haven't lived with them since secondary school. My 'buddies' are all royals and have an enormous castle or homes of their own to live in. I've never had a wife."

Livvy swallowed. She knew he'd never been married. She'd kept close tabs on him. The way he was studying her now made her stomach hop like it was playing Chopsticks.

Shadows approached his window and Jensen said, "Excuse me while I give my people instructions. Then we'll get you settled in your room."

She nodded.

He slid out of the car and spoke to three men and one woman. They all listened and nodded. She thought they'd take

off, but Jensen strode around to her side, offered his hand, and helped her out of the car. His hand surrounding hers was the anchor and connection she'd been missing in her life. She smiled her thanks. His 'people' had followed him around the car.

"Livvy Moser ..." He tilted his head to her and smiled reassuringly. "This is Lieutenant Yost, Officer Frank Halladay, Officer Danson Etienne, and Officer Val Brahms. They'll be staying with us and monitoring the exterior and interior of the property as well as watching the cameras."

"Thank you," she said. "I really appreciate you all helping me."

They each nodded to her. Lieutenant Yost's gaze was fixed on Jensen. Another beautiful young lady interested in the chief?

Officer Brahms offered his hand. Livvy put her hand in his to shake, but he held on. "It's an honor, most special lady."

"Val," Jensen warned.

"What?" Val gave a good-natured grin and a shrug of his shoulders. "I've never seen our highly respected police chief bring a woman into his fortress. She must be special to you indeed, sir."

Livvy could see Val was teasing Jensen, and she liked him immediately. It was brave to tease the highest-ranking official in your department, and Jensen was a man who commanded respect.

Officers Etienne and Halliday exchanged looks. Lieutenant Yost's lips flattened, her brow furrowed, and she sent Val a dark look.

"I'm sure your 'highly respected police chief' brings women into his fortress regularly," she said, teasing but also testing Jensen. "I assure you I'm nothing special to him."

The other four's eyebrows rose, and they all looked to Jensen. The object of her comment and desire looked decidedly uncomfortable. She probably shouldn't have called

him out, especially in front of his people. Did his lack of response mean he *did* bring women here all the time?

Val laughed easily, easing the tension somewhat. “I beg to differ, beautiful and talented Livvy Moser. I saw you play in Vienna and it was incredible.”

“Thank you.”

Jensen’s gaze was warm on her, but then he turned to his people.

“All right. Val, you and Danson go search the interior. Lieutenant Yost, please use the link to my cameras and security to set up a command station in whatever basement bedroom you think is best. You each can choose a bedroom for yourselves. Frank, you’re on exterior.”

It was interesting he called the men by their first names, but not the lieutenant. They all nodded crisply, except Val, who saluted. Then the three men strode off without another word. Val did wink at her.

Lieutenant Yost grabbed two laptop bags out of the backseat of their car and then walked inside. She didn’t look at Livvy. The lady was beautiful but seemed severe. She probably had to be to thrive in a mostly male profession, or she was interested in Jensen and didn’t like Livvy being close to him.

Livvy hugged herself for warmth. She had a sweatshirt in her suitcase, but only a T-shirt and sweats on. It was chilly at night in mid-September in Augustine, and even more so in the mountains. She hadn’t felt the chill until Jensen hadn’t responded when she’d said she was nothing special to him.

“Please excuse Val.” Jensen pushed a hand at his hair. “He doesn’t have a filter between his brain and his tongue, but he’s an exceptional officer and I’d trust him with my mum’s life.”

“It’s okay.” She blinked up at him. Maybe she shouldn’t have brought it up again, but it would bug her until she knew. “Do you host women at your home regularly?”

He stared down at her. His dark eyes got that warm and intense look that she loved. “Rarely,” he said softly. “And I’ve

never even considered bringing a woman here to protect her.”

She shivered, but it was a good shiver this time. “You date a lot,” she said. That wasn’t a question. Local media loved to capture him, all the princes, and Major Chad Prescott on dates. All the princes were taken now, so Jensen and Chad got a lot of attention from the media and single women.

“I have dated different women,” he said. “But nothing serious. For years there has been a woman in the back of my mind that I hoped ...” He broke off and looked away.

Livvy’s gut turned over. Was she the woman in the back of his mind?

“All clear, sir,” Val called from the front porch.

“Thank you, Val. Lieutenant Yost has sent the schedule and rotations to each of your phones?”

“Yes, sir. I’m on sleeping duty first.” Val grinned and disappeared back into the house as Frank walked up to them.

“All clear, sir. I’ve got the exterior rotation.”

“Thank you.” Jensen nodded, and the younger man strode off.

Jensen went to the back of the vehicle and retrieved her suitcase. He gestured toward the house, but he didn’t put his hand on the small of her back like when he’d escorted her out of her house. Dang. What had changed? Was he worried about being too intimate while they were at his home, or had something she or Val said made him want to keep his distance?

They walked across the asphalt driveway and up the wide porch steps. She admired the stonework and the massive timbers. “This is gorgeous.”

“Thank you. It’s my sanctuary.” He opened the tall, wooden front door, and she worried that she’d invaded his sanctuary. Not just her, but four officers would also reside in his formerly quiet home.

She’d had her own sanctuary, and Treven had destroyed it.

He held the door, and Livvy walked inside. She gaped at the massive open space. Two stories of windows covered the back of the house with a huge living room in front of her, a kitchen and dining area to the right, and a graceful staircase lining the wall to the left. A balcony lined the left side of the upper floor, with at least two doors leading to what were probably bedrooms.

Her eyes were drawn back to the living area. The overhead lights were on, illuminating the spacious room. Though most people would probably say the focus was the huge windows and she was certain an incredible view in the daylight, or the two-story rock fireplace, for her it was the mahogany baby grand piano.

“You have a Petrof Model V baby grand piano?” her voice squeaked. Petrof was a reasonably-priced piano but classic and beautiful. She’d played pianos that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars but she loved the rich yet bright tone of the Petrof. The fact that Jensen had a piano in his living room made her feel connected to him. She had no idea he was musical.

“Yes,” his voice was cautious and he studied the piano.

“It’s beautiful.” She walked over and ran her hand along the wood. “I thought I wouldn’t be able to play ...” She broke off, her voice full of emotion. Music was such a part of her. She’d never imagined while hiding from Treven she’d have access to a piano like this.

Jensen turned to her and gently touched her arm. “I would love to hear you play. Please feel free to use it anytime.”

“Thank you.” She swallowed so she wouldn’t cry. She was tempted to sit down and play right now but she was exhausted and her hands would probably tremble from the fear of earlier tonight and her knuckles hurt from battling with her attackers.

She wanted to play for Jensen when the music would speak to his soul. “I had no idea you played.”

“Oh ...” He pulled his hand back and folded his arms across his broad chest. “I don’t.”

“Why do you have a piano then? And not just any piano, a classic baby grand?” Most people who didn’t play and wanted a piano as a showpiece would choose one that could play itself.

He stared at her and she had the most insane sensation. Jensen cared deeply for her and somehow this piano factored into that. Her eyes widened and her stomach pitched happily at the thought. Could he possibly have bought this piano with her in mind?

His eyes shuttered and he said, “I bought it at a charity auction for the Hillcrest House. You know the home that shelters abused children?”

“Oh. That’s very generous of you.” It was. Of course he’d buy a ten thousand dollar piano to support such a cause. She’d gotten her hopes pretty high. It was silly to think he’d bought it for her. “It looks beautiful in here. Thank you for letting me play it.”

“I can’t wait.” His eyes got warm and her pulse skittered. He leaned closer. Livvy pulled the side of her bottom lip between her teeth, and his gaze became smoky and downright hot.

A door slammed downstairs and they both startled. Footsteps pounded up the stairs and Lieutenant Yost paused to look between them. “I left my keyboard and mouse in the car,” she muttered.

Jensen nodded, and she hurried out the front door.

The moment was lost.

“In the basement there are five bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a living area,” Jensen said, gesturing to the floor, all business, and not looking at her. “The main area is mostly open except the laundry room, bath, and my office.” He tilted his head to the left where she saw a door she assumed led to the laundry room and bath, and double doors that led into a dark room. Then he gestured to the stairs.

They fell into step, and he explained, “Upstairs is my master suite and another bedroom and bath over the garage,



laundry room, and office. You'll stay in the bedroom next to mine and my officers will all stay downstairs."

Staying next to him sounded very ... nice. She'd be safe, close to the man she was enthralled with. Was there a chance he had ulterior motives and wanted her close as well, or was it simply the most convenient arrangement to give his officers a measure of privacy downstairs?

"You designed and built this house?" she asked.

"I worked with the designer on the plan and hired everything else out."

"Why did you build an extra bedroom and bath next to your master?" she asked as they ascended the staircase made of wood and wrought iron.

They reached the top and stopped outside the first bedroom door. He met her gaze. "I assumed when I married and we had children, we'd want a nursery of sorts close by. Not have to run two sets of stairs to check on or feed the baby."

"Oh." She wanted to believe he'd imagined her as his wife, but that would be more presumptuous than imagining he'd bought a piano for her. The image of them in the nursery, her holding the baby while he held her ... Her playing the Petrof while he stood close by and watched her with pride and longing in his gaze.

She had to stop her random and unrealistic thoughts. She'd never be free of Treven, and Jensen was hardly proposing.

He pushed open the bedroom door and set her suitcase inside. "Let's get you settled so I can head to the prison."

That sobered her and redirected her daydreams to nightmares. He was going to confront Treven. Unless she was right and Treven was nowhere near the prison. She shuddered. Where had the creep gone after he left her house? Could he have followed her here?

She looked out the two-story windows of the main area, easily visible from this loft. Darkness was all she could see. Dark like Treven's heart. What if Treven and his men were circling the property, looking for a weak spot? What if they

killed one of these diligent officers to get to her? What if they killed Jensen?

“Are you all right?” Jensen asked, his voice soft and kind.

“I don’t want to put anybody at risk with Treven out there somewhere. He’s psychotic, and he won’t stop until he’s forced me to marry him, or he’s dead.” She didn’t want to wish death on anyone, even Treven, but she could think of no other solution that would grant her freedom.

“My people are exceptionally trained. They can take care of themselves if Treven’s guys somehow came here and got through my security fence.” Jensen stared down at her. “You’ve been very brave on your own, Livvy, but you’re safe here. I promise he will never touch you again.”

Livvy’s heart thudded faster. She loved his promise and the warmth in his dark eyes. “Thank you, Jensen.”

“Can you rest? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She didn’t want him to leave, but that was silly. His people were competent, the property secure, and she would be safe here. “Can you leave me with a pistol? I’ll sleep better with one on the bedside table.”

She didn’t know what kind of response she expected, but his wide, beautiful grin was a pleasant surprise and broke the tension. He drew a 1911 from the small of his back. She hadn’t even realized he was carrying, but she should have. She’d never seen him not armed. It was enticing the way he drew that pistol, studying her the entire time, flipped it in his hand so the butt was extended toward her, and held it out.

“Have you used a 1911?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Okay.” He handed it over. Their hands brushed, and she felt the warmth of it all the way through her body. “Please don’t shoot one of my officers by mistake if they surprise you.”

She laughed, but it was unsteady. That was because of the effect those dark eyes and any slight touch had on her, not any

worries about shooting one of his officers. She knew how to handle a gun. “I promise. I’ll only shoot if my wall and window explodes and Treven tries to yank me out of your house.”

“If that happens, you have my permission to unload the entire clip.”

She shivered at the thought. Jensen looked like he wanted to reach out to her, but he stepped back instead. Maybe he was interested in her, but not enough to risk crossing any lines of propriety.

“I need to go. You’ll be all right?”

“Yes.” She pointed the gun at the floor like Cap had taught her, but gestured to it with her free hand. “Thank you for trusting me with this. Do you have another pistol to take with you?”

He looked surprised, and then he chuckled. “I do.”

“Do you have a lot of guns?” She imagined he did. The Augustine people’s safety and police work was his life.

“Tomorrow, before we go shooting, I’ll show you my gun safe. I think you’ll be impressed.”

“We’ll see if you can impress me, oh highly respected and far-too-enticing police chief.” Maybe she shouldn’t have thrown the last bit in, but he *was* too enticing, and she wanted him to know how she felt. Truthfully, everything about him impressed her. The only thing she’d change was she’d like him to wrap her up tight in those strong arms and hold her for a very long time.

He grinned and lifted a hand. “See you in the morning.” Turning, he entered his master suite.

Livvy slowly walked into her room, shut the door, and turned on the light. It was a spacious bedroom with a queen bed, a rustic wooden dresser and nightstands, and a walk-in closet and bathroom attached.

She needed to rest, but all she wanted was to be with Jensen. How would he react when he found out Treven was

not in prison but running around free? The jerk was probably consorting with his mum and planning how to kidnap Livvy and take over the kingdom of Augustine. She loathed the Rindlesbachers and their selfish and power-hungry minds.

Her body thrummed with a weird mixture of excitement from being close to Jensen and staying in his house and nerves about what Treven would try next.

Jensen would protect her.

*I promise he'll never touch you again.*

She prayed he could keep that promise.

## CHAPTER

## *Ten*

**JENSEN SMILED** to himself as he changed into a button-down shirt, tie, and slacks, then strode down to his office and retrieved a Magnum pistol and a side holster from his safe. If only he could stay here and talk to Livvy, hold her so she felt safe, but he had to confront Treven. Tomorrow he'd spend the entire day with Livvy. Would she play the piano for him? He'd almost revealed to her that he'd bought that piano with her in mind. Lieutenant Yost's interruption was annoying but probably for the best.

He spoke with Lieutenant Yost about his objective, and she reassured him they'd keep Miss Moser safe. She stared hungrily into his eyes, clearly hoping he'd say something personal. They'd gone to dinner half a dozen times when she was working at the military facility under Chad. When she'd been transferred to his department with a promotion to lieutenant, he'd kept a professional distance and started calling her Lieutenant Yost even though he was usually more casual with the people who served directly with him. She'd never said anything, but she glanced at him a lot. Maybe he should've explained initially that he didn't date employees and that Livvy had long held his interest. It felt a little late now. He said goodbye and hurried out of the house.

