


MINDY BURBIDGE STRUNK

THE PROBLEM WITH PRINCES

An illustration of a woman with long brown hair in a braid, wearing a yellow dress, sitting on the word 'PROBLEM'. A man with dark hair, wearing a red polo shirt and black shorts, stands on the word 'PRINCES'. The background is a blue sky with stylized clouds. The bottom of the image features a white balustrade with blue decorative elements.

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

**THE
PROBLEM
WITH
PRINCES**



A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

THE MONARCHY MATCH SERIES

MINDY BURBIDGE STRUNK

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Chapter One



IF I DIE RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW... I WILL DIE CONTENT.

Not that I'm ready to meet my maker or anything. I mean why mess up a perfect vacation?

The view before me—it's beyond amazing. But there is something else. Something I can't quite put my finger on.

I place my forearms on the chest-high rock wall separating me from the sheer cliff and lean tentatively over. My heart races at the height, but the view of the sparkling blue water of the Aegean Sea, the waves breaking into white foam on the rocks below make it worth it. And this wall is sturdy. I feel mostly safe behind it. On either side, the hills slope gently away from the water's edge. Red tile roofs and white stucco houses are separated from the green foliage only by the road winding up the hillsides. This little Mediterranean island is just what I imagined it would be.

A light breeze blew off the water, picking up the small hairs at the back of my neck and fluttering the brim of my large floppy hat. I close my eyes, breathing in the salty scent. If only this was real life.

My mouth pulls down at the thought of returning home. My muscles tighten and I knead at the back of my neck, trying to ward off the headache that is sure to come. This vacation is supposed to help ease these feelings. I open my eyes, hoping to regain some of my previous serenity.

"Earth to Grace. Come in, Grace." Texie waves her hand back and forth in front of my face.

I blink a few times, turning to look at her over my shoulder.

“Where are you, Gee? I don’t think you’ve heard a single word I’ve said.” There is a hint of irritation in her voice, but mostly she sounds like she is on the verge of laughing.

Texie and I have been best friends since meeting in a poli-sci study group our first semester at Stanford.

“I’m in Atraxia, Tex. Just like you.”

She tilts her head to the side and raises a brow at me.

I straighten, shaking my head. “Sorry. I’m just reveling.” I sweep my hand to the side, encompassing the view I’ve been watching. I heave another deep sigh. “What were you saying?”

“I said I’m starving. How about we head back to that little pastry shop we saw on our way here?”

My stomach growls loudly. “Apparently, you’re not the only one.” I push off the wall and turn to face her. “That sounds fabulous. Maybe we can bring it back here and eat on that bench over there?” I offer a hopeful smile, adding a bit of whine to my voice for added measure.

“I don’t care where we eat as long as I get some food.” Texie is one of those people who eats whatever she wants and never gains an ounce. It’s one of the many ways we’re opposites. I love her in spite of her unfair genetics, but that doesn’t stop me from clenching my fists beneath the table when she snarfs down three servings of dessert while I pick at my half-serving.

Her blonde hair swishes around her shoulders as she turns in the opposite direction. “Come on, Grace. That view isn’t going anywhere. But the baklava in the bakery window surely is.”

We make our way down the cobblestone street toward the little pastry shop we’d passed earlier. Centuries-old buildings shade the narrow street. Two cars can’t pass each other with more than an inch of clearance, but that doesn’t stop the delivery trucks from wedging themselves into every alley, sometimes blocking the road completely to unload their wares.

The ambiance makes me feel a little like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. I can't stop the smile that breaks out on my face. Goosebumps even dot my arms. Something about this place just makes me happy.

"Are you reveling again?" Texie gives me a little shoulder bump. "I'm glad this is the final stop on our trip, rather than our first. You would have been no fun at all in Romania or Serbia after this, assuming I'd have even been able to get you there."

I roll my eyes. "Whatever." But I stop and stare at her. "Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what? It's beautiful, but so were Albania and Montenegro."

I tilt my head to the side, really looking at her. How can she not be moved? But then I realize something. She just doesn't get it like I do.

For me, there is something almost spiritual here. I frown. *Wow*. Even I think that sounds overly sappy.

I give her a quick shrug before I turn my attention back to the buildings around us. The tinkling of a bell adds just the right amount of fairy-tale charm to the picture.

"Grace." Texie grabs my arm and pulls, but not before I slam into something solid, nearly knocking the wind out of me.

"Oh, for the love of Pete." I take a step back and look down at the stain covering the lower half of my white tank top, barely visible beneath my gauzy floral top. A burning sensation envelops my belly and scalds a dark brown path down my white skinny jeans.

Tears form in my eyes, and I suck in my stomach, trying to get the fabric away from my burning skin. Breathing out slowly through clenched teeth, I look around. What did I hit?

Texie elbows me in the ribs.

"Ouch." I turn my head and glare at her. "Can't you see ___"

She motions to a group of men standing in front of us.

Three of the men are large. No, actually, they are *huge*. Like weightlifters but dressed in nice suits rather than muscle shirts.

I try discreetly to pull the fabric of my pants away from my skin, but skinny jeans don't exactly leave a lot of breathing room. The tallest man in the trio, standing slightly behind the wall of muscle men, pushes his way to the front, and I suck in my stomach for a different reason.

The man's dark hair curls around his ears and the back of his neck. He is beyond handsome; he is beautiful. An Apollo or Hercules kind of beautiful. Have I said how much I love this little island country?

"Oh, my gosh. I am so sorry," I stammer out.

"My coffee!" He mutters in Greek. Then he reaches up and slips his sunglasses down slightly. Not enough to fully see his eyes, but enough to show he is displeased. An irritated sigh escapes his perfectly formed lips. "Stupid, stupid," he muttered in only lightly accented English. He stares down at his legs, lifting one foot at a time to examine them. "Fabulous. Just fabulous," he grumbles.

I lean forward, trying to see exactly where the offending coffee is. Two little drops darken the toe of one of his expensive-looking loafers. My mouth drops open. "Are you kidding me right now?" Perhaps Apollo and Hercules are too nice of a moniker for this guy. Ares is way more appropriate.

He holds out a hand and the muscle wall behind him produces a handkerchief. Modern Ares—that's what I've decided to call him—rubs at the spots several times and grunts, handing the cloth back. "That's never going to come out of the leather." He pushes his sunglasses back up on his nose and growls—like, literally growls. Who does that? I thought it only happened in books.

He doesn't look at me, but rather just over my shoulder. As if looking directly at me might turn him to ash or something. "Thank you for ruining my loafers."

The flutter in my stomach subsides only to be replaced with rancor. I've always thought accents make men sexier, but this tool is making me rethink that idea.

The burning on my skin reminds me I have more urgent needs. I can feel the blisters forming on my stomach and legs. I need to get back to the hotel where I can change into something looser. Standing here fighting with this tool isn't worth the pain I'm feeling.

"Yeah, sorry about the shoes." I motion to the front of me. "But I think maybe we can call it even." I'm not really feeling the apology, but like he knows that.

I rummage through the small purse slung across my body, trying to find the ibuprofen I keep there. I turn to Texie as I pull out the small bottle of pills. "Can we hurry and get the pastries, please? I really need ice or something."

Texie looks down at my jeans, her mouth forming an O. Nodding, she turns toward the bakery just two shops down the street. I follow behind, trying to keep my stomach sucked in and away from the waistband of my jeans.

"You're just going to leave? What about my shoes?"

I stop at the sound of his deep voice. "Is he kidding me, right now?" I grumble.

Pulling several bills from my neck wallet and then shoving it back down my shirt, I turn toward him and throw the money at his chest. "Buy some new shoes," I say as I turn away from him and resume my walk toward the bakery. But I glance over my shoulder and smile to see the muscle men all bent over picking up the bills. Why am I not surprised that he won't even pick up his own money from the ground?

I grab Texie's arm, walking as quickly as I can with third degree burns rubbing against my jeans, nearly shoving her between the Black SUVs parked at the sidewalk.

A mirthless laugh comes from behind us. "This is not even close to enough money to replace *these* shoes."

Barely turning my head in his direction, I shout over my shoulder. "Then send me a bill for the rest."

“Stop engaging him, Gee.” Texie whisper shouts next to me. “Just shut up.”

“Sure, *Grace*.”

I still. How did he know my name? I haven’t told him what it is. But then I remember Texie used it when she’d tried to pull me out of the way. Weird that he recalled that after everything that happened.

“Where shall I send it?” The man continues, his tone mocking. “I don’t even know your last name.”

I flinch. The idea of him even knowing my first name makes me uncomfortable. I mean I haven’t exactly been the picture of politeness. “Kelly,” I yell over my shoulder.

“Your name is Grace Kelly?” He sounds incredulous.

“*As far as you know*,” I mutter as Texie and I push through the door of the bakery. I jump at the sound of the little tinkling bell. My hands are shaking, and my stomach is in knots. Stupid Modern Ares.

I glance over my shoulder to see if any of them are following us, but I can’t see them out on the street anymore. The black SUVs block the entrance of the coffee shop from my view. He isn’t charging around the cars though, so that seems like a good sign. Maybe my mouth hasn’t gotten us into as much trouble as I thought.

One of the men climbs into the front seat of one of the SUVs, but his face disappears behind the tinted glass.

“Well, is he coming?” Texie has her hands on her hips, but I can hear the slight tremor in her voice. “Why couldn’t you just stop?” She glances out the window in the door. “You don’t really think he’ll try and find out where we’re staying, do you?”

“I have no idea what Modern Ares will do. I mean, seriously. Could you even *see* the coffee drops on his shoes?”

“Modern Ares?” Texie shoots me a look.

“It seems fitting because he is hot in two ways.” I hold up two fingers and twist them back and forth. “Get it? Two

ways?”

Her head shakes slowly.

“You know because—”

“Yeah. I get it.” She gives an exaggerated blink. “I just can’t believe you’ve already thought it through this much.”

I shrug. “We can call him MA for short.”

“Why are we calling him anything?”

I snort out a laugh. “Oh, I’ll be telling this story far and wide. You can bank on that.” I take a calming breath, allowing my heart rate to return to normal and my hands and knees to stop shaking. Now that the adrenalin has subsided, the pain from my burns is hard to ignore.

Chapter Two



TEXIE MOVES TO THE DISPLAY CASE. SHE HUFFS AND PUTS HER hands on her hips again. It is pretty much her favorite pose. “Oh. Great.”

My brow wrinkles and I look at her, my hands lifted in a shrug. “What?”

She points to the empty tray with the tag marked *Baklava*. “I told you it would all be gone if we didn’t hurry. Now what am I supposed to have? My taste buds are all primed for *baklava*.”

I roll my eyes again. Because that is my favorite response. “I’m sorry my third-degree burns have caused you to miss out on a dessert.” I fold my arms across my chest and scowl at her.

An old woman comes out from the back room and smiles. She looks like a golden raisin with her dark olive skin and abundance of wrinkles. I’m guessing she is sweet like raisins too.

I point to a flakey pastry on a tray. “*Boró na páro to Galaktoboureko*.”

The old woman smiles wider. “*Échete émfasi se poly kalá*.”

Texie leans in close and whispers. “What did she say?”

“My accent is very good.” I smile at the woman. “*Sas efcharistó*—thank you.”

My stomach growls again, and I hold up two fingers. “*Dýo, parakaló. kai éna boukáli neró.*”

She nods and takes two pieces of the custard filled pastry, placing them in a small cardboard box before turning to a small refrigerator and grabbing a bottle of water. She tells me the cost and I plunk a few bills and several coins onto the counter. If anything can take my mind off my burns, it’s this little box of heaven.

“Are you sure you don’t want this instead?” I ask Texie just before taking a large unladylike bite. Bits of phyllo dough fly from my mouth and I feel a dollop of cream filling sticking to my upper lip, just out of reach of my tongue.

Texie brushes at her shirt exaggeratedly. “No. I don’t want that. I want baklava.”

I wave the pastry in front of her face. “Come on, just try it. Everyone’s doing it.”

She pushes my hand away.

“You’ll be popular,” I say in a sing-songy voice.

She juts her hip out and puts a hand on it. “Fine.” She takes a large bite. “Mmm. That is good,” she says with a mouth full of cream. “But I really did want baklava.”

The raisin lady speaks up. “*Baklava vrísketai sto fóurno.*”

Texie looks at me for interpretation. “She says there is more in the oven.”

Her eyes go big, and she taps her fingertips together. “Really? Oh, can we please wait?”

My flaming skin says no, but Texie gives me her practiced pouty look and I cave. Ugh! I’m such a pushover. I nod.

She drops herself into a chair at a nearby table.

“Can’t we at least wait outside? It’s such a nice day.” Plus, I know if I sit in here smelling all the delicious scents, I will just keep buying treats until I have to be rolled out the door. That’s not a pretty picture. I take another bite of my pastry. “I

bet it'll be getting cold in DC by the time we get back. I plan to enjoy every minute of the sunshine while I still can."

I move toward the door as Texie waves me away, not moving from her position as sentry over the glass case. "I'll be out as soon as the baklava is done."

I let out a little chuckle. Does she really think she'll miss out on the entire tray if she waits outside? I guess if this is the only two-week period that she eats carbs, maybe I should cut her some slack. Besides, why do I care where Texie waits? I need some quiet time anyway. It makes it easier not to focus on the burns sizzling into the deep tissues of my abdomen and legs.

I sit down at a little cafe table and twist the cap off my water bottle, relishing the feel of the cold liquid running down my throat. I carefully lift my shirt and gently place the cold bottle against my burn. A new set of tears form in the corners of my eyes, before I pull the bottle away and let my shirt drop back down.

I glance up and down the street. Thankfully, there is no sign of MA or his henchmen. The guy may still be in the middle car, but I can't tell through the tinted window. The three sleek black Range Rover SUVs are still parked in front of the coffee shop across the street. I cringe at the thought of coffee.

People walk up and down the street. A couple holds hands, talking quietly to each other as they walk past the bakery. Two men chat, their hands moving about wildly on the sidewalk across the street. Are they tourists like me or are they natives of Atraxia? This is why I love people watching. I can give them whatever backstory I want.

I put my elbow on the table and drop my chin into my hand. Who is MA anyway? After the whole coffee debacle, I know he is entitled. The muscled men with him had acted like bodyguards. Which probably means he is entitled, *and* famous.

Why is the lifestyle of the rich so engrossing? I'd just experienced firsthand the arrogance they possess, yet still there

is a draw to keep watching. It's like a car accident. You don't want to see the carnage. Except you can't help but look.

Tanner had been rich. I'd felt a similar fascination with him when we'd first started dating, though not to the same degree. It's probably why I had held onto the relationship even after I realized it wasn't healthy. I just couldn't look away. I push the thoughts of my ex-boyfriend from my mind. *He* is not going to ruin my vacation.

I sit back up and pop another bite of the cream-fill delight into my mouth.

I know what kind of man MA is, and I want nothing to do with him. I'm here to relax and enjoy myself. Picking up the last bite of the first pastry, I chew it slowly, letting every flavor glide over my taste buds, and resume my observations of this charming little street. I refuse to let either my ex-tool or the tool I just met ruin my vacation. I release a breath, pushing both men from my mind.

A clicking sound catches my attention and I look farther down the street. A man, an adult from what I can see, is riding a skateboard up the cobblestones. His baseball hat is pulled down low, shadowing his face.

My nose and forehead wrinkle in disdain. What the heck? Does he not realize I was enjoying the ambiance? And it doesn't include skateboards. Why would someone choose a cobblestoned street to ride on, anyway? There must be other streets that are paved and smooth. Why must all these men vex me so? (I must be really ticked if I'm thinking in *Pride and Prejudice* language.) I have never once pictured a skateboarder in any of my idyllic *Pied Piper of Hamelin* scenarios.

He pushes his skateboard along with his left foot, stopping in front of the shop two stores away from the coffee shop. The man stands in front of the window for a few moments, then turns and makes for my side of the street. Only he doesn't make it more than three steps before he stops abruptly and drops to his knees, as if he is searching for something. He moves slowly, crawling toward the rear vehicle in the line of SUVs.

I glance down at my cream filled pastry. I was planning to take it back to the hotel, but now I'm thinking I should just eat it here. I mean, I don't want to get this flaky crust all over the carpet of the room, right?

The sweet smell of cloves drifts from the bakery. The baklava must be out of the oven. Maybe Texie is right. The baklava smells A. Maz. Ing.

I pick up my pastry and take a bite, glancing over at the skateboarder. But he isn't behind the rear SUV anymore. He is stretched out, face up on the skateboard, slowly making his way up the street under the SUV's. He glances around and I quickly drop my pastry back into the box and pretend to look for a napkin. But I look back at the man from beneath my lashes. Hmm. Apparently, people really do that, not just flirtatious girls in romance novels.

He pushes himself slowly out from under the front bumper of the SUV in the back of the line.

I lean forward, slightly on the pretense of finding my phone under the lid of the box. What is he doing under there?

He disappears again under the middle SUV—the one the driver got into. This time he stops. He reaches up into the undercarriage of the car, but he is too shadowed and far away for me to see exactly what he is doing. Why is the man fiddling with one of MA's cars? My lips lift into a half grin. Maybe this guy has spilled coffee on Ares's shoes too.

But in spite of the grin, my stomach starts to churn. Something isn't right.

The man drops his arms down and slides, much faster than he moved his way forward, back under the rear SUV and out from behind it. He rolls off the board and again pretends to be searching the ground for something. When he stands up, he flips something in the air, like he just found what he had been looking for. If I hadn't watched the entire thing happen, I would think nothing of it.

He looks over and I drop my eyes to my phone. My stomach sinks into my toes, and I freeze. What should I do?

Does he know I watched him? After a minute I chance a glance up through my lashes to see him watching me. Pretending to use my finger to scroll through something on my screen, I see him pull his brim down lower. It's hard to decipher his facial expressions. He puts his foot on the skateboard and rides off in the direction he had come from.

The little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and goosebumps dot my arms. But these are not the same kind of goosebumps I'd had at the cliffs. Well, I guess they are the same kind, because there are only one kind of goosebumps. But their causes are completely different.

What had I just witnessed? I take a shaky-handed drink from my water bottle and wipe the back of my knuckles over my lips. Putting my half-eaten roll into the box, I stare at the corner he disappeared around from the side of my eyes. The pastry in my guts sours and I can't even think about eating any more. Stupid Skateboard guy totally ruined my pastry. I fold the lid down and wipe at the crumbs on the table, but all the while I'm glancing over at the corner. Has he seen me watching him? And more importantly, will he come looking for me later?

I shake my head, trying to remove all the episodes of *Castle* and *CSI* from my mind.

The guy had glanced over his shoulder at me, but I had closed my eyes and taken a large bite of my pastry. Hopefully, he thinks I'm as oblivious as so many people in the world are these days.

I sit in my seat, watching the corner for movement before I finally stand up. My nervous energy isn't allowing me to sit any longer.

I pace back and forth a few laps. What does one do in a situation like this? I mean, obviously, I need to tell someone what I've seen. People don't fiddle with undercarriages just for fun. Unless the guy is a mechanic. But I doubt this was a case of a random act of auto repair.

I run my hands down the side of my legs, both as a nervous habit and to dry the sweat on my palms. I wince when

the action rubs my jeans against my burns.

Leaving my water bottle and pastry box on the table, I walk into the bakery. I need to tell the driver what I saw. Because I'm pretty sure he didn't see anything.

Texie is still keeping vigil over the baklava tray.

"Hey, I am going to walk over to the coffee shop across the street and see if they have any hot cocoa. Do you want to come?" There is a slight tremor in my voice, but Texie seems oblivious to it. Her full focus is on the glass case. She seriously needs to eat carbs more often.

She shakes her head. "No. I think she said the baklava is too hot to cut yet. But it shouldn't be very much longer." Her brow crinkles. "I'm surprised you can even think about coffee after what just happened."

I shake my head and give her a snarky look. "That's why I'm getting cocoa. Duh..." I hold the word out for the length of at least two heart beats.

"Hot is hot. The type of beverage is just semantics."

Ah, I love it when she uses her lawyer reasoning on me. "Do you want some or not? That is the question, counselor." I sound snippy, but my anxiety rises the longer I stand there. What if MA has already left while I've been arguing with Texie? The guy is a total jerk face, but I still don't think he deserves to have whatever skateboard guy is trying to do, happen to him. I frown. I'm not even making sense.

"Yeah, get me one, please." Texie withdraws her wallet from her purse, but I wave it aside.

"I got this one," I call over my shoulder as I hurry out the door. "If I'm not back before you're ready to leave, can you grab my water and pastry from the table outside?"

Texie nods.

I'm relieved to see the three SUVs still parked on the street. I walk to the driver's window on the middle one and I knock.

He's turned away from me, and visibly jumps in his seat which makes me grin slightly.

He must have been asleep. He rolls the window down a crack. "*Metakinitheíte makriá apó to aftokínito.*"

"I will move away, but I need to tell you something first." I lift my chin up as if that will make my voice float through the cracked window more efficiently.

He glares at me and rolls the window back up. I grit my teeth. How can such a beautiful country have such a loser male population?

I'm half tempted to walk back to the bakery and let whatever skateboard guy has planned just happen. I mean, I tried, right? What is my obligation here?

My stomach twists. "Fine," I grumble.

I walk in front of the middle SUV and glare at the driver as he watches me with narrowed eyes.

Pushing into the little shop, the smell of burned coffee assaults my nostrils and my stomach lurches for a new reason. I hate the smell of coffee, to the extent that I avoid that aisle in the grocery store. The day Target put a Starbuck's in my neighborhood store was the beginning of the end of a beautiful relationship. Our relationship is mostly online now.

I think I may throw up. How would MA feel about *that* on his shoes. Maybe the small drops of coffee won't seem so bad anymore. I pinch my eyes shut, trying to squelch the roiling in my stomach. My fists clench at my side. I can do this. It's just coffee.

The shop is busier than I would have guessed for the middle of the morning. I look around until I see MA and his well-dressed wrestlers in a booth toward the back. They are kind of hard to miss.

I walk over—my hands are sweating again—and I stand in front of their table. "Excuse me." I can carry on the conversation in Greek, but part of me doesn't want to let Jerk Face know that I can understand him when he speaks his

native language. It gives me the upper hand. And I want the upper hand with him.

He looks up, and I feel his disinterest even from behind his sunglasses.

Who wears sunglasses inside anyway? Who does he think he is? Bono? I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from walking out of the shop.

“Hey. It’s me again. You remember? The stupid person who bumped into you?” I know I should not have said that, but I can’t help myself. “Yeah, anyway. I was across the street at the pastry shop just now—”

He lowers his sunglasses slightly and for a moment, something about him seems familiar. Maybe it’s just the universal aura of the entitled. His eyes go up and down the length of my body, at least what is visible above the tabletop. He gives a barely perceptible nod of his head.

I squint at him. What does that mean? Is he insinuating he doesn’t doubt I like pastries or is it more of a he wouldn’t have guessed I liked pastries kind of thing? Whatever it is, it flusters me. And I’m irritated, because I realize that even though he is a complete jerk, I’m strangely attracted to him. I actually care what his assessment of me is. Now I don’t know who I’m more irritated at, him or me.

I stammer. “Umm, I got the *Galaktoboureko*.” Why am I telling him this when it makes no difference to the story?

“That is a good choice. Especially from Mrs. Psilakis.”

I take a step back. He can be civil? What an unexpected turn of events. “Anyway,” I really don’t want to be in here any longer than I must. “While I was eating, a man on a skateboard pretended to drop something on the ground.”

Ares’s eyes dropped back to his coffee cup, and he pushes his sunglasses back into place. I’m pretty sure that is the universal sign for *I’m not listening to you*. I stand there, uncertainty humming through me. Should I even finish talking? It is very evident he doesn’t care what I have to say.

“Yes? But he didn’t drop anything?” One of the large men sitting with him speaks up in a thick accent, intently watching me. His English is better than I thought it would be, just from looking at him. Man, judge-y much, Grace?

I shake my head. “No. Once he was on the ground, he used his skateboard to push himself under your SUVs. He didn’t stop under the back one, but he did do something under the middle one.”

All the wrestlers’ eyes at the table are fixed intently on me, but the same one does all the talking. “What did he do?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know, exactly. I only saw him lift his hands into the undercarriage.”

“Is he still there?” The man stood up and while he isn’t much taller than I am, I feel completely dwarfed by him.

Again, I shake my head. “No. I waited until he came out from under the cars and skateboarded around the corner a few blocks down. I pretended not to notice him.”

All the men stand up. The one who has been talking is obviously the one in charge as he barks orders at all the others. He speaks rapidly in Greek, telling them to get outside and check the cars. They spread out like bees looking for nectar, drawing the looks of several people in the shop.

Modern Ares is the only one who stays seated. He looks up at Mr. In-Charge and raises a brow. “*Tin pistéveis pragmatiká?*”

Do you believe her? Seriously? Why have I made myself sick over this guy? Maybe Mr. Skateboard guy was not so off base after all.

He turns back to me and smirks. Smirks! At me. Jiminy Cricket! Every time I think this guy can’t be a bigger tool, he seems to exceed my expectations.

And yet I still flush as he stares at me. I’m an idiot.

Two men come back inside and move over to Mr. In-Charge, talking in low voices. His face becomes a stony mask, and he turns back to Modern Ares. “She *is* to be believed. The

brake line was cut, not all the way through, but enough that we would have lost the brakes eventually.” He speaks in rapid, Greek.

I stand a little taller. *Yeah, Modern Ares. Take that. I’m to be believed.* I may have smirked at him, but I’m not completely certain. I don’t always have control over my facial features. My mom often says I can’t hide my feelings because they are written all over my face. It kind of sucks.

Mr. In-Charge turns back to me, and I school my features to be less of an I-told-you-so look. “Thank you for informing us of what you saw, Ms....”

“Kelly. Grace Kelly,” MA says, arching his brow at me.

He remembered the name I had given him? It’s moderately surprising. I don’t get a he-remembers-much-about-anyone-but-himself vibe from him. Should I correct him or just leave it alone and get on with my vacation? I decide to leave it alone. I lift my hand up and give a small wave. “No need to thank me. I was just doing what anyone would do.” I’m not sure that is true. But it doesn’t really matter. I’m ready to get out of here and be done with this guy for good.

“I would like to reward your kindness.”

“Yes, perhaps we could replace your clothes.” MA dips his head toward the dark brown coffee stain on my shirt and pants.

He won’t replace them after he bumps into me and spills his coffee all over them. But he will because I potentially saved his life? Oh, my heck. I can’t even...

I’m at least gratified to see Mr. In-Charge glance over at his boss with a confused look on his face. But it is gone almost as quickly as it came. How does this man, who seems to care—at least a little—about people work for someone like Modern Ares? But while this man is in charge of the wrestlers, it is evident who pays the salaries.

“No, no. I’m good.” I wave my hand in front of me. “Just glad I could help. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I still need to go and change my clothes.” I shoot Ares a look and move toward the door. But I pause after just a few steps. “I’m sure you have

very important things to do...like buy new shoes,” I say over my shoulder. Crap. There goes my mouth again. Sometimes I wish it would obey my brain.

I push through the exit before either man can say anything more. I lean my back against the door and take a deep breath. *Phew*. That is over. Now I can grab Texie and my pastries, and swing by the hotel to make sure my skin hasn't burned itself onto my jeans. After some quick first aid, we can head back to the overlook bench before the morning is over. I have more reveling to do.

I walk quickly across the street and throw open the bakery shop door. My hands are shaking. Whether it is due to speaking with Modern Ares or seeing MSG—Mr. Skateboard Guy is such a mouthful—I'm not sure. I just know I need to get away from here and calm down. I need to hear waves crashing and seabirds squawking.

“Hey, you get that *baklava* yet?” I try to swallow the wobble in my voice as I glance behind me to see if MA or Mr. In-Charge has followed me to the bakery. They haven't. My brow furrows. I kind of thought they might be more persistent about the reward thing. Oh, well.

I sag at the thought of not seeing MA again. Ugh! I stomp my foot at my traitorous body. *Whatever. No reward is worth spending a minute longer with him.* I just need to convince all of me that that is the truth.

Chapter Three



TEXIE STANDS UP WHEN THE LADY BEHIND THE COUNTER hands over a paper wrapper with two pieces of baklava inside. Texie giggles as she cradles the pastries. I think she might be in love. “Okay. Now we can go.”

“Let me grab my water and box off the table. Just a sec.” I walk quickly to the patio, searching up and down the street one last time. I don’t see anything. But I feel like someone is watching me. Maybe it’s just the driver in the SUV across the street.

I snatch up my stuff and head toward the front door.

“Hey, where is my hot chocolate?” Texie asks as she walks behind me out onto the sidewalk.

“Uhhh.” I can’t believe I forgot the hot chocolate. What am I supposed to tell her? “They were out.” I drop my head to the side and push out my lips in a pout, like I’m very disappointed.

She looks at me through squinty eyes. “What’s up with you? You’re all jumpy and nervous.”

“Nothing. I’m fine.” I laugh it off, like it is a completely unfounded accusation.

We walk in the direction of the hotel.