Driving quickly down the mountain road and past Traverse to the prison out in the fields north of town, he found himself thinking about Livvy's irresistible combination of sweetness and bravery instead of the upcoming confrontation with Treven. Dwelling on Livvy would surely give him more

motivation to get the information he needed out of the guy—like where their money was coming from, his mother’s whereabouts, and the identities of his henchmen. They hadn’t been able to get a peep out of the slime yet, but Jensen planned on changing that tonight. Then he’d have the prison guards move Treven to the highest-security cell. The guy was done threatening Livvy.

Pulling into the prison, the gates swung open and uniformed officers saluted as he passed. He parked in the employee parking lot. It was almost one-thirty in the morning when the employee door swung wide, held by a stiff-looking guard. Jensen entered the building and was greeted by the shift commander, Captain Rhodes. They shook hands.

“The prisoner is waiting, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Locked doors popped open, and men saluted as they walked down halls. The prison was quiet this early in the morning, but the guards had known he was coming and showed it with respect and him not even having to wait for a door to buzz open. These men knew their job, and they did it well.

Captain Rhodes stopped outside the interrogation room. “Where would you like me, sir?”

“Watch from the observation room and see what details you can pick up. I might trade you places at some point. Who knows how long he’ll hold out.”

“I’ll be watching and awaiting my turn, sir.” Captain Rhodes opened and held the door for him.

Jensen strode in.

Treven Rindlesbacher was waiting, his hands cuffed in front of him, his legs manacled. He stood between two guards. Both men saluted sharply when Jensen walked in. Jensen nodded to them and focused on the prisoner.

The blond man was a couple years younger than Jensen, stocky, and had the bearing and twisted confidence of a bully who won every fight.

Jensen sat in a cushioned chair and gestured to the hard seat across the small table from him, gearing up for a confrontation that would give him some answers. He'd never physically torture anybody, but he would win this verbal battle.

The guards helped Treven settle into the seat. He rested his cuffed hands on the table in front of him and slouched slightly forward, as if anxious to talk to Jensen. The guards stepped back against the wall, staring holes into the back of Treven's head. If he so much as raised his voice at Jensen, they'd be on him.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Chief?" Treven asked.

Jensen stared at the man. Treven was smart, too smart for his own good, and he loved taunting and trying to get under Jensen's skin. He always wore an ugly sneer when they spoke. It had been over a month since Jensen had interrogated him, but he knew Treven and his motivations well.

There was something off about the question. It was the middle of the night, but he'd never known Treven not to try to rattle him, claim he was beating him, and gear up for the battle. Tonight he seemed unconcerned and almost pleasant.

Jensen blinked and leaned forward, cold tingles prickling his skin. All of Livvy's assertions that Treven had come for her earlier tonight pinged around in his head. He'd felt uncomfortable dismissing her concerns, but he'd known it was impossible for Treven to escape.

Unless...

Jensen stared deeply at him and instructed, "Say something else."

"Excuse me? You woke me up in the middle of the night, Chief. I figured you must have a lot to say."

He was trying to be cocky and unruffled, but there was an odd quiver in his voice. It was pitched differently than Jensen remembered, and he'd interviewed him or listened to interrogations often enough to recognize his voice.

As he studied Treven, the criminal's eyes widened, then he broke eye contact and studied his bound hands.

"Look in my eyes," Jensen demanded.

Treven's gaze flicked up to his, and dread churned in Jensen's gut.

The prisoner's eyes were blue, a true summer-sky blue. Not bluish gray like Treven's eyes. 'I've only seen eyes like his on him, his dad, and Sophie's daughter Sunny.' Livvy's words.

She'd been right. It was impossible but the evidence was staring directly at him.

Jensen was frozen for half a beat.

"What?" the guy snarled.

Jensen leaped to his feet, leaned across the table, and grabbed the man's prison uniform. He fisted it and yanked him against the table, face up, where the harsh lights proved the truth about his identity.

No!

"Where is Treven Rindlesbacher?" he demanded.

"Chief?" one of the guards asked cautiously.

"Where is he?" Jensen yelled.

"I'm Treven Rindlesbacher," the guy said. He grinned, but it was uneven. "You're going nuts, Chief."

Jensen stared at the guy. The eyes weren't the right color, and now that he studied him, something about his face wasn't right either. Had he had plastic surgery to look like Treven? Had the Rindlesbachers found someone who looked eerily similar to Treven and paid and groomed the guy? How had they switched the prisoners out? Had Treven even come back to prison after his release when William brilliantly framed Hattie for another murder and being arrested again for kidnapping Ellery? Was it possible this guy had been here a month and nobody had looked deeply at him enough to connect the dots.



Livvy had been right all along. He cursed himself for not listening. His stomach churned.

“I’m going to ask you one more time ...” He paused. “But I think before I do that you’d like to know about some new information I received today.”

The man only cocked his head to the side.

“Treven—well, I mean you—might have some new charges dropping.” Jensen arched his eyebrows. “Something involving crimes against children.” Jensen released him, and the man fell back into his chair.

Jensen sat back and casually crossed his ankle across his other leg. “I’d hate to be a guy in gen pop if that rumor somehow got out.”

“You wouldn’t.” The man’s eyes finally registered fear.

Jensen remembered the pain of protecting Hattie, the way these people had tormented Livvy. He looked him dead in the eye. “You have no idea how far I would go. What lines I would cross.”

Fear rounded the man’s eyes, but he acted brave. “The venerable police chief. I know you’ll only stay on the up and up.”

“That’s your final answer?”

The guy nodded.

Jensen faced the guards, who stared wide-eyed at him. “Get him back to his cell.”

“Yes, sir.” They both saluted him.

Jensen glared at the fake Treven one more time. “You can act stupid and seal your own fate, or you can cooperate and maybe we’ll go more lenient on you.”

“You’ve lost it, Chief. I am Treven.”

“Your funeral,” Jensen said. He hated the twisted loyalty this man had to Treven. He’d rather go back to general population as a known child molester rather than turn on him. Loyal or scared? The Rindlesbachers would stop at nothing to

succeed. He'd heard about and could imagine even more the vile threats and snares they wove.

Jensen stormed to the door and banged out of it. Anger surged through him. This was a hit to his pride and another time the Rindlesbachers had gotten the upper hand. He'd long detested Treven for trying to frame Hattie and hated the concessions he and Peter had made to protect her. What he'd done to Livvy and Sophie made it even worse.

Jensen had been right to consider Treven his nemesis, and it stung deep to be outsmarted like this. Treven could not win against him again.

Captain Rhodes met him in the hallway. Jensen started issuing commands. "Get his fingerprints and a DNA sample and figure out who he is and what his affiliation with the Rindlesbachers is. Wake up Warden Geary and have him call me. If anybody can get him to talk, they get a promotion and a pay raise. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Yanking out his phone, he called Lieutenant Yost first. He should never have left Livvy. Treven could even now be figuring out a way to bust through his security and get to her. His pulse raced.

Guards stood at attention but watched him warily as he stormed past.

"Chief?" Lieutenant Yost answered on the second ring.

"Is the property secure?" he asked in a rush.

"Yes, sir. Is everything okay?"

"No." Doors buzzed open and finally he reached the exterior door. He shook Captain Rhodes's hand quickly, nodded to him, and then he upped his pace to a jog as he reached the employee parking lot.

His phone buzzed. Another incoming call—Warden Geary. Captain Rhodes must have somehow gotten ahold of him as they'd walked.

“Treven Rindlesbacher has escaped,” he told Lieutenant Yost.

“No,” she muttered.

“Get everybody patrolling, and be on alert. That guy could be anywhere, and we both know he has resources and intel that he should never have.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m on my way back now.” He climbed into his car.

Searching for Treven would be a top priority, but he would stick to Livvy’s side like glue. Treven and his parents had somehow made a doppelgänger and gotten Treven out of prison. Was it possible Treven had never gone back to prison after he’d been released last month because of William’s trickery? Maybe the guy who kidnapped Ellery had been the double?

Starting the car, he switched the call. “Geary?”

“What’s happening, Chief?” Geary’s voice was scratchy from sleep, but he sounded alert.

“A nightmare.” He should’ve believed Livvy. But how could he have imagined this? “Treven Rindlesbacher has a double. Either he somehow escaped from prison and switched with this guy, or the fake has been there since Ellery’s attempted kidnapping.”

“Sir, Captain Rhodes personally checked last night—”

“Our prisoner’s eyes are the wrong color, his voice is different, and if you compared his face, I’m betting you’d find some slight differences.” He cut him off. There was no doubt. Livvy had been right all along. “Captain Rhodes is already working on fingerprints and a DNA sample to figure out who he is and what his affiliation with the Rindlesbachers is. Get your best people to review film as far back as you need to go to figure out if they switched, and if they did, who helped Treven escape. Also have them review the film from Treven’s admission last month. The fingerprints and DNA on file. If someone can get the prisoner to talk, they get a promotion and a pay raise.” He repeated the instructions he’d given Rhodes.

He didn't care if anything got done twice. He wanted nothing missed.

"I'm on it, sir."

"I know you are. Thank you, Warden Geary." He paused. "Also, be on high alert with Officers Bradford and Palmer. They've shown ..." He hated to say allegiance, as the mutters Livvy had heard had never been confirmed. But he'd failed to believe Livvy tonight. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. "A weird allegiance to Rindlesbacher before."

The loyalty to Rindlesbachers went beyond money. Did they promise spots in their new regime, or did they blackmail, extort, and manipulate? Probably all of the above. Their horrific mix of genius and treachery knew no limits.

"Got it."

"I'll check back in soon." He hung up and dialed his assistant's number. It rang twice and then Sheryl said groggily, "Somebody had better be dead."

He actually smiled. "I wish Treven Rindlesbacher was."

"Me too, boss. Me too." Sheryl was a forty-year-old mum of three teenagers. How she kept up with everything at his office, at home, and with her kids' sports was beyond him, but she was organized, smart, had a supportive husband, and was always after Jensen to delegate more to her. He'd liked telling Livvy he'd delegate. To spend more time with her. That warm look in her eyes had made him irrationally happy. Now he had to focus completely on recapturing Treven and keeping Livvy safe.

"Sorry, lover. Go back to sleep," Sheryl said to her husband. There was a pause as she most likely walked out to her living room. "What's up?" she asked. "Besides me at this insane hour."

"My apologies."

"Yeah, yeah. I get your 'apologies' all the time."

Sheryl always made him laugh, but he could hardly even smile tonight. Being away from Livvy and knowing Treven

was out there somewhere made his heart race and his palms grip the slick steering wheel. The devious criminal had better not get through Jensen's security. He trusted his people to keep her safe, but who knew what curve ball Treven or Naomi would throw at him next. He raced through the streets of Traverse as he explained the situation to Sheryl.

His assistant kept cursing throughout the quick retelling. When a patrol car, who didn't recognize his vehicle and plates, flashed their lights, he almost joined her in the cursing. He slowed so the officer could see his plates. The patrol car's lights went off, and the guy faded away. He upped his speed again.

"What are we going to do, boss?" Sheryl asked.

He was through the city and almost to the mountainside and his turnoff.

"I'm going to keep Livvy safe," he began.

"Ooh-ee. There is something in your voice when you say her name. You like Livvy Moser, don't you?"

Jensen blew out a breath. Denying it would do no good. He turned onto the narrow road, thick trees lining his way. His anxiety ramped up. He'd have an SOS from his lieutenant by now if there was a problem.

But he had to see for himself that she was safe. He wanted to keep her so close she would easily guess she was the most important woman in the world to him. He couldn't do that and focus on bringing Treven down.

"I do," he admitted.

"Yes!" Sheryl crowed. "Finally. The mighty, irresistible, handsome oak has fallen."

Jensen did smile then. "She's in danger, Sheryl. More than I even realized. I can't act on my feelings until Treven is no longer a threat."

"Dang your moral compass all to heck," she scolded him. "You lied to keep Princess Hattie from being thrown into prison or killed by William Rindlesbacher."

“That was to protect an innocent woman from the depraved Rindlesbachers.”

“So it’s justified if you’re helping someone else, but not if you’re helping yourself?”

“I don’t know that not following the law is ever justified, but I couldn’t let those psychos hurt Hattie. Peter and my own conscience wouldn’t let me do it six years ago and Ray and my conscience prevailed again this summer,” he said, pulling up to his gate and breathing a sigh of relief. Everything looked calm, but appearances could be deceiving.

He typed in the code and the gate swung wide. “I suppose you’re right. It’s easier to justify if you’re helping someone else.” Hattie Ballard had been a special case, and it had cost Jensen to not follow the law to exactness, but he couldn’t have lived with himself if he hadn’t listened to his partner Peter and protected Hattie.

“Be selfish for once,” Sheryl boomed. “Oh, and think on this. You’d be *helping* Livvy Moser if you loved and kissed and held her while you were protecting her.”

“Sheryl, stop.” His voice was weaker than usual. She’d know his protests were just that.

She cackled. “She’ll appreciate your help, just like you’ll love helping her. What woman could resist your hot face and body?”

“I’m sure James would love to hear you say that.”

“Pshaw. He likes my colorful personality.”

“I’m sure.” Jensen pulled up to his house. Everything looked calm and Danson walked past, lifting a hand in salute. His trusted officers were much more comfortable with him than the prison guards.

He pushed the garage button opener and eased the Volvo in. Earlier, he’d wanted to walk Livvy through the front door. That had been prideful of him, but he loved his house and had enjoyed her appreciation. He could envision her living here someday, playing the piano, going on walks through the

woods, cooking together ... He had to shut those thoughts down and not get distracted.

Turning off the vehicle, he snatched his phone. "I'm home, Sheryl. Sorry to wake you up, but I need you to send out an alert. Tell all officers to be on high alert and get an APB for Treven and Naomi Rindlesbacher." They already had one for Naomi. "I don't know that they'd dare show their faces anywhere in Augustine, but we can hope. I'll personally send the information on Treven's escape to Interpol and the European Nation."

Normally he'd delegate to his deputy chief, but honestly, Cheryl was faster and more efficient.

"Okay. What else can I do?"

"Pray," he said. "If someone can get the doppelgänger to talk, it could be a breakthrough. Unfortunately, the perp who accompanied Treven earlier tonight to blast through Livvy's bedroom wall and try to kidnap her was killed, so no help there."

He walked through the living area. All he wanted was to rush upstairs, see Livvy, and reassure himself she was all right. Treven hadn't gotten through his exterior security and bombed through his wall. Thankfully she was on the upper story so it would be harder this time.