“Oh, and don’t think you have me fooled. I know you’re lying about the hot chocolate. You’ve never been a good liar.” She gives me a side look and eyebrow raise. Wow. A double

look. “If you weren’t going to get hot chocolate, why’d you go over there?”

She gives a nod and a little scoff as we walk past the SUVs.

I respond with a little huff and an eyeroll. She isn’t the only one who can give the double look. “I’m sorry.” I say in my best *Clueless* voice. “Unlike you, I take pride in my inability to lie. I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t become a lawyer.” I’m feeling pleased with my little put down.

She smirks back. “No, you became a lobbyist. The only profession that lies more than lawyers.”

My mouth drops open, and all pleasure disappears. That was rude. I bump her with my hip. “Touché.” I sulk. “But maybe that’s why I’m still just a coffee fetcher. I can’t lie to my full potential yet.”

“That’s a good thing.” She puts a hand on my arm and looks at me sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Gee. I wasn’t trying to bring that up.”

I shrug it off, even though she’s hit a nerve. It’s not her fault my career is stalled, while hers is going full steam ahead.

The hotel comes into view. The burns on my stomach flare with pain, as if they can sense how close they are to feeling relief.

We stand in front of the bank of elevators and the pain consumes my thoughts. “I wish this elevator would hurry. I can’t stand here any longer. I’ve got to get these clothes off.”

Texie grins and waggles her brows. “That’s what she said.”

It is a long-standing joke between us. We both love the show *The Office* and will often have weekends where we binge watch several seasons at a time. “I’m glad you can find humor in my injury.” I smirk.

She rolls her eyes. “You are so dramatic sometimes. It’s not as if you’ll be scarred forever.”

The elevator dings and finally opens in front of us. “Hurry and change so we can go back to that overlook.” She says as if

it had been her idea.

The elevator crawls up the shaft, finally opening on our floor. I walk as quickly as I can to our room, trying not to look like a weirdo. Texie saunters behind me, obviously not in as much of a hurry.

I shove the keycard at the lock and fling the door open. Grabbing my suitcase from the closet, I head to the bathroom, not waiting to see if Tex comes in the room behind me.

Standing in front of the mirror, I pull both of my shirts over my head at the same time, letting out a gasp. My eyes land on the angry, red blisters on my stomach. They are the size of a large hand with the fingers splayed out.

I grimace. Texie's wrong. This will definitely leave a mark. I sit down on the edge of the tub trying not to let my eyes fill with tears. I will ugly cry if I allow it to start. It claws its way up my throat, burning and tightening, feeling like a strong hand is squeezing the air from my windpipe. I lean over and turn on the shower. I don't want Texie knowing how bad this is.

She may be a tough attorney in the courtroom, but if she finds out about this, she will turn all Florence Nightingale on me and be overly attentive. There is no middle ground with her. It's all or nothing. That is how she has always lived her life. Sometimes, it makes me jealous. But today, I can't have her go big attitude or my vacation will essentially be over. She'll hover over me like my grandma. And that's not happening. This country speaks to me like none of the others have.

I know, I'm sounding sappy again.

I take a deep breath. Running a washcloth under cold water, I first drag it over my face, then wash the coffee off the skin surrounding the burn. Closing my eyes for a moment, I grit my teeth and take a deep breath before pressing the cold cloth to my stomach. Tiny pops of color appear in my peripheral vision. *Come on Grace, woman up.* I've never had this bad of a burn. Should I go to the hospital? I shake that thought off. My only time in Atraxia is not going to be from a

hospital room. I have plenty of antibiotic cream and some cotton gauze pads. That is all they will do at the ER. Or I'm pretty sure that's all.

I unzip my suitcase and pull out the first aid kit from one of the zipper pockets. My dad taught me that you never travel anywhere without a hundred-dollar bill tucked in your shoe and a first aid kit at the ready. I have a large one in my car and a small one inside my purse. This one is somewhere between those two.

And instead of my shoe, I keep my hundred-dollar bill tucked in my bra. My dad would be proud.

I open one of the Velcro flaps and pull out a small tube of antibiotic burn cream. twisting off the cap, I squeeze it onto my fingers and gently rub it over my stomach. Biting my cheek, I keep the crying at bay, but I can barely swallow past the tightness in my throat. Once the ointment is spread liberally over the affected area, I carefully tape gauze over it. Hopefully that will protect it from my clothes rubbing on it.

First aid complete, I dig through my clothing, trying to find the maxi dress I had packed. Tex hates maxi dresses. Like she loathes them. I know she will give me some crap when I come out of the bathroom. But I don't care. Comfort is more important than her fashion sensibilities right now.

My fingers curl around a soft wad of fabric and I yank it out. Just looking at it makes the pain ease slightly. I pull it over my head and let it fall loosely around my body.

A deep sigh sounds. I would own a whole closet full of maxi dresses if I thought I could get away with wearing them to work every day. They are so cool and comfy. I look in the mirror. What is not to love about them?

Now I can go back to enjoying the last little bit of my vacation.

I open the bathroom door and step out. Texie sits on the bed, scrolling through TV channels. "What took you so long?" She eyes the ankle-length dress. "Are you sure you don't need

to put on more clothing before we go? I think I can see your ankles.”

“Bawahaha.” I fake laugh and pull the hem of my dress up, allowing her to see the bottom of one of the burns on my leg. It is the least severe looking one, which hopefully will make her slightly sympathetic, but not overly concerned.

“Ooh. That looks painful.”

I drop my dress back down and walk to the mini fridge, grabbing my water bottle and pastry box. I shove them into my bag and motion toward the door. “It is painful.” I give her my best teacher lecture face. “But this fabric is soft and loose, so it doesn’t rub. Although, if you are more concerned with my style...”

Texie doesn’t respond to my comment. Instead, she reaches for the local attractions booklet sitting on the table and walks quickly out the door.

So much for sympathy.

“Let’s go back to that bench and plan the rest of our trip,” she says.

The elevator dings and I wait for the doors to part. I glance over my shoulder, feeling like someone is there. When I don’t see anyone, I pretend to scratch my chin on my shoulder. Could MSG have found me or is my imagination running wild now that it doesn’t have the pain from the burns to think about?

I tap my foot impatiently, looking back over my shoulder again. What is taking so long? I’m thinking I might have to pry the doors open with my bare hands, when they push apart. *Finally*. I let out a long breath.

We step inside and my anxiety eases as the elevator makes its way to the lobby. It dings and stops on the fourth floor. The doors open and a man steps inside. He glances at me and then averts his eyes.

Scenes from the *Pelican Brief* play through my mind. How had MSG found me?

I stare at the man's back. He looks taller than Mr. Skateboard Guy. Maybe they are working together. It seems unlikely he was working alone.

The elevator dings and a woman steps on. The man from floor four slips his arm around her waist and kisses her on the cheek. "Did you get checked in okay? Sorry we are on different floors."

She smiles up at him and winks. "It's okay. I don't think I'll be spending much time in my room."

He grins and kisses her again.

I look up at the ceiling, embarrassed to have heard their private conversation. My cheeks burn. What is wrong with me? It's like I think I'm Jason Bourne or something. I shake my head, trying to dislodge all the dumb things that are rattling around up there.

The elevator stops and the doors open in the lobby.

I swallow and step out, smoothing my hair, which doesn't really need smoothing because it is neatly pulled away from my face in a thick rope braid.

Texie looks over at me, her hands on her hips. "Seriously, what's up with you?"

I make a cursory glance around the lobby. "Nothing. I'm fine. Why?"

She grabs me by the arm and pulls me to the side. "Because you're acting weird."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but I shake my head pushing any thoughts of intrigue or mystery away. Things like that just don't happen to people like me.

Several men in the lobby are wearing baseball hats, but they aren't the same color as MSG's. No one looks overly shady or seems to be staring at me, so I walk toward the doors. "I'm just anxious to go back to that overlook. The whole coffee incident made me grumpy."

"Okay. I get that. That guy was so rude to you." She gives me a sideways look. "He probably doesn't have burns on his

toes.”

“Right?” I smile at Texie. I’m so glad we are here together. She may not understand the draw I have to this place, but she does understand me. Most of the time, at least.

We move up the street and I glance behind me one last time, committing to myself to forgetting about MSG and just enjoying our surroundings. We sit down on the bench and the breeze pulls small hairs from my braid, splaying them across my face. I take a deep breath and turn my face to the sun. The rays warm my cheeks and closed eyelids. This is why I came here.

I feel Texie wiggle in closer to my side and nudge me. “Hey, let’s plan what we are going to do for the rest of the day and tomorrow.”

The guidebook crinkles in front of me, and I reluctantly open my eyes. I straighten up so I can see a small bit of the island over the top of the magazine and focus on the list of top attractions. “I can’t leave this place without going to the Hilltop Monastery.” I point. “What else is around it that we can see while we are over that way?”

Texie squints. “It looks like Crater Lake is not too far from there. Maybe we can get in some swimming tomorrow afternoon.”

“That sounds divine. It will take up most of the day tomorrow, so what do you want to do today?” I lean down and grab my bag, pulling the bakery box out. What’s left of the pastry is pushed to one side of the crushed box, the cream filling oozing out one end. I run my finger along the inside of the box and pop the errant cream into my mouth. Everything is right with my world.

My gaze flicks quickly to the sound of a skateboard on the sidewalk of a side street. I push down the lurch in my stomach. It obviously missed the part where I said everything was right with my world. MSG better hope he doesn’t run into me again. Because I am feeling the desire to smack him for tarnishing my vacation.

“There isn’t much left of the day. Maybe we should just walk around the city.” She motions down a road. “There is a cathedral just down there. It probably looks like the other cathedrals we have seen, but I’m sure it’s pretty.”

I nod. “It’s the cathedral where they held the King’s coronation.”

Texie tilted her head. “Wasn’t that like, thirty years ago? How do you even know that?”

“It’s called research. You should try it sometime.” I smirk at her.

She looks blandly at me. “I do research too. I just didn’t research every minute detail of this country, that’s all.”

“Fair point,” I concede. “I saw a video of the cathedral on the internet, but the quality wasn’t great. I’d love to see it in person. How about we leisurely finish eating our treats and then we can walk down to the cathedral and burn off the calories? Deal?”

Texie nods and takes a bite of her baklava, the sticky juice running down one side of her mouth. “Deal.”

I shoved the last overly large bite into my mouth. Standing up, I step to the rock wall that separates the ledge from the cliff below. The sun is moving lower in the sky, but the pinks and purples haven’t yet started tinting the horizon.

I suck in a deep breath and listen to the waves crashing on the rocks below. My eyes flutter shut, and I allow all the stress and anxiety of the day to flow out of my body. I imagine it is like water running from my shoulders down my arms and legs and trickling out of my fingertips and toes. (I learned this visualization thing when I did Pilates for about six months. The exercise didn’t stick, but apparently the visualization thing did.) A deep breath pushes from my lungs. Slowly, my eyes open and I take in the view in front of me with a new viewpoint. A more natural viewpoint. Yeah, I know I sound like some natural foods commercial. “Okay.” I turn toward Texie. “I think I can face life now. Are you ready to go?”

Texie crumples up her paper and chucks it in a nearby garbage can. “Yep. Let’s go see *another* dark, musty church.”

“Come on, Tex. Even you must admit that *Hram Hristovog vaskrsenja* in Montenegro was gorgeous.”

“Okay. I’ll reserve my judgement until we get there.” She smiles and I know that she is just messing with me. She knows I feel different here.

The Cathedral is, contrary to Texie’s assertion, neither dark nor musty. The pink from the waning sunlight reflects off the white stucco walls. Gold leafing lining the walls of the chancel casts the center of the nave in a golden light. I tilt my head back, focusing my gaze on one of the saints in bright blue robes on the ceiling above me.

“See? Aren’t you glad we came in here?” I don’t drop my head to look at Texie.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Now I do turn to look at her. “You guess? What are you talking about? You don’t think this is amazing?”

She shrugs. “It kind of looks like all the others. I guess there’s more blue in this one though. So that’s different. Otherwise, I really can’t tell one from the other.” She looks around, as if trying to find something that sets this place apart from the others. But then shrugs again.

I squint at her trying to see if she is messing with me again. But she isn’t saying it to get a rise out of me. She is completely dead-dog serious. She doesn’t see a difference—doesn’t *feel* a difference here?

“Well, thanks for humoring me anyway.” I turn my eyes back to the paintings on the ceiling, letting them speak to me instead. “I guess we can go.”

She puts her hand on my arm. “It’s okay, Gee. We can stay as long as you want.” She tilts her head to the side and a soft smile plays at her lips. “I like Atraxia Grace. She isn’t as high-strung as DC Grace.”

“DC Grace isn’t high-strung,” I pout.

Her lips flatten. “Yeah, right,” she mutters as she moves off to the other side of the nave.

I watch her back for a moment, knowing she is completely right. Even with the coffee and skateboard incident, I’m way less stressed here. If only I could bottle this little island feeling and take it back to DC with me.

Chapter Four



MY STOMACH GROWLS AND I QUICKEN MY PACE, GLANCING over at the man standing behind the registration desk. I flash him a quick grin because what else do you do when someone catches you looking at them? He nods at me and returns the smile. “Good morning, Miss Martindale,” he practically yells across the lobby.

Uh, does he have to let everyone in the whole hotel know what my name is?

I frown slightly, but I dip my head in response. “Morning,” I mumble. How did he remember my name? There must be hundreds of people staying at the hotel and he remembers *my* name? That’s creepy, right? It seems like more than just good customer service. But maybe I’m just projecting.

The man flicks his eyes to someone sitting in the lobby and nods in my direction. My heart trips a little and I have a desperate urge to turn around and see who he’s looking at. Is it MSG? Has the concierge totally sold me out? I don’t look. Instead, I keep my gaze focused straight ahead until I reach the café.

The elevator doors ding, and my heart speeds up. Not because I think that someone is coming for me out of the elevators. Or maybe I do. I’m not really sure what to think. Except that I’m regretting watching so many crime shows over the years. They are completely messing with my head.

I use the elevator sound as an excuse to turn around and look. I scan the lobby quickly, but no one looks familiar. Why

didn't I give in to my impulse to look when it happened? Had they left or had I just imagined the whole exchange with the concierge?

Texie waves and I grin, even as I continue to survey the area. She walks toward me. Although, if you have ever seen Texie walk, you would know that isn't the right word. It is like saying Chris Hemsworth is cute or *Pride and Prejudice* is a good book. The description just doesn't do the descriptee justice. It is the same with Texie. She doesn't just walk, she sashays. Some might think that is not the right word because it implies an easy, nonchalant way. And in my case, they would be right. I imagine I look a bit like a drunk ostrich. But not Texie. For her, it is all one fluid motion.

She glides up next to me and stops. "Another maxi dress, Gee?" She frowns. "Wait, I've never seen that one before." Her head falls to the side and her mouth pinches shut in a scowl. "Please, don't tell me you bought another one here."

My lips twitch and I look down at the front of me. "What's wrong with it?" I lift one foot and wiggle it. "Look, you can even see my shins. Doesn't that make you happy?"

She looks down at my legs. "Does it feel better with your burns?"

I nod.

She huffs out a breath. "Then I guess I can't be too unhappy about it. Besides, it's not like you're here to meet a guy or anything."

"Exactly." I frown. "Hey, wait. Are you saying a guy won't want to date me just because I'm wearing a maxi dress?"

Texie looks innocently at me. "I said nothing of the sort."

"Well, I wouldn't want someone that shallow anyway." I lift my chin and turn away and quickly scan the lobby.

"Why do you keep doing that?" Texie follows my gaze.

"Doing what?" I feign ignorance.

"Looking around like you are trying to find someone."

I scoff. “I’m not doing that. Who would I be looking for? I don’t know anyone here.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re looking for Modern Ares.” She raises her brows.

“Um, no.” I roll my eyes. “Fine. I’ve watched enough crime shows to see how clueless most people are about their surroundings. I just want to be aware.” I still haven’t told her about the skateboard guy, or *the incident*, as I’ve come to think of it. I haven’t even told her I saw Modern Ares again.

She looks around the lobby with squinted eyes and pushed out lips. “Actually, that isn’t your most terrible idea,” she says.

“Awe, thanks,” I give her a pert smile and bounce of my shoulders.

We turn toward the café entrance. But two large men step in front of us, blocking our path. I pull Texie back just before we both collide with them. I flash a quick smile and mumble an apology as Texie and I try to step around them. They step with us, not allowing us to move past.

We take a step back and Texie looks at me. “A lot of help your scanning did, Grace,” she mumbles.

The first one speaks in broken English. “Miss Martindale?”

I stare at him. How does he know my name? He looks like he could belong to the group of wrestlers that hung out with MA. But they only knew me as Grace Kelly.

The big guy glances over at the reception desk and motions to me with his eyes. The man behind the desk nods.

I scowl at him. What kind of hotel is this, anyway? Don’t they protect their guests’ identities at all? I make a mental note to ask for the manager once I have freed myself from this situation.

“Miss Martindale, if you will please follow me. My employer would like to have a word with you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. My mother taught me not to talk to strangers.” I take a few steps back, pulling Texie

with me. Is MA his employer? I can't imagine anyone else who could be. Except perhaps, MSG. I shake my head at the alphabet soup I've created. Unfortunately, thanks to many police procedurals (that's their official name, I think), I can imagine with little difficulty what MSG might want with me. Or rather to do to me. But if this guy is with MA, what could he possibly want with me? He wouldn't really track me down to get the rest of the money for his shoes, would he?

The man shifts on his feet. "I mean you no harm, miss."

I snort. "Isn't that just what someone who means me harm would say?"

He looks at me, his forehead creasing. "I...I don't understand."

"Who is your employer?" I fold my arms across my chest and jut out a hip.

The man licks his lips. "I am not at liberty to say at this time."

"What if I refuse to go with you? Are you going to force me?" My bravado ends somewhere just past my jaw line. My knees are shaky, and my heart feels like it might come up my throat at any moment. But I mentally shake myself. I am pretty sure I'm not supposed to show fear. Or is that just with bears and other wild animals?

The man shrugs. "I can't force you, Miss Martindale. But it is to your advantage to go. My employer wishes to speak with you about what happened yesterday afternoon."

I swallow. Which incident? Coffee or car?

Surely, Modern Ares is over the whole coffee thing. But I have already told them everything I know about Mr. Skateboard Guy. And I'm still not convinced that MSG isn't behind this. Why don't crime procedurals ever teach you how to handle these types of situations?

"I can allow you to go up by yourself if that will put you more at ease." He takes a step back, clearly meaning it as a show of good faith.

Do I dare go? I look over at Texie. She is staring at me with wide eyes.

“Miss Kincade may accompany you.”

These words only seem to widen Texie’s eyes. “How does he know my name?” She hisses in my ear.

My curiosity pushes me to take the chance. A part of my brain doesn’t believe MSG would make such a public display of collecting me. Especially if he was planning to do me harm. And we have definitely become a public display. The other part of my brain wants to know if this is Modern Ares’s doing. And if it is, what can he possibly want from me now?

I frown. Is this the reason all the girls in mystery shows do such stupid things? If I was in a movie, would people be yelling at the screen, *don’t do it, stupid girl*, just to watch me do it anyway? Yeah, it looks like they would.

Texie grabs me by the arm. “We’re not actually going to go, are we?”

I shrug one shoulder in an *I think so* gesture.

She looks at me. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“What do you think is going to happen?” I ask partially because I’m curious what her answer will be. But mostly I’m trying to appear unafraid. I’m actually pretty grateful to this maxi dress right now. It is totally hiding my shaking knees.

“I think we might get killed.”

I guffaw. “You watch too many crime shows.”

“Maybe I should stay down here.” She smiles sweetly at me. “Because if we’re both killed, who’s going to tell the story back home?” She takes in a breath, and I know she is in this with me.

“Very funny.” I raise my brow at her. “I think he works for Modern Ares. What do you think? Do we take a chance?”

Her countenance completely changes. “You think so?” She scrutinizes the man more completely.

I nod.

“Oh, then yeah. I think we take the chance.”

Has she learned nothing from watching crime shows? She caved like a wet paper towel. And all because he has a pretty face.

I glance over and glare one last time at the man behind the counter. He gives me a big grin and a thumbs up. What is that all about?

The big man motions us to the bank of elevators and presses his hand to the scanner on the inside panel. He offers a smile before backing out into the lobby. I think he thinks his smile is helping the situation. It's not.

“Why do you think he works for Modern Ares?” Texie whispers as the doors slide shut.

“That big guy looks like one of his goons—although I'm not sure why he is asking to see us.”

Texie eyes me. “Not us, Gee. He wants to see *you*. What have you done now?” She takes a deep breath. “What if you are wrong? Can we even do anything now that we are on the elevator?”

I try to sound more confident than I feel. “If you are worried, we'll just push a button and get out on another floor.” We both turn to the panel and sag in unison. There are no other buttons. I've never been in this elevator before and now I know why. It's reserved for the penthouse suites.

I've mostly moved beyond scared. Mostly. Something about this whole thing feels odd, but not dangerous. Still, I don't like meeting people without having consented to the meeting first. I like to have my ducks in a row, as it were. And I have nothing in a row—ducks or otherwise. No research to back me up in whatever is about to happen.

I hate it when that happens. Some might call me a control freak. But I just call it being prepared. It is why I am a good lobbyist. Or I will be, if my boss ever gives me the chance to actually *lobby*.

“Uh, Grace, what is your back-up plan?” Texie shakes her hands at her side—something she does when she is gearing up

for something big. She does it every time before she enters the courtroom.

“I guess we’re going to have to face whoever planned this meeting. But that doesn’t mean we won’t be on our guard.” I rotate my shoulders. “We’ve both done enough kick boxing classes to be able to hold our own.”

Texie puts her fists up in front of her and bounces side to side on the balls of her feet. “Are you going to hum the music for the punching rhythm, or am I?”

I chuckle. “Okay. That is a lame idea. But I just think we should prepare ourselves mentally, you know?”

We both take a deep breath just as the elevator dings and the doors, of course, open promptly.

Chapter Five



“THIS MUST BE THE PRESIDENTIAL SUITE,” TEXIE WHISPERS next to me as we peer into a large vestibule.

“Is it even called that here? They don’t have a president.” I murmur.

We stand there, neither one of us making a move to exit the elevator. It doesn’t ding, and the doors don’t automatically shut like most elevators do. Does that mean it won’t return us to the lobby if we stay in it long enough?

“Surely, no one would pay this much money just to kill us.” Texie mutters. She seems to take courage in that realization.

“That’s what I was trying to tell you.” I take a deep breath and poke my head out of the elevator.

She relaxes and leans against the back mirrored panel. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But do you really believe Modern Ares would go to this much trouble?”

She laughs. “That name still cracks me up. It’s such a spot-on description of him.” She puts her pinkie nail into her mouth and nibbles on it. “It really is not so big of a stretch to think this is him. Who else do we know here?”

I avert my eyes. I should have told her about MSG. But it feels less productive to tell her about him under these circumstances. All she’ll do is freak out. I’ll tell her when we go back to the room.

My stomach tightens slightly. *We'll be going back to the room, right?* My head feels certain Modern Ares is behind this, but my insides are not completely convinced.

“But why does he want to see us? It’s not like we’re besties with him or anything.”

Texie takes a step to the side. “Uh, this is a you, not a we. I’m not a party to any of this. I’m just along for the ride.”

I smirk at her. “It’ll be a total bummer if you get murdered just by being along for the ride.”

She shivers. “Can we stop talking about being murdered? Please?” She rubs her hands up and down her arms.

“Please, come in, Miss Martindale. We have been expecting you.” A decidedly female voice drifts into the elevator. I look at Texie in surprise. “Do you think she heard us?” I mouth.

She shrugs. “That’s not Modern Ares voice,” she whispers.

I take the first cautious step out onto the travertine tiled entryway.

Texie comes up behind me and hisses in my ear. “Look at this place? Even the vestibule is over-the-top opulent.”

Couches line the wall on either side. I guess they are there in case the wait for the elevator is far too taxing and a person needs to rest while they wait?

We shuffle forward into a sunlit living room.

Stepping into the room, I sink into the plushest carpet I have ever felt. It overlaps the sides of my flip-flops and caresses my feet. It is like stepping onto a cashmere goat. I have a strong temptation to lay down and make a cashmere angel right then and there. But I refrain. Cheese and rice, how was I to ever be happy with a standard room again? I now know how the other half lives.

A woman, about the age of my mother, sits on the couch, while an older man with his back to me, paces at the far end of the room. He turns and I instinctively smile. It’s what I do

when I'm nervous. And the nervous meter is quickly moving into the red zone.

The man looks like a hotter version of Victor Kiriakis, from *Days of Our Lives*. Victor is a terrible person on the show, so it seems weird that I feel more at ease when I see this stranger. It must be because I grew up watching *Days* with my Aunt Shirlee, unbeknownst to my mother. It is a safe memory. Surely, Victor means me no harm.

I squint at him as the memory shifts to the *YouTube* videos I watched while researching our trip. My brows rise on my head. Wait a minute. This guy isn't just Victor Kiriakis' doppelganger. He looks just like the King of Atraxia.

I elbow Texie and motion to him with my head. "I think that is the King," I whisper through clenched, smiling teeth.

Her brow creases, and she gives her head a small shake. "Yeah, right. The king and queen asked us up for tea." Her lips barely move, unlike her rolling eyeballs.

The whole conversation reminds me of the scene in *Friends* when Chandler gets locked in the vestibule with Jill Goodacre. I nearly laugh, but I'm just so utterly confused about what is happening.

"Never mind." I mutter.

The older woman waves us forward. "Please, have a seat."

We move farther into the room. A tall, vaulted ceiling reaches at least two stories high, with gold and crystal chandeliers glittering in the sunlight. My mouth hangs open as my head drops back to look up.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with us today, Miss Martindale." The woman on the couch stands.

I snort-laugh. Ugh. That is the worst thing I can do right now. "Uh, we weren't given much of a choice."

She nods. "Yes, well, I am sorry about the highhanded measures we took. But security has been tightened recently."

Highhanded measures? Where am I? In a Jane Austen book?

A throat clears and I glance to the other side of the room. Modern Ares sits in a chair beside a large desk.

My breath hitches and my skin itches.

Without sunglasses covering his altogether too handsome face, it is more than obvious who he is. Perhaps Superman should have worn sunglasses to hide his identity rather than just regular old glasses.

I have seen this man's picture in the newspaper more times than I can remember—every time with one model or another hanging on his well-defined arm. Modern Ares is none other than Prince Tyrone.

He quirks up one brow and gives me a slow, appraising look. My stomach does a little flip-flop at his attentions. And I thought the attraction was strong before. Wow. He is even hotter in person. But then his eyes move to Texie, and a small smile plays at his lips. I bristle slightly.

What else is new?

Why do I even care? So what if this guy is a prince. He's also a complete jerk. Texie can have him, for all I care.

I scold my traitorous insides and clasp my hands in front of me. "So did you bring me here to get the rest of the money for your shoes?" I swallow. My mother would be appalled at the way I just spoke to him. And not because he's a prince. But because my tone is beyond rude.

Besides, I doubt I have enough money in savings to pay for his shoes. From the look of all this luxury surrounding me, I'm guessing they aren't from *Ross Dress for Less*.

The woman looks to Modern Ares—or I guess I have to call him the prince now. "What is she speaking of? Why is she paying for your shoes, Tyrone?"

He stands and shakes his head. "Pay it no mind, Mother. It is what Americans call an inside joke, is it not, Miss Martindale or is it Miss Kelly?" He comes closer and motions to a large man I had not noticed earlier. It's Mr. In-Charge. "Are you sure this is the same woman, Sander? She looks..."

different.” He turns his head to the side. “This one is much prettier.”

I step away from him. What does that mean? I don’t know whether to be flattered or offended. I put my hand to my forehead and shade my eyes, like I’m wearing a hat. “Is this better? Now do I look familiar?”

“Ah,” he nods. “Yes, actually, that does help.” He squints at me. “You really do not have a face for hats.”

I open my mouth and snap it shut, my hand fisting at my side. As if I didn’t already know that. But how dare he say something like that and make it sound as if he is doing me a favor by informing me? If I didn’t think it would land me in some Atraxian prison, I might just slap this guy.

The woman shakes her head. “Really, Tyrone, your manners.” It seems a half-hearted reprimand at best. My mom would have sent me to my room for that kind of comment. But not before the lecture of if I couldn’t say something nice, then I should just keep my mouth shut.

The queen—I can’t believe this is happening—comes over and takes my hands in hers, smiling all toothy and wide. “I must apologize for my son’s behavior. I am afraid his near accident yesterday still has him a bit ruffled.”

Ruffled? Yeah, we’ll go with that one. Obviously, she doesn’t know the whole of my history with her son.

She places a hand at my back and leads me to the couch. She nods to Texie, indicating she can follow. How hostess-y of her.

The king ceases pacing and comes to join us on the couch. Once everyone is settled, we sit staring at each other.

Finally, the woman speaks up. “Perhaps introductions are in order. I am Queen Selene Theodoropoulos and this is my husband, King—”

Texie sucks in a breath next to me.