"I'm on it," Sheryl said. "Chat in the morning or any time you have an update."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

"Oh, you owe me way more than one. We'll call it even if you can get to loving on that beautiful musician of yours."

"After the case is solved, I'll try."

"That's pathetic. You've got her captive right now. Woo her, my boss. Woo her."

Lieutenant Yost pumped up the stairs from the basement. "I thought I heard you." She sounded out of breath.

"I've got to go, Sheryl. Thank you."

“Of course.” She hung up.

“Everything’s secure?” Jensen asked as he headed for the staircase.

Lieutenant Yost licked her lips and blinked at him as if he were coming straight for her. “Yes. Everything’s been calm.”

“Thank you.” Jensen walked around Lieutenant Yost and pumped up the stairs. He didn’t want to wake Livvy and terrify her when he confirmed she’d been right about Treven, but he had to see her, had to see for himself that she was sleeping and all right.

Lieutenant Yost followed him. “Can you tell me everything that happened, sir?”

“Yes, just give me a moment. I have to see—”

He reached the balcony just as Livvy’s door flung open. Jensen reached for his pistol, increasing his pace. Who was in her room?

Livvy stepped out of the bedroom, and everything in him softened. The light in the main area illuminated her beautiful face. Her dark eyes searched his, and it was all he could do to resist storming to her, capturing her mouth with his, and holding her close for the rest of the night.

This woman was meant to be his—to protect, to lift, to love. Did she feel the same?

He reached the top of the stairs, Lieutenant Yost right beside him. She stood stiffly, reminding him of his duties and responsibilities. No matter what Sheryl said, this wasn’t the time for love and romance.

With how slippery, brilliant, and tricky the Rindlesbachers were, he feared it would never be his and Livvy’s time. Treven’s escape humbled and infuriated him. He’d do anything, even keep himself from reaching for Livvy, to capture Treven and make certain she was safe.



## CHAPTER

## *Eleven*

**LIVVY TOSSED** and turned but couldn't sleep. What would Jensen find at the prison? How would he react when he realized it wasn't Treven? What if whoever was pretending to be Treven looked so much like the man Jensen wouldn't believe her? How could she convince him?

Danger seemed to press around her in the dark room, despite all the safety protocols at Jensen's property, house, and his people watching over her. She found herself praying silently and picking up Jensen's gun, holding it close.

She heard the rumble of a vehicle and saw lights flicker through the wood shutters.

Jensen?

Lying there was torture, but then she heard what she thought was a garage door, interior doors open and close, footsteps, and his deep, appealing voice.

She set the gun down and slid out of bed. Creeping to the door, she listened as his voice grew closer and his footsteps ascended the stairs. Who was he talking to? Was he coming for her?

"... I have to see—" his voice rumbled through the door.

Livvy flung it open. She had to see *him*.

She stepped out into the light of the main area. His dark gaze seared through her. He was strong and commanding and inspiring. It was all she could do to hold herself back from

leaping into his arms. His lieutenant stood stiffly by his side and glared at her.

“Livvy.” Jensen breathed out her name with an almost reverence. His shoulders relaxed and his eyes traveled over her. “You’re all right.”

“I’m fine,” she reassured him. “You?”

He eased closer, but then he seemed to remember his audience. “Lieutenant, please give us a few moments. I’ll come down to the basement and update you soon.”

“Yes, sir.” The words were thrown like bullets but thankfully Lieutenant Yost spun and marched down the stairs.

Jensen took Livvy’s arm and escorted her back into the bedroom. He flicked the light on and shut the door. Livvy blinked against the sudden brightness. He released her arm and stepped back.

“What happened?” she asked, fearing the worst. Treven had gone after her parents and brother and was holding them hostage to get her to come to them. Treven was coming with an army.

“I’m sorry, Livvy.”

Oh no. Treven had already hurt someone she loved. Who?

“I didn’t believe you,” he continued. “Treven’s lookalike is in prison.”

He knew the truth. She didn’t care about being vindicated but she did want Jensen and everyone on high alert.

“I didn’t want to be right, but I knew I was.” At least Treven hadn’t hurt anyone else. Yet. She rubbed at her chest. It felt too tight. “He’s coming for me.”

“We don’t know where he is.” His gaze became piercing again. “But I will do everything in my power to track him down and I will keep you safe, Livvy.”

The determined and protective look in Jensen’s dark eyes accelerated her heartbeat and strengthened her.

“I know you will.” She held his gaze, and then she boldly took a step closer.

Jensen’s gaze swept over her face, warm and full of her. He’d said she was brave. Could she show him how brave she was?

“Thank you, Jensen,” she said in a breathless voice she hardly recognized.

He nodded, the tension between them drawing tighter than a piano string. His gaze was concentrated on her. She could hardly catch a breath for her thumping heart.

Maybe her timing was wrong. Treven’s darkness was oozing toward them. But she needed Jensen, his comfort, his strength and she wanted him to know how deeply she cared.

Livvy took another step. She was inches from him, inhaling that unique pine and musk scent and studying each nuance of expression in his eyes and on his face. He would be here for her. He cared for her. Would he hold her, comfort her, kiss her?

Neither of them moved, her quick pants for air far too loud in the otherwise quiet room. Jensen’s breathing sounded labored, too. He moistened his lips and swallowed. She thought he might say something, but it was as if he was reluctant to move or to break the silence.

*Brave. Be brave.*

Livvy rested her hands on his chest.

Jensen sucked in a breath and then let out a telling groan. “Livvy ...”

She gently pushed him against the wall. He let her, his gaze growing in intensity, a fire in its depths for her and her alone.

Still, he didn’t touch her. Why not?

Livvy had to do this. Metaphorically strut out onto a precarious stage with thousands of fans watching, not knowing if she could complete the difficult piece she’d been assigned to play.

She lifted onto tiptoes, slid her arms around his neck, and pressed her lips to his.

For a brief moment, Jensen didn't respond. He seemed frozen, and fear filled her. He wasn't interested. He was too focused on his work, too noble to return the kiss of a 'victim.'

Then Jensen wrapped his arms tight around her back, held her so close every dream was within reach, and returned her kiss.

Oh, how he returned it. Livvy heard the strains of Pachelbel's "Canon in D" playing in her head. She was transported to another world in Jensen's arms, his lips working with hers like a magical instrument, like an angelic harp. She was safe, she was brave, she was in love, and she was loved.

Livvy would've happily kissed him all night. The joy she found in his arms was unparalleled. She'd never felt like this, not even when thousands of patrons had cheered and given her a standing ovation. Jensen was the only audience she'd ever need, the only man who could protect and lift her to higher plains. The man who would be there for her.

Jensen released her from the kiss and stared at her as if captivated. His eyes sparkled with the same magic and music she'd felt as he kissed her.

He looked for all the world like he would kiss her all over again. Yes, please. She'd initiated their first kiss, and she would never regret that. She would let him initiate this one.

Playfully pulling the edge of her bottom lip between her teeth, she fluttered her eyelashes at him.

Jensen left out a husky groan and bent to capture her lips again. His phone rang, and she felt it vibrate against her hip. He muttered an oath that made her smile. He didn't want to be interrupted any more than she did.

"Excuse me," he murmured.

She nodded.

Releasing one of his arms from her back, he looked at his phone, silenced the ringer, and grunted, "Ray." His eyes grew

hungry and full of her, and he wrapped her up tight again. “Ray can wait a minute.”

She laughed, a happy peal of laughter that she felt clear through. The general of all of Augustine could wait. Jensen’s kiss couldn’t.

He bent to her, and every dream and hope filled her body and soul as his lips captured hers again. The music of their unique connection filled her being.

A loud rap sounded on the door behind them.

He startled and straightened, releasing her. Easing to the door, he cracked it open. “Yes?”

“Sir.” It was Lieutenant Yost’s voice. “General Raymond said you didn’t answer your phone, and he needs to speak with you.”

That was quick. Maybe she’d been too engrossed in Jensen’s enthralling kiss, but she could’ve sworn Ray had called seconds ago.

“Thank you.” Jensen shut the door and turned to Livvy. His gaze filled her with longing to be in his arms again. “I guess Ray can’t wait a minute.” He pushed his hand through his short hair. “I’ve got to go. You’ll be all right?”

“With you watching over me, I will.” She smiled at him. “Come for me when you can?”

Jensen’s chest heaved with his quick breaths. “Livvy. Ah, Livvy.” His gaze suddenly changed. It looked ... tortured.

Ah, no. What was wrong?

“Livvy. I have to protect you and find Rindlesbacher. I can’t let my guard down, not with Treven roaming free. I have to finish him. It’s personal, and I have a duty to the people of Augustine.” He raked a hand through his hair and then gestured to her. “I can’t be like this with you.”

“Pardon me?” Livvy went from the highest high to an unimaginable low within moments. “Can’t be like what with me?”

He only shook his head. “Get some rest. I’ll figure everything out. You’re safe.” With those words, he hurried through the door and closed it behind him as if she’d grab him and snatch him away from his important duties.

Livvy wanted to fling the door back open, give him a piece of her mind, and then kiss him all over again. She heard his voice and then his footsteps descending the stairs.

She was safe with Jensen, but he couldn’t ‘be like this with her’?

Had he not felt their insane connection? If he had, nothing and no one could interrupt them, save a bomb exploding in the house or Treven’s mercenaries opening fire.

Livvy leaned against the wall, weak and devastated. She’d thought she and Jensen were creating the most beautiful music in the world. He obviously didn’t agree. He’d returned her kiss, but she’d initiated it. He’d obviously enjoyed it, but it must not have meant as much to him. He couldn’t have felt the connection she felt and walked away.

*Duty* came first.

## CHAPTER

## *Twelve*

**JENSEN RUSHED OUT** of Livvy's room, feeling the most awful letdown of his life. What could Ray need that was more important than him kissing Livvy again?

Yet Ray's call and Lieutenant Yost's interruption had been sorely needed. He'd ignored Ray's phone call. In the middle of the night and with a desperate criminal after Livvy on the loose. The criminal he had to catch. The most important catch of his life.

It was personal and professional with Treven. That man and his family had taken a lot from Jensen and his country. He owed it to everyone to be at his top performance and not get distracted.

He'd been distracted a few minutes ago. He never ignored his phone. Livvy's kiss had taken him to another sphere, a beautiful and consuming connection he'd never experienced before. She'd been all that mattered in that moment, all that he'd ever need. She consumed him, body and soul.

He wanted Livvy in his heart and his arms, but he had to focus. Too many people, including Livvy, needed him at his best. If he let himself be consumed by his feelings for her, he would make mistakes. The Rindlesbachers were despicable, but they were also very smart, had beaten him before, and were not to be underestimated.

Someday he could focus on Livvy. Hopefully, someday very soon. The timing simply wasn't right. After Treven and Naomi were caught, when he knew she was safe and choosing

him not because of the safety he represented but the man he was and the fact that she was the only woman for him...

Right now, he had to concentrate. His country and his duties had to take precedence, as they always had.

Lieutenant Yost waited for him, her look pointed and unhappy, but she said nothing. He pushed Ray's number on the callback as Lieutenant Yost hurried down the stairs and to the basement.

"Yeah?" he asked his best friend, walking down the stairs with heavy treads. He headed for his office just off the stairs on the main level.

"Lieutenant Yost informed me that Treven Rindlesbacher has escaped from prison and apparently has an impersonator masquerading as him?" Ray's voice was gruff, annoyed, and ready to hunt down Treven.

Jensen would utilize his best friend's dedication, insights, and forces, but why had Lieutenant Yost woken Ray at two a.m. and then claimed the general had called her?

That wasn't Ray's problem, but Jensen would ask her about it. He had been cloudy and consumed by Livvy's kisses, but it had seemed to him Ray's phone call and Lieutenant Yost knocking on the door were seconds apart. Had she been standing there waiting? That was annoying and out of line.

"Yes," he told Ray. "The man in the prison is definitely not Treven."

He and Ray talked through everything that had happened, and the General Prince promised to continue searching for Treven and Naomi, but as they'd all been on high alert for Naomi already and hadn't found her, it was becoming more frustrating by the day. Was Naomi holed up on some private island where they'd never find her? Who was pulling the strings and financing Treven if not Naomi? William was definitely dead. That was the only good news they could cling to at the moment.

Jensen hung up with Ray and sent the alert to Interpol, the European Union authorities, and Sutton Smith. He took the



time to talk to each of the officers at the house. It was after four a.m. when he finally lay down on his office couch. He was roused at seven by movement in the kitchen.

Swinging his feet to the floor with a groan, his head pounded with lack of sleep. He stood and took a deep breath, rolling his head around to loosen his neck up. He headed into the main area and paused when he saw Livvy standing next to the counter, a glass of water to her lips. She was freshly showered, and her long, dark hair trailed over her shoulder. She was absolutely glorious. How could he resist fixating on her when she was right here?

“Good morning,” he managed. “You look incredibly beautiful this morning.”

She looked incredibly beautiful all the time.

Her eyes narrowed slightly at him, as if he had no right to tell her she looked beautiful, and he probably shouldn't have gone there. Dang the line he had to walk to solve this case and keep her safe. Treven could not win. Not with Livvy at stake.

“You look exhausted,” she returned.

“I am.” He forced a smile, looking down at his rumpled shirt and slacks and back up at her. “Please feel free to eat anything you like, and ...” He wanted to tell her she could explore, but where could she go? The living room? At least she could play the piano. “Please don't leave the house.”

“Don't leave the house? So I'm a prisoner here now?”

“Livvy.” He crossed the room, stopping a foot away and impressively not pulling her into his arms. Sometimes he amazed himself. “We have to keep you safe until we find Treven. Please.”

She studied him and then whispered, “Are we going to talk about it?”

Their world-altering kiss? Their connection? How she consumed his every thought?

His hand moved without him granting it permission, and he gently cupped her jaw, his thumb trailing across the

softness of her cheek.

She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes.

Jensen wasn't tired any longer. He could fight a dozen men to keep her safe.

The front door beeped and then opened. Jensen pulled his hand from her face, and she straightened away from him.

Frank walked in, shutting the door and arming the alarm behind him. "Morning," he murmured, nodding to them before heading to the stairs and the basement.

Jensen focused right where he wanted to ... on Livvy.

"Keeping you safe has to be my focus," he said in a gravelly voice.

"What does that mean?" She blinked up at him, so beautiful and right here, in his kitchen, looking at him. Wanting him? He felt as if she were meant for him.

Jensen steeled himself. "I have to focus on finding Treven and Naomi and keeping you safe."

"Your duty has to come first," she said softly.

She understood? That was good, even if it was hard for both of them to exercise restraint right now.

He nodded.

"Excuse me." She walked a wide arc around him and jogged lightly up the stairs.

Jensen watched her go. He felt devastated and alone.

Saying a quick prayer for help, he yanked his thoughts from Livvy and the desire to chase her up those stairs. It was a massive effort, but he concentrated on what he needed to do. First order of business was calling Warden Geary to see if any progress had been made on the prisoner. Second would be walking the perimeter with Lieutenant Yost and determining if there were any weak spots that Treven or his men could exploit if they discovered Livvy's location and attempted an attack.

He wouldn't get any more sleep—or a sparring or lifting workout—today. He felt off his game and cloudy from lack of sleep and his usual routine.

He'd told Livvy last night that he'd work with her on fighting and shooting. Could he carve out time for that today? He wished he could spend every minute with her.

It had to be enough that she was safe and he was close to her. He appreciated that she understood why they couldn't just kiss the hours away, no matter how badly he wanted to.

He had a higher purpose right now: keeping her safe and bringing the remaining Rindlesbachers to justice. He'd finally triumph over Treven and close that chapter of his life.

Why, then, did he feel so empty?

## CHAPTER

## *Thirteen*

**LIVVY RUSHED UP THE STAIRS.** She made it into her room, shut the door, and was steps from the bed before the tears traced down her cheeks. She threw herself onto the bed and let them come. Jensen had told her she was beautiful and looked deeply at her as if he cared for her, but then his ‘duty’ had to come first.

She should be grateful, as his duty was protecting her, but she wasn’t asking him to kiss her for hours on end, though she’d love that. She didn’t want to distract him from all he needed to do; she wanted Treven arrested as much as anyone. She only wanted reassurance that all she’d felt as they’d kissed hadn’t been one-sided. That she was the only one for the unparalleled man that was Chief Jensen. That they could be together someday.

Livvy straightened off the bed and paced the room. She had no clue what she’d do with herself until Treven was found, or until he somehow penetrated this safe space like he had the safe space of her home.

The next few days were the most boring she’d ever experienced. Everybody else was busy, while she had nothing to do except practice her self defense, play the piano for hours on end, and stare at Jensen when they passed in the hallway or sat down for a quick meal.

They were cordial to each other, but he kept his distance physically and emotionally. Neither of them brought up the kiss, and she didn’t break down and beg him to care for her

like she did for him. A few times she felt someone watching as she played the piano. She'd turn and see him standing in his office door, his gaze filled with longing. She'd tried to beacon to him with her eyes. He'd lift a hand, and slip back into his office. Leaving her alone and dejected once again.

He gave her updates each day, but despite how busy he and his people seemed, there wasn't much progress. Treven and Naomi were still at large. No sightings of either of them. The prisoner still wouldn't talk. Security had been improved on Jensen's property, and she was safe. Ramone Pitcher had come up clean, but they were still digging. None of Treven's former friends were giving them any leads. What groceries would she prefer he order? He thanked her for playing the piano and that longing filled his eyes but he never admitted he wanted more with her.

It all came down to she was still a prisoner in Jensen's beautiful house, and he still wasn't interested in falling in love. He'd claimed he didn't see her as a victim, that she was brave. Had that somehow changed when they'd kissed? She'd thought those kisses would seal them together, but apparently they'd pushed Jensen away.

At least as a self-sentenced prisoner in her own home, she'd had a huge variety of piano music not just the songs she had memorized, her students, her family coming by, her yard to work in and house to clean, books to read, and television series she enjoyed watching. At least at home she hadn't been tortured by the man she wanted being *right there*, giving her longing looks but not making a move because of his idealistic moral compass or because he was intent on finding Treven. He seemed to take Treven's escape as a personal affront.

So Livvy spent an hour every morning in her bedroom, practicing the defense moves Cap had taught her. She spent hours playing the piano, going over and over the same ten songs she had committed to memory. She paced the house throughout the day. She read through some books in Jensen's office—Clive Cussler and Dean Koontz were the only fiction options. She liked suspense, but would a little romance be out of line? She cooked and baked. The men all appreciated that.

Lieutenant Yost didn't seem to like her and avoided her, she even heard the woman mutter about the 'annoying piano music'. Val teased her whenever he saw her. Frank and Danson were cordial, but like the rest of the police force, they treated her with the same respect the chief got.

On the morning of the fourth day, she knew she had to get Jensen to take her outside and spend at least a few minutes with her or she would lose her mind. She put on a long-sleeved T-shirt and running tights and descended the steps. He was usually in his office, though she'd also seen him outside sparring with his men. That had been a fun show to watch. He was so lean and tough and the way he moved ... ooh. It made her tingle.

Livvy approached the glass double doors of his office and studied him for a few beats. He stood with his back to her and his phone to his ear. He was dressed casually today in a gray T-shirt and black joggers. He looked mind-blowingly appealing no matter what he wore.

Should she knock, or just stare for a while? She didn't want to interrupt his conversation.

Jensen turned, saw her, and his face lit up with an inviting smile. Livvy's stomach hopped as he walked toward her with determined strides, his dark gaze full of her and intense, just the way she liked it. Would he let down his guard for just one moment? Let her know he cared for her, and not only as an endangered woman to protect?

Swinging the door wide, he motioned her in. She brushed too close to him as she walked in, setting off a swarm of butterflies in her stomach. He sucked in a breath, and she paused. Right in his space.

"Ray, I'll get back to you." He ended the call, pocketed his phone, and stared at her.

He had just hung up on the general of the army—a prince. That had to mean something. *Ray can wait*. If only he'd kiss her again.

"Hey," he said, brushing at his hair.

“Hey,” she returned, staring up at him. How would he respond if she pushed him into the doorframe and kissed him for a very long time?

He stepped back and gestured to the leather chair across from his desk. “Would you like to sit?”

“No thank you.” She prayed for bravery and said in a rush, “I would like to take you up on your offers today.”

“Offers?” His gaze was completely full of her, and it was hungry. Heat filled her chest and hope filled her heart. Jensen was too classy to ever look like a man who would devour a woman, but he wanted to be with her. That much was obvious by his gaze. Now to get him to admit to it.

“Yes,” she said in what she hoped was a determined and not quavering voice. “You told me you’d delegate to your assistant. I assumed that meant so you could spend time with me?”

She didn’t like the way she’d phrased that. It wasn’t a question. It shouldn’t have been a question. Was it a question? Had she just given him an out? Did he not want time with her?

He only studied her and finally nodded. “I did say that, but I didn’t know Treven Rindlesbacher had escaped from prison and was at large.”

Her hopes wilted. “Oh.”

Would it profit her to ask for time with him, or simply force him to explain why he didn’t have time for her? She wasn’t a needy child, had been independent and on her own for a long time, but she needed Jensen. She needed him desperately.

Instead of fighting for him, she turned toward the door. Maybe after Treven was caught, she and Jensen could have a chance. But no—even if Treven was back in prison, she’d still be the creeper’s target.

Jensen stepped into her space, and his hand cupped her hip. Heat flared through her from the point of contact. That heat grew as she looked up into his warm, brown eyes.

“What would you like to do together if I could delegate some of my responsibilities?”

*Kiss for a very long time.*

She couldn't start there. They felt far from those beautiful kisses. If miracles occurred, maybe she'd work him back into that place, but she wasn't hopeful.

“You told me you'd show me your gun safe and work with me on improving my shooting and fighting,” she reminded him. She did want to be as proficient as possible for when Treven or his people attacked again, but she'd be happy to go on a walk through his property. Anything to be by Jensen's side, and getting outside after being trapped for four days sounded wonderful.

“I did.” He released his grip on her and stepped back. “I apologize that I've been so busy and an awful host.”

Disappointment filled her, and she had no response. An awful host? She didn't care about him 'hosting' her. She wanted him to be comfortable with her, to fall in love with her, to not be able to stand to be away from her for a moment.

“Let me delegate some responsibilities. After lunch, I could set up targets for shooting out back and then we could work on some self-defense moves in my room to add to what you already learned from your cousin.”

She could hardly swallow past the sudden dryness in her throat. In his room? Did that just mean practicing fighting, or was there another reason he wanted her alone, without the cameras one of his officers monitored at all times?

“Thank you.” She clapped her hands together and then impulsively threw her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his.

Jensen let out a groan that caused more visions of them being together. He wasted no time wrapping her up tight and holding her very, very close to him.

Livvy savored every moment of the hug, memorizing the lean lines of his body and his strong arms surrounding her.



Who knew when he'd touch her again? She had to cherish each second.

She eased back just enough to look up at him and try to convey with her gaze that she would be happy to kiss him anytime, anywhere. His gaze was concentrated on her, and she didn't think it was her imagination that his mouth was slowly growing closer and closer and ...

Steps sounded through the main area and then a throat cleared. Jensen released her. Livvy bit back her disappointment and turned. Lieutenant Yost. Great. The woman despised her. Her gaze shot daggers at Livvy, but she spoke to Jensen. "Chief. A delivery van is at the front gates. Thompson's Grocers. It looks legitimate, but ..."

"I have a standard delivery every Thursday, but I added items Livvy requested." He gave her a quick smile. "Will you please ask the guards to carry the groceries up to the house?"

"Of course." Lieutenant Yost's voice was icy. "I'll just inform Val."

"Thank you."

Lieutenant Yost strode away, darting one last poisonous look at Livvy.

"She doesn't like me much," Livvy muttered.

Jensen looked from Livvy to the door Lieutenant Yost had marched through. "Lieutenant Yost?" He rubbed at his jaw, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

"Did you ...?" It hit her at the guilty expression in his eyes. "Are you *dating* her?" Had that come out as a shriek? It sure sounded like a shriek to her. Shoot.

"No." He shook his head sharply. "We went to dinner a few times when she was working at the military facility for Chad. When she transferred to my department this summer, I didn't ask her out again."

Lieutenant Yost's frosty reception made a lot more sense, and a pit of dread formed in Livvy's stomach. Was that how Jensen would describe her soon? *We kissed a few times, but*

*she was a victim of Treven Rindlesbacher. I didn't ask her out again.*

He'd been insistent he didn't see her as a victim and that she was brave. She'd been brave to come in here and cajole him into spending time with her. What would the result be? Could she break down his barriers, or would he walk away or get interrupted? She kept seeing glimpses of care and desire in his gaze, but if he was interested in her, he was a master at schooling his feelings so he could 'focus.'

His phone rang. He held it up and blew out a breath. "My assistant, Sheryl. She'll be ready to cuss me out for something."

Livvy dredged up a smile but wondered if Sheryl had also fallen for Jensen, but he hadn't reciprocated the feeling. How many women had he dated? There was probably a trail of broken hearts in his past.

She turned to go.

"I'll see you at lunch. We'll tour my safe and shoot and practice self-defense after," he said to her back.

Livvy glanced over her shoulder. She didn't want to be a burden on him, but she'd take what she could get. "Thank you."

"Anything for you, Livvy." The words were said like a promise, and his gaze backed them up.

Livvy prayed he meant those words.

## CHAPTER

## *Fourteen*

**LIVVY TOOK** a deep breath of fresh, crisp fall air mixed with decomposing leaves, dirt, pine needles, musk, and man. She and Jensen were behind his house. It couldn't really be called a backyard as it was a natural landscape and the forest almost encroached on the house. She loved this view—wild and beautiful and so fitting for Jensen's gorgeous home.

He had been true to his word, and after lunch they'd toured the walk-in safe built into his office wall. She'd been more than impressed with his array of military and civilian weapons—pistols, shotguns, fifty calibers, semi-automatic, and automatic machine guns. He could defend an entire city. Then he'd selected a couple pistols and some ammo and taken her out back, where he'd somehow had time before their arrival to set up some targets at a clearing in the trees with a natural hill backdrop. He'd probably had one of the officers do it. She doubted Lieutenant Yost would do anything that gave her and Jensen time together. At the same time, Lieutenant Yost would do anything for Jensen.

"You've shot before?" Jensen asked, standing too close for her heart's ability to beat at a normal rate.

"Yes. But when Treven came to kidnap me, I was shell-shocked and night blind and the shot went wild."

He nodded. "You did great. Until you have a lot of time with your weapon and chances to react in mockups and real-life situations, it's hard to hit the target every time."

"Are you a perfect shot every time, Chief?"

“Yes, ma’am.” He picked up a pistol, glanced at the target, and shot. The bullet hit dead center. She hadn’t even seen him aim.

“No way,” she breathed out. “That was incredible.”

He grinned. “Impressed, Miss Moser?”

“Very, Chief Allendale.”

Their gazes held for a few beats. He looked away first, out at the forest as if hearing something or assessing danger.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, easing closer to him.

“Yes. Look.” From here, she could see his property fence through the trees. Just beyond it, a couple of deer bounded past. His sense of hearing was as impressive as his ability to shoot, kiss, and make her swoon with a single look.

He refocused on her. “The important thing is learning to be calm and steady.” He slipped the pistol into her hands and turned her to face the target, his hands warming her where they rested on her hips. “Okay, line up the sights.”

She lifted the gun, clinging to it. Her hands quivered, not because of nerves but because he’d touched her so gently and all she wanted was more of his touch, more of him.

Jensen came up behind her. His chest pressed against her back. She instinctively leaned into him. He was her strength and her protection. Both of his hands slowly slid along her arms and then around her hands. Each movement of his hands was tantalizing and distracted her from anything but him.

“Steady,” he whispered in her ear.

Livvy trembled. She glanced back at him; he was so close his lips brushed her cheek. “This is not helping me be steady.”

He arched an eyebrow. “I’ve got you. You can focus on the target.”

“Focus,” she muttered. She usually was a great shot, but she was trembling from him touching her. She stared at the target, aimed, and pulled the trigger. The gun jarred her. She

hit the bottom of the target, not inside any of the circles like she usually did. Dang.

“Not bad,” he said. “If that was Treven, you’d remove his belly button. Now take some deep breaths.” He breathed with her—in and out, in and out. All she could smell was his cologne and all she could feel was his warmth. She leaned back into him, and he gently surrounded her. Like a warm blanket on a cold night. Like the confidence ten thousand hours of practice gives a concert pianist stepping onto the world’s biggest stages.