“Alesandro. And this is my son, Prince Tyrone.”

So this is the royal family. I glance over at the prince. It explains a little about his Modern Ares-ness and his underwhelming personality. He's probably used to people falling all over themselves to attend to his every whim. That's the problem with princes. Or I assume as much.

I frown slightly. How am I supposed to respond to this information? Shouldn't I bow to them or something? I stand up and curtsy. "It is very nice to meet you." Somewhere in my head I remember learning that you're supposed to kiss a royal's ring, but I'm not one hundred percent sure of that. I may have gotten that information from the Disney version of *Robin Hood*. Instead, I just stay with my one leg tucked behind the other.

The queen and king stare at me, but I hear a small chuckle and see Prince Tyrone's lips twitching.

I quickly stand, very glad I hadn't attempted any ring kissing. I'm not certain if he is laughing at my poor attempt at a curtsy or if I'm not even supposed to curtsy. But that doesn't seem right.

The queen motions for me to be seated. "I am sure you know the reason we asked for this meeting."

I shrug my shoulders and retake my seat. "Actually, no. I don't."

The queen smiles at me. "After your heroic actions yesterday, we cannot simply allow you to leave our country without properly expressing our gratitude."

I wave her comment away, embarrassed by the attention. "Oh, it was no biggie. Anyone would have done the same."

"What is she talking about?" Texie whispers through her wide smile.

"I'll tell you later," I whisper back, guilt turning my stomach.

Texie and I tell each other everything. Or we usually do. But I haven't wanted to worry her. At least, that's what I've been telling myself. In truth, there is just something about my

other encounter with Mod—Prince Tyrone that I want to keep to myself.

“Perhaps someone would have intervened, but I believe you are being too modest. According to our analysts, had you not informed Sander of the incident, the brakes on Tyrone’s car would have gone out on the coastline road. The chances are high they would have crashed into the sea below.” Her voice chokes up, and she withdrew a handkerchief from the clutch sitting next to her. “Which I am sure is no coincidence.”

“Do you know who did it?” I glance over at Texie, and she looks at me in confusion. My guts twist even more.

The queen regains control of her emotions and folds the handkerchief in her lap. “Not yet. But I am confident we will discover the person. Sander is very thorough.” She looks over at Sander a.k.a. Mr. In-Charge.

He dips his head to her. “Perhaps you can be of assistance in identifying the person when the time comes,” Sander says.

The queen returns her gaze to me. “Yes, well, as a show of our gratitude, we wish for you to join us at the palace for dinner. Do you have plans tomorrow night?”

Texie’s head shakes furiously. I’m pretty sure if I decline, I will be the only one murdered here today.

I sit forward slightly. “You really don’t have to do anything for me.”

Texie puts her hand on my thigh and squeezes.

“Ouch,” I scowl over at her.

The queen looks at us both with a furrowed brow. “It is the least we can do.”

“If you are certain it’s no trouble, we would be honored to join you.” I say with a British accent. Where that came from, I have no idea.

“It will be a small, intimate, family dinner. I hope that does not disappoint you.”

I shake my head. “No. Not at all.”

The queen stands, so I jump off the couch. “Very well. We shall send a car around to pick you up at six?”

Texie and I nod in unison.

Sander steps forward and lifts his arm toward the elevator. We are being dismissed, but I don’t feel affronted or anything. I mean, it isn’t every day that people get an invitation to dine at a palace.

We make our way to the elevator and step inside. As we stand waiting for the doors to close, I raise my hand and offer a little wave. The queen returns it and I feel a thrill of excitement. She feels more real than Prince Tyrone and the king—aside from her formal language like *highhanded*. I like her. Although, I have no idea how such a nice woman raised a man like Prince Tyrone. I shrug. Not that it really matters. I can spend the evening talking with the queen and virtually ignore Modern Ares.

The elevator doors slide shut and the box slides down the shaft.

Texie turns toward me and lets out a high-pitched scream. “Oh. My. Heck, Gee! We’re having dinner at the palace!”

Chapter Six



WE PUSH OPEN THE DOOR OF A LITTLE BOUTIQUE-Y TYPE SHOP with gorgeous gowns displayed in the window. I hesitate slightly. In my experience, boutique-y type places always mean more money. But I haven't seen a mall or even a Target since we landed in Europe, so this is probably my best option.

Texie pulls me through the door and lets out a small squeal. This is her Mecca. She moves from dress to dress, each one eliciting an ooh or an ahh.

Most of the dresses I can see are form fitting and the burns on my stomach hurt just at the thought of slipping any of them on.

Texie looks over at me. "Why do you have such a look of disdain on your face? There are so many gorgeous dresses to choose from in here."

"I don't have a look of disdain. I am simply looking for an option that will suit my needs." A part of me had hoped that a prim and proper woman would show up at our hotel room with racks of gorgeous gowns for us to choose from. I mean, it happened in the *Princess Diaries*, didn't it? Isn't that what royalty does for commoners that come to the palace?

Texie gives me a little hip bump. "I don't think they make maxi dresses in formal wear, Gee."

"Yeah, haha." I move away from her to see what else I can find. Pulling dress after dress from the rack, I finally find a gold gown that drapes in folds across the front. The back also drapes, but lower, leaving much of the back exposed. At the

waist, the dress tapers, looking like it will hug the body—not an altogether happy thought. Not only will it accentuate my ‘birthing hips’ as my grandmother called them, but the thought of the fabric rubbing against the burns on my legs makes me grimace slightly. They aren’t as bad as my stomach, so maybe it will be okay. Unfortunately, there isn’t much I can do about the hips. At least not in the next twenty-four hours.

I grab the dress and head for the dressing room, picking up the price tag, just to see. I stop in my tracks. Twenty thousand dracones? I do quick math in my head and nearly drop the dress. More than three thousand dollars? I turn and quickly put it back on the rack, as if just holding it will drain my bank account. This vacation is already going to put a heavy dent in my savings. I can’t justify spending that kind of money on a dress I will wear once. Not even to dine with a king and queen.

“Why did you put that dress back? I think it is pretty.”
Texie says holding an armful of dresses.

“It’s a little too prom dressy for me, don’t you think?” I lie.

Texie holds the gown out and looks at it, then at me. Her eyes narrow slightly, and she looks at the price tag. “It’s the cost, isn’t it?” She tsks. “This is a big deal, Gee. Splurge a little.”

I tilt my head to the side—my eyes rolling of their own volition. “Says the DC lawyer who just made junior partner.”

Her eyes fill with pity, and I want to flee from the store. I hate being pitied.

It’s funny. Maybe not funny haha, but more curious. We both attended the same amount of school, and both have master’s degrees. But an associate lobbyist doesn’t make the same kind of money as an associate lawyer. And certainly not as much as a junior partner. I make just enough money to cover my high-cost DC apartment and food. Some months, if I brown bag it every day and eat Ramen for dinner, I’m able to put a little in savings. It’s how I was able to afford this trip. But I don’t have a contingency account for formal attire.

I look at the dress, thinking of it in terms of Ramen. How much will I have to eat to pay for it? I run my tongue over the roof of my mouth several times, an overwhelmingly salty chicken flavor fills my senses.

I shake my head at Texie. “I can’t do it. I just can’t spend that much money on a single dress.” It just isn’t worth the heavy, salty toll it will cost.

Texie lays aside her stack and grabs the price tag. “This isn’t terrible, Grace. Not for a gown like this.”

“But I’ll only wear it one time. This isn’t my wedding day, Tex.”

She waggles her brows at me. “If you play your cards right, it could be.”

My eye roll is immediate.

She pulls the gown from the rack. “I’ll buy it for you.”

I shake my head emphatically. “Not only no. But....”

She holds up her hand and stops me. “Think of it as an early Christmas present.” She smiles and shoves the gown into my arms.

I still shake my head. “No way. I can’t afford to buy you a three thousand-dollar Christmas present.” I don’t want to be a charity case. I hate feeling like this. This dinner invitation is starting to feel like a burden rather than a reward.

Texie places her hand on my arm. “So what if it’s your birthday *and* your Christmas present?”

“For the next ten years?” I shake my head and sigh, placing the dress back on the rack.

She looks so disappointed. “Fine. If you aren’t going to buy one, then I’m not either.” A smile dances on her lips. “I’m sure a maxi dress is totally appropriate for dining at the palace.”

My shoulders sag. “Fine, I’ll get the dress.” There is little enthusiasm in my voice. Probably because all I can taste is Ramen.

“How about I pay for half and call it your Christmas present.”

I stare at her. I can't afford a fifteen-hundred-dollar Christmas present for her either. But I guess it is better than three grand.

“I don't care if what you give me costs the same amount, Grace. It's the thought, remember? Everything doesn't have to be even Steven.” She gives me a little pout. “Didn't I agree that I wouldn't obsess over calories and carbs on this trip? So maybe you can agree to not worry so much about spending a little extra money.”

“But your carbs and calories won't get you evicted from our apartment, Tex.”

“I won't let that happen and you know it.” She tilts her head to the side. “Come on. An extra fifteen hundred dollars won't get you evicted either. I know you still have savings.”

She's right. I won't be evicted. At least not *this* month. I rub my fingertips up and down between my eyebrows. Why am I letting my pride ruin this for us? She has been super chill about the foods we have been eating on this trip. I take a deep breath. *Fine*. I can do this for her.

I nod once.

She lets out a squeal and shoves me toward the dressing room. “You go first. I want you to do this before you can think too much about it and change your mind.”

I pull the curtain closed over the fitting room door and change into the gown. It is pretty and it fits well, but the color does nothing for my complexion. I look completely washed out and pasty. A relieved sigh escapes my lips. No three-thousand-dollar dress for me.

“Come on. I want to see you in that dress,” Texie hollers from the sitting area outside the dressing room.

I step out, running my hands self-consciously down the skirt. I'm surprised at how little pain I feel from my burns. The style of the dress is just what I need, if only we could find it in a different color.

Texie sits with her index finger to her lips. “The color is all wrong.”

I nod. “I know. I look like someone from *The Walking Dead*.”

Texie laughs. “You’ll need to work the make-up around your eyes a little bit more, but other than that, you’re right.” She stands up. “I like the style of dress for you, though. Your curves are smokin’.”

I snort. “I think you’re the one who’s smokin’.”

She frowns and waves me aside. She hates it when I body shame myself. I only do it when I have to wear something form fitting, which is why I generally stay away from dresses like this.

“Go start getting out of that dress—”

“That’s what she said,” I say, interrupting her.

She ignores my comment. “I’ll go see if there’s one in a different color or something similar and I’ll bring it to you.”

I nod and turn back into the fitting room.

I have the dress off and I’m draping it back on the hanger when Texie slipped through the curtain.

“What are you doing? Couldn’t you just hand it over the curtain?”

She looks at me with a bland expression. “I didn’t want to snag it on something. Besides, it’s not like I haven’t seen you in your underwear before.”

I give her one more wide-eyed look before reaching for the dress in her hand. It is a similar style, only instead of a cowl type drape, it is more of a criss-cross style, in a shimmery black fabric. I reach to look at the price tag, but Texie blocks my hand. “Just try it on, Gee.”

I sigh and turn to hang it on the hook, when I hear Texie gasp.

“What?” I follow her eyes to the hand shaped blisters on my stomach.

“Oh. My. Gosh.” She raises her eyes to me. “Gee, why didn’t you tell me it was this bad?” She reaches two fingers forward to touch it, but I instinctively suck in my stomach.

She swallows. “Wow. I will buy you half a dozen maxi dresses if you need them. I’m so sorry I was making fun of you before. I had no idea.”

I put my hand on her arm. “It’s okay, Texie. Really. They’re getting better.” I eye the dress. “And this looks loose enough that it won’t rub.”

She eyes my thighs. “He really did a number on you, didn’t he?”

I shrug. What is there to say?

She points to the burns on my legs. “What about those? Is the tight skirt going to hurt too badly?”

I shake my head. “I thought it might in the last one, but it didn’t bother me. I’m sure this one will be fine.”

She nods, her face a little chalkier than it was before.

I shoo her out of the room. “Now go sit down so I can try this on. I still want to see some sights today.”

I slip on the dress, and I’m surprised to find it even more comfortable than the last one. I look in the mirror. The black doesn’t make me look pasty; instead, I look creamy. I tilt my head to the side. And the contrast with my red hair—even I’m impressed by what I see. I hardly even notice my hips. This dress looks as if it has been made just for me.

I step out of the dressing room and Texie lets out a long sigh. “Oh, Grace. It’s beautiful. You look amazing.” She grins. “Prince Tyrone won’t be able to keep his eyes off of you. Not that he was able to before.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one he was ogling yesterday. Besides, we have a very mutual dislike for one another. He has never even *seen* me, let alone stared *at* me.”

Texie shrugs. “Whatever. I know what I saw.”

I frown. “If he only likes me when I look like this that makes him a shallow jerk. Which we already know him to be, so I guess there will be no surprises.” I turn and go back into the dressing room. “So this is the one?”

“Definitely,” Texie calls through the curtain.

Now that I ‘m alone in the dressing room, I turn over the price tag and cough. The price has *only* increased by seven hundred and fifty dollars. Well, crap. I love the dress and how it makes me feel too much to put it back now.

I change back into my clothes and push out of the dressing room. “Your turn, Tex.”

She grabs the pile sitting in the chair next to her and moves into the dressing room. I sit back. How silly it was of me to think we were going to do any sightseeing today.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE you saved the prince’s life, Gee. Or that you didn’t tell me about it. Seriously, no one is going to believe it when we get back to DC.” Texie has a hard time sitting still in the back of the limo. She watches out the window and then moves to open the little mini fridge on the other side of the car.

I, on the other hand, have the opposite problem. My legs seem to have lost all feeling. Not even my burns hurt. Can a person truly become paralyzed from fear? Not fear, exactly. Extreme nervousness? How will I even walk into the palace if I can’t feel my legs? My stomach heaves, and I try to focus on my breathing.

I direct my gaze out the window, staring as the lights of the city fade. The roiling in my stomach calms as I watched the waves crash against the shoreline below us, the moonlight reflecting off the water. It is the perfect fairytale setting, just like in every princess Hallmark movie I have ever seen.

Or it is until I hear the queen’s voice in my head. *The brakes on Tyrone’s car would have gone out on the coastline*

road. The chances are high they would have crashed into the sea below. This must be the road the queen was talking about. I swallow hard, thinking of a car plunging over the side of the cliff.

I scoot a little closer to Texie.

We clear the drop-off and moments later the car stops. I look past Texie, out her window at a brightly lit palace. It isn't like Buckingham Palace big, but it is still palatial.

The driver opens the door and we both climb out.

I run my hands down the front of my skirt, trying to smooth the wrinkles that will surely stay there.

“Look at this place!” Texie whispers fiercely in my ear. “I am so glad you have a conscience and saved the prince’s life. Because this is the coolest thing I’ve ever done.” She squeezes my arm.

A footman —I’m guessing that is what he is—stands at the door. When we approach, he silently opens it for us.

A man in a black suit and tie waits just inside the door. He bows when we approach.

“Miss Martindale. Miss Kincade. Welcome. My name is Andino. Please, follow me.” He leads us down a long hall and up a set of stairs. Then we make a series of turns and I know I will never find my way out on my own. This place is way bigger than it looks on the outside.

Finally, after what feels like a mile of hallways, Andino pushes open a door and announces us. I take one last deep breath in the hallway and then step inside.

As I expected, from my vast knowledge of all things royal, we enter a sitting room. In all the movies I have seen, people always wait for dinner to be announced in a sitting room. It is finely decorated, but homey. The leather couches appear lived in, with creases and worn spots. The atmosphere of the room puts me instantly at ease.

Until I spot our hosts as they stand up to greet us.

Chapter Seven



WELL, JIMINY CRICKET! THIS IS JUST THE WORST.

The queen's wearing a pair of jeans—expensive and obviously ironed—but jeans, none the less. The king has on a nice pair of slacks and a golf shirt. Perhaps if he had been wearing an ascot, it might have dressed it up, but alas, the ascot is absent. My only hope is that Modern Ares is wearing a tuxedo. I close my eyes tightly, as if I'm wishing on a star. *Please, let him be wearing a tuxedo.*

I open my eyes and look around again. He's sitting across the room in a club chair opposite another man. No tuxedo in sight.

“Seriously?” I mutter under my breath. My face flames with heat. How much money had I spent on this dress? And how much ramen was I going to have to eat? And for what? I could have worn a maxi dress!

But why are they dressed like this? Had they not said it was a family dinner? My brow creases. Doesn't royalty dress formally for dinner? I mean they use words like highbrow. And I'm fairly certain in every movie I have seen with royalty, it shows them dressing formally for dinner. I tug on my skirt. My 'research'—finger quotes are needed here—based entirely on TV and movies has led me completely astray. But in my defense, had I known I was going to meet Atraxia's royal family, I would have researched the crap out of all this.

The prince comes forward, a smile playing at his lips. Unlike our past encounters, he is at least kind enough not to

laugh aloud. He gives me a slight bow and places a kiss on my hand. “Miss Martindale, you look lovely this evening.”

I eye him suspiciously. Why is he being so nice? This is nothing like our previous interactions.

He glances over at his parents and speaks rapidly in Greek, telling them he will return shortly. Should I tell them I speak fluent Greek? It seems rude to eavesdrop on their conversation when they think they may speak freely.

His mother sighs and asks if it’s necessary. He nods and turns back to me. “I apologize, but I left something in my chambers. I shall return shortly.”

I paste on my fakest smile and nod. I know when I’m being blown off. He can probably already tell what a disaster this evening is going to be and is bailing now before the real carnage begins. He leaves and Texie and I am left standing in awkward silence.

The queen comes over, her smile twitching slightly. “I’m sorry. I must have forgotten to tell you it was an informal dinner.” She looks my gown over. “Although, Tyrone is correct. Your dress is stunning.” She glances at Texie. “Both of you look lovely.”

Texie self-consciously puts a hand to her hair and curtsies simultaneously. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Queen Salene motions to the couches facing the large windows. “Please, have a seat.” She waves to the other man who was seated with the prince. He comes over, meeting us halfway to our destination.

“Miss Martindale. Miss Kincade. This is my son, Prince Barak.”

He gives us a slight bow, kissing each of our hands in turn. A giggle escapes Texie’s lips, her eyes unable to leave the man’s face. I have never seen her act like this around a guy. She isn’t usually one to play the dumb blonde. I’m not sure what is causing this reaction. He is larger in stature than his brother, but equally handsome. But it can’t be the

handsomeness or the prince-ness because she has never reacted like this around Modern Ares.

We both curtsy. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness,” I say.

Texie still seems unable to form a coherent sentence.

“My daughter is away at school. Perhaps we will meet again when she is home with us.” She says it like there is a chance we will be besties from here on out. While I wouldn’t push away such a relationship, I hardly think it’s going to happen. Look at this place. Never have I felt the disparity of my upbringing more so than I do now.

Queen Salene motions for us to sit down. “Dinner should be ready shortly.”

“Where is she at school?” I ask as we walk over to the seating area.

“Helene is studying medicine at Oxford.” Prince Barak says, coming to join the group.

I raise my brows. “Med school and Oxford. That’s impressive.”

The queen shrugs. “Yes, well it will be of no use to her. She has other responsibilities. But it is what she wants so we are allowing her the chance to do it.”

I fight the frown that wants to come to my face. That feels like such an archaic mind set. The little lady belongs at home doing wifey things and raising the kids. Was it an Atraxia thing or a royal thing?

Texie grabs onto my arm, her hand clutching me like a vise, as we walk to the sofa.

“Miss Martindale, tell us about yourself.” The king looks my gown over and smiles. His face is kind, but I can see he finds humor in the situation. I’m beginning to think I’m just a big joke for the whole royal family. Except for maybe Prince Tyrone, because he has already fled. Not that I blame him entirely. If given the opportunity, I would bolt too.

I lift my chin a fraction. I'm sure this is going to be the story they tell everyone at their next fancy cocktail party. They will tell of the ridiculous Americans who didn't listen and came to a casual dinner dressed for the red carpet.

I can't really fault them. I mean, I would totally tell everyone if the roles were reversed. This is story time gold. But it's probably going to be a few years before I find humor in it.

"Umm, I am not sure what you want to know. We live in Washington, DC. Texie and I came to Europe to celebrate her recent promotion." I glance over at her, and she nods, smiling like an idiot at Prince Barak.

I elbow her. "Calm down. You look like a crazy person," I whisper when I turn my head to fake cough.

"What fun." The queen looks at Texie. "What kind of promotion?"

Finally, Texie snaps out of her googly-eyed fantasy world. She squares her shoulders, putting on her serious face. The face she gets when she is in lawyer mode. All the crazy melts away to expose the calm and no-nonsense attorney. "I was named as a junior partner at my law firm, Your Majesty."

Both the king and queen's brows rise on their foreheads. Apparently, we have not conveyed the fact that we are both well-educated and usually well-spoken.

"And are you a lawyer, also, Miss Martindale?" the king asks.

I shake my head. If they are like most people in America, I will see their impressions drop a bit. My job never elicits the kind of response Texie's does. "No, Your Majesty. I'm a lobbyist."

My prediction is spot on. Their brows drop as much as they had risen at Texie's announcement. "A lobbyist? Meaning companies pay you money to bribe members of your congress to vote in favor of their agenda?"

Ouch. I cringe. He hasn't sugarcoated it. Normally people don't use the "B" word. It seems the false generalization about

American lobbyists has reached all the way to this little island in the Mediterranean. “Not exactly, but close. While that is a general misconception, we do not bribe members of Congress. We merely provide them with facts and figures that they may not have access to or have uncovered in their own research.” I put a particularly perky tone in my voice.

His brow does not smooth out in the least. “We have *lobbyists* here too, Miss Martindale. Only we have laws governing their actions.”

Wow. I have heard people use the word politician with less disdain than when the king uses the word lobbyist. I’m never going to see this guy again. Why didn’t I just lie and say I am a lawyer like Texie? Dinner would be less tense, that’s for sure. “Yeah, we have laws too.” Much of my previous perk has abandoned me.

“Do you even need a university degree for such a job in America?”

My brows shoot up and my mouth drops open. What is with this guy? Not only is he dissing my job to my face, but now he is questioning my education? Hmm. Guess the proverbial acorn didn’t fall far from the tree. Modern *Zeus* stands before me. “Yes, actually. I have a master’s degree in business administration from Dartmouth. My under grad is in political science from Stanford.” Hah. That seems to smooth out the creases in his forehead, at least a little. Although, my education does not completely erase the distaste of my job. I can still see that in his eyes.

I raise my chin a notch higher. Would it be rude to feign illness and just return to the hotel? Why do I even care if it’s rude? He’d been rude first. I sulk like a two-year-old. They can keep Texie as their proper guest.

Queen Salene seems to sense the tension in the room. You’d have to be completely socially awkward not to feel it. She clears her throat. “I am very impressed with the level of education you’ve both received.”

I move to the edge of the couch. My hackles are up, as my father says. Why was this woman so surprised that an

American woman could be educated?

Texie must sense my irritation because she places a hand on my arm and whispers, “I don’t think she means it as a slight, Gee.”

I force the tension out of my shoulders. She is probably right. This whole evening had started off on the wrong foot, and I’m just allowing that to dictate my attitude.

The queen’s lips set into a firm line, and I follow her gaze to see Modern Ares has returned. My cheeks heat and I think my heart might beat out of my chest.

He’s no longer wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Instead, he is decked out in a navy-blue suit—by the way it hugs his form in just the right places it’s obviously tailored just for him—complete with a vest and tie. It’s not a tux, but it’s really close. Many of my friends’ husbands had worn something similar for their weddings.

My breath whistles quietly out between my teeth. Wow. And I thought he looked like a god in jeans?

I stare at him as he walks across the room and I feel like crying, which is completely stupid. But it’s one of the nicest things a man has done for me in the memorable past. My brow furrows. Or had he done it for Texie? Regardless, it’s a completely *unAres* thing to do. Does he have an ulterior motive behind the action, or had I simply misjudged him?

I bristle. I like to think of myself as a good judge of character. Maybe not where Tanner was concerned. But as a general rule, I do pretty good. It bothers me that I might have been so wrong about this guy.

His mother eyes him suspiciously. “You changed your clothes,” she says in Greek.

“I believe that is quite obvious, Mother,” Modern Ares—no, that name doesn’t seem to fit the man standing beside the couch—Prince Tyrone replies in Greek.

“What are you trying to accomplish, Son? She is a tour—”

I clear my throat. While I want to relish a bit longer in the kind sentiment of Prince Tyrone's gesture, I need to let them know that their conversation isn't private before one of them says something that will embarrass us all. "You may be interested to know that I'm fluent in Greek." I speak the language to illustrate my point.

This time, it is me that makes the brows of every member of the royal family rise. I sit up a little straighter.

Prince Tyrone grins. "You speak Greek?" he asks in English.

I nod. "Yes."

Texie nudges me. "She also speaks French, Spanish, Japanese and Russian."

While I'm not completely comfortable with Texie's pronouncement, it is probably better that she has put the information out there, just in case they try to use another language to converse with each other.

Prince Tyrone lets out a whistle. "What, no Arabic or Chinese? Your education must be lacking." He winks at me. "That's beyond impressive."

What happened? Modern Ares left and a prince came back in his place.

The tension from earlier drains from my shoulders. This is the banter of friends, people comfortable with one another, not those who barely tolerate each other. It makes me second guess myself again. "Well, I don't speak either fluently—yet. But I'm taking classes in both languages."

His smile drops a fraction. "You're not serious."

Texie laughs at my side. "Actually, she is. Gee has an amazing talent for languages. It's what sealed the deal on getting her hired at the top lobbying firm in DC."

This is why we're best friends. We don't compete, rather we complement each other. I'm equally proud of Texie and her promotion. While I can't help but bask a bit in the pride I hear in her voice, I also don't want my job brought back up.

“Gee? I’m not familiar with this word. What does it mean?” The king’s brow furrows.

I grin. “My name is Grace. Gee is just Texie’s nickname for me.”

He nods. “I see.” He may see, but from the look on his face, he doesn’t like the nickname much. Oh well. He won’t have to hear it much after tonight.

“You’re a lobbyist?” The prince doesn’t sneer even a little. Is this even the same guy I had met the other day? Prince Tyrone is nothing like the Modern Ares that dumped his coffee all over me.

“Yep.” I shrug. “Well, a junior lobbyist/interpreter.” I can’t bring myself to confess that I have yet to lobby anything. Most days I feel more like a glorified research assistant/coffee fetcher. And people say I can make a wicked good espresso. So I guess I do have options, even if the smell of coffee makes me want to hurl.

With more and more of our clients coming from overseas, my skills in language *are* putting me in higher demand, even if I’m not allowed to do any actual negotiating.

The prince nods, an appreciation in his eyes that is hard to miss.

My stomach goes all flippy and fluttery.

His mother says something in a language I don’t know. Turkish, maybe? Or perhaps Armenian? I smile. It isn’t often people have a second language they can revert to that I don’t understand. It appears I’m not the only linguist in the room.

She flicks a glance at me, as if she is checking to see that I’m not understanding what she is saying.

The door opens and the butler enters and bows. “Dinner is ready.”

Prince Tyrone extends his arm to me. “Will you do me the honor of accompanying me into dinner, Miss Martindale?” His tone is charming and endearing.

I nod and place my hand in the crook of his arm. I study him through side eyes, unable to account for the complete personality change in the man next to me.

Chapter Eight



THE ROOM WE ENTER DOESN'T HOLD A LONG, FIFTY-SEAT table complete with glittering chandeliers and tapestries like I expected. Instead, the room is smaller with a large, round table. There *is* a chandelier, but it is a simple drum style, hanging from wrought iron fittings. It is both modern and ancient looking at the same time.

Prince Tyrone leads me to a spot at the table and pulls my chair out for me. He waits for me to sit down, before tucking the chair underneath me and taking the seat next to me.

I place the napkin on my lap, trying to discreetly observe the room around me. A darkly stained wood wainscoting covers the lower half of the room, extending ten to twelve feet up the tall walls. The upper half is painted a creamy yellow, blending into the mural of toga-clad men and women on the ceiling.

“It is a bit garish for this day and age, I know. But it was painted more than five hundred years ago.” Prince Tyrone leans over, whispering into my ear. “And it was done by Raphael. It’s not something you just paint over.”

I swallow hard. Raphael? I’m pretty sure he isn’t talking about the Ninja Turtle. I glance over at him. Is he serious? The look on his face says he is. “It’s amazing,” I breathe out.

King Alejandro clears his throat and I return my gaze to the table and its occupants. “Thank you for joining us, Miss Martindale and Miss Kincade.” He bites his lower lip a

moment. “This small gesture doesn’t come close to expressing how grateful we are for what you did for Tyrone.”

I shake my head. I want to wave him away, uncomfortable with the praise he is giving me. Surely, someone else would have discovered the problem with the brake line, had I not told them of it. That is why he has so many bodyguards, right? Don’t they check under the cars with mirrors or something like that?

“Really, you don’t need to thank me. We’re all good.”

The king tilts his head to the side and gives me an odd look.