Amazingly, her trembling stopped. She felt steady, strong, and empowered in his arms.

“Align the front sight and the far sight on the top of the target,” he said.

She squinted at it and gently raised their joined hands.

“Breathe slowly.” Jensen supported her and murmured, “When you’re ready, take the shot.”

She concentrated, supported by him, and took the shot. The bullet drove through the second inner circle.

“Yes!” she cried. She whirled in his arms.

Jensen deftly removed the pistol from her grip. “I’ll just take this.”

She’d planned to throw her arms around him and hold him close, but the gun was between them.

“Is that the end of my lesson?” she asked, blinking up at him.

“You did amazing. Most people tighten up as they pull the trigger, but you’re relaxed.”

“I feel as relaxed as someone tossing a beanbag into a cornhole.”

He smiled. “Would you like to keep shooting?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay. Just no whirling with the loaded weapon.”

“You take away all a girl’s fun.”

His gaze dropped to her lips, and he grinned. “I hope not.”

Livvy felt re-energized, being with Jensen, being outside, and hoped that maybe he was falling for her.

They shot through several rounds of bullets. She improved and almost hit dead center a couple times. Jensen complimented her on her shooting but also her bravery—being willing to take the shot, not flinching, keeping her eye on the target, etc.

She felt brave. With him around, she felt more than brave.

After shooting, they walked back inside and returned the guns to his safe.

“Would you play for me?” he asked as they reentered the empty great room.

“Of course. Any requests?”

They eased to the piano and her heart beat quicker. He wanted her to play for him.

“I love hearing you play Claire de Lune.”

She bit at her bottom lip. She loved the romantic song as well.

Sitting at the piano she started into the piece. Usually when she played she focused on her fingers moving with the piano. She got so wrapped up it was only her and the music that existed. This time she played while staring at Jensen standing where she’d dreamed of seeing him. Right in her view. He stared at her as if enraptured by her and the music.

The song finished. The music lingered in the air. Jensen’s dark gaze was intense.

“Livvy,” he whispered huskily, his voice and gaze a caress. “That was like a dream come true.”

Before she could get him to finish his statement, footsteps pounded up the stairs and predictably Lieutenant Yost walked right up. The woman was an expert at interrupting them.

“Chief?”

Jensen’s bearing stiffened. He smiled at Livvy then walked over to his office to speak to the lieutenant. Livvy played Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Number 14 quietly while she waited.

The lieutenant finally finished talking and Jensen returned to her side. She stood and they walked side by side passed Lieutenant Yost and up the stairs to his master suite.

“Thank you for playing for me,” he said again.

“Anytime.” She waited for him to explain his ‘dream come true’ comment but sadly he didn’t.

She appraised the spacious room. The large windows showcased a breathtaking view filled with green pine trees and red, orange, and yellow deciduous trees.

“This is a beautiful room,” she said.

“Thank you.” He smirked at her. “But I prefer manly.”

“It’s that too.”

Jensen shut the door, and Livvy’s pulse quickened. He wanted to be alone—without the cameras and his people watching. If Lieutenant Yost dared knock on that door Livvy was going to try out some of her self-defense moves.

“What did your Navy SEAL friend teach you about self-defense?”

“He taught me some basic jabs and uppercuts but mostly worked with me to react in different situations and to fight any way I could—use my keys, fingernails, poke them in the eye, throat punch, basically whatever I can do to get away and then run and call for help.”

“Good. You did a great job defending yourself at your house.” Walking toward her, there was a purposeful look in his dark eyes that made her blood feel like liquid fire.

He flipped her away from him and had her pinned against his chest before she realized what had happened. His breath

seemed to come as quick as hers, and the way his breath brushed her cheek made her light-headed.

“All right, Livvy.” Jensen’s words were a tender touch against her cheek. “If a man had you like this, what would you do?”

“Um ...” With her arms pinned, there weren’t a lot of options, but she’d practiced and practiced this. She was a world-famous concert pianist; she knew how to work, and she didn’t mess around.

She stomped on his instep and elbowed him low in the gut. He obviously hadn’t been expecting her to react like that and released her. She elbowed him high, a solid hit to his jaw, and whirled to face him.

Jensen’s eyes were wide. He rubbed at his jaw. “You don’t mess around.”

“Thank you. Sorry if I hit you too hard.” She bit at her lip. Her elbow smarted.

His eyes dropped to her lips, then back to her eyes. He smiled. “Don’t be sorry. I’m impressed. I loved it, actually.” He looked her over as if she was the most impressive person he knew.

She smiled. “You obviously spar a lot. I watched you out my window.”

“I meet Steffan for weights and sparring every morning at a gym near the station.”

“I’m sorry you’re missing your meetings with Prince Steffan.”

“It’s okay. I’m where I need to be. Okay.” He brushed at his hair. “Your reaction was perfect. If I came at you head on, what would you do?” He wrapped her up tight in his strong arms. “Please just tell me if you’re planning to ...” He didn’t finish his statement.

“Oh! I would never knee you, but yes that’s what Cap taught me to do.”



“Perfect,” he said, nodding. “Now, I release you for just a moment after you knee me. What do you do?”

*Get lost in his dark eyes?* No, that wasn’t right. “Punch you in the throat or jab my finger deep into your eye, and run.”

“Great ideas, especially if you didn’t catch him full in the groin, but if you did, he should be incapacitated enough for you to run, get away, and call for help. You did amazing the way you fought Treven and his man.”

“Thank you.”

“You can’t prepare for everything, but the most important thing is to use any weapon you can reach, even if you make yourself throw up on him.”

“Gross.”

“For sure, but if it distracts your attacker and gives you a way to escape, it’s worth it. I guess you could also pretend ... I’ve seen it work in a few cases ... No, sorry. I hate that idea.” His voice trailed off and his gaze dropped to her lips and fastened there.

She eased closer. Her gaze met his and she could see—he wanted to be with her. He’d been denying himself these past few days, and it had been torture for him like it had been for her.

Her heart thumped out of control, and not because of their topic of discussion. “Pretend what?”

He swallowed and shook his head. “Sometimes it’s worked for a woman to pretend they’re interested in a man, get in close, kiss him, and bite his lip or tongue or head butt him, but ... I don’t think you should do that.”

“The thought of me kissing another man bothers you?”

He jolted and released her, stepping back to push his hand through his hair. “Yes, it does,” he admitted.

“Jensen?” She pulled the edge of her lower lip between her teeth.

His gaze dropped to her lips, and he blew out a heavy breath. It was a few seconds before he met her gaze and asked, “Yes?”

She wasn’t sure where to start, how to break through to him and let him know how interested she was. “I know you’ve been extremely busy, but I can’t help but feel that you’re avoiding me.”

He studied her but didn’t speak.

*Brave. Be brave.*

“Is it something I’ve done?” she asked.

“Something you’ve done? Ah, Livvy.” Jensen stepped back in, his strong chest brushing hers. “Livvy, no. I’m trying to keep my distance.”

“Why?”

“I have been for years, wanting to be professional, but with Treven escaping, catching him has to be my focus. Since you’ve been here, it’s become evident to me that you consume me, Livvy. When you’re close, you’re all I can think about.”

Her heart threatened to race out of control at those beautiful words. “You’re all I think about when you’re close, and when we’re apart.”

“I’m the same, but Livvy... I can’t be consumed with you and get distracted. Did I distract you when you took that first shot outside?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“I have to catch Treven and Naomi. I have to keep you safe. Keeping an emotional distance isn’t some arbitrary rule in my line of work. It keeps people alive. Do you understand why I have to keep my distance so I don’t make a mistake?”

“But for the second shot, you steadied me with your arms around me. How can I steady you?”

His eyebrows rose, and he lifted his hands. “Pray for me, Livvy, and tell me I have a chance to date you after this is all over.”

Her heart pounded as hope filled her. “You have more than a chance. I don’t want to distract you, Jensen. I just needed to know if you cared.”

He let out a breath of disbelief and wrapped her up tight in his beautiful arms. “I apologize if I left you thinking I didn’t care. You’re all I want to care about, all I want to focus on. Which means I need to keep my head on straight so you can be safe and free from Treven. Free to decide what you want to do, who you want to date.” He winced slightly, as if he didn’t like the thought of her dating anyone else. She knew the feeling. “I want you free to have the life you deserve, performing, traveling, whatever you want, Livvy. That’s what I want for you.”

“You,” she said fiercely, sliding her arms around his neck and pulling his head down toward hers. “I’ve performed and traveled and I loved it, but you are all I want, Jensen. I want to date you, play the piano for you, kiss you, be with you nonstop.”

He grinned, and it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen, prettier than any view outside his windows. “Sadly, I can’t take you on fabulous dates yet. I can’t be with you nonstop until Treven is behind bars again and unable to threaten you, but I love hearing you play the piano and I think I could spare a few minutes to kiss you.”

“Only a few minutes?” She pulled the side of her bottom lip between her teeth.

Jensen let out a husky groan and held her so tight she could hardly breathe. She loved it. “Okay, more than a few.”

Then he kissed her. The music started in her head, and she floated in Jensen’s arms. Their lips melded together like nobody could ever pull them apart. She knew all too soon his phone would ring or Lieutenant Yost would rap on the door, but at the moment she was focused right where she wanted to be. Jensen cared for her. He wanted her, and his kiss promised joy and safety she’d never thought possible.

Jensen was the right man for her.

He even made her believe that someday she'd be free of Treven.

Livvy still didn't know if that was possible, but her and Jensen... They were more than possible. They were meant to be.

## CHAPTER

## *Fifteen*

**JENSEN HADN'T LIED** that Livvy consumed him. He was so caught up in her and her mind-altering kisses that he barely felt his phone buzzing against his hip. He'd turned off the ringer but couldn't in good conscience put it on silent like he wanted to when he was with her. He'd had an uninterrupted hour and a half with Livvy. It wasn't near enough, but it had been incredible. She'd played the piano for him, kissed him, impressed him with her shooting and fighting skills, and as always completely captivated him. He felt rejuvenated and ready to take down Treven.

He had to force himself to release her from the kiss and check his phone. Lieutenant Yost. The lieutenant was bugging him. Maybe he should replace her on this detail. She'd had no good excuse the first night here when she'd called Ray and then been waiting outside Livvy's door to bang on it besides 'they needed the general and the military's help.' She obviously was bothered by Livvy and treated her coldly. It was annoying, along with the lingering looks she kept giving Jensen.

Maybe he shouldn't be kissing Livvy right now like the sun might not come up tomorrow, but he'd exercised great restraint the past few days, especially when he'd heard her playing the piano. All he wanted was to listen for hours and then kiss her even longer.

He was keeping up with all of his work and doing everything extra he could think of to find Treven and Naomi. In the safe space of his bedroom, he had every right to kiss this

mesmerizing and inspiring woman and admit he cared for her. Livvy was so great to wait until she was safe to date and pursue a relationship. He imagined most women wouldn't like being put off. She was rational, smart, and she consumed him.

He rested his forehead against hers. "I've exceeded my time-off limits for the day."

"That stinks. But I appreciate you taking time off to be with me."

"Same plan tomorrow afternoon? Shooting, fighting, piano playing, and kissing?" His phone finally stopped buzzing. "I'll brainstorm for something more to teach you. You're already so proficient at self-defense it's incredible." His voice dropped low and husky. "You're an expert at the piano and kissing."

She trembled in his arms, and her dark eyes lit with warmth and promise. A promise of forever. Could this really happen for him? Sadly, he had to know Treven was secure in prison before they could pursue a relationship. Capturing Treven was a quest he couldn't fail on.

"I'll be here," she said.

"Perfect." He stole one more lingering kiss as his phone started buzzing again. "I have to go."

"Don't forget about me," she whispered against his lips.

"Not possible." He yanked himself away, stared at her beautiful face as if to memorize it, which was silly as he could conjure her face anytime, even when he tried to push visions of her away so he could focus on work.

Forcing himself to walk out his bedroom door was torturous. Back to work, back to finding Treven and Naomi. He could do this. Finish this. Then he could date Livvy properly.

Someday soon. Why did it feel like someday would never come?

He strode down the stairs where Lieutenant Yost was waiting. She gave him a once over as if she could tell he'd

been kissing Livvy desperately and said, “Did you see the email from Sutton Smith?”

“No. I was ... busy,” he finished lamely. It was none of her business and he would not let her bother him.

The look in Lieutenant Yost’s eyes said she knew exactly what had distracted him and she hated it very, very much. Luckily she said nothing because Jensen might have retorted in a manner that didn’t fit his cool persona of an in-control and accomplished chief of police. Being only thirty and bending the law six years ago—and again this summer to save Hattie Ballard, thanks to Treven and William—he’d always felt like he had to prove himself and be above reproach in all other areas of his professional life.

Right now, he wanted to be with Livvy. He’d walked away from her. He could take a little personal time without feeling heaps of guilt. Yet he’d missed something, an important email from Sutton.

He strode to his office. Lieutenant Yost followed him. Great.

Tapping on his computer, he was glad it was in the standup position. He didn’t want to sit right now; he was too keyed up, and he didn’t want to look up at Lieutenant Yost for any reason. After he saw what Sutton Smith had sent, and anything else he may have missed in the past hour and a half, he’d talk to his deputy chief about who was competent and skilled enough to replace Lieutenant Yost on this job.

The computer lit up, and he clicked on his email. Scanning through it, he found Sutton’s email had been sent minutes ago. He clicked on it, feeling a lot less guilty. It hadn’t been sitting here for an hour and a half. It was a forward to him and Ray from one of Sutton’s men in Belize. A picture of none other than Naomi and Treven Rindlesbacher relaxing in beach chairs. His pulse raced. Finally!

Where were they? Could he fly there right now? Jensen wanted to be the one to take down Treven more than he wanted anything in this world.

No. He wanted Livvy more, and he had to keep her safe. Even when he'd been in prison, Treven had proven to have an abundance of lackeys willing to do his dirty work. Jensen was torn. He'd sworn to himself he wouldn't leave Livvy's side, but to capture Treven, see defeat in the man's eyes, and finally put that chapter of his life behind him was overwhelming.

He focused on Sutton's note.