Thankfully, just then a horde of servants brings in trays of food. I smell the *moussaka* before I see the dish. My mouth waters and my stomach lets out a loud growl. I glance to my side and notice the prince smothering a grin. Whatever. I’m starving.

A bowl of *kotosoupa avgolemeno* is set in front of me. Texie leans over, and whispers in my other ear. “What is this?”

“It’s a chicken soup with a broth and lemon base.” I breathe in deeply. “You’ll love it. I promise.” I look up at the server. “*Sas efcharistó.*”

His face brightens at the thanks. “*Parakaló.*”

Texie looks up at the server and attempts the thank you in Greek, but it comes out sounding nothing like it should. The server smiles at her and tells her she is welcome.

She stares down at her bowl for a moment and then runs her spoon through the soup, taking a tentative bite. I watch her eyes brighten as the lemon undertones hit her taste buds. She turns back to me and smiles. “You’re right; this is really good.”

I turn my attention to the food in front of me. It has been ages since I’ve had *kotosoupa avgolemeno* and I plan to savor every moment of it.

“Miss Martindale, have you ever had a really terrible morning, that only led to a terrible afternoon and a terrible

evening?”

I nod. “I’m pretty sure everyone has days like that.”

He smiles and glances back at his plate. “I’m afraid I was in the midst of such a day when I encountered you on the street. I must apologize for my behavior that day.” The prince’s breath tickles my neck and I feel goosebumps cover my arms and legs. “For both our previous encounters.”

I wince slightly as the bumps cover my stomach and my burns tingle.

“No worries. We’re all good.” I don’t want to look at him because I’m sure he is giving me a look that will make me soften toward him, especially since he has gone and changed his clothes. And I’m not sure I want to soften toward him. Did changing his clothes negate our first two encounters?

My eyes flick over to him against my better judgment. Stupid, traitorous eyes.

My breath hitches and my suspicions are confirmed. There is a look of sincerity in his eyes. I purse my lips together tightly, willing myself not to cave. It is so obvious this guy is a total player. He knows he is next level gorgeous and the whole prince thing doesn’t hurt him, I’m sure. But here’s the thing. I’m a big believer in first impressions—in peoples’ reactions when bad things happen. That is when you see someone’s true character. I’m confident I have seen this guy’s true, unedited self. And it isn’t pretty.

But I also understand bad days. That day was not my best day either. And I had not been as kind as perhaps I should have been. Regardless of his reaction to me. My mom always says poor behavior doesn’t excuse poor behavior. I have grown to hate that phrase over the years. But I also understand the truth of it.

Which if that is the case, shouldn’t I cut him a little slack? He is trying to make it up to me, isn’t he? Isn’t that why he changed his clothes? To make me feel more at ease?

I take a bite of soup, trying to process my emotions.

“You see, I had just left a meeting with my father in which he told me I was required to meet with the Petroleum Union next month.”

I nod. “Oh, sure. I can see how that would make you unhappy,” I say, my tone flat. Is this supposed to make me feel bad for him? He actually had to do some work and it had made him mad? Ugh. Trust fund kids are the worst. Tanner would have had a similar response if he’d ever been made to work. I had learned my lesson with him—stay away from the uber rich.

“I know that doesn’t seem like a big deal, but I had a big ski trip planned with a bunch of my mates from Oxford.” He’s right. It doesn’t seem like such a big deal. Not something that would justify how rude he was to me.

I gave him a pouty face. “Aww, did you have to miss out on a vacation? What, have the other dozen you’ve been on this year not been enough?”

He frowns and I feel a tug of guilt. Why am I being such a jerk? He is trying to apologize. But I can’t seem to shake the earlier assumptions I’d made about him.

“I haven’t been on a dozen trips this year. Is that what your papers said?”

Part of me wants to tell him that our papers don’t even know he exists, but that would be a flat out lie. And as we have already established, I’m not good at lying. “No. I just assumed. Isn’t that what royal people do? Go on trips and wave to people?” I give him my best elbow, elbow, wrist, wrist wave.

I have to give him some props. He manages a smile. “Where are you getting your information about royalty? I think it may be giving you the wrong idea.”

My face turns twenty shades of red and I shrug. “You know, the usual places. Hallmark channel, movies. The typical.” I long blink, kicking myself and knowing I had probably just shot all my credibility as a researcher with those few words.

He laughs out loud, and I open my eyes. The whole table is looking at us.

“What is so funny, Tyrone?” His mother smiles across the table at us.

Oh, please do not repeat my stupidity. Perhaps if I say it enough times, it will actually come true.

“Miss Martindale was just telling me a funny story.”

The queen raises her brows and smiles. “Oh, please share. It must have been very humorous to receive such a reaction from Tyrone. He isn’t easily amused.”

He seems to laugh enough at me. But I’m not about to repeat what we have been talking about. I need to think of something else. But my mind goes blank. What am I supposed to say? I lick my lips and blurt the first thing that comes to me. “I was telling him of the time my nylons fell down around my ankles while I was crossing the street on my way to work.”

What? Did I really just say that out loud? That is so much worse than the Hallmark thing. I don’t think my face could get any hotter, but I’m wrong.

Prince Tyrone laughs even harder and the king and queen both look at me like I have sprouted antennae on my head. From where I am sitting, they are the ones who are not easily amused.

Texie joins in on the laughter. “That is a funny story. Although, it paints the wrong picture when you just call them nylons. They were actually thigh highs.”

I telepathically tell her to shut up.

The prince’s eyes widen, and he glances at me. “Oh? She neglected to mention that part.

Texie laughs. “Can you imagine, the cars stopped at the light honking at her to get out of the street?” She sighs. “It’s one of my favorite stories.”

I kick Texie under the table. “I don’t think they really need any more information, Tex.” Oh man, how did an evening so ripe with potential go so terribly awry?

Texie scowls at me but turns back to her food. A servant comes and takes my now cold soup away, placing a clean plate before me. If it wasn't completely inappropriate, I would totally kiss the man. The change in food seems to draw the attention away from me and other conversations start back up. Although, I can't help but notice Prince Barak keeps glancing at me from across the table. And it's not one of those sly, I'm into you, glances. It's more of the why-did-we-let-this-crazy-person-in-our-home kind of glances.

I want to put my elbows on the table and drop my head into my hands, but I have already made such a fool of myself, I can't possibly breach protocol like that.

"Do not think for one second that I will let you return to America without you telling me that story in its entirety," the prince says softly.

Why does his voice have to sound all rich and velvety?

I shake my head, my mortification complete.

"I should apologize again." He reaches over and puts a hand on my arm. "That seems to be all I'm doing today. I should not have put you on the spot like that."

I take a long, cleansing breath. "No need to apologize. This is not the first time my mouth has gotten me in trouble." I offer a weak smile. It's too bad we will never end up together, because these are the types of stories that become family folklore, handed down for generations. "We're good. Even for the coffee."

"Thank you for your understanding," Prince Tyrone visibly relaxes. "I haven't seen my mates in nearly two years." He shrugs. "We all have responsibilities, which only seem to increase the older we get. So yes, I was disappointed. But as I said, it does not excuse my behavior."

"I shouldn't have thrown my money at you or told you my name was Grace Kelly." I grimace at the memory. I really was not at my best, was I?

He chuckles, but less loudly this time. "Yes, you did make it more difficult to find you." He flicks his gaze at my hair and

smiles appreciatively. “Thankfully, you stand out among a crowd. Especially here on Atraxia. A redhead and a blonde traveling together do attract some attention.”

A servant interrupts our conversation with a platter of cabbage rolls and *moussaka*. Suddenly, I’m starving again. I glance over at Prince Tyrone and grin. “Why don’t we start over?”

“Yes, neither of us showed well on our first impressions,” he murmurs.

“Even more reason to begin again.” I lift my hand. “Hello. My name is Grace Martindale. I’m pleased to meet you.”

The prince takes my hand, gently squeezing it. “The pleasure is all mine, Miss Martindale. My name is Tyrone Theodoropoulos.” He continues to hold my hand a little longer and my stomach gets all fluttery again.

“That is not how you actually introduce yourself, is it?” I cut into my cabbage roll. “Don’t you have to include Prince in there somewhere?”

He shrugs. “Not if I have my choice.” He drops my hand and switches his mouth to the side. “If I am being honest, I was not as mad at you for spilling my coffee as I was at myself for drawing so much attention to me.”

“But you called me stupid.” There are those hackles again.

He frowns, but then his eyes lighten with understanding. “No, I never said you were stupid. When I said stupid, I was referring to myself. Or rather the situation I was in. I prefer to remain invisible when I can. The media is rarely kind to me.”

I smile and flick my brows up several times. “That is something I *have* learned from Hallmark movies. Princes rarely like to be recognized.”

He stares at me for a minute.

“Do I have something in my teeth?” I put my hand to my mouth.

He shakes his head. “No. I just have never met anyone quite like you.”

A snort totally sneaks out. “Yeah, I’m sure about that.”

He just smiles at me again. My pulse ticks up. It’s not often a smile can cause such a reaction.

Is it possible that we are now friends? Maybe not the hang out and binge watch *Melrose Place* kind of friends. But maybe the stop by and say hi when you’re in town kind of friends. Whatever the scenario, I think we may have come to an armistice of sorts.

But then, I rarely stay mad at people for very long. My mom says it is one of my best attributes. In fact, my feud with Modern Ares is the longest I have ever stayed mad at anyone. Well, except for Tanner. I still pretty much can’t stand him.

“How much longer do you plan to stay in our lovely country?” The queen looks between Texie and me.

“We fly out on Saturday morning,” I say because Texie still has food in her mouth.

“Hmmm. Four more days. What have you seen while you’ve been here?”

“Not a lot, actually. The first day we spent some time looking around the city, visiting the cathedral and the bakery.” I eye my friend and grin. “Texie is a big fan of *baklava*.” She deserves the callout after her comment about my thigh highs. This time she kicks me under the table.

The queen smiles. “We do have delightful pastries.”

I nod. “I know. I’m thinking about smuggling home an entire box of *galaktoboureko*.”

Prince Tyrone smiles. “Ah, yes. I believe you mentioned them in the coffee house.”

“I will see they are delivered to your hotel first thing Saturday morning,” the queen says.

“Oh, you don’t need to do that,” I hurry to say.

“That is for me to decide,” she says.

I look down at my hands in my lap, then raise my gaze to hers. “That is very kind. Thank you.”

Prince Tyrone puts his napkin on the table. “I feel the only proper way to show you my thanks is to give you a personal tour of my country.”

“Oh, no, Your Highness.” I shake my head. “I’m certain you have better things to do than show a couple of Americans around Atraxia.”

He holds up his hand. “Nonsense. I can assure you; nothing will please me more. You will see the things most tourists do not even know about.” He looks at me, a challenge in his eyes. “You will not deny me the chance to thank you properly, will you?”

I stare at him.

“We would be honored.” Texie smiles at him and smacks my leg under the table.

I smack her back. I don’t know why I feel so reluctant to accept. Especially after our newfound truce. But I am. I’m certain it can’t have anything to do with the acrobatics happening in my stomach and chest. No, that can’t be it.

Smiling through gritted teeth, I nod. “Yes, we would be honored. Thank you for the offer.”

Prince Tyrone looks at his brother. “Great. Shall we come and collect you at nine tomorrow morning? There’s a great little restaurant I know that has an amazing breakfast. Just the way to start out the day, I think.”

“Sounds great,” I say while still holding my smile. I can’t decide if it’s real or fake. Maybe it’s a little of both.

Prince Tyrone stands rather quickly. The footman doesn’t even get there in time to pull his chair out for him. “I know I’m far too full for dessert just yet. What do you say we start our tour now with the palace gardens? We can walk off some of dinner.” He holds out his hand. “What do you say?”

I put my hand in his and glance back at Texie. I can’t just ditch her, can I?

Her eyes are wide as saucers, and she nods at the unspoken question.

“Do not worry about Miss Kincade. I’m certain Barak would love to entertain her. Isn’t that right Barak?”

Prince Barak narrows his eyes at his brother, but it’s such a quick action, it’s almost like it didn’t happen.

“You see? He is happy to do it.” Prince Tyrone pulls my chair out and helps me to my feet. “We will return for dessert, Mother.”



THERE IS a lovely path at the bottom of the stairs that leads out into the gardens. The path is not completely dark, but neither is it fully lit. Long strings of landscape lights swag along the path, swaying in the breeze coming off the Mediterranean. I would likely be quite ruined if I were in a Regency novel. But as I’m not, I intend to enjoy it to the fullest.

It’s not like any garden you’d see in England or even most European countries. Gravel marks the paths between round white Greek columns supporting thick wooden timbers. It forms a sort of long pergola-type corridor. Grapevines hang low through the gaps. Flowers of all kinds fill pots lining the path. Purple, pink, and white lavender fill in behind.

“This is beautiful,” I say as I dip down to smell the red bougainvillea.

“Some of these grapevines are more than a hundred years old.”

I gasp. “I had no idea they could live for so long.”

He reaches over and plucks an orchid off the stem and tucks it behind my ear. He smiles at me in the dim light. My heart races and I wonder if it might just burst out of my chest so it can reach the finish line ahead of me. I don’t know what the winning prize is, but a small part—okay, that’s a lie—a really big part of me hopes it’s a kiss.

What am I thinking? All the dim light and fragrant flowers, mixed with the salty air, is making me think things that aren’t

possible. Things that aren't real. I'm not even sure if I want them to be real.

"Come, there is something I want to show you." He motions ahead on the path and we start walking again. His hands are clasped behind his back and mine hang loosely at my side. Is it because I want him to hold my hand? That may or may not have crossed my mind.

We walk past flowers of lavender purple and bright pinks, their colors only heightened by the whitewashed columns among them.

I breathe deeply, in awe that Prince Tyrone gets to see this whenever he wants. Does he even appreciate it? I can't imagine having anything like this just outside my back door.

He puts his hand on the small of my back and I nearly melt. He is close enough that I can smell his delicious cologne and it makes me heady. What has happened to me? This is not what I came to Atraxia for. But then, I hadn't known seeing all this was possible. My gaze takes in all of my surroundings.

The path opens to a large expanse of lawn. "This area of the garden dates back nearly three hundred years." In the center, a stone-framed rectangular pond trickles over stone steps every foot or two. At the head of the pond is a large water fountain. It's not your average garden variety fountain. Its basin is at least fifteen feet across and has a large statue of a woman shooting an arrow. The water flows from the arrow tip, falling into another smaller basin, that waterfalls into the rectangular pond. It's quite a water feat, especially considering its age. The quiet trickle calms my racing heart and mind.

"Wow," is all I can mutter.

"Do you like it?" he asks, almost as if he is worried I won't. I give myself a little internal guffaw. Because the idea that a prince cares what I think of his garden is laughable.

"I love it, Your Highness. I've never seen anything like it."

He tilts his head to the side. "I think we are past the 'Your Highnessing' at this point. You can just call me Tyrone."

The fluttery feeling travels up into my throat and I'm not sure I can even answer him. Seriously, this garden is doing things to me that I can't explain.

"It's beautiful, Tyrone," I whisper.

He smiles, tucking the orchid more firmly behind my ear. His hand drops to his side and he frowns. "Does your boyfriend take you to beautiful gardens?" There is a timid quality to his voice.

"As opposed to my vacation boyfriends?" I can't help myself and I laugh. "That was very smooth, Tyrone. Do they teach you things like that in Prince school?"

"No. That was all me." He shrugs and looks adorably like a little kid. "I just didn't want to assume anything."

I reach up, looping my arm through the crook of his arm, and clasp my hands together. "I kind of like that it was all you. I was beginning to think that you might be too good to be true."

"Too good to be true? You mean like when I spilled my coffee on you or acted like a complete jerk when you were trying to save my life? Yeah, that was all me."

I grin at him. Who would have guessed hours ago that this would be how the evening would turn out? "There is no boyfriend back home."

He releases a sigh, like he was afraid there might be. Who is this guy? It's like he's a completely different person from Modern Ares. Could it just be that he's at the palace? On his home turf, so to speak? Or maybe it was just as he said. He'd had a bad day.

But suddenly that thought scares me. I was crazy attracted to him when I thought he was a jerk face. But what will happen now that I actually like him?

Chapter Nine



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU’RE LEAVING TONIGHT?” I STARE AT Texie, barely able to see her features in the darkened car.

“The Murray trial date was moved up. I have to fly home tonight.” She bites at her pinkie nail. “I’m really sorry, Gee.”

“When did you find out?” I ask.

“My office called while I was on the treadmill in the gym this morning.” I heard her nail click against her teeth.

“And you’re just telling me now?” I can’t hide the irritation I feel.

“Hey, you didn’t tell me about your heroic rescue attempt. So back off the righteous indignation.” Now she sounds irritated.

I hate it when she calls me out on my crap.

“Can’t someone else take over the case?” I’m pouting and I know it. But I don’t want to leave before we’ve even had a chance to experience this country.

She shakes her head. “No. Mr. Peterson’s wife died.” Her voice quiets and I suddenly feel selfish for throwing a tantrum. “Besides, this could be a big case for me. I have to leave tonight. I’m really sorry.” She says again. I know she is. I can hear it in her voice.

I close my eyes briefly. This night has been such a roller coaster ride for my emotions. Suddenly, I’m exhausted. “Have you called the airline? How much time do we have to get packed?”

Texie lets out a laugh-grunt. “You aren’t coming with me, Gee.”

“Whatever. Why would I stay here without you? We are supposed to do this together, remember?” I sit back against the seat.

She shakes her head. “There’s nothing to talk about. You love it here. I’m not going to be the reason you miss out. You haven’t even seen the Hilltop Monastery yet and you’ve been talking about it for months.” She turns as much as her seatbelt will allow and looks at me. “Don’t give me that look, Gee.”

“You can’t even see my look. It’s too dark,” I grumble.

“But I know you’re giving it just the same.” I hear her sigh. “You’re staying here and finishing out the trip.” She squeezes my arm. “And now that I know you won’t be alone, I feel much better about leaving early.”

She is such a traitor. She thinks she is doing me a favor, but she isn’t. And now what am I supposed to do? I can call Tyrone once we get to the hotel and cancel on him. I’m not sure this is why he put his number in my phone, but what choice do I have? I’m sure I can still get my ticket changed.

He may actually appreciate me canceling. Maybe he only made the offer to show us around as a way of apologizing. Which he already did. Numerous times. The more I think about it, the more I’m sure I’m doing him a favor to let him off the hook.

My stomach sinks and soars at the same time. He had seemed sincere, hadn’t he?

I sit quietly, thinking through my options.

“You’re staying, Gee.” Texie’s voice is quiet, but firm. “And don’t be you while your here, okay?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I scowl at her even though I know she likely can’t see me.

“You know how you are. You overthink everything and get all in your head. Just let things happen. Don’t think too much about it. He’s a prince. Have fun.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “I don’t overthink things,” I grumble, even though I know she is right. But it’s not like I can help it. I’m a planner. I don’t just fly by the seat of my pants like she does. “And I have plenty of fun.” I add for good measure.

“Just promise me you won’t get all cerebral about this. Please?”

I look out my window at the glittering lights of the city. The moon reflects off the Mediterranean on my other side. A soft sigh escapes my lips. “I can’t promise anything. I haven’t even decided if I’m staying.”

She grunts. “You’re staying.”

“You’re not my mother, Tex. You can’t order me to stay or go or not to think about things. I can and will make my own decisions.”

But deep down, I know there really isn’t much of a decision to make.



I WAKE up the next morning to the sounds of *Let’s Get Rocked* by Def Leppard. It is the kind of song that makes it difficult to go back to sleep after the initial few notes sound. It’s why I chose it as my morning wake-up alarm. Well, that and I love the song. Can anyone go back to sleep after hearing Def Leppard? I think not.

I glance over at Texie’s empty bed. I can’t believe she left me here alone. It doesn’t matter how much she tells me it is the best plan. I still feel betrayed.

I square my shoulders. I’m a big girl. There is no sense lamenting over the situation. I have two more days before I return home and I plan to take full advantage of the time.

I take my phone and dance into the bathroom. I’m going to be shuttled around the island by a prince today. I grip the

countertop to stop the slight shake in my hands and look at myself in the mirror.

I suck in a breath. *I'm going to be shuttled around the island by a prince.* "A prince," I say to my reflection. A little squeak of excitement bubbles out. How is this happening to me?

I lift my shaky hand up in front of my face. I'm not afraid of him. It's more that I'm...*leery*. Yeah, that's it. I'm leery of him. Or maybe I'm leery of the way I feel when I'm around him. I'm not sure anything good can come of those feelings. From everything I've seen in the papers, he's a player. A different girl every week. What does he want with me? I look nothing like his typical flavor of the week.

I wiggle my fingers, trying to exercise the shakes out of them. It's probably just like he said. He wants to show me his appreciation. Nothing more.

But it feels like more. I can still feel the tingle of his hand from last night on the small of my back. Something stirs in my gut and I wonder, just for minute, what it would be like if we actually dated.

I fist my hands and set them on the counter. I'm 'being me'. This is what Texie was talking about.

I breathe in through my nose and hiss it out through my mouth. Okay. I'm going to stop 'being me'. I'm just going to enjoy my day and file everything away to remember later... once I'm back home living my normal, humdrum life.

I step into the shower, wondering what we will do today. Prince Tyrone had been pretty tight lipped about the day's activities, saying only to wear comfortable clothes and shoes. The only real details he gave me were that we will start off the day with breakfast.

Another alarm goes off on my phone. I have a lot of them programmed in. It's the only way I remember things when I'm ultra-focused on something. This alarm says that I need to haul some hinny, because all this 'being me' has put me way behind schedule.

I dressed in a pair of straight-leg linen capris with a drawstring waistband. I tie them a little loosely, allowing them to sit low on my hips, just below the burns on my stomach. The tunic style shirt with a boat neck hangs low enough to cover my low-riding pants and hopefully prevent any wardrobe mishaps should I bend over for any reason. I'm adamantly opposed to exposed crack.

I go to the closet to pick out my shoes, reaching for a pair of Toms and a pair of Converse sneakers. The Toms probably went better with the outfit, but if my hopes are correct and we go to the monastery, then the Converse will be more practical. In the end, practicality wins out. In my younger days my motto had been different. I far preferred to look good than feel good. I look at the Converse in my hands and feel good about my growth and maturity. I toss the Toms back into the closet just as a knock sounds. The floppiness returns to my stomach.

I open the door and my heart pitter-patters. I had no idea that was really a thing until now.

Prince Tyrone stands in the hallway. For a moment all I can do is stare. He's wearing shorts and a polo shirt which is probably a size smaller than it should have been. Although, I'll be the last one to complain about it. It hugs his body, emphasizing the contour of his pecks and shoulders. I release a wispy breath. Wow.

He grins down at me, drawing me out of my open-mouthed stupor.

I step back. "Sorry. Am I late? I thought we were meeting in the lobby." I run a hand down the front of my pants.

He shrugs, as Sander steps around him and into the room. I hadn't even realized Sander was there. Although, I'm not sure why. The man is the size of a semi-truck and I've never seen Tyrone without Sander nearby. Except at dinner last night. But wasn't Prince Barak coming too? I lean forward and glance farther into the hallway. There are a few of Sander's men at either end, but otherwise, it is empty. "Where is Prince Barak?"

Tyrone lifts a finger to his lips.

Sander walks around the room, looking at everything and running something in his hand along frames and lamps. He gives the prince a nod.

“No, you’re not late. I’m early.” He looks slightly sheepish—something I have never said about any of the men I’ve dated. Not that this is a date or that I am dating the prince.

Tyrone steps into the room. “I know I said we would meet in the lobby, but Sander thought it might be better if we came directly here.” He lifts a brow. “It’s a security thing. Besides, I’m anxious to get our day started and didn’t want to wait another minute to see you.” He runs a hand through his perfectly messy hair, which actually makes it even more perfectly messy. I want to hate him for that, but I can’t.

I look out into the hall one last time. But still no sign of Prince Barak. “I thought your brother was coming with us?”

“He was,” Ty’s smile slips slightly. “But your friend somehow left a message saying she was leaving early so he didn’t need to come if he didn’t want to. He had some business to take care of, so he stayed back at the palace.”

“Oh, okay.” I smile even as I try to think of ways to kill Texie. Or maybe I want to hug her. I’m not entirely sure, yet. I guess we’ll see how the day plays out before I plot her downfall.

“I hope that’s okay.” Tyrone clears his throat and looks past me.

“Oh, that’s totally fine. I was just surprised when he wasn’t with you.” I hold up my shoes. “Let me just slip these on and we can go.”

I glance up at him from tying my shoes. He is looking around the room, the frown still pulling down his lips.

“Is this outfit okay for what we’re doing today? I wasn’t sure if you meant comfortable like yoga pants or comfortable like these.” I give him wide eyes. “I’m a little uncertain of dress codes after last night.

He tips his head to the side. “While I am sure the yoga pants would look great, what you’re wearing is nice.” He

finally smiles again. “You look lovely.”

My cheeks are probably the same color as my hair. “Thanks. You look nice yourself.”

He comes and stands in front of me, lightly gripping my biceps. “I thought you looked stunning last night, so stop worrying about it. But I promise to be more detailed from now on. Even though I feel like you always seem to have an understated refinedness about you.”

I snort out a laugh. “Yeah, that’s what people are always telling me—how refined I am.”

He lifts his shoulders. “You may not see it, but I do. And so did my mother.”

I stop midway through the bunny going into the hole on my shoelace and look up at him. “Your mother thinks I’m refined? Was she *at* dinner last night?”

He grabs a chair and sits it in front of me. “You handled yourself very well last night. Especially considering how far—it was Hallmark I believe—misguided you in your royal knowledge.”

I finish tying my shoe with a hard yank and laugh. “Yes. Hallmark.” I shake my head in disgust. “I’m going to have to question everything I’ve learned from watching their shows. They’ve lost some serious credibility with me.”

We stand up at the same time and he holds out his hand, a tentative look on his face.

I look at it and then up at him. He wants to hold my hand? My mind wants to take this in a million different directions and analyze every aspect of it. But I pause and push it all away. I’m going to do as Texie ordered. I’m just going to have fun.

I place my hand in his and he gives it a gentle squeeze. “Let’s go start your reeducation on royalty. What do you say?”

I tip my head to the side. “You think you’re a qualified teacher?”

He grins down at me and raises his brows several times. “Oh, I believe you’ll find I’m qualified to teach all sorts of subjects.”

What does he mean by that? It makes me both nervous and excited. “I can hardly wait to be educated.” I wink at him, which is totally not me thing to do.

As he pulls me to the door, I grab my neck wallet, phone and hat.

He grabs the hat from my hand and Frizbees it onto a chair just as I shut the door. I look back at the door. “Hey, I need that hat.” I know he thinks I don’t have a hat face, but it isn’t for fashion. It’s for protection.

He tilts his head to the side. “But I can’t see your face when you wear that monstrosity.”

I point to my skin. “But I will look like an over done lobster without it.”

“I have sunscreen in the car. Or if you prefer, we can stop and buy you a visor.” He puts his finger under my chin and lifts it slightly. “This should not be hidden.”

I pause with my hand on the doorknob. *Don’t be you*, I hear Texie’s voice in my head. Fine, I growl at her. I won’t be me.

“Are you ready to see what Atraxia has to offer, Miss Martindale?”

I nod. “If I am calling you Tyrone, you can call me Grace.”

He gives me an appraising look. “Can I call you Gee?”

My head slowly shakes, and I lightly tap my finger on his chest—his very firm chest. “I think we might be a bit early for that, mister. But I’ll take it under advisement.” I stop. Can you call a prince mister?

He guides me down the hallway and through a back door, where he pushes the button to an elevator I’ve never seen. Sander and his men take up positions around us. I think it’s what the professionals call flanking.

The sheer strangeness of all this suddenly hits me. A prince is holding my hand and asking to call me Gee. *A Prince*. I drew the last word out in my mind. What the what? This whole situation is totally crazy town. The flippies start back up in my stomach. But I push them down, determined to wait until I'm in a restroom or some other semi-private place where Tyrone is not.

We walk as discreetly as we can through the kitchens, but I feel the hotel staff watching us. It's weird and disconcerting. But not in the same way that it felt weird and disconcerting before. Although, before I never could confirm that someone was watching me. For all I know it was just my imagination.

One of the black Land Rovers from the coffee shop is parked in a distinctly marked no parking zone outside the kitchen doors. I point a thumb at the sign. "That doesn't apply to you?"

He tilts his head and lifts one shoulder. "No. I need to be as close to an entrance as possible. Long walks to cars make for a greater security risk."

I nod. It makes sense.

He opens the front door and I slide into the seat, expecting to see several large men inside the vehicle. But it is empty. "What? No security today?"

Tyrone chuckles as he closes my door and then hurries around to his side of the car. As he shuts his door, he reaches to adjust the rearview mirror. "They're around, just sometimes more discreetly." He jerks his thumb behind us, and I turn in my seat.

Sure enough, two silver SUVs are parked two cars back. Through the front windshields of the first car, I can see the hulking figures of four men, two in front and two in back. I feel my pulse slow down.