*One of my ops has been searching the private islands near Belize for a mafia lord who has eluded us for years. His surveillance cameras took this picture yesterday. As he was studying the footage this morning, he was pretty certain this is the mother and son you're looking for.*

*I have men who could move in, but I understand if you want to send your own team.*

*Best,*

*Sutton*

"Do you want to send a team?" Lieutenant Yost asked.

"I do, but I'll have Sutton's men secure the area and move in if Naomi or Treven try to leave. I'll call Ray right now. Thanks."

He hoped she'd leave, but her eyes burned a hole in his back. "I understand if you want to go personally. My men and I can watch over Miss Moser while you're gone."

Jensen turned to look at her. She obviously didn't like Livvy. Were her intentions pure? She'd been a diligent officer with the military and his police force, fighting to succeed and prove herself in a man's world. He'd tried to champion and support her in her dreams, but something felt off right now.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll remember that as we discuss plans."

She smiled. "This is a great breakthrough."

"It is." He smiled back. It *was* a great breakthrough. Finally. But then something hit him. "How did you know Sutton emailed me? It only came through a couple minutes ago, and you weren't CC'd on it."



She blinked, and he saw a flash of guilt in her eyes. “I was looking for you and walked into your office. The alert flashed on your screen, and I knew you’d want to know about it.”

Was the flash of guilt because she’d come into his office without him in here, or because she’d interrupted him and Livvy yet again? Lieutenant Yost was diligent, smart, and hard-working, but he would reassign her. He was convinced she was jealous of Livvy. That jealousy could cloud her attention to detail just as Jensen being too consumed with Livvy could. It was also getting old feeling awkward and trying to avoid Lieutenant Yost and her longing looks at him and angry looks at Livvy. This was his home, and Livvy had done nothing to deserve this woman’s spitefulness.

“I see. Thank you, Lieutenant Yost. I’ll let you know what I need.”

“Thank you, sir.” She spun and strode out.

Jensen’s mind was full right now. Livvy was at the top, as she’d been for a while now, but the awkwardness with Lieutenant Yost, this breakthrough of locating Naomi and Treven, and who he and Ray could trust to capture those two was all stewing up there as well.

He had to go. This was the closure he needed after all the evil Treven and Naomi had committed against him and his countrymen. Without Treven murdering Jane Presley six years ago, Jensen would’ve never had to compromise his ideals. Without Treven targeting Livvy, maybe he and Livvy would’ve been married and creating a family already. He hated Treven and prayed that wasn’t clouding his thinking.

Ray could help him see this clearly.

Jensen pulled out his phone and called his friend. It would be a busy afternoon and evening. With any luck, they’d have a task force, headed by him and Ray, on its way to a Belize island soon, and the Rindlesbachers’ reign of terror would finally be over.

“Ray,” he said when the phone connected. “Did you see the email? I’m just letting Sutton know to have his team secure

the area and not let them escape, but I want to go.”

“Yes, sir,” Ray’s voice was uncharacteristically excited. “I was grabbing my phone to call you. I’m not missing this one either, but good call on having Sutton’s men move in.”

Jensen wanted in. Oh, how he wanted to see Treven’s face when they captured him. Could he leave Livvy?

“I feel torn,” he admitted. “I promised myself I wouldn’t leave Livvy.”

“Really?” Ray paused.

Jensen peered out his large window at the forest surrounding his home as he waited for his best friend to come to the same conclusion Jensen had.

“You fell for her?”

“I’ve been falling for a long time. She finally caught me.”

“I could go my entire life without hearing you say something that sappy again,” Ray said gruffly.

Jensen only laughed. He’d do anything for Livvy, even talk sappy to his too-serious best friend. Would he miss out on the op to bring down Treven and Naomi? He pushed that away. Livvy would want him to go. She wanted this nightmare over too.

“About time you figured it out,” Ray said gruffly. “Macey and Sophie have been pestering me to convince you Livvy is the ‘woman of your dreams’.” Ray made his voice higher pitched, which made Jensen smile.

“They’re right.”

“Good for you. All right; let’s make a plan.”

Typical Ray not to expound on anything to do with emotions or personal stuff. Luckily, Macey was head over heels for the general and drew him out in ways nobody had ever seen before.

He and Ray worked out a plan and then he went to inform his men and Lieutenant Yost.

“General Ray, Major Chad, Captain Levi Favor, and Lieutenant Mason Henson are all flying with me on Prince Malik’s jet to Belize. Sutton Smith has ops in the area who will stake out and monitor the island—make sure Naomi and Treven don’t leave, see how many men they have with them, get the layout of the island and all the buildings, and move in if they try to escape. Sutton will also have a helicopter waiting at the Belize airport for us.”

They all nodded their understanding.

“I’m trusting you all to keep Livvy safe while I’m gone.”

Lieutenant Yost’s eyes flashed, but she said nothing.

“This is the culmination of many hours and a lot of stress and pain for the royal family.” *And many others*, he added silently. “Capturing Treven and Naomi Rindlesbacher is our top priority, but I can’t tell you what it means to know you’re all here watching out for Livvy.”

“Of course,” Val said.

“You can count on us,” Lieutenant Yost reaffirmed.

“Thank you.” He shook each of their hands, ignoring the way Lieutenant Yost clung to his, and then went to find Livvy. Climbing the stairs, he was hit with a wave of exhaustion. He hadn’t been sleeping well, and all the stress had been weighing heavily on him.

He paused at the top of the stairs. Her door was closed. Should he knock? Was she resting or reading? He imagined she was bored without her usual schedule and demands, her students and her family. He loved hearing her play the piano for hours and could easily envision her staying in his house and his life indefinitely.

Her door opened, and Jensen’s exhaustion vanished. She was wearing a gray knit dress that molded beautifully to her curves, but it was the light in her deep-brown eyes and the warmth in her smile that captured him completely.

“I thought I heard footsteps,” she said, easing out of the doorframe.

“I didn’t want to wake you if you were resting.”

“I was reading another spy novel. You really need to invest in some romance books.”

He grinned. “I’m invested in you.”

She laughed, her eyes sparkling. “Truthfully, I was just waiting around hoping to catch an extra glimpse of you.” She pulled the side of her bottom lip between her teeth.

Her words and that enticing move were too much. Jensen had her pinned against the wall and was devouring her mouth before either of them took another breath.

Livvy responded wholeheartedly. She matched him kiss for kiss, arching up into him and filling him with visions of their future together. Here. In his house. Would she marry him? Fill up the nursery and then all those bedrooms downstairs with dark-eyed, dark-haired children who could play the piano as well as they shot a gun?

That thought filled him with warmth and had him kissing her as if the world was about to end.

The kisses gradually slowed in intensity, but only because oxygen was a necessity. He rested his forehead against hers. Consumed wasn’t a strong enough word for what she did to him.

“You know how, as the police chief, you have to be all commanding and inspiring and in charge?” she whispered.

“Yeah.” Is that how she saw him? He hoped she also saw how soft and at her command he could be.

“That was the most inspiring move I’ve ever seen.”

He grinned. “You liked me pinning you to the wall and kissing you?”

“Oh yeah. I liked that very, very much, Mr. Police Chief.”

“So you won’t complain if I repeat it?”

“No, sir.”

She ducked out of his arm and to the entrance to her bedroom.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Getting in my spot. So you can do it again.”

He laughed. She was irresistible.

He had to go. If only he could tell her the entire plan, but he wouldn't put it past Lieutenant Yost to be listening in.

He'd focus on kissing Livvy, and soon he'd be back to kiss her a lot more—and to plan their future.

“Okay.” He stepped back in front of her. “You have to do that enticing move where you bite your bottom lip.”

“Oh, you like that?”

“I love it,” he said in a husky voice full of desire for her.

She grinned, then she did her lip-biting move.

Jensen wrapped his arms around her waist, pinned her to the nearby wall, and pressed his lips to hers. She giggled against his mouth but quickly focused on kissing him back.

Oh, did she kiss him back.

Treven and Naomi would be captured soon, and then Jensen would take some time off. If Livvy was game, he wanted to date her properly, talk for hours, listen to her play the piano for hours, and kiss for longer than that.

Hopefully the future he envisioned for them would make up for walking away from her tonight.

Nothing had ever been so difficult.

## CHAPTER

## *Sixteen*

**LIVVY HAD NEVER TAKEN** drugs in her life, but the high she experienced kissing Jensen had to be much better than the euphoria any kind of drug could produce.

Jensen released her from the kiss but stayed so close his lips brushed hers as he said, “I hate that I have to go.”

“Back to work?” She nodded. “Maybe tonight you’ll have a few minutes ...”

“I’m flying to an island near Belize to capture Treven and Naomi.”

“Oh.” Disappointment that he was leaving her, relief that they’d found Treven and Naomi, and outright terror that he’d be hurt by that monster Treven collided inside her. She had no idea what to say.

Jensen straightened and stared down at her. His expression was concerned and guarded. He waited a few beats, either for something more out of her or for her to process the information, before he continued, “You’ll be safe here. Everyone is on high alert. None of Treven’s friends could possibly get through my security or my people. If they even know you’re here.”

“I’m not worried about me,” she said. “I’m worried about you. Treven and Naomi won’t be taken without a fight.”

“Ah, Livvy.” His smile was teasing. “You’re worried about your man?”

“Don’t you mock me,” she said, though him calling himself her man shot a thrill of happiness through her. “They are vile and smart and underhanded.”

He cradled her close. She didn’t resist. He was impossible for her to resist.

“Good thing I’m smarter and can fight and shoot better than them.” He tenderly kissed her. “Don’t worry. Ray and I have a great plan, and I’ll be back soon. You should just spend all your time missing me.”

“Since I have nothing else to do,” she tried to tease.

Livvy would miss him. She would miss him desperately, and not because she had very little to occupy her time right now. She didn’t want to be needy, but she felt a desperation to have him close. She needed him.

He chuckled. “Soon that will change. Treven and Naomi will be locked in the most secure cells we’ve got. I might even build a special hole for them.” His dark eyes were determined. “And then you will be free, Livvy. They’ll never threaten you again.”

That was all she’d wanted a week ago, but now he was all she wanted.

“I’ve got to go.” He kissed her one more time, then pulled away and jogged down the stairs.

Livvy watched him go. Then she walked back into her bedroom and watched from the window as he pulled away in his sport utility. He hadn’t even said how long he’d be gone.

She lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Hot tears pricked at her eyes and ran down her cheeks, wetting her hair. She dashed them away. What was wrong with her? Jensen was invested in her. He’d said that. The way he kissed her, the way he looked at her ... she couldn’t doubt his feelings. Why was she being a wimp about him leaving to do exactly what he needed to do? Putting Treven and Naomi away would provide the closure they both needed.

It made no sense, but she had the most awful feeling. Like he’d chosen his obsession with capturing Treven over her.

Like she would never see him again.

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Livvy forced herself to roll off the bed and onto her knees and beg heaven above to keep Jensen and all those going after Treven and Naomi safe. She felt some reassurance, but she couldn't stay on her knees all day. She had to do something to fill her time. She played the piano for an hour and then she started cleaning and didn't stop until she'd dusted, vacuumed, mopped, scoured sinks and countertops, and scrubbed all the bathrooms. Jensen had told her he usually had his house professionally cleaned, but he'd had them skip this week to keep her location secure.

Lieutenant Yost gave her a few strange looks every time Livvy passed her. The men all thanked her. Officer Val teased her about keeping busy because she missed the chief. She only laughed that he had guessed exactly what she was doing.

Then she started cooking. She cooked and baked up a storm, making a fine mess in the kitchen and having to clean it all over again after everyone ate.

She took a long bath, read for a while, and finally thought she might sleep. She prayed almost nonstop that Jensen and everyone with him were safe.

Treven and Naomi would be captured soon. That would be amazing news. The best. Then she and Jensen could finally start dating and hopefully plan a life together.

Closing her eyes tight, she prayed for sleep.

It seemed only a few seconds later that something pulled her back to consciousness. She'd finally fallen asleep and didn't want to open her eyes.

Had her door just opened and closed?

Soft footsteps approached her bed. Livvy blinked her eyes open, but it was so dark she couldn't see a thing.



Suddenly, a cloth was pressed tight over her mouth while several pairs of hands pinned her legs, arms, and head to the bed.

Livvy tried to scream, but hardly any noise got through the cloth. She tried to target specific eye sockets or an accessible throat to punch, but there were too many people pressing down on her. She could barely wiggle her toes.

The cloth smelled like a strong but somehow sweet antiseptic.

It seemed inconceivable with the level of security Jensen had and his people watching over her, but she knew ... Someone was drugging and kidnapping her.

She fought with everything in her, but it had no effect.

*Please help me*, she pleaded with heaven above.

She had a strong impression to stop moving.

What? That was insane. If she stopped fighting, they'd knock her out with chloroform, or whatever this was, and she'd never see Jensen again.

Tears pricked at her eyelids as she struggled mightily.

The impression came again, and she realized it could work. She'd heard somewhere it took chloroform five minutes to take effect. She could pretend she was passed out and they might remove the cloth before she was unconscious. As they carried her out of the house, she could scream for one of Jensen's men or Lieutenant Yost.

Unless these people had killed them all.

No. She couldn't think like that.

Livvy pretended to fight more feebly and then she slumped, rolling her head to the side to displace the cloth as she pretended she was unconscious. The cloth slid to the side a few inches, but part of it was still over her mouth and nose.

"Is she out?" a male voice said in the dark.

"Already?" A female voice.

“She’s pretty small. It might take effect quicker.”

The cloth lifted and Livvy took slow, even breaths, both to convince them she was asleep and to get some clean oxygen in and clear the drug from her system quicker.

The hands softened on her, and then somebody grabbed the skin on the side of her neck and twisted.

Livvy almost screamed, but heaven’s angels must’ve been working overtime. She was able to keep taking in slow, even breaths and get through the pain without reacting.

“I think she’s really gone,” the female said.

Was that Lieutenant Yost’s voice? It seemed unfathomable that the woman who appeared so interested in Jensen would betray him, but it also made sense. To get into Jensen’s fortress, they’d need help from the inside.

“Let’s go, then,” a man’s voice said. It was eerily familiar.

Treven.

No! He was here. He had gotten to her again and Jensen was somewhere across the ocean.

Treven would always win. There was no way to stop him.