Tyrone looks over at me and nods in front of us. "Sander is in that car." He puts his sunglasses on, but then tilts them down to look at me. "And a full sweep of the car has been conducted. You don't need to worry about any brake lines

today.” He smiles and I feel a security that I haven’t felt in a long time. Probably since I moved away from my parent’s house.

“I’m never without security, Grace. And it’s only gotten worse since the attempt on my life the other day.” Tyrone grips the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white. I’m surprised Sander hasn’t set up a cot in my bedroom so he can watch me sleep.” His voice rings with aggravation.

I laugh, but it fades quickly. I would totally hate not ever being able to do something by myself. I reach over and squeeze his arm. “They just want you to be safe.” And then because I can feel the tension in the car and I hate it, I laugh again. “After dinner last night, I can only assume they know they may need to protect you from me.”

He doesn’t laugh, but his grip loosens, and he takes one hand off the wheel. He grabs my hand that had just dropped away from his arm and laces his fingers through mine. Whatever I may have thought about this relationship before, this feels more than just friendly. After a deep breath, he starts the car. “You haven’t already had breakfast, right?”

“Nope. And I’m starving.”

He taps the thumb of the hand on the steering wheel to the tune of the low playing music on the radio. But his other thumb rubs light circles on the side of my hand.

My body explodes in tingles and warmth. And my heart starts running that race again. I can barely keep my behind in the seat, I’m so jittery.

Does he do this with all the flavors of the week? Is this all part of a play book that he uses on every girl he dates? I want to think I’m special, but my brain won’t allow it. I’ve seen too many pictures of him on the internet.

I glance over and see his pulse visibly thumping in his neck. Turning quickly toward my window, I watch out as we pull away from the hotel. Could it be possible that he is feeling the same way I am?

The thought scares me. I mean, I've had boyfriends before. But this time is different. This time I'm slipping fast. And I don't know how to stop it.

He glances over at me and smiles. I flick up the corners of my mouth but then turn back to look out the window. The flutters and tingles are in overdrive.

This can't happen, I tell myself. I'm only here for another few days and then I'm returning to DC. And besides, he's a player. This isn't real. It's just something he does. Maybe if I tell myself all these things enough, I'll believe them.

Chapter Ten



TYRONE IS RIGHT. THE BREAKFAST IS DELICIOUS. THE FIVE-star restaurant at the hotel I'm staying at doesn't even compare to this little out of the way place. We have the restaurant completely to ourselves, which seems weird considering it is at the height of the breakfast rush. Not even Sander or his men eat while we are there.

Tyrone reaches for my hand, and I strategically pull them under the table on the pretext of placing my napkin in my lap. Then I just don't bring them back up to the table, except to eat my food. I know I'm being me, but I can't help it. This is all moving so fast.

If Texie wanted me to be someone else, perhaps she should have stayed and helped me be that person instead.

Tyrone helps me into the car and then slips behind the wheel, but he doesn't push the ignition. "Did you not enjoy breakfast? You seemed quiet." He scrunches up his brow, looking all broody and adorable.

I bite the inside of my cheek. "I'm just not a morning person. It takes me a bit to wake up fully. I'm sorry if I was poor company."

He seems to think about that for a moment. "Why didn't you just order some coffee?"

I give him a smirk. "I have an aversion to coffee."

He looks confused for a moment, but then recognition dawns. "Ah, because of the mishap on the street? You're never going to drink coffee again?"

I shrug. “I never drank it before, actually. I’ve never been a fan of the smell, so I’ve never had a desire to taste it.”

“You don’t ever drink it? Surely you’ll get over the dislike if you taste *good* coffee. I can take you to a place where it is excellent.”

I shake my head. “Thanks, but I’m good.”

He shrugs. “Okay, but you’re missing out.” He pushes the ignition on the car and pulls out of the parking lot and into traffic. His hand sits on the gearshift between our seats, but I keep my hands clasped together in my lap. My gaze keeps flicking to his hand, my fingers itching to move to the console and see if he’ll hold my hand again. But I can’t bring myself to do it. My brain wars with itself, both afraid he will take it and afraid that he won’t. Why am I such a weirdo?

“So we’re good?” Tyrone’s voice is soft and a little hesitant. “You weren’t quiet because I did something stupid again?”

I nod. “Yeah, we’re good. I think this whole thing is just so surreal.” I look out the window. “I mean, look at these surroundings. This is all so amazing. I did so much research before we came, it just doesn’t feel real to be seeing it all.” I glance over at him.

He raises his brows quickly and grins. “*All* of your surroundings?”

I mimicked his expression. “*Most* of them.”

He chuckles and the strange tension between us lifts. It’s like we are just two friends hanging out. I breathe in deeply. That’s it. I just need to think of him as a friend that I have absolutely no interest in. A strictly platonic friend who is showing me around Atraxia.

“So I know you live in Washington, DC. Is that where you’re from originally?”

I let my shoulders relax. I can do conversation. In fact, I’m quite known for my gift of gab among friends. “No. I grew up in the suburbs of Salt Lake City, in Utah.” I open my mouth,

prepared to answer the next inevitable question from foreigners. *Where is Utah?*

He whistles. “Wow. You’re a lucky girl. All that amazing snow just a short drive away.”

I tilt my head and look at him. Not what I was expecting. “You know where Utah is?”

“Yeah. I am educated, Grace. I know geography.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply you don’t. It’s just most people I run into outside of the US—even some inside the US—have never even heard of Utah. I’m just surprised.”

“Then you don’t associate with serious skiers. Utah has some of the best snow I’ve skied.” He looks at me. “Is that really true that people don’t know where it is? I mean, there was an Olympics held there.”

I shrug. “That was a while ago. But yeah, it’s true.”

“So what was it like growing up in Utah?” He watches the road, but his gaze constantly flicks over to me, so I know he is listening.

“I loved it. I miss it a lot, actually. Utah is one of my favorite places on earth. It has such a diverse landscape. There are snowy mountains and red rock desert all within a few hours of each other.” I sigh. “But I especially miss it at Christmas time.” Just talking about my childhood home makes me feel warm and cozy.

“Don’t you go home for Christmas?”

I nod. “Usually for a few days, at least. But last year my firm had just landed this big company, and it was all hands on deck. No one got time off except the partners.”

He scoffs. “Oh, yes. The partners got the time off. That seems to make sense.”

I chuckle. “It was way better that way. Those were some of the best days I’ve had at work. There was a ton to do, but without the partners there, things just went smoother and there was less stress in the office.”

He glances over at me and holds my stare a little longer than I think prudent for someone who is driving. But he finally returns his gaze to the road. “If you don’t like your job on a daily basis, why do you stay?”

I don’t like where this conversation is headed. I’ve had it plenty of times in my own head. And even more times with Texie. I don’t need to have it with a guy I barely know who has no idea what it’s like to *need* a job, so you can do things like, you know, pay bills. “I didn’t say I don’t like my job. I do. Mostly.” I really need to work on my lying voice. *I* don’t even believe me; And from the look on his face, Tyrone doesn’t either. “I may not love what I do right now, but if I put in my time, then eventually I will have my dream job. My boss told me in my last performance review that I’m on the fast track. It should happen pretty soon.” Fast track to what, I’m not sure. My boss used a lot of catch phrases but not many details.

Tyrone nods, but doesn’t look at me this time. “That’s good then, right?”

I nod and fold my arms across my lap. I don’t need his approval. I have a plan and I’m well on my way to achieving it.

We pull into an empty parking lot. I stoop down and look out the front window, the Hilltop Monastery just barely visible at the top of the rock formation in front of us. I turn to Tyrone and bounce in my seat. “This is the Hilltop Monastery. Oh, my heck. I’ve wanted to visit this place since Tex and I decided to come here.”

Tyrone grins at me. “Yes, I heard Miss Kincade mention how much you want to see it.” He gives a little chuckle. “And she may have reiterated it in the message she left.”

“How did she leave you a message?” I ask, because I have no idea how I would go about calling the palace. Let alone leaving a message.

He lifts a shoulder. “I have no idea. But I get the idea that your friend is more than a little determined.”

I laugh. “Oh, you have no idea.” I look around the parking lot and then glance at the clock just above the radio on the console. It is after ten, but ours are the only vehicles in the lot. Why is no one here? I sag. The monastery must be closed for some reason. A sign, just at the bottom of the trail leading up the hillside confirms my suspicions. “Ah, shoot. It’s closed today.”

I sit back against the seat and frown. Not only am I disappointed that I’m not going to see this place I’ve heard so much about, but I’m also sad that Tyrone’s plans are ruined. He obviously put thought into this outing, and now we are going to have to turn around and head back to the city.

Tyrone opens his door and steps out. I guess seeing it from the parking lot is better than only seeing it in pictures. He opens my door and helps me out of the car. “Come. Perhaps I can persuade the guard to let us go up.”

Sander and two other men step up behind us. I quicken my pace next to Tyrone to keep a little distance between Sander and myself. These bodyguards, apparently, don’t have a notion of personal space.

Tyrone reaches out and grabs my hand again and I stumble. My smile is instantaneous, and my chest and stomach feel like a butterfly house. I seriously need to get a grip. But then Tyrone tugs me a little closer. “Are you okay?”

No. I’m not okay. I’m being me and overthinking every touch and facial expression. I’m just a jumble of nerves and emotions that are wholly inappropriate and misguided. I give a quick, nervous smile. “Uh, yeah. Just excited, I guess. Do you really think they’ll let us in?”

He winks at me. Oh, I so don’t need him winking on top of everything else. I’ll undoubtedly have bloodied palms and knees if I don’t get some control here. We’re just friends. I remind myself. He probably brings all his friends here when he shows them around the island. I’m nothing special. Just another friend. He does this for everyone. *Okay*. I relax my shoulders. I can get through the day knowing this.

We approached the guard stationed at the bottom of the trail. He comes out of his little booth and bows. “Everything is as you requested, Your Highness. Do you wish to take the tram or the trail?”

Wait, what? He knew the trail would be closed? I look back over my shoulder. He arranged all this just for me? Arranged for us to be here alone? I stare at the tram and tune them out.

Ty looks down at my shoes. “Are those comfortable for a semi-strenuous hike or would you prefer to take the tram?”

“Ummm.” Do I really want to take the tram? Do I want to be suspended in the air with no control over whether I fall to my death or not? The view will be spectacular but it’s still a tram. He will surely see my freakish fear of heights and this little friendship we have going on will end. I look up the steep hillside and take a calming breath. I can put on my big girl pants and take the tram one way, right? “Can we do both?”

I’m tapping my lip with my finger and Tyrone’s eyes watch intently. He pulls his bottom lip in between his teeth. *This is how he treats everyone*, I scream at my stupid body.

He clears his throat and shoves his hands into his pockets. “What if we take the tram up and then hike back down? That way we can see the view both ways.”

I nod. “That’s a really good idea. It won’t cause a problem for them to bring the tram down empty?”

He shakes his head. “No.” His eyes still linger on me even after he stops talking.

“Great. Should we get going?” I infuse more excitement than is necessary into my voice. PMA, right? A positive mental attitude and all will be fine.

He nods. “After you, my lady.” His hand sweeps to the left and the trail that is labeled as the direction to the tram.

To call it a trail is probably oversimplifying it. It isn’t paved of gold or anything, but it is definitely not like any of the trails I’m used to hiking. This one is paved with pavers to look like cobblestones. We don’t walk far before it opens up

and the tram sits docked before us. Sander pulls open the door and I step forward, but he throws his arm out in front of me and shakes his head. Yeah, he's not a big talker.

I step back as two of the men with him—I have no idea what their names are—step inside and the tram leaves the dock.

I look up at Ty.

“They're just checking to make sure everything is secure up top.”

I nod with a sort of fascination. This guy's whole lifestyle is so foreign to me. I just—oohhh. Suddenly things fall into place. “This place is closed to the public because we're here—you're here— isn't it?”

He nods and it is like a bucket of cold water drops on me. I was right. He hadn't arranged for us to be alone. This wasn't all because I'm special in any way. We are alone for security purposes. I'm such an idiot. “And the restaurant?”

He nods again.

Is it always like this? Everywhere he goes, do places close? I think back to that day in the coffee house right after we'd first met. There had been other people inside then. So why now? Is it just a move to impress me with his importance? “Is it always like this wherever you go?”

He shrugs. “Not always.”

I frown. “It wasn't this way at the coffee house. That place was full of people besides you and your UFC friends.”

He chuckles at my reference to Sander and the rest of his bodyguards. “Sander won't appreciate the reference, but the other guys will.” He glances over to his head of security who nods. But I have no idea what the nod means. “Since the incident in front of the coffee shop,” his gaze returns to me, “Sander is insisting on implementing the complete security protocol. No unauthorized people allowed, and the areas are to have a thorough sweeping beforehand.” He sighs. “At least until the guy who snuck under my car is caught. Although, I

don't think even then Sander will let up. That incident rattled him more than it did me.”

Wow. That stinks.

He leans against an iron I-beam. “After I bumped into you in the street, Sander didn't even want me to go get another coffee. He wanted to send someone for it because he was concerned that perhaps you were...” He doesn't finish the sentence.

My eyes widen. “I was deemed a credible threat?” I know I should be offended, but I'm really flattered. I've never been a security risk before.

“He was really unhappy when I insisted we go inside and sit down.” Tyrone makes a face. “But I was still angry, and I just couldn't bring myself to return to the palace.”

I frown. “But it seems Sander had reason to be concerned.”

“I suppose.” He lifts a shoulder. “You just ended up being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Umm, I was pretty much in the right place at the right time. Wouldn't you say?” If I hadn't been there at the bakery, we wouldn't even be talking right now.

He grins. “You think bumping into me was you being in the right place at the right time?”

I absently place my hand on my belly. No, there was nothing right about that encounter. “I'm referring to the coffee house.”

A soft smile plays on his lips. “You were definitely in the right place then. And I thank you for not ignoring it. After our previous encounter, most people would have pretended they didn't see anything, not that I could blame them.”

The tram finally comes into view, moving slowly down the cables toward us. Sander presses his hand to his ear and casts a glare at Tyrone.

Tyrone places his fingers to his lips and whispers. “That is the sign that we are being too loud, and he can't hear what his

guys are saying in his earpiece.”

We both stay quiet, which is okay with me. My eyes are focused on the tram bumping and swaying its way down the cable. I can't believe I agreed to set foot on that death trap.

Chapter Eleven



THE TRAM COMES TO A STOP IN THE DOCK. IS THAT EVEN WHAT you call a parking spot for a tram? I have no idea.

The door slides open and Sander steps inside, making a sweep of the car.

I lean over and whisper to Tyrone. “Does he think someone got into the car while it was coming down the lines? I’m pretty sure we would have seen that, right?”

Ty shrugs. “I bet James Bond could get in without us seeing.” He stares at me with one eye slightly narrowed. “For someone who has gained so much knowledge from movies, I’m surprised you even questioned that.”

I roll my eyes. And he gives me a shoulder bump. I like this easy back and forth we have going on.

“I’ve decided to keep all my movie knowledge to myself from now on.” I grimace. “It hasn’t done me much good, lately.”

He chuckles.

Sander steps out of the tram and motions them inside while he does a visual check around the car.

“The guy was pretty sneaky.”

“Sander takes his job very seriously. No one should have been able to get that close to my car. The fact that someone got under the car, cut the brake line, and then got away—without one of his men seeing? It’s not good. I was worried he might resign.” He whispers the last part.

Sander steps over and speaks to the two men he is obviously leaving down here to stand watch. Then Sander steps in and shuts the door behind him. The tram lurches forward and I reach out and grab Ty's hand. But not in a romantic way. I think I actually see him flinch as I squeeze his fingers.

Tyrone leads me to one side of the car, deftly removing his hand from mine. "One of my favorite views is of the valley below, especially at this time of the year." He points to a cluster of trees, their leaves varying shades of orange and yellow.

"I can't believe you get the change in color here. The weather seems too temperate."

"For the most part, it is," he says. "This is the only place on the island where it happens." He scoots closer and points to something else in the distance. But I'm at a loss to repeat what he is telling me. His cologne fills my nose. It isn't strong or overpowering; rather it's just subtle enough that I want to lean into him more, just to breathe him in. It doesn't help that I can feel the warmth from his body mixing with my own. It's a delicious distraction. But it's a distraction I can't afford. I'll be better off waiting for the tram to fall off the cable and plummet to the earth.

I clear my throat and focus on where he is pointing. I make the mistake of looking out the windows in the front of the tram. The car bounces on the lines and I put my hands to either side, helping to balance and calm my nerves at the same time. I don't dare take Ty's hand again. The ground below disappears, and the trees look smaller and smaller with each minute we climb.

He puts a hand on my arm. "Are you okay?"

I nod and smile my fake smile. "I'm a little afraid of heights."

He rubs at his hand. "Yeah, I figured that out."

Maybe if we start talking, I can get my mind off the images of the tram coming off the cable and plummeting to the

valley below in a fiery ball. I have no idea how the fiery ball comes into play. I'm fairly certain there is nothing on the car that will cause a fire. But who ever said fears are rational?

“What happened to the driver that was in the car when that guy cut the brakes? I don't see him here today.”

Tyrone watches out the window.

I try to focus on the horizon. If I squint, I can just barely make out the blue green of the Mediterranean.

“He was let go. There is really no way Sander can keep him. He fell asleep, which is why someone was able to get under the car in the first place.” There's a hint of regret in his voice.

“We had no choice,” he says again, like he is trying to make me see reason.

I nod slowly. “I mean, I get it. Him not doing his job almost was a life and death kind of thing.” I lean forward and grasp onto a thin iron railing that encircles the car. “It kind of reminds me of an episode of the show *Seinfeld*. Have you ever seen the series?”

He nods, a slightly confused look on his face.

“There is this one where George buys a rocking chair for the security guard at the store that is owned by his fiancée's uncle. As soon as the guy sits in the rocking chair, he falls asleep, and the store gets robbed.”

A soft, still confused, smile plays at Ty's lips. “You're comparing the guy cutting our brake line to an episode of *Seinfeld*?”

I shake my head at him. He had missed my whole point. “No. I'm comparing your driver to the security guard who fell asleep on *Seinfeld*.” Is that right? I'm not sure the comparison really works out like I originally thought. I sigh, “Never mind. It wasn't a great comparison.” I squint at him. “But just so you know, most of life can be compared to *Seinfeld*—so you should learn to see the parallels if you're going to hang out with me for long.”

“I’ll begin my studies tonight.”

“Do you really think Sander would have discovered the brake line if I hadn’t told him?”

Tyrone bites his lower lip. “I do. This vigilance,” he motions to Sander who is pacing from one end of the tram to the other, his eyes darting in every direction, “this is fairly typical for Sander. But I think he feels like maybe he was getting a little lax and that is why the driver fell asleep—because Sander had not emphasized to him enough the importance of his job.”

“But it wasn’t Sander’s fault,” I hurry to defend him.

“I know. But he sees any failure with his men as his own failure.”

The tram jerks to a halt, and my heart leaps into my throat, until I realize we have reached the top.

Tyrone places his hand at the small of my back and my body jerks slightly as a small electrical current pulses beneath his hand.

He leads me out of the car and onto the dock platform, guiding me toward the railing at the other side. I slow my steps, pulling him back with me. I had seen this platform from the dock below; it is cantilevered out over the valley, the only thing holding it to the mountainside is some steel beams.

My feet stop, rooted to the platform.

“What’s wrong?” Tyrone comes to stand in front of me, his eyes growing more concerned as he studies me. “You look pale.”

I try to swallow, but my mouth feels like it does after the dentist, all packed full of cotton. I stare at the railing in front of us. It looks flimsy and a little too low to be safe.

Tyrone follows my gaze, but it only serves to deepen the creases already on his brow. “The view from up here is amazing. Do you think you can look over the edge?”

I can do this. I’ve been waiting for weeks to see this view. Granted, I hadn’t considered the height issue before. I swallow

my fears and lift my chin. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“You can hold on to me. I won’t let you fall.” I notice his hand flexes, as if preparing for the vice grip he is anticipating. Then he lifts it out to me. “Come on. I promise it’s worth it.”

I swallow, not sure whether I’m more afraid of the drop or of the way my heart hammers in my chest at the feel of his hand closing around mine. He walks slowly, only having to pull me the last few steps, to the railing. He reaches out a hand to the railing and gives it a good hard tug. It doesn’t even wiggle. “You see? It’s perfectly safe.”

I nod and try to forget that I am suspended over a very high cliff.

“It’s worth it, isn’t it?” He points straight down at the valley floor.

I release my hold on him and grab the railing with both my hands as I hesitantly lean over. “Jiminy Cricket, that is really far down,” I whisper. A trail can be seen intermittently through the trees. My breath comes out haltingly. “But you’re right. It’s really pretty.”

He chuckles lightly as he pries my fingers off the railing and leads me quickly off the platform. “Okay. Let’s get you to solid ground.” He looks down at the deep impressions of my nails in his skin.

I put my hand to my mouth. “Oh. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” I shove my hands in my pockets, trying to hide my weapons.

He waves aside my apology. “You gave me fair warning. After the tram ride, I had an idea what I was in for.” He gives my hand a little squeeze. “It was worth it.”

“Yeah, it was a great view.” My feet land on the rocky ground, and the tension in my shoulders eases. I look up at the tall stone walls of the monastery and release a squee of excitement. *This* is what I’ve wanted to see.

“I wasn’t only meaning the view.” He winks at me, and I feel the heat climb up my neck. He is so smooth. It’s easy to forget that this is just how he is. And that we’re just friends.

“We could have hiked both ways.” We walk beside each other, and I glance out of the corner of my eye at him. He is staring at me.

I shrug. “The end height is the same whether we walked or trammed.” I think I might have just made that word up, but oh well. It fits. “I’ll be fine. I just need a few minutes.”

Tyrone reaches out to take my hand, but it’s still buried deep inside my pockets. I’ve finally calmed down every nerve in my body, I can’t rev it all back up again so soon by holding his hand. That’s what causes heart attacks. At least, I’m pretty sure I’ve heard that somewhere.

He drops his hand, but I see the confusion in his eyes. Yeah, I’m sure I’m even more confused than he is.

I look straight ahead, hoping he can’t see the waffling I’m doing in my head. Does he like me? Do I like him? Should I like him? Should we just be friends? But what if he likes me? Holy crap, it’s actually giving me a headache.

I take a deep breath. Three more days and I’ll fly home. We can be friends for three more days. How hard can it be?

He puts his hand on the small of my back to guide me between two pillars as we enter a kind of courtyard. But he doesn’t drop it once we are inside. In hindsight, I should have just given him my hand. He rubs small circles on my back with his thumb and smiles down at me. I scowl at the ground. “Three more days of torture! Please, just stop being charming for three more days,” I grumble to myself.

We stop just short of the door to the monastery. A young woman—I’m guessing about the same age as myself—steps forward. “Good morning, Your Highness.” She speaks in Greek.

Tyrone smiles at her and I feel unfriendly feelings toward the woman. “Good morning, Claire. Thanks for agreeing to do this for me today.”

She gives him a large smile, full of straight white teeth. “You know I can never say no to you, Your Highness.”

She moves closer to him and lays her hand on his arm. I want to bare my teeth at her, but I refrain. Ty and I are just friends, after all. But seriously. The nerve of this woman. Who hits on a guy when they are with someone else? I run a hand over my tightly plaited braid. Claire's dark brown hair flows down her back in soft waves. Have I mentioned that I kind of hate Claire?

“Prince Tyrone says you are visiting from America.” She says in English as she eyes my flowy capri's. Her nose scrunches. “Normally, you must wear long pants or a skirt to enter the monastery, but I think your pants are close enough to a skirt, it should not be a problem.”

Ty smiles at Claire and I want to punch her. Not in the throat. I'm not a monster. But maybe just enough to make her scrunched up nose swell to the size of a tomato—the beef steak kind.

He returns his hand to the small of my back, but then slides it over resting it on my hip and pulling me into his side. “This is my *good* friend, Miss Martindale. She is very excited to see this place.”

I don't know what to make of all this. Is he implying we are more than friends? Or is he just trying to tell *Claire* that he is not interested in her and I'm the excuse.

I give a little shrug. I can be his excuse. It's what friends do, right?

Claire turns an icy look on me before placing a professional smile on her lips. “Then I will endeavor to show you as much as I am able.”

She opens the door and motions us into a smallish-sized room. Ty drops his hand from my waist, allowing me to precede him inside and Claire brings up the rear. Sander is already inside making a methodical sweep of the room. Hmm. I wonder when he snuck in here. And how does he think someone has planted anything? Claire was here before us. And the keys dangling from the ring around her neck makes me think this place isn't just left open for anyone to enter. I give

her a side eye. Maybe Sander doesn't trust her. Not that I blame him. She seems a little shifty, if you ask me.

Sander completes his sweep and nods to Ty.

Ty grabs my hand and pulls me farther into the room.

"Did anyone know we were coming here?" I ask.

Tyrone shakes his head. "Only the few people that work here, like Claire and the guard below. But then, no one knew I was going to get coffee the other day either."

I cast a suspicious look at Claire. "Does that mean you have a leak in your security team?"

Ty grins down at me. "More movie knowledge?"

"TV, actually."

He pulls me a little closer to him.

"I don't think so. I think it was more a crime of opportunity. But every angle is being investigated. If there is a leak, we'll find it."

Should I mention that maybe he should take a hard look at Claire? Even now she is looking around like she is trying to avoid eye contact. Yeah, shifty.

"Are you ready to begin?" Claire asks.

Ty nods, tugging me a little closer to him.

The monastery is breathtaking. The nave and chancel are covered in paintings of saints, all in bright reds and yellows. Chandeliers of green, red, and blue glass trimmed in gold glow with candlelight. My neck aches from tipping my head back to see the paintings on the high, domed ceiling above.

As we walk through the rooms, Claire tells stories of ancient times and things that happened more recently. She talks about the Nazi occupation and of the treasures they stole when they left. "Many of the artifacts have yet to be returned," she finishes with a sad sigh.

I lean into Tyrone. "It's a story I've heard through much of Europe. I don't think most people realize how much of the

world's treasures were lost at the hands of Hitler and his armies.”

I'm startled as we round the corner into the anteroom of the catacombs. Shelves of skulls line the walls. I look at Claire and see the mischievous look in her eyes. She purposely didn't warn me to get a reaction and make me look like an idiot. But the jokes on her. He already knows I'm an idiot.

Tyrone slides his hand around my waist and whispers into my ear. “I'm sorry. I should have warned you about them. We don't need to stay in here if you find them unsettling.”

I shake my head. “No. I was only startled. They don't bother me in the least.” It is stretching the truth a little. I mean, who really enjoys staring at skulls? But I'm not about to let Claire think she has succeeded with her little game.

We enter the dining room. It looks like a modern-day restaurant with a dozen or more small square tables dotting the room. The view out the tall wavy glass windows is stunning and I suck in a breath. In my mind I can see the long rustic tables that must have occupied this room when the monks lived here centuries ago. At the center of the room, a table is set for two.

Claire nods toward the table. “There is your table, Your Highness. I will send your waiter out immediately.” She gives me one last appraising look and makes it very obvious she finds me lacking.

Suddenly it hits me. She is such the Hallmark movie cliché. The woman who wants the male character for herself, so she treats the female lead contemptuously. Oh Claire. I can read you like a book.

But my satisfied smirk falls when I realize I'm just as much of a cliché as she. Me and my jealous glares are about as cliché as it gets. Why are we girls like this? Why do we fall into this pattern enough that we've actually become a cliché?

I square my shoulders. My cliché days are over. I smile warmly at Claire, and I reach out and grab her hand in both of mine.

She looks a bit shocked at the contact.

“Thanks so much for the tour. You were a great guide and really know your stuff.”

Her brows furrow slightly, as if she is wondering if I might be trying to trick her. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. You had some very intelligent questions.”

“Oh, thanks.” I tilt my head to the side. “It very much lived up to my expectations. So thanks again.”

She smiles and it seems genuine, if a little off kilter. I guess she didn’t expect me to be sincere. I decide not to mention Claire’s shiftiness to Sander or Ty. It does feel on-plan for my new non-cliché lifestyle.

Tyrone motions me over and pulls a chair out.

“Thank you.” I sit down and put my napkin in my lap as I look around at the platters and pictures hanging on the walls.

“What was that all about?” Ty dips his head in Claire’s direction.

I glance over at her. “Oh, I was just telling her how much I enjoyed the tour.”

He raises a single brow. “Oh? I got the feeling the two of you didn’t care for each other.”

I lift a shoulder. “Maybe I didn’t like her all that much at first. But she’s growing on me. I mean she is so knowledgeable. You have to admire that.”

His head slowly moves up and down and he has a perplexed look on his face.

I motion to the room around us. “You really didn’t have to go to all this trouble on my account. I’m perfectly happy just looking around.”

“But you are happy to be eating here also, right?”

“Well, duh.” I put my elbow on the table and drop my chin onto my palm. “What is there not to be happy about when food is involved?”

“Then my objective is achieved.” He sits back in his seat and watches me.