“The chief’s never going to forgive himself when he returns empty-handed and finds out I not only outsmarted him again but I have his woman. My woman now.” Treven stroked his fingers down her cheek and along her neck.

Cold chills covered Livvy’s body. His touch was worse than a hundred spiders crawling on her bare flesh. The pain of someone pinching her wasn’t even close to the agony of knowing that Treven Rindlesbacher was inches away, that he’d come for her like he’d always promised he would.

*Jensen!* she cried out in her mind.

He’d been tricked. They all had. Treven wasn’t on that island. He was right here in Jensen’s house, and Jensen was a thousand miles away. Would anybody help her, or had they all been killed or knocked out?

Her life was over. She'd never escape from Treven and Jensen would never know how deeply she loved him.

## CHAPTER

## *Seventeen*

LIVVY PRAYED DESPERATELY in her head. She had to wait until the perfect moment to fight, to escape. Maybe when they went outside? She could run for the forest. She didn't know how to fight off multiple people, but she'd fight and use every bit of strength to escape.

Hands wrapped around her legs and under her armpits. She was swung off the bed and carried through the house. It was hard not to stiffen or struggle. She stayed limp and let her head loll to the side.

Even through her closed eyelids, she could see it was still pitch black. Did they all have infrared goggles on?

They carried her down the stairs. Her heart raced out of control, and she prayed they couldn't tell. She kept trying to breathe as if she were unconscious—in and out, in and out.

The lights flicked on and penetrated her closed eyelids. She wanted to open them but kept feeling like she had to keep them closed.

The people surrounding her cursed, and she let herself peek. They all were flicking goggles off their heads and yanking out their guns. Sure enough, Treven and Lieutenant Yost were on either side of her while Officer Danson and another man she didn't recognize carried her.

The sound of multiple guns cocking made her heart crash against her rib cage. She couldn't see past the group surrounding her and closed her eyes again so they wouldn't know she was awake yet.

“You know how some people learn from their mistakes, Rindlesbacher?”

Livvy almost jumped out of her skin.

Jensen!

Jensen was here? Jensen was here! She wanted to break free and go kiss him. He hadn't left. He'd stayed. Or had he come back? It didn't matter. He was here, and somehow he'd rescue her from Treven.

“No. Tell me what mistakes you've made, Chief.” Treven's voice was mocking, but there was a slight tremor in it. He hadn't planned on Jensen returning.

Could she fight her way free now?

*Steady*, she heard in her head.

“I underestimated you before, but never again. This time I listened to my heart, trusted in heaven above, and now you'll finally be locked in a deep, dark cell for the rest of your life,” Jensen said.

“Give her to me,” Treven demanded. He ripped Livvy from the people who were holding her and held her in front of him, pressing a pistol to her temple. Livvy let her body sag and kept her eyes shut. Treven struggled to hold her up.

“I'm not going back to prison,” Treven yelled. “I'm the one who's got Livvy, and I'm the one who's going to kill her if you don't set down your weapons. I know all about how desperately you love the woman I'm going to possess.”

Livvy had to fight not to shudder as cold chills raced through her body.

“Calm down,” Jensen said. “Nobody needs to get hurt.”

Livvy had to act. Before Jensen and whoever was on his side set their weapons down and Treven's people killed them. Treven had no qualms about killing anyone.

She prayed she was making the right move. Her eyes popped open, and she saw Jensen's handsome face twisted in

agony as he held his pistol up as if he were going to set it down.

“Wait,” Lieutenant Yost said. “Treven, she’s—”

“What?” Treven roared, but he had relaxed his grip just enough.

She ducked away from Treven’s pistol and elbowed him viciously in the gut. He grunted in surprise. She pivoted and then grabbed onto his arms and kned him with all the anger, fear, and frustration he’d created in her life. Her knee sank into parts that were soft and ... gross. She didn’t even want to think about it.

Treven screamed in agony and doubled over, but he held on to his pistol. It was aimed directly at her head.

A gun discharged.

Livvy cried out and dropped to the floor, her ears ringing and her body trembling.

Treven fell onto her, knocking her flat.

More shots rang out, and Livvy felt like she was inside a steel drum with a dozen drummers doing their thing. Among the gunshots, she heard and felt bodies hitting the floor.

All she wanted to do was scream and get away from Treven, but instead she prayed and prayed. She could hardly catch a breath with Treven’s weight on top of her and warm liquid oozing onto her back. Having her nightmare this close terrified her, but she relied on heaven above. The smartest thing she could do right now was remain still. Steady.

Then Treven was flung off her. Livvy blinked, looking up into the dark gaze of the most enticing man on the planet.

“Jensen!” She finally moved, scrambling to her feet as Jensen wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up. She swayed, suddenly dizzy and nauseated.

“She can’t have you,” Lieutenant Yost screamed, restrained by one of the police officers. “I’m supposed to be with you, Jensen!”

“Get her out of here,” Jensen told his man.

“Yes, sir.”

The guy dragged Lieutenant Yost out of the house, screaming about ‘the plan’ and how she was supposed to be with Jensen.

Jensen ignored her ranting and gathered Livvy close. “Are you all right?”

“You’re here!” She pressed into him and found his mouth. She didn’t even care that there were voices around them talking and laughing. Somebody even gave a wolf whistle.

Jensen pulled back first, staring deeply into her eyes. “How are you awake? Didn’t they knock you out?”

“I prayed so hard and felt like I should pretend to faint so they stopped with the chloroform.” She looked around. Everything was a bit fuzzy and her head hurt, but it was a million times better than it could’ve been.

“That was brilliant.” Jensen held her up, so at least she didn’t need to worry about the dizziness in her head.

“I kept praying and didn’t move or react until I felt like I should.”

“You are unreal.” Jensen kissed her again, but it was far too quick.

Lights pulled into the driveway out front. Lots of lights.

“Oh, no! Who’s that?”

Jensen smiled. “More of my men. I knew something was off, so I prayed hard and Ray and I made a plan for me to double back. I’ve been watching and waiting from the woods with Sergeant Laramie and a few trusted men. When Treven and his men infiltrated the property, we called for backup and came to rescue you, but you rescued yourself.”

She shook her head. Still so cloudy. “God rescued me, and so did you.” She kissed him again.

Many footsteps came up onto the porch and into the living room.

“Chief, I hate to interrupt, but what are your instructions?”

Jensen grinned at her and said, “Clean this refuse out of my house so I can kiss Livvy in peace.”

The man laughed.

Livvy loved that plan.



## CHAPTER

## *Eighteen*

**JENSEN COULD NOT BELIEVE** the nightmare was over. Treven was dead. He'd shot him to protect Livvy from being shot. It was closure, but he found having Livvy close was much more important. He would've rather had Treven escape again than see him almost shoot Livvy. Thank heavens she'd been protected.

The adrenaline was settling, and his men had done exactly what he'd asked and cleared the refuse out of his house.

He and Livvy walked into his office hand in hand. He didn't want to be out in the main room with blood spots he still needed to clean up and the memory of Treven holding Livvy against him with a gun to her head. He needed to replace that image in his brain, and fast.

Sinking into his office chair, he tugged Livvy onto his lap. She came willingly, cuddling into him and giving him a lingering kiss.

"Ah, that helps so much," he said.

She smiled. "How did you know to come back?"

All Jensen wanted to do was kiss her, but he understood she needed answers. He relaxed against the large leather chair, cradling her against him.

"I knew something was off with Lieutenant Yost. I trusted heaven and my gut instinct not to leave you." He stared into her dark eyes. "Even if I'd been wrong and they would've

arrested Treven and Naomi on that island, you are more important than me going on that op.”

Livvy’s eyes lit up. “You never even got on the plane?”

“No. Being here for you is my top priority.”

“Ah, Jensen. I wouldn’t have been upset at you for going. I know you needed that closure with Treven. But knowing that you stayed for me and protected me...” Her eyes got bright, and she kissed him. Her kiss was filled with an adoration, gratitude, and love.

She pulled back, and he just wanted to keep on kissing her.

“So Ray went without you?” she prompted.

“Yes. Ray and I planned that from the start. Sergeant Laramie met me with gear and some men. We staked out the property, watched my cameras on my phone, and waited.” He shook his head. “It was torture. What if Lieutenant Yost hurt you? What if she killed one of my men? We didn’t dare contact any of them, not knowing who was loyal and who might betray us. What if I was wrong and we sat in the cold all night when I could be inside holding you?” He winked at her.

“I was praying so hard,” she said. “I feel like we were both inspired.”

“For sure. Then the power cut and we lost our visual just as a large sprinter van approached. They went through the gates, and we followed them. We found Frank knocked out and tied up outside. When we infiltrated the house, we found Val knocked out and tied up in his bedroom. Danson had been bought off by Treven as well. As you can tell, Lieutenant Yost was motivated by money and her jealousy, thinking we should be together.”

“Gross.” Livvy wrinkled her nose. “That’s just wrong.”

“I agree.” He wanted to kiss her all over again.

“So Treven was never on that island?”

“I think he and Naomi were, but the image was a day and a half ago and we think it was all a clever ploy. Lieutenant Yost must’ve been giddy this afternoon when she thought she could

get me out of here, kidnap you, and blame it all on Treven. She thought she could take his money and get her competition—you—out of the way.”

“Is everyone else going after Naomi still?”

He shook his head. “Ray, Malik, and Chad are on their way back now. Sutton’s men infiltrated the island and searched with boots on the ground, but they couldn’t see Naomi or Treven. They confronted the manager of the resort. The man confirmed Treven and Naomi had been there, but they left yesterday morning.”

“So Naomi’s still at large?”

“Yeah.” That needled at him. “That’s the only unhappy news. She’ll be a lot less effective without William and Treven but there are still people loyal to her. We’ve got everyone looking for her. Warden Geary also discovered that Officers Bradford and Palmer had gone into the records at the prison and changed the photo and the fingerprints so the doppelgänger just slid right in when Treven was supposed to return to prison after he tried to kidnap Princess Ellery. The guy still isn’t talking, but Bradford and Palmer both want an easy sentence, so they confessed to taking cash to help Treven. It makes sense too that William and Naomi wouldn’t have risked Treven kidnapping Ellery. Still not sure if they had that guy undergo plastic surgery or if they found someone who looked that similar to Treven.”

“So crazy the lengths those people would go to put Treven on the throne.”

“Crazy is right. Treven made huge promises to people about positions of power. Apparently Bradford was supposed to be the next chief of police.” He scowled.

She smiled, and he laughed. Finally, she was in his arms and Treven was no longer a factor. The nightmare was behind them. Closure felt good. Holding Livvy felt a million times better.

He didn’t want to say it, but he felt he had to. “Livvy, you’re finally free. You can go perform around the world again

if you want.” Did he have to say he’d let her go? Probably. “I don’t want to hold you back.”

“Stop.” She put a finger to his lips. “I told you earlier.” She arched up close to him. “You’re all I want, Jensen.” She paused to let those words sink in. His heartbeat was quick and hard. He’d thought he might experience a letdown after Treven was captured and that huge focus of his life was complete, but there was no letdown with Livvy in his arms. He was soaring.

“I’ve performed around the world, and I enjoyed it. I will start taking performances again, but not as often. You can come with me as my protection.”

“That’s a fabulous idea. I have all that vacation time I never take.”

“I also want to do many private performances.” She blinked up at him, enticing and beautiful. “For you.”

“I’d love nothing more.” Jensen’s heart raced. “I do have to admit something to you.”

“What’s that?” She smiled, inviting him to share all his secrets.

“I bought that baby grand piano just hoping you’d play it for me someday.”

“Jensen!” She kissed him and he felt lit up all the way through. They took their time kissing and then she whispered against his lips, “I feel my place is here in Augustine with my family, and with you.” She suddenly looked shy. “If that’s what you want.”

“What I want?” He grinned. “Livvy, you’ve just made every dream I’ve ever had come true.” He kissed her, savoring the connection. That connection would grow with each shared experience. If he had his way, they’d rush ahead to marriage and fill his house with love, laughter, music, and a bunch of children. He’d take it slow for her. He’d do anything for her.

“Livvy ...” He studied her. “Would you go out to dinner with me tomorrow night?”

“I’d love to.”

“Livvy ... Would you go on a hike with me tomorrow morning?”

“I’d love to.”

“Livvy ... Would you spend any spare minute with me from now until you need some space?” He would have to readjust his work schedule and delegate more. Sheryl would be thrilled.

Livvy grinned and arched up toward him. “I’ll never need space from you,” she whispered against his lips.

He returned her kiss, grinning and planning all manner of dates and things he’d always dreamed of doing with her. A personal concert was at the top of the list. They were already doing the best thing.

Tonight, they would kiss the night away. Tomorrow would be soon enough to start his plans. Plans that included Livvy. She was the only essential for him.

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Thank you for reading Jensen and Livvy’s story. I hope you loved it. Please read on for an unedited excerpt of the charming Major Chad Prescott and the secret love of his life, Hope Radisson.

Hugs and thanks for all the support,

Cami

**Sweet Royal Romance Suspense**

*The General Prince and the Nerd*

*The Brave Prince and the Teacher*

*The Doctor Prince and the Outsider*

*The Ninja Prince and the Investigator*

*The Charming Prince and the Single Mum*

*The Crown Prince and the Traitor*

*The Police Chief and the Musician*

*The Royal Major and the Personal Trainer*

*The Grieving King and the Emissary*

# *The Royal Major and the Personal Trainer ~*

## *1st Chapter*

### Chapter One

Hope Radisson stood on the patio of her Wengen, Switzerland home high in the Swiss Alps overlooking the unreal view of the Lauterbrunnen Valley, the valley of seventy-two waterfalls, arguably the real home of the Hobbit.

A stiff, chilly wind bit at her cheeks but she didn't mind. This was her favorite spot on earth and even more so because sometimes the charming Major Chad Prescott of Augustine flew over for a visit when he somehow learned she was here. She suspected her younger sister Faith. It was more than suspect. Faith had probably texted him this morning as the two sisters got settled in for a week of hiking, exploring, and relaxing. A welcome break from their demanding work load. Chad was a very welcome break from her demanding life.

As if her thoughts had conjured him, she heard the unmistakable sound of helicopter rotors. Was it him? Her stomach did a flip flop of anticipation, even as she told herself to calm down. Chad was a flirt to the millionth degree and he had no clue that she was completely smitten by him. At least she hoped she'd hidden that truth after he broke her heart several years ago.

She was an ultra-successful American businesswoman and she didn't need a charming, foreign boyfriend. She and her two sisters had created Lady Fit together after their mom had ditched them when their dad had cheated on her one too many times. Their dad only stayed long enough to make certain

then-sixteen-year old Grace could take care of her younger sisters and knew how to access the bank account.

She and Faith now had stores and fitness centers in most major cities throughout America, but their online business was even more profitable. Hope could have her pick of dates with athletes, entertainers, politicians, or billionaires, but she was too busy and nobody but Chad appealed to her. With Grace in heaven and Faith being the creative mind behind the business, Hope had to take care of all the other aspects.

Why she only felt that special zing with Chad was beyond her. He'd never settle down. His philandering ways were lauded throughout Europe. She'd felt the sting of his inability to focus on one woman as sharp as a scorpion's sting.

The only woman she'd ever observed him to be serious about in the three years Hope had known him was the accomplished chef and single mom Sophie Pederson. He'd dated the lady for months before Sophie revealed her lifelong dedication to Prince Malik August. Had Sophie broken Chad's heart? Hope didn't know if that was possible. Chad had a generous and giving heart, but Hope suspected he was too much of a playboy to let his heart get deeply invested in any one woman.

The military helicopter settled onto the pad next to her garage. She and her sister paid someone in Bern to fly them from the airport when they arrived in Switzerland. They could afford a helicopter or jet of their own, but a charter was simpler and why not leave that pad space open for Chad?

She smiled and bit at her lip to tamp down her excitement, focusing on the fall beauty spread out below her—greens, reds, oranges, and yellows decorated the valley and the mountainside while waterfalls danced amongst the trees.

The rotors shut off and still she forced herself to wait and not run to greet him like an overanxious pup. She didn't even turn and she was very proud of her self control. Not that she could see the helipad from this angle as it was past the garage.

Hope also reminded herself she was busy and happy. She did not need a man in her fulfilling and too-demanding life.



Especially a man who would flirt with her, make her believe the sun rose and set on her face, but never be serious about a relationship.

She was also recovering from the vicious murder of her sister Grace by the foul David Zeus III last year. Thankfully the famous basketball player Hayden ‘the Beast’ Warren and the infamous Sutton Smith had killed Zeus while rescuing the supermodel Eva Canterbury from Zeus’s demented plans. It was still hard to forgive and not let anger canker her soul. With a name like Hope she’d tried to be filled with that virtue. If only she could ‘hope’ for a future with Major Chad Prescott.

She heard the man door around the side of the garage beep open. He knew their security codes. He’d walk through the garage and then into the house. Her excitement mounted and she clung to the railing to hide the trembling in her hands.

The patio door opened behind her moments later. Her sister Faith had told Chad where she was. Faith knew Hope was determined to only be friends with Chad, but only Grace knew what Chad had done to her. Faith cussed her often for her reluctance with Chad and begged her at regular intervals to give the ‘charming stud’ another chance. Hope couldn’t do it. She’d never end up like her parents.

“Now if that isn’t the most beautiful view in the world,” his smooth, deep, ultra-appealing voice washed over her like silk brushing her skin.

Hope finally let herself look back at him. Her breath rushed out and tingles covered her body. How did he do this to her? Every, single, time. She should probably demand Faith not tell him they’d arrived for a visit, but she didn’t have it in her. Time spent with Chad was the highlight of her busy life.

His generous lips curved in a smile and his green eyes sparkled at her. She’d never seen an emerald gem sparkle as beautifully as his mesmerizing eyes did. His face was manly but he could definitely be called a pretty boy. His well-built body and developed muscles probably kept many people from daring to call him that.

“It is a gorgeous view,” she agreed, sweeping her hand out. “I never tire of it.”

Chad eased toward her like a cheetah stalking a gazelle. He was far too alluring and deadly. Not that he'd ever physically hurt her or anyone that wasn't a criminal, but he was deadly to her heart. He'd never love her like she did him and she couldn't afford to let down her guard and get her heart broken again with a player the likes of Major Chad Prescott. Her older sister being killed, her parents deserting them, and her first heart's destruction at Chad's hands was enough misery for a lifetime.

He came right into her space, resting each of his hands on the banister behind her and effectively trapping her. His green gaze traveled over her face. If he was any other man she'd say he was completely smitten with her, but not Chad. He had too much experience, too much charm, and too many women after him. He was an expert at making every woman think they were the only woman in the world for him. Until the next social media post showed him hugging or kissing some other well-known beauty.

Three years ago they met snow skiing right here at Wengen. He'd charmed her that weekend, skiing together each day and dining together and then soaking in her hot tub each evening. Three incredible days and he'd made her believe he'd fallen for her. She'd fallen hard and fast, the feelings Chad created in her had never been experienced before or replicated after. So incredibly silly for her to have let down her guard like that.

Sunday evening she headed back to America with her sisters, floating she was so gone over him. Monday night her sister Grace had shown her the social media posts and grocery store magazine covers of him cuddled up to the well-known actress Bermuda Venus. Bermuda had been filming in Southern Germany at the time.

Hope had stopped responding to his texts and calls, nursing her bruised heart. Chad hadn't given up on her, even though she'd never told him why she'd distanced herself. He and Faith were always in cahoots and Chad kept texting,

calling, and stubbornly coming to visit them every time she was in Switzerland.

Despite the armor she'd placed around her heart, she loved seeing him. They had a lot of fun together and also had in common that his dad had left him when he was a small child and her parents had deserted them when she was fourteen.

She also had to remind herself she was too smart to fall prey to Chad again. She did allow herself to enjoy his visits and teasing with him. How could she not?

"We both know the view is not what I'm talking about," he said in that silky voice of his as he expertly leaned in. He was close enough that his warm, minty breath brushed over her mouth and cheeks, making her long for him to kiss her. "Is it hard being the most beautiful woman in the world?"

Hope's heart raced and it was a Herculean effort to not reach for him. She could easily envision wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling his head down. His mouth was the perfect match for hers and the way his lips had hungrily devoured her ... She trembled.

She had to not think about it. They'd shared that one perfect kiss as they'd said goodbye after their long weekend. The very next day she realized how stupid she'd been to fall so quick. Chad had been mesmerizing but he'd never said he loved her or was committed to her.

She had to keep reminding herself their time together had been a few extremely fun days, a break from reality, and the one incomparable kiss. Chad wasn't committed to her. He'd made that more than obvious by being with Bermuda the next day.

"Is it hard being the biggest schmoozer in the world?" She fluttered her eyelashes at him.

He chuckled as if that were a compliment. "The only thing hard is not having your lips meeting mine. I expected a better hello out of you, beautiful."

Hope wanted to flirt and have fun but he was hammering her heart right now and her heart was tellingly hammering out

of control. She couldn't let him see how deeply he affected her or he'd only increase the charm and blow her resistance out of the water. She was vulnerable to him and him alone. Why did he have to be the playboy of the century and the last man she could trust with her heart?

She ducked out of his arms and he thankfully let her go. "To what do we owe the honor of the charming and famous Major Chad Prescott visiting? If I remember right, last time you were here you used my house and you almost blew it to bits and pieces."

"Almost is still only almost, beautiful," he teased her, an irresistible smirk on his lips as he folded his brawny arms across his chest.

It couldn't have been forty degrees out here and he was in only a t-shirt. Showing off his beautiful build or impervious to the cold having grown up in this climate? She loved it here but having lived in Southern California all of her life she wasn't used to the biting cold.

"Similar to the many times I *almost* kissed your enticing lips." His gaze traveled languidly over her lips and her entire body was on fire. "Only the one perfect kiss between us."

His voice sounded full of regret and longing. Dang, he was good. He unfolded his arms, slowly crossed the distance between them and cupped her face with both of his large palms. His right thumb trailed across her lower lip in the most tender of caresses. Hope could not catch a full breath and feared she'd hyperventilate and pass out. He'd catch her and she could pretend she was unconscious as she savored his muscular arms wrapped around her. Then he'd kiss her to wake her up and it couldn't be considered weakness on her part that she had to respond.

"Shall we remedy that mistake and make it *many* shared kisses?" He arched an eyebrow.

Hope had to rip herself away from him. She backed into the railing again. His eyes looked full of injury, as if she was his one true love and she was denying him a kiss from the only woman that consumed him.

What a joke. Chad was a moral Christian so she knew he didn't sleep with all the women flocking to him but she could bet he'd kissed a hundred or more, before and after they'd dated.

"If touching you felt that incredible, kissing you might give me a heart attack."

He was teasing now and she appreciated it.

"I could never be the cause of your demise," she gave the standard tease right back.

He chuckled but he still looked devastated by another near miss. Chad always felt so genuine to her, though she knew rationally he had to be acting most of the time. Nobody could be as charming and committed to her as his gazes, touch, and words made her believe, until she saw a picture tomorrow of the next beauty in his arms falling for his charming smile.

"What are you doing here? Just come to flirt and tease as always? Faith is making her famous stuffed peppers for lunch. Would you like to stay and eat with us?" She walked a wide circle around him, hoping he'd follow her into the house, her sister could be a barrier between them. They'd talk, laugh, and tease through lunch then he'd be on his way when he realized for the hundredth time that she wasn't falling prey to his charms ever again. It wouldn't bother him for long. It was still early enough in the day he could get at least one if not two more dates in.

Chad caught her arm before she could escape. "I have a favor to ask of you." His voice sounded as serious as she'd ever heard it. Well, except for when he beseeched her to tell him why she'd stopped responding to his texts and calls after their 'perfect weekend' together. She'd simply told him she'd lost her head that weekend and she had no interest in anything but friendship with him. He'd acted as if she had hurt him. Which just showed what impressive acting skills he possessed.

They had remained friends. They didn't see each other often or she'd probably falter at some point and succumb to his charm. Her insistence on the friends label didn't stop him from making his sultry advances every time he saw her. Once

they'd been together for an hour or so he'd calm down. Of course he was still more charming than any man she'd ever met but he relaxed and they laughed and teased like close friends.

“Oh?” She arched an eyebrow. “You need to borrow the house again? Some damsel in distress needing a hideaway?”

His lips flattened. For some reason that tease didn't go over well. She didn't know the extent of his relationship with Sophie Pederson but it had obviously stung when Sophie chose the 'Charming Prince' over the 'Charming Chad'. Prince Malik seemed incredible and he and Sophie appeared deep in love, but Hope didn't know how any woman could not choose Chad. She would in an instant. If she thought he might be faithful to her. Which he could never be.

He studied her and then he rushed out in a very un-Chad-like tone, “I need a date for Sophie and Malik's wedding.” He cleared his throat and seemed to remember himself as he gave her a smoldering look and said in a husky, irresistible tone. “Beautiful Hope. Would you please do me the honor of accompanying me to Sophie and Malik's wedding? Spending time with you in Augustine as we laugh and adventure and fall ridiculously in love would mean the world to me.”

Fall ridiculously in love? She rubbed at her heart but it didn't slow its frenzied beat. He couldn't do this to her. He was always charming and flirtatious but he was stepping up his game today. Was she strong enough to resist? He studied her, as sincere, manly, and appealing as only Chad could be.

“Let me get this straight.” She drew a steadying breath and spread her stance wider to keep from toppling over. “You don't want to go alone to your former love's wedding so you want me to go as your friend?”

“Not as my friend.” She hadn't even noticed him move, but somehow he was in her space again. He was the most accomplished charmer she'd ever encountered. “As my girlfriend.”

His girlfriend? Her heart was thundering in her ears as she studied him. If only she could trust him.

“To prove you’re over Sophie?”

“No.” His gaze got even deeper. His hand ran down her arm until he encircled her fingers with his. Her entire body tingled from the simple touch. He brought their clasped hands to his lips and pressed a heated kiss on the back of her hand. Hope was going to have a coronary. If a kiss on her hand felt that insane, meeting his lips again would give her a heart attack. She didn’t say the tease though. She was too invested in this moment.

“To prove you have always been and will always be ...” He paused, his lips still close to her hand. His warm breath heated her cold fingers up. He looked at her from beneath his thick lashes. The effect was better than a prince bowing over the hand of his one true love. “... the only woman in the world for me.”

Hope’s stomach lurched and her heart thumped out of control. How could he so easily spout lines like that? How could she not fall to his irresistible charm? The fact remained that he was the only man she’d ever given her heart to. She’d imagined she knew him, the true Chad Prescott. That beautiful weekend they’d had together had started a deep and abiding friendship which, despite her cold shoulder, and because of his insistence, they’d continued to develop every time he came to visit. Of course he was always funny and charming. When they were together he also seemed genuine, loyal, and interested in only her.

No! He couldn’t do this to her again. She knew what happened when she fell prey to his magnetism. She saw how her mom was destroyed by desperately loving a cheater, devastated enough she’d deserted her children.

“Come inside. I’m freezing.” She pulled her hand free and wrapped her arms around herself. Even in a thick sweatshirt it was cold out here but the excuse was a farce. With his hand around hers she hadn’t been one bit cold.

“I can easily warm you up, love.” He gave her a heated look and now she was far too warm.

“Faith will want you to stay for lunch,” she rushed out, ignoring his offer. “It’s such a beautiful fall day, isn’t it? How are all your royal friends in Augustine? All the princes in love now, eh?”

She all but ran for the patio door, flinging it open. Chad was right there, holding the door for her, an injured look in his emerald eyes, as if she was the one who’d rejected him.

Hope hurried into the warm house. How was she going to stay strong if he kept spouting his irresistible and charming lines, touching her and lighting her up from the inside out as only Chad could do, and giving her the most meaningful and heart-stirring looks known to mankind?

Attending Prince Malik and Sophie Pederson’s wedding would be incredible, but she couldn’t agree to it. Not as Chad’s date or girlfriend. In the magical world of the kingdom of Augustine she’d be in even more danger of falling to his charms, losing herself in his happy light and irresistible allure.

She could never let herself do that again. Her heart wouldn’t recover.



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## About the Author

Cami is a part-time author, part-time exercise consultant, part-time housekeeper, full-time wife, and overtime mother of four adorable boys. Sleep and relaxation are fond memories. She's never been happier.

Join Cami's VIP list to find out about special deals, giveaways and new releases and receive a free copy of *Rescued by Love: Park City Firefighter Romance* by clicking [here](#).

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