Heat fills my cheeks. I’ve never liked being the center of attention. And this is even worse. I don’t like the intense scrutiny I see in his eyes. It makes me feel all squirmy. “Is this what you do for all the ladies you show around Atraxia?”

His face is serious. “Actually, I’ve never given a woman a personal tour of Atraxia. Nor have I ever brought anyone else here.” He shrugs. “Well, except for my sister, Helena.”

The weight of the effort he went through for this settles on me. He did all this just for me? It’s not his standard thing that he does for all the women he dates? I swallow. But it’s just what a friend does, right? Still, I can’t help but feel a little special and I don’t know what to say. Thankfully, the waiter comes and saves me from having to say anything.

Chapter Twelve



MY PHONE BUZZES ON THE NIGHTSTAND NEXT TO ME. I REACH out and swat at it, trying to hit the snooze button. I'm not ready to get up yet. I roll over and snuggle into my pillow, thinking back over my time with Tyrone.

He'd dropped me off at the hotel later than I'd expected. After lunch we had finished the tour of the monastery and then Claire had hiked back down the mountain with us, showing us the hermitage and pointing out landmarks along the way. It was more than I had imagined.

Once we arrived at the parking lot, we drove to the back side and walked up the hundreds of steps to a smaller monastery perched on the top of a tall slender rock formation.

My shins ache and my glutes burn just thinking about all those steps.

It had been a strenuous day, but it had been amazing.

Claire and I will never be besties, of that I'm pretty certain. But I think we discovered common ground and were able to enjoy the rest of the day in each other's company. Ty said they had grown up together. Her father is a minister or something in the government. Tyrone says they are just friends, but I know when a woman is willing to change the status of their relationship.

I put my arm over my eyes as my phone buzzes again.

It has not been ten minutes since I hit snooze. I grab my phone off the charger and crack open my eyes. Email, text messages, Facebook and Instagram notifications all stare back

at me. I swipe away the Facebook and Instagram notifications. I don't need to look at those right now.

But I click on the text messages. I hope it is from Texie to at least tell me she arrived back in DC okay. I smile when I see one is from Texie. But the other one is labeled only as HPT. That sounds fishy. Has some African prince gotten my number and needs me to send him money so he can reclaim his throne?

In spite of the risk, my curiosity forces me to open that one first. "Sorry, Tex. You can wait."

Two messages appear. The first one came just after Ty had dropped me off.

HPT: I had a great day today. Thanks for coming with me.

I hug my phone to my chest and squeal like a little pig. It's from Ty. But why had he named himself HPT? What does that stand for? I go back to the second message. It only came in a few minutes ago.

HPT: Beach? I know a private little cove with great views.

I hurry and text back.

Me: Sounds like fun. Just promise me there are no STAIRS.

HPT: Oh, good. You're awake. I thought after yesterday, you may sleep until it's time for you to go home.

HPT: Haha. I promise, no stairs today.

I grab the pillow next to me and ball it into the right position.

Me: I don't know what you're talking about. I feel great.

I add a Pinocchio nose faced emoji at the end because every muscle in my body aches. In fact, there are pains in places I didn't even know I had muscles.

HPT: You're in better shape than I am then. My whole body hurts. Crying face emoji

I laugh.

Me: Lol. So does mine. I just didn't want you to think less of me.

HPT: No worries on that. I think you did amazing! How about I pick you up in an hour?

I hug my phone to my chest, all thoughts of sleep gone.

He thinks I did amazing. What is wrong with me? I only met this guy a few days ago. How am I letting myself get all fluttery about him? What happened to just being friends? I close my eyes and focus on that idea. Friends go to the beach together. Texie and I go all the time. Okay, not all the time. But several times a year.

I breathe long and deep. I'm not here much longer. Then I will go home and be regular old Grace again. I channel my inner Texie. There's no harm in letting myself enjoy these last two days, right?

Me: Sounds like a plan.

HPT: Can you bring something to change into?

Me: Like my dinner at the palace clothes or your parents' dinner at the palace clothes? I put a thinking face emoji at the end of my message.

He sends a laughing with tears emoji.

HPT: What would Hallmark tell you to wear?

Me: Uhhh. As we have already established, Hallmark leads me astray. I'm not following their lead anymore.

HPT: I am sure whatever you wear you'll look amazing.

My face is surely crimson by now.

Me: How about you just tell me what to bring so I can look amazing and not feel like an idiot?

HPT: I'm sorry you felt like an idiot.

My phone dings and I see another message from Texie come in. I hurry and switch over to her, telling her I will call her in a few minutes. Then I switch back to Ty.

Me: It was my own fault. I'm pretty sure your mother mentioned it. But I wasn't listening.

HPT: How about we just say nice casual?

Nice casual? What is nice casual? Is that like business casual?

Me: So no daisy dukes and tank tops? Or are we talking slacks and a blouse?

HPT: Daisy dukes????

I send him a gif of *American Dad* that says, 'Who wears short shorts?'

Me: Shorty short cut-off jeans. Sorry. It's from an old TV show.

He sends a gif of Ryan Reynolds raising his brows.

HPT: It may be worth you feeling like an idiot for me to see you in those.

Me: Sorry. I don't even own a pair of Daisy Dukes.

He sends back the crying face emoji.

HPT: Why did you ask if you don't even have them? Are you a tease?

I scoff. I wouldn't know how to be a tease, even if I wanted to be one.

Me: Just trying to gauge the level of casualness.

HPT: No formal wear.

Me: Deal. See you in—I look at my watch. Crap. I have just used ten minutes—Fifty minutes.

HPT: While I can't wait to see you, I can give you back the ten minutes if you need them.

My stomach gets all flippy. He said he can't wait to see me. I throw the covers back. Me: Nah. I'm good. Winky face.

I run to the bathroom and set a world record in showering. Thankfully, I washed my hair yesterday, so it'll be fine to skip it today. One of the benefits of long hair. I pull on my bikini

and look down at the scabs covering my belly. I am grateful to have my board shorts and rash guard. I don't feel inclined to explain the scabs to Ty. Besides, they are pretty gross to look at.

I dial Texie's number as I pull on the shorts and shirt.

"Hey, Gee." Her words are slurred, and I grimace.

"Sorry, I didn't realize what time it is there."

"It's okay." She yawns. "How's your trip?" Her words say trip, but her tone says Tyrone.

"It's good. I still wish you had been able to stay." I only partially mean it. But you don't admit that to your best friend, right?

She laughs. "Yeah, I can tell." Her voice is bland. "What did you do yesterday?"

"We went to the Hilltop Monastery."

"Oooh. How did it go? Is it as amazing as you thought it would be?"

"Yeah. It's so amazing. We spent the entire day there. You should see the paintings on the walls, Tex."

She stops me. "Yeah, whatever. I can see the pictures when you get home. I want to know how the prince is."

I rub my tinted moisturizer in, hoping it will even out the raccoon eyes I got at the monastery.

Leaning close to the mirror, I drop my chin, concentrating while I apply my mascara. "Good. He is nice and a total gentleman. He arranged for the monastery to be closed for the entire day while we were there."

Texie sighs. "Are you putting on your mascara? You sound weird."

I give my lashes one last stroke of the brush and then twist the cap back on. "Yeah. I'm just getting ready to leave."

"What are you doing today?"

I grab a maxi dress and a short-sleeved cardigan and tuck them into my bag. “We’re going to some beach and then I don’t know where.”

“Ohh. We’re? Who’s *we’re*?”

I roll my eyes. “Ty just texted me and asked if I wanted to go to the beach today. And after all the stairs we climbed yesterday, I think the water will feel amazing.”

“He’s Ty now, is he?” Texie’s voice is all gooey and sweet.

I don’t say anything back. She can be so annoying sometimes.

“So the beach,” she says. “Are you wearing that cute little bikini I made you buy?”

I smile into the phone. She doesn’t know about the board shorts and rash guard. And I plan to keep it that way. “Yep.”

“No, you aren’t. I can hear in your voice that you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying.” Dang her. “I’m just wearing shorts and a rash guard over it.”

“But it’s so cute. Why are you covering it up?”

I sigh. “The suit may be cute, Tex. The oozing, crusty burns on my thighs and stomach are not.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about those.” She pauses. “Okay. Probably best not to show off the bikini then.”

“Thanks for your approval.” I find my pair of sparkly jeweled flops and toss them next to my bag. They will look great with the maxi skirt.

I look around the room, trying to think if I have forgotten anything. A knock sounds at the door and my stomach does the rhumba.

“Who’s knocking?”

I put the phone between my shoulder and cheek. “I don’t know. I’m not at the door yet,” I mumble as I look through the

peephole. My breath sucks in when I see Tyrone standing in the hallway in a t-shirt and board shorts.

“It’s him, isn’t it? I just heard you suck in a breath.” Texie squeals from the phone.

“Sshh. He can probably hear you through the door,” I whisper-yell at her.

“I can hear *you* through the door, Grace.” His voice is deep, and it melts over me.

“See? You just sighed again,” Texie whispers. “You really like this guy, don’t you?”

“I can’t really talk about this right now,” I hiss into the phone.

I push the lock to the side and open the door wide. Sander comes in first, followed by Tyrone. I’m flattered to see that Sander doesn’t let Ty wait in the hall. He must be starting to think I’m relatively safe. Or at least safer than the hallway. Although, he did still search the entire room. So I may still be a threat?

I point to the phone. “Okay, Tex. I’ve got to let you go. We’ll talk when I get home.”

“Hey, Texie. How was your flight?” Tyrone leans in behind me, talking into my phone over my shoulder, but he doesn’t back away once he’s done.

“Tell the prince ‘hi, back.’ And my flight was completely uneventful.” Texie lowers her voice. “Call me when you get back to the hotel tonight.”

I cover the phone with my hand. I can feel Ty’s breath on the back of my neck, and it gives me a shiver. “She says ‘hi, back’ and her flight was fine.”

I get back on with Texie. “You’ll be in court when I get back. We’ll just talk when I get home.”

“Fine. Call me while you’re getting ready in the morning.” She is pouting on the other end. I can hear it.

“But that will be like two in the morning there. I’m not waking you up in the middle of the night. Especially when I’ll be coming home in like thirty-six hours.” I’m not going to call her, no matter what she says. She can just be patient and wait.

“Just call me!” she growls before hanging up.

I move to my bed and throw my phone in my bag, snapping it shut. “Sorry about that.” I look over at Sander and then back to Ty. “You ready to go?”

Ty looks me over and I’m super glad I’m not only in my bikini. He whistles low. “I never realized board shorts and a rash guard could look hot, but on you, Miss Martindale...” He leaves the rest of his sentence unsaid as his waggling eyebrows seem to fill in the blank.

My face heats. It does that a lot around him. Maybe having a sunburn isn’t so bad after all.

I slip on my comfortable leather flops and sling my bag over my shoulder. “I could say the same for you, Your Highness.” I try to put a flirty tone to it, but it just comes out sounding weird.

He moves to put his hand on the small of my back, but I catch it first and intertwine my fingers with his.

I look over at him. Is it okay? I know we held hands yesterday, but maybe he’s over it.

He looks down at our hands, then back at me and smiles.

My shoulders relax and I let him lead me out the door.

We go down the back freight elevator again, but this time we go out a side door. An orange Jaguar F-Type convertible is parked at the curb, with SUVs parked in front and back of it. Two men pace in opposite directions on either side of the cars. Obviously, there is to be no waiting for the prince inside the car anymore.

Tyrone walks over and opens the passenger side door of the Jag.

I stop and run my fingers lightly over the frame of the car. “Ahh. A Jag. This was always my go-to car when we played

MASH in school. I usually wanted it to be red.” I glance over at him. “But I really like this orange, too.”

“Mash? I’ve never heard of that.” He helps me get in and I drop my bag on the floor at my feet.

“Oh, it’s just a game,” I say, hoping he will leave it alone.

He sits in the driver seat and presses the ignition. “How do you play the game?”

Why am I never so lucky as to get what I want? I wave his question away. “It’s just a dumb game that we played at school when I was a girl. It supposedly predicts your future.” I give what I hope is a ho-hum expression. “Not that I believe in such things now. But as a girl...I really hoped it would come true.”

His brow creases. “Your future car?”

I look at him with wide eyes. “Well, of course. Is a prediction of your future complete without a car?” I give an exaggerated shake of my head. “Oh sir, I think not.”

He grins over at me. “You’re not like anyone I have ever met, Grace.”

I snort-laugh. “Yeah, so you’ve told me.”

Ugh, really? It’s like every weird thing I can do seems to come out when I’m with this guy. I glance over and his smile grows.

“Like I said. Not like anyone else.”

Chapter Thirteen



TYRONE FOLLOWS BEHIND THE BLACK SUV, TURNING OFF onto a gravel road. I cringe as the small rocks bounce up, pinging the low undercarriage of the Jaguar. This place must be special to risk damaging his car like this. My fingers grip the door handle.

We drive for about a mile and then the SUV stops. Tyrone pulls up behind and waits as one of Sander's men hops out of the front SUV and runs to unlock a gate blocking the road. He swings it wide, standing and waiting while all the vehicles drive through. We all wait until the gate is secure before we continue.

The road begins a gentle decline, while the landscape stays level. Sharp rock walls rise up around us until the front SUV pulls to the side and everything drops away revealing a clearing of white sand and blue-green water.

I breathe out a sigh. It's magnificent. "What is this place? It's gorgeous." I stare out the windshield. "How did I miss pictures of this beach? I'm certain I saw every photo there is of Atraxia on the internet."

Tyrone's deep chuckle sounds next to me. "That's a lot of pictures.

"Of all the places we visited on our trip, Atraxia is the one I looked forward to the most."

"Why?" He leans back in his seat and pulls his knee up so it is wedged between the steering wheel and the door.

“I don’t really know. I just loved looking at the pictures. They felt different than any other place.”

“And what do you think about it now that you are here?”

I stare hard at him for a minute. Would he understand what Texie doesn’t? That there is just a feeling here that I can’t put words to. “I love it. There’s something here that speaks to my soul.” I look down at my hands. “I know that sounds stupid—”

“Not at all. I feel the same way.” He plays with the hem on his shorts and looks out the windshield. “When I leave, for whatever reason, I always feel like I leave a bit of myself here. I don’t really feel whole until I return.”

Yes. That was it. I feel whole here. The only other place I’ve felt like this is when I’m home.

“You do understand.” I pull my legs up underneath me. “Texie doesn’t get it.”

He tips his head to the side. “That’s sad.”

“Why?” I ask. What does he care what Texie understands?

“Because it means she’s never truly felt at home. Once you feel it, you never forget it. I feel bad for those who don’t know what they are missing.”

He sucks in a breath. “Why are we just sitting here in the car when we can be out there?” I feel his eyes move off me and I take a deep breath. No one has ever understood me on this level. It’s so weird that it’s coming from a man I’ve only known for a few days and that I loathed at the beginning.

He hops out of the car and comes around, opening my door for me. He offers his hand to help me out and I take it. Where did this guy come from? With the exception of our first two encounters, he had been a perfect gentleman. More so than any guy I’ve ever dated. Do they teach these things at prince school? It’s like Mr. Darcy has been this guy’s personal tutor.

I’m going to miss being with him. We are just barely getting to know each other and now I must leave tomorrow night. Why couldn’t we have come to Atraxia first? Then I could have spent the whole three weeks with him. But this is

why I wanted to just be friends. Why didn't I listen to myself? Instead, I've allowed myself to be all swept up by this guy.

He leans in as he shuts the car door behind me. "If you don't unfurrow that brow, I may get the impression that you aren't having a good time."

I jerk my eyes up to his, relieved to see a grin.

"I'm sorry. I am just thinking of something else."

He takes my bag off my shoulder and tosses it over his own. "What can be so bad to make you scowl so fiercely?"

I shrug. "I'm just thinking how bummed I am that I'm leaving tomorrow and will be at work the next day." It isn't totally the truth, but it is close enough. I'm not looking forward to leaving this all behind and returning to my barista duties.

"Then why don't you quit your job and stay here?" A slightly vulnerable look crosses his face. Something I didn't think him capable of just the other day.

"You've got to be kidding. And do what? I already know what your father thinks of lobbyists."

He reaches over and wraps my hand in his. My step falters but I cover it well. "My father likes you. He may not be fond of American lobbyists, but if you were working as one here, he would have no problem with it."

"Yeah, because that makes complete sense to quit my job and bail on my lease to move to a country where I have no job, no home and no family."

"But you would be home. You said so yourself."

I have no words, so I just stand there, blinking at him.

"At least think about it." He lifts our hands. "I would kind of like to see where this goes."

I grunt. "You hardly know me. I mean, for all you know, this is just my tourist persona. I could totally be a crazy stalker chick in my normal life."

He stops walking and studies me, his head cocked to the side. Without a word, he pulls me toward the water.

I stay quiet. What else is there to say after announcing that you may be a stalker? I'm surprised Sander hasn't come over and moved between us.

"Are you?" He glances at me sideways. "A crazy stalker chick?"

I shake my head. "No."

We come to a stop just out of reach of the water. Tyrone drops my bag on the sand.

I fold my arms across my chest and level a stare at him. "But isn't that what I would say if I *was* a crazy stalker?"

He laughs and the weird tension in the air lessens.

He turns and walks back toward the car.

I jog to catch up with him. "Hey, where are you going?"

"To get my stuff out of the boot."

I sigh at his word choice. I'm going to miss listening to him talk. I watch as he leans into the trunk to grab his things and I sigh again. I will miss more than just his accent. He is hot; there is no arguing that point. But I'll also miss the comfortable banter we sometimes have. I can honestly say I never felt as comfortable with Tanner, even after more than a year of dating, as I feel with Ty after just a few days.

He stands up with several beach-type chairs slung over one shoulder and a large canvas bag over the other. Reaching forward, he slams the trunk closed.

This time I grab his bag. "Here. Let me help you carry some of that stuff."

He opens his mouth to object, but I already have the strap of his bag over my head and crossed over my chest, so it hangs on the opposite side. "Seriously, how long do you plan on staying at the beach? A week?"

He dips his head and looks at me over the tops of his sunglasses. "Hey, a beach trip is serious business. I had to

make sure we have everything we need.”

I return his look. “Like sunscreen?”

He grimaces. “I really am sorry about getting you sunburned yesterday.”

I shrug. “I’ll live.”

We get back to the spot where he’d dropped my bag, and he unfolds the chairs, placing one next to the other.

I look around. Sander and two other men, dressed down today in what looks like cabana shirts and slacks, are spaced equally across the beach to the side and behind us. I have no idea where the other men have gone off to. “Where are all of Sander’s guys?”

Tyrone glances around. “Probably patrolling the perimeter.” He hands me a chilled glass filled with a bright pink liquid. I lift it to my nose and smell it. “Lemonade?”

He nods, but his face is a mixture of curiosity and laughter. “Do you smell everything? I noticed you did it yesterday at the monastery and also at the restaurant.”

I wince. “Yeah, I do. It makes my dad crazy when I go home to visit.” My face warms all the way to the tips of my ears. Tanner had commented on it excessively. He’d even brought it up when he’d broken up with me. I’ve tried stopping it, but most of the time I don’t even realize I’m doing it.

Ty stares at me with his brows raised.

I blow the air out of my lungs through mostly closed lips, making them puff out slightly. “So Texie and I had this roommate in college. And she made the weirdest food. Half the time, the ingredients she used were expired. We never knew what we would find in the fridge. We both got used to smelling all the food we ate to make sure it was edible.” I shrug. “I’ve tried to stop doing it. Tex still does it too, so I can’t really rely on her to tell me to stop.” I clear my throat and the memory of Tanner comes to my mind. “It made my last boyfriend crazy. He would slap my hand whenever he saw me doing it.”

Tyrone's brows shoot up and he leans slightly forward in his chair, his features hard. "Are you serious?"

I nod. "You would think that would make me stop, but it didn't. I just became more discreet. I think it may have been one of the reasons he broke up with me." Thinking back on it, I don't know why I'd been so heartbroken about the break-up. Tanner had been a pretty big jerk.

"I think it's cute. You look like a little rabbit."

I want to change the subject. Thinking about Tanner or rabbits is not making me feel confident in myself. I look out at the water. "You never told me why I've never seen pictures of this little cove."

"This is a private beach. It belongs to one of the estates that my family owns."

"One of?" I arch a brow. "Because you need more than one?"

He looks away from me. "We have many holdings. There are a lot of reasons for it. Most of them are financial."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the defensive. I meant it as a joke, but my humor doesn't always hit its mark." I want to pick up my chair and move it to the far side of the cove. But at least I'm making it so he won't be asking me to stay here longer.

He pushes himself out of his chair and I think maybe I've really offended him this time. But then he puts his hand out to me. I won't even admit to Texie how hard my heart pounds with relief that he doesn't seem angry.

He helps me up and pulls off his shirt.

Like an idiot, I just stare. A wave crashes hard in front of us and I feel moisture run from the side of my mouth. Am I actually drooling? His physique warrants such a reaction, but I want to be more discreet about it. It tastes salty, so maybe I haven't just humiliated myself. Again.

If he notices my cartoonish jaw drop at seeing him without his shirt, he doesn't indicate it.

I try to pull myself together as Tyrone recaptures my hand in his. “What do you say to testing out the water?” He pauses, as if waiting for me to take off the board shorts and rash guard. But when I don’t make a move, he just turns toward his heap of stuff.

“That’s why we came, right?” I try to cover up my embarrassment.

He bends forward and grabs a football out of his bag. “I brought a rugby ball. You want to toss it around a bit?”

I snatch the ball away. “I feel I must warn you. I grew up with five brothers.”

“Oh?”

I nod matter-of-factly. “I can take it easy on you for the first little bit, but then you’ll have to up your game if you want to keep up.”

“Oh, really?” He laughs. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

We step into the waves that crash on the sand. The water isn’t cold by any means, but against my sun warmed skin it feels cool. The goosebumps that erupt remind me of the burns still healing on my stomach and legs. Several scabs crack as my skin tightens. I bite the inside of my cheek and close my eyes until the pain ebbs.

“Is the water too cold?” Ty squeezes my hand.

“Nope. I just need to get used to it. My skin is warmer than I thought.”

He grins and uses the football to splash water up onto me.

I totally pull a girl move and squeal. I squelch it quickly, glaring at him. “You’ll pay for that one.”

He drops my hand and waves toward himself. “Bring it on, babe.”

My mouth drops open again but for an entirely different reason. My eyes widen. “You did *not* just call me babe.” I pinch my mouth into a tight line.

“Woah,” he holds his hands out in front of him as he takes several steps away from me. “I take it you don’t appreciate the term?”

I move forward, trying to look as menacing as possible. Flicking my hand forward, I send a spray of water toward him. “What gave you that idea?”

He puts his hands up, but the football blocks most of the water from hitting him in the face. He snickers, moving away from me slightly quicker now. “What you meant to say earlier is that you aren’t a crazy *stalker*, but just crazy in general? Because normal people do not get mad over a cute pet name like *babe*.”

I lunge forward and he drops the football and grabs my wrists. He moves with me as I try to pull them away. His grasp isn’t tight but is still unyielding.

“Babe is not a cute pet name. Kitten or sweetheart are cute pet names.” I guffaw. “Even chickie is better than babe.”

He manages to tuck both of our hands behind my back, bringing me tight against his body. My breath stutters as his chest comes to my eye level. It isn’t smooth, but instead is covered with just the right amount of sexy hair. It’s rather spectacular from my vantage point.

“Then I can call you kitten?” He whispers in my ear.

“Not if you want to live.” I laugh in mockery. “I’m deathly allergic to cats.”

He stares down at me all squinty eyed and he looks so adorable I relax slightly.

His grip loosens. He looks as if he can see right through me. “Then what am I supposed to call you? You said it’s too soon for Gee. And Gee isn’t really a pet name anyway.”

I lift a shoulder. “Shouldn’t pet names have some meaning? Like they come from something we share together?”

“How about coffee?”

I tilt my head and give him an exasperated look. “A good experience.” I say, my indignation coming through.

“I guess that means I need to spend more time with you.” His grip slackens and he stares down at me like he wants to kiss me. I know I shouldn’t want it, it’s a terrible idea. But I do. I want it so bad it almost hurts. We can be friends with benefits, right?

He bends his head and I close my eyes. It’s going to happen. He pauses, just before meeting my lips, as if he is asking for permission. I push up on my tiptoes and his lips connect with mine.

I have only three words that come to my mind. Oh. My. Heck.

Every reason for *not* kissing him flees from my brain. And all I can think of is how good his lips feel on mine.

He releases my hands and wraps his arms around my waist, bringing me closer to him and deepening the kiss. The saltiness of the water only intensifies the sweetness of the lemonade I can taste on his lips. They are soft and warm. He obviously knows what he is doing as his lips leave mine and move to my jawline.

I’ve never felt a kiss like this. My toes curl into the sand, trying to keep me upright.

The noise of an engine brings me to my senses, and I pull away, taking several steps back and drawing my upper lip into my teeth. What have I done?

I look out into the water, but I don’t see any boats. Maybe I just imagined the engine.

He looks at me and where I expect to see confidence and triumph, there is only concern and vulnerability.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have presumed...” He takes a step forward with his hand raised but stops mid-stride.

I swallow and try to take a calming breath. My muscles and nerves seem to be in a hurdles race, jumping about inside me. I give a little laugh. “No worries. You’re good.” I stop, realizing how it sounds. “I mean, I don’t mean that your kiss was good...” I stammer. “Not that it wasn’t good. It was—” I bite my lip to keep me from embarrassing myself even more.

A grin quirks up one side of his mouth. “Thanks, I think?” He plucks up the football and tosses it to me. I easily catch it, even though my hands still shake and throw it back to him. Both of us back up several steps, putting some much-needed distance between us.

Chapter Fourteen



WE TOSS THE BALL AROUND FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR, UNTIL finally my legs scream with the exertion of running through the water. So much for allowing them to relax today.

Tyrone wades toward me. “You look tired. Should we head back and have something to eat?”

I nod and he comes toward me, taking my hand. He glances at me from the corner of his eyes, almost as if he is uncertain that it is okay, after the kiss.

I give his hand a squeeze, and he tugs me a little closer.

We come out of the water, and I practically collapse onto the towel I have spread out on the sand. I lay on my back and close my eyes, stretching my arms up above my head and pointing my toes, enjoying a full body stretch.

Ty takes in a sharp breath, and I realize too late that my rash guard top has slid up, exposing a portion of my belly. I put my hand above my eyes, shielding them from the sunlight.

“What happened to your stomach?” He stares down at me.

I bite my lip.

After he’d spilled his coffee down the front of me, I’d had all kinds of imaginings about what I would say to him if he ever found out what his coffee had done to me. At the time, it had seemed completely impossible that I would see him again. Let alone show him my stomach. But now, sitting here with him, liking him a lot, I can’t bring myself to say all the snappy, cutting lines I came up with in my head.

I run the sand through my fingers and avert my eyes. “I had an accident. But it’s getting better.”

He kneels beside me, and I feel his finger gently shift the rash guard up a little more. His face blanches, and he looks from my stomach to my face. “This isn’t from—” He stops and swears in Greek.

I push his hand away and pull the rash guard down as I sit up. “It’s not a big deal,” I lie. The stricken look on his face makes it impossible to accuse him as I had planned out in my head.

“I did that, didn’t I? That’s my fault.” He sits back on his heels and looks down at my thighs, as if remembering every spot the coffee had dropped, but my board shorts keep those burns covered.

I put a hand on his arm. “You didn’t spill your coffee on me on purpose. It was an accident that was every bit as much my fault as it was yours.”

He gives a mirthless laugh. “Yeah, and I was so concerned about you following the accident.” He runs his hand through his hair and drops back onto his behind, pulling one knee up. “No wonder you thought I was such a jerk. You’ll have those scars to remember me by for the rest of your life.”

He hits his forehead with his palm. “And then I wanted to call you coffee as a pet name? How have you not slapped me yet?”

I grin. “I’m not going to lie, I’ve thought about it.” But then I soften and put a hand on the arm he has resting on his knee. “Come on, Ty. “I think we both realize that the person either of us saw that day isn’t a reflection of our true characters.” I pat the sand next to me. “Please, can we just forget about it and continue with our beach day?”

He stares at me, and I can see the pain in his eyes. It takes my breath away to see the intensity of his feelings. “I’m quite certain I will not be forgetting about it anytime soon. But after all I’ve done to you, I can’t deny you the chance for a pleasant day at the beach.”

This man isn't the player I've assumed he is. I don't think that kind of guy would feel such remorse for something that had been an accident.

Well, he may have *been* a player, but I don't think he's playing with me. It unsettles me to think that I'd misjudged him so completely.

Making good on his word, he hops up and moves over to the cooler bag. He pulls out an insulated thermos and dumps both of our glasses of lemonade.

"Hey," I reach for my glass. "I wasn't done with that."

He scrunches up his nose. "I'm quite confident those are past their prime after sitting in the heat for so long."

He pours fresh lemonade into each glass and hands mine to me. Then he pulls out two over-stuffed pita sandwiches filled with meat, cheese, and veggies. He hands me one and my eyes widen. "This is huge. I'm never going to be able to eat even half of this."

He shrugs but his voice is tight. "Just eat what you want. I won't force you to eat it all."

I miss the easy conversation we'd had just moments ago.

He pulls out a bag of potato chips and dumps some onto a napkin, then hands them to me. They are flecked with green, like the sour cream and chive chips I eat at home. I take a bite and the taste of oregano fills my mouth. "Mmm. Ty, these are so good."

"Have you never had them before?"

I shake my head.

He turns to me. "Hey, you called me Ty. Does that mean I can call you Gee?"

"If it's that important to you," I give him an exaggerated eye roll, but then grin at him. "Yes. You can call me Gee."

He takes a bite of his sandwich, a satisfied look on his face.

I release a breath. Good, maybe now things will go back to normal. Or as normal as it is to be at the beach with a prince.

He leans back on one elbow and takes a bite of his sandwich, looking out over the water. “I’m glad you agreed to come to dinner that first night. I can understand why you may have been hesitant.”

I thought we were past this. I sigh. “Yeah, I’m glad I did too.” I take a bite so that I don’t have to say anything more for the time. We eat in silence, both of us watching the waves as they crash lightly onto our little beach. With barely half of my sandwich gone, I groan and drop the rest onto my napkin.

Ty pops the last bite of his into his mouth. “You aren’t too full for dessert, are you?”

I eye him. “That depends on the dessert.” I toss my braid over my shoulder and grin. “Aw, who am I kidding? I don’t really care what kind it is as long as it’s dessert.”

He motions to the water with his head. “Do you want to go back out?”

“Nah. I already know my leg muscles that weren’t already sore are going to hurt tomorrow. And you *did* mention dessert, remember? You can’t bring something like that up and then think a girl will just go about her business. I want dessert.”

He drops his head back and laughs.

The tension that has been building in my body since Tyrone saw my stomach washes away at the sound of his genuine laughter. “Then I better get the lady some dessert.”

He jumps up much quicker than I imagine myself doing. He puts out his hand and helps me up, pulling me gently to him. I bump into his chest, and he puts his hands on my waist and looks down at me. Is he going to kiss me again? I really want him to, but then will our conversation be all stilted and weird?

He takes a deep breath. “I can’t put into words how sorry I am about the coffee.”

I shake my head. “Please. Can’t we just pretend it never happened?”

He takes a step back. “No, we can’t, because it did happen.”

I open my mouth to protest but he places his finger on my lips. “I won’t continue to mention it, but I need you to know how deeply sorry I am.”

This feels like a boyfriend talk. Not a just-a-friend talk. I pull away from him and scrunch up my nose. “Eeww. Do you know where your fingers have been?” That doesn’t come out exactly as I had intended. It may have sounded rude. But I’m trying to ease the jittery feeling creeping up from the tips of my toes. I rub my hand across my lips, attempting to wipe the tingle from them.

He tips his head to the side, studying me for a moment. I feel completely exposed. Like he can read every thought in my head. And I’m not sure whether I want that or not. His mouth settles into a soft smile. “You have a very good point there. No fingers on lips without prior hand washing.” He leans forward and brushes a kiss against my lips. “But surely lips are okay.”

I nod. “Yeah, that’s a good rule.” Especially the part about the kiss.

We gather up the chairs and towels and I stuff the bag of chips back into the insulated bag. Ty stuffs my half-sandwich and our napkins into a paper sack.

I grab my bag and the duffel, but he takes the duffel back. “You have plenty to carry. I can get this stuff.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, please. There’s hardly anything in it. Now give me the duffel bag or I’ll tell Sander you said he is fat.”

He chuckles. “Actually, it might almost be worth it to see that conversation.” Still, he hands me the duffel bag. I sling it across my chest, and it rests at my side. My other bag rests on the opposite hip. I’m sure I look like some overly packed tourist just without the Hawaiian shirt and knee socks.

Tyrone snatches up my hand and laces his finger through mine. It's beginning to feel more natural. What am I going to do once I return to DC and no longer have Ty's hand to hold. It isn't something I am anticipating in the least.

Chapter Fifteen



TYRONE HELPS ME INTO THE CAR AND SHUTS THE DOOR ONCE I'm settled. He moves over to Sander and hands him the insulated cooler bag. Sander dips his head and then speaks to his men, as he hands them each a sandwich.

“Off to get dessert then? Or have you changed your mind?” Tyrone asks as he slips into his seat.

“I never change my mind about dessert. If anything, we've taken so long, I've made more room for it.”

Tyrone laughs. “Then I will get to it.”

We leave the same way we came in, waiting while the gate opens and closes. It only takes about ten minutes until we pull up to a little store in a nearby town.

Ty comes around and opens my door for me.

The bell above the door tinkles as Sander pushes it open. He makes his sweep of the shop and then stands to the side.

I notice the closed sign as we walk in. The woman behind the counter puts her hand to her hair and then runs her hands down the front of her apron. “Welcome, Your Highness. What may I get you?” she asks in Greek.

Ty releases my hand only to put his at the small of my back, guiding me forward.

The woman behind the counter watches the motion, with a knowing look. My face heats, which is stupid, because it isn't like I've never been on a date before. But the look on this woman's face says she knows what our relationship is about.

I swallow.

If I ask her, will she tell me? Because I'm not entirely sure. Are we just friends? Friends with benefits? Or does Ty think of us as more?

I shake my head. I'm not a hundred percent sure what *I* want us to be.

"What would you like?" Ty whispers close to my ear.

I pull my thoughts away from the woman and look up at the handwritten board above her head. "Oooh. Ice Cream."

Tyrone slides his hand back around and rests it on my waist. I study the board even more intently, so I don't over analyze it.

"Have you ever tasted *Pagoto Elaeolado me syko*?"

He startles me and I jerk my head toward him. "What?"

"*Pagoto Elaeolado me syko*. Have you ever tasted it?" He motions with his head to the order board, completely unaware of what his touch is doing to me.

"No. But it's one of the things I had on my list to try."

He leads me forward and orders two cones made of olive oil and figs. The woman turns from the counter and leans over the ice cream freezer at the side. She hands the two cones to Tyrone, forcing him to remove his hand from my hip. My body relaxes.

He hands the second one over to me and walks over to a little cafe table. We sit down and both take a bite of our ice cream.

I close my eyes and let the creaminess coat my tongue and mouth. It's like ice cream I've eaten at a shop in Georgetown, only the flavor is completely unique. The olive oil is subtle, but discernable. However, it's the sweetness of the figs that takes center stage. It isn't overpowering, just very pleasing. "Mmm, this is delicious." I take another bite.

Ty smiles. "Does it live up to the hype I unintentionally gave it by making you wait so long?"

I nod. “Totally worth it.”

He sets his hand with the cone down on the table, the bottom of his cone hovering just above the surface. “This game you mentioned playing as a girl involving Jaguars—”

I love the way he says it, using the long *u* sound in the middle. It is so European. “What is the game about? Can you teach it to me?”

I guffaw and a little bit of ice cream comes out of my nose and lands on my hand. My eyes widen and I look up to see if he notices.

The large grin tells me he did. I take a deep breath and the smell of dairy and figs fills my nose. Great. Now I can be reminded of my unladylike behavior for the rest of the day.

“It isn’t really a game that the boys played. It’s just silly and juvenile. You don’t want to play it.”

He looks at me; if anything, my explanation seems to only heighten his interest. “Can’t I be the judge of that?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I will not be a party to you learning this dumb game. I should never have mentioned it.”

But his frown makes me back pedal. “Okay, fine.” I don’t even try to keep the exasperation from my voice because I know he is just going to think I’m a complete idiot when we are done with this. Or maybe just really childish.

“I need to be able to draw and write. I can’t really do that with the cone in my hand.”

He reaches over and takes the cone, tilting it in my direction. “You need to lick it, so it doesn’t drip.”

I lean over and lick the cone. His eyes follow my every movement, and he flicks up his brows when I catch his gaze. For a moment, I forget all about the stupid MASH game.

He clears his throat and looks at me expectantly.

“You realize you will never be able to get this time back, right? It is that dumb.”

“I’ll risk it,” he says. I think he is only continuing with it because he likes to see me riled.

I narrow my eyes at him, hoping maybe I can scare him into relenting. But he just grins at me.

“I need a pen and a piece of paper.” I pat down my rash guard shirt. “I’m fresh out of both of those things, so we may have to wait on that game.” I snap my fingers in an aw, shucks kind of way. And then it dawns on me. He keeps calling it a game, which it really isn’t. “It’s not really even a game. Maybe you have the wrong idea about this.”

He looks at Sander and motions him over. “Miss Martindale is in need of a pen and piece of paper.”

Sander withdraws a small notebook from his pocket. “Is this big enough, Miss?”

I nod reluctantly.

Sander puts a pen on the table and then tears a piece of paper from his notebook. “Is this enough? Or do you need the whole pad?”

“This will do fine. Thanks, Sander.” There is no excitement in my voice—just resignation.

He nods and goes back to his position behind Ty.

I take the paper and draw a square toward the top. Above it I write the letters MASH. I look up at him and make an X through the M, replacing it with a P.

He frowns. “Why did you change that?”

I tsk at him. “I will explain everything once it is all set up.

I make six lines on each side of the square with three small lines under the square.

I sigh and my head shakes in disgust. “This is uber lame. You’re really sure you want to do this? This is your last chance to back out.”

“Uber? I’m not familiar with the term, except as a car service.” His brow creases in thought.

“Uber...as in super or greatly.”

He nods. “Ah, so you are saying this game is super lame.”

He’s catching on. Maybe I’ll be allowed to skip this after all. I nod vigorously. “Yes. Completely lame.”

“I like lame things.” He levels his gaze at me. “You realize that making such a big deal of it is only making me want to play more.”

I grab my ice cream and run my tongue all the way around the cone, hoping I can distract him from this ill-conceived plan.

He watches, but then taps the paper. “I have high expectations now.”

I let out a fake cry. “I know. And that makes it so much worse.”

I start to make a spiral in the box I’ve drawn. “Tell me when to stop,” I tell him.

“Wait.” He puts his hand on my arm. “You said you will explain it all.”

“I will,” I say as I put the pen back where I left off.

“But how do I know when to stop?” He looks worried.

“It’s a game. It doesn’t really matter. Just say stop whenever you want to.” I keep making the spiral bigger and bigger.

He leans forward, watching the pen intently. “Stop,” he yells.

The woman behind the counter looks over at us, her hands twisting together.

I lift the pen off the paper. “Hey, is she closed just because you’re here?”

He licks his cone. “Yes.”

“Then shouldn’t we leave so she can open for business again? She’s probably losing money because we’re sitting here playing this lame game.”

He shrugs. “She’ll be compensated.” He taps the paper again. “If you would quit stalling, she wouldn’t have to be closed for so long.” He bites off a piece of his cone. “Man, Gee. This game is taking forever.”

“Fine. I need the names of three cars you like.”

His face scrunches up. “You mean like the names I give them?”

I tilt my head. “Do you name your cars?”

His brow creases like he’s trying to decide how to answer. “Doesn’t everyone?”

Probably. All my brothers have named their cars. Maybe it’s a man thing, instead of an American thing. “Not proper names. Like brands or models.”

He nods. “Okay. So like Jaguar—” There is the long *u* again. “Audi and Ferrari.”

I write each car down on a line to the side of the square. “Now I need the names of three women.” I can’t look at him when I ask for these.

“Women that I like—as with the cars?” What is that tone in his voice?

“Yeah, sure.” I keep hyper-focused on the paper in front of me.

“Grace.”

“Huh?” I look up and he taps the paper again. I should institute a no touching the paper policy from now on.

“You said women I like. I like you.”

I shake my head. “Other women. This is like telling your future. I’m not your future. I go home tomorrow, remember?”

“Are you trying to change fate, Gee?”

I give him my blandest face.

He narrows his eyes at me. “Fine. Calliope.”

Who is this Calliope woman? Does he like-like her or just like her? Ah, crap. Now I’m acting like I’m in elementary

school. I lean forward to lick my cone, hoping my stomach will stop feeling like I've just eaten a bowl of jalapenos. I write down Calliope's name. "And?"

"Grace."

I shake my head. "I already said no. Pick someone else."

"Very well. Chloe."

I feel an instant dislike for this Chloe person. What is my problem? Haven't I told him he can't pick me? I can't dislike people for displacing me on the list when I am the reason I'm not on the list. I knew this was a bad idea.

He touches the last line. "And Grace. This is my game. You can't tell me who I can add and who I can't."

I give a token roll of my eyes. "Fine." I write my name on the last line and my stomach goes all flippy. Stupid stomach. It isn't like this thing is real. Even if I feel more invested in the outcome than I ever did when I was in grade school.

"Okay. I need three numbers."

"Four, nine and twelve." He rattles them off without thought.

I give a low whistle on the last one.

His eyes widen slightly. "Are those bad numbers?"

I shrug. "Maybe for Chloe or Calliope." I smile innocently at his creased brow. "Three city names, please."

He taps his chin. "Hmm. Any cities?"

I nod.

"Kaysariyyah, Paris and Washington, DC." He gives me a smile, challenging me to tell him he can't add DC to his list.

I scribble it down and move on. "Okay. Last ones. I need three occupations you would like to have." I list Prince on the top line. "That one I can add myself."

He hands the cone over to me to lick. "Hmm. Are these realistic occupations or dream occupations?"

"Whatever you want."

His mouth twitches to the side. “Okay. How about one dream and one realistic?” He pauses and glances around us. “Rock star.”

I snicker. “Yeah, I can totally see that.”

As if to prove he can, indeed be a rock star, he leans in and sings a few lines from *Sister Christian*.

I lean forward, our noses almost touching. “I love *Night Ranger*,” I whisper to him. “But that song doesn’t really scream rock star. It’s more of a ballad.”

He holds his cone up to his mouth, and I grin stupidly. It looks ridiculous, but also incredibly hot at the same time.

“I just haven’t gotten to the rock part.” He keeps singing until he gets to the chorus where he stands up and puts his foot up on his chair, holding his cone up in front of his mouth. He looks very much like a rock star.

The ice cream lady’s eyes widen.

I turn on the flashlight on my phone and wave it around as I sway to the song. I would totally be a groupie for him.

He finishes the song and drops down into his seat.

“I love that song.”

His brows tick up. “I’m not surprised. All the cool chicks do.” He has a good voice; it isn’t hard to envision him on a stage. He sits back and taps the paper again. “And king. That is to be my real occupation.” There is much less enthusiasm in his voice.

I gape at him. How had I not realized he would ultimately become king? It is obvious, as the heir to the throne, but for some reason, I’ve never thought past him being a prince.

I look over at him. “You don’t sound too excited about it.”

“What am I to be excited about? It’s been my duty since I was born. I have no say in the matter. Just expectations to fulfill. I’ve had so many lectures on department I can’t even keep track of how many there have been.”

“But once you are king, you can make changes that you want for your country.”

His brows flick up. “It’s not like the old days where the king’s word was law. We still have a chancellor and a parliament we must work with.”

I close my mouth and hurriedly write it down, not wanting to think about it.

“What does this mean?” He points to the P.A.S.H. written across the top.

I point to each letter. “Palace, Apartment, Shack and House. One of these is your future living accommodations.” I should give him one last out. “Hey, if your life goes to heck in a handbasket because this changes your future, don’t come crying to me.”

“Didn’t I already say I would risk it?” He grins. “But I still don’t get these letters.”

“Just wait.” I count the spirals I had drawn earlier and write the number twelve down on the bottom of the paper. Starting with the P, I count to twelve, crossing out things as I land on them. I cross out Jaguar and frown, but then when I circle Ferrari, it seems like an okay compromise.

I land on Calliope and then Chloe and cross them out. My heart accelerates as I circle my name. *Oh, stop it dumb heart. This isn’t real.* I have a plane ticket to Washington, DC in an email on my phone.

Finally, all the categories are selected. Twisting the paper on the table, I push it toward him and point at each thing I’ve circled starting at the top with the P. “You will live in a palace,” I give him my best surprised look. “Shocker, drive a Ferrari, be a king and live in Washington, DC.”

He points to the numbers at the bottom. “What about this?”

I laugh exaggeratedly. “You’ll have twelve children.”

“Oohh.” He grimaces. Then he points to my name and holds my gaze. “And how do you figure into my future?”

His grin tells me he's already figured it out, but he is going to make me say it out loud. I shift my eyes away from him. "According to this you will marry me. But I'm not having twelve children, so I know it can't be accurate."

He leans to the side until he catches my gaze again. "Perhaps the kid part is wrong, although I'm not opposed to that number." His voice lowers. "But everything else seems to be spot on." He shifts and chuckles. "I don't even have to wait for the future to drive a Ferrari. I already have one of those."

I reach for the paper, but he beats me to it. "I believe this is *my* future." He folds it in half, then pulls out his wallet and slips the paper inside. That seems weird, right? Why would a grown man keep some lame elementary school game?

I push back my chair and it clatters to the floor. I need to move, to get on to our next adventure or even just return to my hotel. Something to help end how awkward I feel.

Sander steps forward, but Ty waves him back.

He comes around and picks up my chair off the floor. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm fine." But I don't feel fine. I feel all kinds of jittery, like I had just consumed twelve big Fizz Colas. I look at my watch, and my hand shakes slightly. "Wow. We've been gone a long time. You're probably needing to get back."

He hitches a shoulder up in a half shrug and throws the wrapper from his cone into the garbage.

He holds mine out to me, but I shake my head and he tosses it into the garbage too. I'm not hungry anymore.

He stares at me a moment before grabbing my hand and leading me toward the door.

I half expect to burst into flames or something with all the current that is flowing through me.

He helps me into the car and as he walks around to his own door, I clench my fists tightly, my nails digging into my palms. "Pull it together, Grace."

What am I, some teenager on her first date? I have never felt this out of control of my own emotions before and it's scaring me.

I swallow and take a deep breath. I have just over twenty-four hours and then I will be on a plane, back to my normal life. I just hope that after this, I can still be satisfied with normal.

Chapter Sixteen



I WRAP THE TOWEL AROUND ME AND TUCK THE CORNER UNDER my arm. Grabbing my brush, I start at the top and brush out the snarls in my hair.

My phone starts playing *I'll be there for you*, by the Rembrandts. I pick it up and press the answer button. “Hey, Tex. I thought we weren’t talking until I come home. What time is it there, anyway?”

“No. *You* said we weren’t talking until you came home. I never agreed to your terms.”

I sit down on the edge of the tub. “Ah. I must have missed that part.” I tuck the towel between my knees. “How’s your trial going?”

She sighs. “Fine. But I didn’t call to talk about my trial. I want to know how the beach was yesterday.”

I lean over and place my elbows on my knees. “It was beautiful and completely private. It was only Ty and me and his security guys there.”

“Oohh. Sounds cozy.”

“Mm-hm.” I say as I slip on my flip-flops.

“So what did you do at the beach?”

I tell her about what had happened, only leaving out the part where we kissed and when he’d discovered the burns on my stomach. Tex will make a bigger deal of it than it really is.

“Then we went to this ice cream shop, and I got olive oil and fig ice cream.”

“Yuck. That sounds disgusting.”

I frown, pulling at a string on the edge of the towel. “It isn’t gross at all. It’s actually delicious.”

“Okay. So you ate ice cream. I bet you looked at each other’s lips a lot. Did it lead to any kissing?”

I can picture Texie with her dreamy-eyed look as she imagines Ty and me lip locking over ice cream.

“Ugh. No. That would be so gross. Dairy kissing? No thanks.” I prop my chin up with my hand. “We did play a game of MASH, though. Which was totally awkward and weird.”

“Wait, like the MASH we played in elementary school?”

I nod. “Yep.”

I can hear the confusion in her voice. “How did that happen? I can’t even imagine how that game came up.”

I tell her about his beautiful car and the offhanded comment I had made about Jags.

“Wow. You should probably filter what you say to him.” She’s right, and I know she’s right. Which is probably why I’m annoyed with her.

“I only brought it up as a way to tell him how much I liked his car, not to act as a plea to play the stupid game.”

Her voice changes, hitching up slightly. “What were the girls’ names that he gave you?”

Of course she asks about that. “Why do you care? It’s not like you know any of them.”

“Did he at least put your name on the list?” She pouts and I can tell she regrets not being here to see it all in person. If she had been here, it likely would never have happened. Dang her for leaving.

I really did not want to have this conversation over the phone. It feels too impersonal. I sigh. “Yeah.”

Texie squeals. “Yes. I knew he liked you.”

“It’s so weird, Tex. It’s like we’ve lived a whole month in the last two days. I don’t feel like we just met less than a week ago. How is that possible?”

“What are you say—”

A knock sounds at the door and I pull my phone from my ear to look at the time. “Crap, Texie. I’ve got to go. I think Ty is here to get me. We are going to some ruins today and I’m not even dressed yet.”

“Oooh. Sounds like I did you a favor.”

“You’re ridiculous.” I hang up without saying goodbye.

Another knock sounds.

“Just a minute,” I yell as I open the bathroom door and look through the peephole. Ty and Sander stand outside the door. Sander looks nervously up and down the hall.

I unlock the deadbolt and twist the door handle enough to jar it open. “Come on in,” I holler before shutting myself back in the bathroom.

The door opens and I hear the guys shuffle in. “Grace? Where are you?”

“I just got out of the shower. Sorry. I’m running late.” Ugh. I hate being late. It shows such a disregard for other people’s time. So disrespectful. And to be late for Ty seems doubly so, for some reason. The strain in my voice is obvious as I grab the hair dryer and plug it in with more force than is necessary.

A knock sounds on the bathroom door. “Miss Martindale, are you sure everything is okay?” Sander’s voice is strained.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Texie just called me, and I lost track of the time.” Before I can turn on the dryer, there is another knock. Seriously? I will never get ready if people won’t leave me alone.

“Miss Martindale, please open the door.” Sander’s voice is low.

“Really, Sander. I don’t think that’s necessary.” Ty’s voice sounds close.

“Yeah, Ty’s right. I’m just stressed that you’re having to wait for me.” I stare at the door. Sander won’t break it down or anything, will he?

I forget about my hair and reach for my clothes, just to be on the safe side.

“Please, Miss Martindale? It’s for your safety as well as Prince Tyrone’s.”

“Okay. Just a minute. Let me just throw my clothes on.”

“Don’t go to any trouble on our account.” Ty calls through the door.

“Ha, ha.” I fumble with the tie on my pants, finally untangling the knot I’d put in it in my hurry to get them on. I unlock the bathroom door, just as I finished tying them.

The door swings open and Sander looks around, pulling back the shower curtain and looking me over. “You’re sure you’re well?”

I nod. “Yeah. I just hate to be late.” My eyes flick to Ty standing just outside the door. He shrugs and gives me an I-don’t-know look.

He moves forward and looks around Sander, seeing me fully for the first time since he entered my room. I see an appreciation in his gaze. I’m not even wearing makeup. Man, he might be perfect.

“My apologies, Miss Martindale.” Sander looks flustered when he eyes my wet hair hanging over my shoulder, leaving a wet mark on my shirt. “I found this on the floor just inside your door.” His mouth is set in a firm line as he holds up a piece of paper between his fingers.

I grab the note and open it up. Ty comes over and stands next to me, reading over my shoulder.

You should not have told him.

I look up at them. “What is this?”

Ty steps closer to me.

“I was going to ask you the same thing. Have you seen it before?” Sander looks intense.

“No. It wasn’t there this morning.” It’s weird. I hadn’t realized it until now, but in all the time I’ve spent with Ty, I’ve never once scoped out a room looking for MSG or some other dangerous person. I feel completely safe when I’m with him. In fact, I had almost forgotten the brake line incident even happened.

Ty snatches the note from my hand. “Get dressed. You’re going to be staying at the palace.”

I look at him like he has gone crazy. “Um, hello. I’m flying home tonight, remember?”

Tyrone shakes his head. “Actually, that is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Sander’s men have found footage of the area surrounding the coffee shop. We need you to extend your trip so you can look at all the footage and see if you can identify the man you saw.”

“But I need to get home. I have a job.”

“My secretary has already changed your flight to early Wednesday morning. I can have her contact your boss also—”

I turn on him. “What do you mean, you already changed my flight? You didn’t feel the need to ask me first?”

He seems taken aback at my response. “We need you to stay a few more days, Grace. I’m just trying to make it easier on you.” He turns me toward the bathroom. “Why don’t you finish getting ready and we’ll grab your bags. You can check out on the app once we’re in the car.”

My mind is reeling. I don’t know which part of this conversation to be mad about first.

“But now that this note has come,” his voice floats through the bathroom door. “I insist you stay at the palace.”

I wind up the blow-dryer cord and put it back under the counter. Squeezing my moisturizer onto my fingers, I rub it roughly on my face as I try to filter through my feelings. The idea that MSG knows which is my room is more than a little alarming. It captures more of my emotions than the presumptuous actions Ty has taken.

“Miss Martindale, we need to hurry. I don’t like that man knowing where you are.” Sander’s voice is professional but urgent.

I guess makeup can wait. Brushing my hair all to one side I work it into a French braid across the top of my head and down the side.

I glance in the mirror. I won’t win any beauty contests, but maybe I’ll stay alive.

I gather my stuff from inside the shower and on the counter, stuffing it into the toiletry and clear zipper bags as I open the door and walk out of the bathroom.

Tyrone stands up when I come into the room. He gives me an appraising look. “You look beautiful.” I can’t help but wonder if it is just to get him out of trouble. If it is, it’s working, because I forget for a moment that I’m mad at him.

“I’m so embarrassed you had to wait.” I shove everything into my open suitcase on my bed and slam the two sides together, yanking the zipper closed. I’m grateful I had at least packed up everything else before I showered.

I slide the suitcase to the floor and jerk the handle upward so I can pull it along. Then I drape the handles of my duffle bag over the handle and let it sit on top of the suitcase.

Ty walks toward me and leans in, pressing a kiss to my cheek. “I hope you slept well.”

Is he specifically not mentioning making me move to the palace? He has to know I’m irritated by the *high-handedness* of it. “I slept pretty good, I guess. How about you?”

Sander waves us to move faster.

I hurry and yank my jacket off the chair and give one last look around as I sling my messenger bag over my shoulder. Had I forgotten anything? I glance at the plugs, making sure I have my cell phone charger. The room looks devoid of anything that doesn't belong there.

Tyrone steps forward. "Here, let me get these for you." He takes hold of both suitcases and rolls them toward the door.

"You don't have to do that. I can take them myself." I'm not feeling particularly inclined to let him be gentlemanly, just yet.

He ignores me and opens the door to the hallway. One of Sander's men steps into the doorway and takes the bags from Ty. "Put those in the car."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Ty turns back into the room. "Do you have everything?"

I nod, clutching at the straps of my messenger bag. "Yep. I think I've got it all."

He slides his hand along the small of my back. "Then let's go." While his face does not show any tension, I can feel the rigidity of his body.

Sander speaks, but it must be to his men through his earpiece because he turns away from Ty and me. I'm guessing the new threat is being passed along and the men will be even more attentive. Oh, yay.



TYRONE STARTS the car and pulls away from the curb. "So I was thinking..." His focus is on the road.

I swivel in my seat as much as the seatbelt will allow. "About what other plans you can make for me?" I fix him with a scowl.

He sighs. "Listen, I'm sorry about that. I'm used to making decisions quickly. I didn't really think about how you might

feel about it. I'm sorry."

His words say he is sorry, but I don't hear as much regret in his tone as I'd like to. "But it's not as if you have much of a choice. You are a material witness in an attempt on my life. Sander will make you stay regardless."

"So it's like I'm under arrest?"

"No. You can move about Atraxia as you wish." He pauses. "Except that it isn't exactly safe for you to do anymore. We'll keep to the palace grounds."

I turn back and face forward, knowing if I speak now, I will say things that I'll regret.

He reaches over and touches my hand where it sits next to my leg on the seat. I pull it away and drop it into my lap. I'm acting like a baby, and I know it.

"Hey. I'm sorry, okay? Please don't be mad." He drums his thumb on the steering wheel. "I am looking at this as a wish come true. Neither one of us wanted our time to come to an end, right? This is a good thing. Now we can spend more time together and get to know each other even better."

I close my eyes and take a long, slow breath. I have two options here. I can be angry and have a miserable three days, confined to the palace. Or I can push aside my irritation and try to enjoy the extra time I have with Ty. Had I not been dreading leaving him just yesterday? And as Ty pointed out, I don't really have a choice in the matter. So I guess I'll take door number two.

I glance over at Tyrone, and he gives me a strained smile. "And hey, maybe when you leave on Wednesday, I can fly with you back to DC."

I bite my lip and look out the front window without seeing anything. He wants to go to DC with me? Yesterday I would have jumped at the chance, but right now I'm not the president of the Prince Tyrone fan club. "Let's just see how the next couple of days go, okay?"

I turn and look out my window recognizing places as they fly past. I love Atraxia—I have from the moment Texie and I

first arrived. So why am I so angry to be spending some extra time here? And staying in the palace, no less?

Maybe it's because the way it was handled bears too much resemblance to when I dated Tanner. He always made plans for me and just expected me to fall in line. I've since become overly reactive when I feel like someone is trying to control me.

Maybe Ty was just trying to help. Sometimes it's hard to see the line between controlling and helpful.

My phone buzzes with a text message and I lift it up for the facial recognition. My screen comes to life, displaying a text message from Kimberly, my boss's secretary. *Mandatory staff meeting at noon tomorrow.*

I switch the screen off and my stomach twists. Staying longer is going to be a huge deal and I know it. Not only have I already used all my vacation time but now I'm going to be missing a mandatory meeting. My day is just getting better and better.

My boss won't be happy about my absence, even if I can convince someone to video conference me in. And I know the reason he'll be mad. Because I can't video conference the coffee they expect me to bring to the meeting. If I'm not there to do that, is there even a reason for a video conference?

I don't even want to think about the financial repercussions of staying here longer.

"My boss is going to freak out when I don't show up for work on Monday. Congress will convene in the next few weeks and there's a lot of prep work to be done. He isn't altogether happy with the timing of this trip as it is."

"I already told you I can make a call to your boss and explain that you are needed here." Tyrone glances at me, his smile tentative.

"Uhh, no. I don't let my mom call in my excuses and I won't let you either. I'd be better off just calling in sick."

"Then why don't you just call in sick?"

“Because that’s dishonest. And just not my style. I’ll call him when we get to the palace.” It strikes me again how surreal this all is. I’ve just offhandedly mentioned *getting to the palace*. Like this *is* my normal life.

He nods. “I’m sorry I just sprung all this on you. But the video was only discovered last night and then with the note...”

I give him a quick, insincere smile. I’ll need to work on that if I don’t want things to feel awkward for the next few days.

Chapter Seventeen



I PRESS THE BUTTON TO DISCONNECT THE CALL AND SET MY phone down on the side table. Mr. Wainwright was annoyed, but I'm not sure if it is because I bothered him on a Sunday or because I won't be bringing coffee to work tomorrow. He says he is disappointed I won't be there because there is a project he needs me on. But he says we can go over the details when I return on Wednesday afternoon. I think he believes why I have to stay longer, but who really knows?

Tyrone steps into the small sitting room. "Did you make your call?"

I nod.

"And? What did your boss say?" He carries two cans of Coke in his hands.

"What can he say? I mean, he can't really call me a liar without proof." I shrug. "He says we can talk about the project he wants me to start on when I get in on Wednesday."

"So we're good?" He motions between us.

He doesn't seem to understand that missing work isn't really why I'm mad.

I sit down on the couch and look out the large sliding glass doors at the sparkling water. "Yep. We're good." I nod and smile at him, putting it all aside for now. "And I called my parents, so they won't worry if they don't hear from me tomorrow."

Ty's shoulders drop a fraction as he sits down next to me, both of us quiet for a moment.

"I can't believe this is the view you grew up seeing every day." The calm, glassy water settles into my soul.

"I never really think about it, but yeah. I guess you're right." He moves to face me. "But I bet you grew up with your own amazing views, right?"

"Yeah, I miss seeing the mountains. Not that DC doesn't have some pretty great sights." I sigh. "Seeing the Washington Monument with the sun rising behind it is breathtaking."

He puts his can on a coaster on the side table. "Would you like to go out on a boat? It's a perfect day for it."

I shift so I'm completely facing him. "But I thought we had to stay on the palace grounds."

"We do. But the water is still considered palace grounds. You know how the White House has air space above it that planes can't fly through without authorization? We have that here too. But because the palace is close to the water, we have water space that is protected and strictly controlled. We'll be safe."

I don't even try to hide my excitement. Not that the palace isn't beautiful—I'm sure there are tons of things I have yet to see inside it—but thinking of being confined here for two and a half days leaves me feeling slightly claustrophobic. "Oooh, I'd love that!"

He grins and it feels like we are back on friendly terms again.

"You may want to bring a jacket. Even when it's warm, sometimes the breeze can be a little chilly."

"Will do, Captain." I give him a little salute and turn to go to my room but stop in my tracks. "Uh, where is my room?" My bags had been taken from the car and I assume delivered to my room. But I don't really know. Ty had led me to a quiet study so I could call Mr. Wainwright.

He grins. “I wondered how long it would take you to figure that out.” He pushes himself off the couch. “Follow me.”

We go down two hallways and stop in front of a closed door. He twists the knob and swings the door open before motioning me inside.

I step into the nicest room I’ve ever seen. Although, ‘room’ doesn’t really do it justice. It is more like a suite. We step into a spacious living room, with couches and a gas-fire place to one side and a small desk on the other. The same plush feeling carpet from the night we came for dinner, tickles the sides of my feet. The bedroom is off to one side and is nearly as large as my entire apartment in DC. It’s decorated in creams and blues, with a huge four poster bed in the middle of the room. This is where Hallmark gets it mostly right.

A poof of air escapes my lips.

“I hope this room is okay. I think you will enjoy the view best from here.”

I haven’t even looked out the windows yet. I glance over and sigh. He’s right. The view from here is similar to the one in the room we just left. And the balcony makes enjoying the view that much better.

“It’s more than I could have imagined.”

“You mean you’ve never seen this on a Hallmark movie?” His eyes sparkle with mischief and I remember again why I feel fluttery around him. He’s so charming.

I laugh, but there is no way I’m going to tell him I had just been thinking about Hallmark. “Well, you know. Hallmark is on a tighter budget.” I find my suitcase and throw it on the bed. “Do I need to change my clothes?”

“I think you look great.” He comes up behind me.

“Thanks.” I duck my head and dig through my suitcase until I find my sweater. I hold it up in the air in victory. “Okay. I’m ready.”

He looks at my wedge flip flops. “You may want to change those. I wouldn’t want you plunging overboard.”

I slip them off and grab my Toms. They seem like an updated version of the deck shoes my mom still wears thirty years later. “Good?” I look at him.

He nods and holds his hand out to me. I take it, hesitating only a moment.



IT’S JUST as peaceful being on the water as it is looking at it. I was surprised when Ty led me to a small sailboat. I had pictured him as a faster, speedboat kind of guy.

I lay back on my elbows on the deck, lifting my face to the sun. This is perfection.

Ty drops the sails and the anchor, letting us bob up and down on the waves. He crawls over and lays down next to me, staring up into the cloudless blue sky with his hands behind his head. “Do you like living in Washington?”

I pull a small cushion from the railing, and put it under my head. “Yeah. There’s a ton to do there, and so much of it’s free. It’s like the cheap daters dream come true.” I fold my arms across my chest. “And it’s the best place to live if you want to be a lobbyist.”

He grins but then becomes pensive. “But what if you weren’t a lobbyist? Would you still want to live there?”

I’m quiet for a moment. Would I live in DC if not for my job? “Probably not. It’s super expensive and crazy busy there.” The breeze flutters the hem of my shirt. “Sometimes I miss the slower pace of life—like I had when I lived with my parents.”

“Have you ever considered moving to another country? I mean, with how many languages you speak, I would think you would enjoy living abroad.”

“I’ve thought about it. But I have no idea what I would do for a living. I’ve worked my whole life to be a lobbyist. I have

a hard time picturing myself doing anything else.”

“I’m sure you have great research skills, when you use reliable sources,” he winks at me. “There are plenty of jobs out there for that skill set.” He pulls the arm that is next to me out from under his head and rests it at his side. “Maybe you just need to look and see what else is out there. I think you would be pleasantly surprised. I’m sure there are companies that would treat you better than the firm you work for now.”

“Maybe. But that would require a lot—to uproot my life and move to a country where I don’t know anyone.” My voice lowers. “Right now, I don’t think I’m that brave.”

“What if you *did* know people? Would that make a difference?”

He clearly has a point to this line of questioning—like is he trying to gage my openness to moving to Atraxia? But why would he do that? We haven’t known each other even a full week. It’s too early for that kind of a conversation, right? “Maybe. I don’t know. I guess it would depend on how well I know the people there and of course, the job would have to be just right.”

He stays quiet so I turn my head and look over at him. He is staring at the sky, his brow furrowed in thought.

I drop my hands from my chest and feel his hand wrap around mine. For a moment I see visions of this happening time and again, as if we are *together*. I shake my head. The fairytale element of this whole thing makes me want to believe that things like this can last. But they don’t. We’re just too different.

The breeze blows harder, and the boat starts to rock. Tyrone sits up and looks around. “We had better head in. It looks like a storm may be coming.”

I stare at the sky above me. It is still blue and cloudless. “But there aren’t even any clouds.”

He motions to the horizon. “There are over there, and they don’t look friendly. We wouldn’t want to get stuck out here in rough seas. This boat isn’t meant for those kinds of waves.

I sit up and pull my sweater tighter. He is right; there is something brewing farther out in the Mediterranean and it's coming in fast.

Ty deftly raises the anchor, but he keeps the sails down, instead lowering the motor and starting the engine.

"Why not use the sails?" I ask as I sit in the seat next to him.

"The wind is coming from the wrong direction. We can get back, but it will be a lot harder. The motor will get us there faster."

The wind whips at my hair, pulling tendrils free and blowing them into my face. I try to block them as best I can. Thankfully, after only about twenty minutes, the boat is back at the dock and Ty is helping me out.

My foot barely touches the grass butting up to the dock, when the rain starts. It pelts down in huge, wet drops. I cover my head with my hands, but it does little good.

Ty reaches for my hand, and we run as fast as we can for the shelter of the palace.

"It's times like these I wish the grounds were smaller," Ty yells back to me, his voice carrying quickly away on the wind.

By the time we reach the nearest portico, we are both soaking wet. A servant emerges from the sliding glass door with two large towels in his hands. He hands one to each of us. I wrap it around me, wringing water from the end of my braid. "H-h-how did h-h-he know we were here?" I stammer from the cold.

"Sander must have radioed ahead and told them." Ty dries his hair and runs the towel down his arms.

"But how did Sander know?" I'm getting colder as the wind picks up and the shade of the upper balcony casts us in shadow.

Tyrone laughs. "Have you not learned by now that Sander is always watching? He and his men are keeping a lookout on

the cliffs and if I know Sander, which I do, he probably had several drones in the air as well.”

I frown. Drones? Why had I thought we were alone? Sander hasn't let Tyrone out of his sight for as long as I have known him. Why had I thought this time was different? My frown deepens. I don't like the thought of being watched by a drone.

Ty drapes his arm across my shoulder. “Let's get you inside and out of those wet clothes.”

“That's what she said,” I blurt before I even think about it.

Ty squints down at me. “I beg your pardon?”

I give a half-nervous, half-freezing-to-death laugh. “Sorry. Inside joke between Texie and me. I forgot who I was with for a minute.”

His mouth twitches. “I see. I guess I should be flattered you feel as comfortable with me as you do with Texie.”

I don't really feel that comfortable with him, but he looks so pleased at the prospect, I can't bring myself to correct him. I mean, I do feel comfortable with him when I'm not stressing and over analyzing everything.

He guides me to the door of my room. “Why don't you get warm and then maybe we can start on my Seinfeld homework.”

I smile. “That sounds like a great plan.”

“I'll come and pick you up in an hour?”

I shiver. “I'll be ready.”

Chapter Eighteen



I HOLD THE PHONE TO MY EAR AS THE OTHER END RINGS, careful not to drop it in the steaming, hot bath water. Just as I'm about to hang up, the ringing stops.

“Grace. I’m so glad you called me from the airport. I don’t think I can wait to hear everything until I see you tomorrow after work.”

I smile into the phone. “Well, that’s why I’m calling. It’s been crazy here today. I’m not flying home tonight as planned.”

“What? Why?” Texie’s voice gets all excited. “Does this have anything to do with Prince Tyrone?”

I sink a little deeper into the water, rolling my neck back and forth in the warmth. “Kind of.” I draw the word out. “His security team found footage for the surrounding areas of the coffee shop and they want me to look through them to see if I can spot the guy who sabotaged his car.”

“Is that all?” she asked suspiciously.

“Of course, that’s all. If it weren’t for that, I’d be at the airport right now, instead of soaking in the biggest tub I’ve ever seen.”

“Wait, our room at the hotel didn’t have a big tub. Where are you, Grace?” She has that I-already-know-but-I-want-to-hear-it-from-your-lips sound to her voice.

“There was an incident at the hotel and Sander says I have to stay at the palace until they can get it figured out.”

“What type of incident?” Texie’s voice is all sing-songy.

“There was a threatening note left under my door this morning. Sander thinks it’s from MSG.” Just mentioning it makes my skin prickle.

“MSG? What is that?”

I forgot Texie wasn’t privy to that acronym. “Mr. Skateboard Guy.”

“You and your dumb acronyms.” She pauses. “Wait. He figured out where you were staying?” The playful tone has completely left her voice. “That’s bad, Gee.”

“Sander thinks so too. That’s why I’m staying at the palace.” I blow at a mound of bubbles on my skin, trying to push away the sudden panic that threatens to consume me. “You wouldn’t believe this place, Tex. The bedrooms are as impressive as the dining room.”

“I can only imagine.” She’s quiet for a moment. “But you’re safe there?”

“Yeah. I’m totally safe. Sander even used drones to watch us when we were out on the boat. There is really no such thing as being alone here.”

“That makes me both happy and sad,” she laments. “When are you coming home then?”

I sigh, pulling all the bubbles I can reach and piling them on top of my chest. The conversation I had with Ty about moving comes to mind, but there is no reason to talk to Texie about it. At least not now. “I’m supposed to fly home Wednesday morning. They think that I can get through all the footage by then.”

“So only two days extra?”

“Don’t sound so disappointed, Tex. My boss is not happy that I won’t be at work tomorrow.”

Texie snorts. “Why, because he’s going to have to tell someone else how to order his coffee?”

I stay silent. I know it's true. I'd had the same thought myself. But it just makes it so much more pitiful when Texie says it. It just shows what a joke my job is.

"Sorry, Gee. I know you do more than that." She sounds contrite.

I laugh bitterly. "Yes. I also get bagels and doughnuts."

"It'll get better." She pauses and I know she is biting her pinkie nail. "For the time being, just enjoy being in the palace and with the prince."

"I'm not *with* the prince, Texie." I furrow my brow. I'm not, right?

"But you could be." She moves back to her sing-song voice.

"Nothing can happen, even if he was so inclined. Which he isn't. He's charming, yes. But...I don't know. It's too complicated."

"What can possibly be the problem?" She sounds genuinely baffled.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because he has security around him twenty-four-seven. Or because he has more money than I can even imagine. Or because we live an ocean apart. Or because he is going to be a king someday. But that is just off the top of my head. The rest I can't quite put into words." The alarm on my phone starts playing *It's My Life* by Bon Jovi. "Hey, Tex. I have to let you go or I'm going to be late for Ty for the second time in one day."

"Okay. But call me tomorrow and be prepared to give me details. I mean it, Gee."

I pull a bubble covered hand out of the water and carefully disconnect, sinking down into the warmth one last time before lifting the drain.

Once I'm out of the water, the chill that had seemed to vanish in the tub, settles over me again. I rummage through my suitcase and select the more comfortable, albeit less attractive University of Utah sweatshirt I brought and a pair of

leggings. The wooly socks I slip on my feet are the icing on the cake. Texie would be appalled at my choice in evening wear, but I have no plans to tell her about it, so I'm not going to worry.

Precisely an hour after he had dropped me off, a knock sounds at my door. I look down at my clothes and suddenly rethink my clothing choices.

The knock comes again. I rush over and swing it open. One would think I would be used to seeing Ty outside my door, but I'm not. The sight of him still takes my breath away. He is dressed in a worn and faded pair of jeans and a tight-fitting, V-neck, long-sleeved shirt. He reminds me of a J. Crew ad.

I open the door wider, and he steps inside. "I have the TV cued up in the media room, unless you would rather watch somewhere else?"

I run a self-conscious hand down my thighs and then push my sleeves up. "Maybe I should change. I was still a little cold..." I cross my arms over my chest, covering the big U on my sweatshirt.

"Why would you need to change?" He leans in and places a kiss on my cheek.

I close my eyes, remembering the kiss from yesterday and he steps back. "I can make us some coffee, if that would help warm you up."

I shake my head. "I don't love coffee, remember? But thanks for the offer."

We leave my room and head down the hallway. "That's right. I forgot you're a weirdo." He grins down at me.

I smirk. "That's me."

He opens the door and leads me into a room where a screen covers the entire wall. There are rows of movie theater-type seats in the back half of the room, and several large, overstuffed couches in the front.

He pulls me toward the couch that is the farthest from the screen and sits down in the middle, throwing his arms onto the back.

I sit down next to him and pull my legs up underneath me. My cold hands disappear into my sweatshirt sleeves.

“Are you cold?” He stands up and fetches a blanket off the arm of the couch in front of us, draping it over my legs.

I pull it up to my shoulders. It tickles my chin and is made of the softest fabric I’ve ever felt.

Settling next to me again, he grabs the remote control from its spot beside him. At the press of a button the lights dim, and the TV flickers on. Jerry Seinfeld is standing paused on the TV in the opening credits of the show.

I look over at him as he types furiously on his phone. I look away, not wanting it to seem like I’m reading his messages.

“Okay. You ready for this?” He sets his phone to the side.

I grin. “I think I should be the one asking that question. I’ve already seen all these like a billion times.”

“A billion?” His brows rise.

“Pretty much.” I nudge him with my shoulder. “There will be a quiz at the end. I hope you’re ready.”

He lifts a notepad and pen. “I have come prepared to take notes.”

The door opens and a maid brings in two insulated cups, like the ones you get from a coffee house, on a tray. “I hope you don’t have an aversion to all hot beverages.” He hands one to me and I sniff at it. He’s watching me with a simple smile, like he knows I’m going to do it and is just waiting to see it. In the stream of light from the hallway, I can make out a small dimple to the side of his left eye. How had I never noticed it before?

“It’s hot chocolate?”

He nods. “Mrs. Doukas makes a delicious cup of hot cocoa.”

I take a tentative sip, testing the heat level. “Mmm. This *is* good. Thank you.”

The maid closes the door behind her, leaving the room darkened except for the glow of the TV.

He takes a sip of his drink and sits back, his arm still over the back of the couch behind me. He presses a button, and the sound of laughter fills the room as Jerry tells several jokes about the names of cars.

His arm slides down the cushion and settles behind me, his hand cupping my shoulder. He pulls me closer to him.

I feel him watching me, and I give in to my impulse to return his look.

He looks like a little boy whose been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “In case you’re still cold. I have enough warmth to share.”

Chapter Nineteen



I WAKE UP WITH A SORE NECK IN A DARKENED ROOM AND HAVE no idea where I am. I squint at my surroundings, shifting slightly. Someone stirs beneath my head, and I turn to see Tyrone, smiling down at me.

I sit bolt upright, narrowly missing his chin in the process. Instinctively, I pull the blanket up tighter around me as I try to figure out what is happening.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.” He twists on the couch, so he is more fully facing me. “You fell asleep.”

No duh, Sherlock. I’ve figured that one out on my own. It’s possible I’m not the nicest person when I first wake up.

“Was I,” I look down at the pillow sitting on his lap. “Was I laying there?” I brace myself for his answer.

He chuckles, deep and rumbling. “Yep.” The one-word answer says everything I need to know to be mortified. “It was quite enjoyable if I do say so myself.”

I rub my eyes because I can’t look at his smiling face. He seems so proud of himself. Or is he just mocking me? Oh, sweet cream cheese, what did I do? Laying in someone’s lap is super intimate. It’s not something you do with someone you’ve known for less than a week. It indicates complete comfort, which is not something I feel with Ty. I mean I feel comfortable with him when I’m not ‘being me’. But probably not comfortable enough to sleep on his lap.

“I’m so embarrassed.” I put my hands to my flaming hot cheeks.

He reaches over and rubs small circles on my back. “Hey, don’t be embarrassed. It’s really sweet.” He raises a brow. “And you only drooled a little bit.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

He throws his head back and laughs. “I’m just teasing you. Your mouth was completely dry the entire time.”

I smack him lightly on the arm. “That isn’t cool.” I tilt my head to the side and give him a sad face. “I’m going to have to get you back now. You realize that, right?”

He sits up straighter. “Hmm. This sounds entertaining.”

I shrug. “I’m just saying, when you least expect it, expect it.”

He winks at me. “I’ve never anticipated anything more.”

I lift my hand to give him a shove, but he catches it and uses it to pull me down onto the pillow on his lap.

I resist for a minute, but then I give up. He doesn’t seem to think it’s a big deal. So I’ll just keep my neurosis to myself.

“I know I should let you go to bed. But today went by so quickly and you leave the day after tomorrow.” He sighs.

I close my eyes and breathe in. How is this my life? People in movies or books say that they wonder if they’ll wake up and realize that everything they’ve experienced was just an elaborate dream. That’s always felt pretty cheesy to me. But now? I totally understand those feelings.

“Maybe we should watch something different,” I say, as I cover my yawn with my hand. “You have any Avengers movies?”

He winds a lock of my hair that’s come loose from my braid around his finger while he works the remote with his other. That’s when it dawns on me that my hair isn’t in a braid anymore. Now it lays splayed out on his chest and the pillow I’m laying on.

I roll over and look up at him. Even from this angle he is beautiful. “Did my braid come undone?”

He looks guiltily away. “It may have had a little help.”

I partially sit up. “Oh?”

He lifts his shoulders. “I’ve never seen your hair down. You always wear it in a braid or a ponytail. Even in the evening dress, it was up in a bun.” He runs his fingers through the length of my hair. “Why don’t you ever wear it down?”

“I do sometimes. But if there is any breeze, then it blows all over and is really a pain. Plus, it’s pretty thick, so it can feel really heavy.” I turn away, not wanting to tell him the real reason. Tanner hated it when I wore my hair down. He said it made me appear lazy and unkempt. And he wasn’t a fan of the ‘*Little House on the Prairie* look’. It was just something he couldn’t find attractive. It just proves what an idiot he was because Laura always had her hair in braids. He probably hadn’t even seen the actual show, now that I think about it. But regardless, the comments had left their mark.

“Do you think when we’re in the house, if we keep the ceiling fans turned down, you could wear it down tomorrow?” He looks so hopeful.

I turn back to look at him. “If it’s that big of a deal to you.”

He smiles down at me and holds up his finger with my hair wrapped around it. “It’s a big deal.”

I point to the screen. “Are you ready to watch now?” My voice is quiet.

He answers me by pressing a button on the remote. *Spiderman: Far from Home* starts playing.

His fingers continue to comb through my hair.

I’m not paying attention to the movie I requested. I’m too busy analyzing everything he has just said and done, trying to decide what it all means.

I wonder how long until Texie is out of court.



I WAKE up in my bed with vague recollections of Ty helping me to my room and kissing me goodnight at the door. But I can't remember at what point in the movie I fell asleep—again. *Ugh*. It's so weird because I never fall asleep in movies. But he'll never know that, because he'll never ask me to watch another movie with him.

A knock sounds at my door and a maid pushes in. “Good morning, Miss Martindale. I hope you slept well.” She speaks to me in Greek. Either she was informed that she need not use English. Or she doesn't even know it.

I nod as she sets a tray on the table.

“His Highness, Prince Tyrone asked me to bring you hot chocolate and the schedule for the day.” She sets to work pouring the chocolate into a teacup.

“I have a schedule?” Why on earth would I have a schedule. I'm only here for two days.

She nods. “Would you like me to draw you a bath?”

I shake my head. “No, I'm good. I think I'll just shower.”

The maid putters around my room, picking up my discarded socks from last night and tucking them into a bag. “I will see these are laundered and returned to you this afternoon.”

“You really don't have to do that. If you just show me where the laundry is, I can do my own wash.”

She turns toward me. “Do you have other clothes in need of laundering? I can see to them all.”

I stare at her. She wants to do my laundry? I think not.

“This is my job, Miss Martindale. I am happy to do it.”

It feels weird to have a stranger do my laundry. I've been doing it myself since I was twelve.

Thankfully, I'm saved from further laundry debate because Ty knocks on the open door and steps inside.

“I see your chocolate has been delivered. I hoped you might join me for breakfast?”

I push the covers back, seeing I'm still in the clothes I wore last night to the movie. "Sure. Is it okay if I shower first?"

Tyrone is already dressed for the day, in slacks and a button-down shirt. He looks every bit the Prince I have seen in newspapers for years.

I look at the clock. It's only seven? He must be an early riser.

He grimaces. "No. Can you shower after? My first meeting is at eight-thirty. You can get ready while I'm there." He walks over and points to the paper on the tray. "I guess you haven't looked over the schedule?"

I shake my head. "I was busy debating with the maid about my abilities to do my own laundry." I lower my voice, in case my earlier assumption that she doesn't speak English is wrong. "Can you tell her she doesn't need to do my wash?"

"But that's her job," Ty whispers back.

"Sander is ready for you to start going over the footage. I have meetings most of the morning," he glances at his watch and raises his brows. "But my afternoon is completely free. I thought we could do some climbing."

"Climbing? What kind of climbing?" My stomach clenches.

"Rock climbing. We have a wall here in the palace that's pretty great. I think you'll like it." He put the paper back on the tray and holds out his hand. "But if I am going to be on time for my meeting, we should go eat now."

I take his hand and step out of bed, slipping on my slippers. I reach out and grab the cup and saucer off the tray. If they had made hot chocolate specially for me, the least I can do is drink it.

Ty smiles and leads me from the room. When we are halfway down the hall, he stops. "Wait here a moment. There is something I need to speak with Cora about."

“Who is Cora?” I call as he jogs down the hall and back into my bedroom.

He returns only moments later, and we continue down to the breakfast room. “That’s the name of your maid.”

He opens a door and we enter a room with a large buffet along one wall. It is filled with trays of food. A round table with eight chairs sits off to the side in a large bay window.

I set my teacup on the table and move over to the selections of food, staring at all the options. The Las Vegas buffets have nothing on this spread. I lean toward Ty. “Who’s going to eat all this stuff?”

He picks up a plate and hands it to me. “We are. And then anything left over will be for the staff.”

I load up my plate; everything looks delicious. We sit down and I take a bite of the pita bread with eggs on top.

Ty turns to me. “So you never did finish telling me the story about, what was it? Your nylons falling off?”

I choke and a bit of bread flies from my mouth and lands on the tablecloth between us.

Tyrone hands me my cup and I take a drink, partially to stop my choking, but also to stall while I come up with an answer. I swallow and finally, I’m able to stop coughing. “It really isn’t a flattering story. I have no idea why I even brought it up.”

He raises his brow. “But you did. And now I want to hear the rest of it.”

I set my fork down. “Listen,” I put my hand toward him on the table. “I humored you with the MASH game. But I think this time, I’m going to give you a hard pass on sharing.”

“Oh, come on. You’re the one who mentioned it first. You can’t bring something like that up and then not share it.” Is he actually pouting?

“Ah, but I can, and I will.” He doesn’t need to know every single embarrassing story about my life. There are plenty of them, and none of them are royal-appropriate.

He lets out a heavy sigh. “Don’t make me ask Texie about it.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” I narrow my eyes at him.

He shrugs in a you-leave-me-no-choice way.

“Listen, I’ll tell you about it someday. Just not today, okay?”

He opens his mouth and I stop him. “Or tomorrow. I will tell you when I decide it’s time. Besides,” I put my elbows on the table and lean toward him. “You know all these embarrassing things about me, but I know nothing about you.”

He leans back and folds his arms across his chest. “What do you want to know?”

“I have no idea. What is something embarrassing that has happened to you?”

He frowns. “You already know most of them. They were splattered all over the internet.”

I bite my cheek. I hadn’t thought of that. At least my embarrassing moments have been fairly private.

“Which one do you regret the most?”

He looks over at me. “Spilling coffee on a poor, unsuspecting tourist.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, which one do you regret second-most?”

He sucks in a deep breath. “Getting drunk and swimming naked in the Chancellor’s fountain. My parents were so angry about that. Are so angry about that. I got the ‘you have a responsibility to your family and to your country’ speech.” He fiddles with the spoon at the side of his plate. “All the pictures on the internet don’t help either.”

I grimace. “Yeah. I can see why you might regret that.”

He meets my gaze and holds it for what feels like minutes. “Okay, I get that sharing embarrassing stories isn’t fun. But I still want to hear about it,” he holds up his hand. “When you’re ready to tell me.”

“Tell me about your favorite memory growing up.” Now that he has shared a little bit of himself, I want to know more. I want to know it all.

“Playing hide-and-seek—that is what you call it?— in the olive groves. They are so full when they leaf out. Helena, Barak, and I would hide in the trees for hours at a time.” He grins. “It would take our security forever to find us.”

I laugh. “You played hide-and-seek *with* your security or *from* your security?”

He shrugs. “Is there a difference?”

“Yes,” I chuckle. “I’m sure they can explain the difference very well.” I plop a cherry tomato into my mouth. I can’t believe this is the same guy that spilled coffee on me. It makes me a little sad to think our time is ending.

A sobering thought hits me. Am I going to be one of his embarrassing moments? More than just because of the coffee. Maybe more of a waste of time than an embarrassment. After all, he has done very few embarrassing things while we’ve been together. I want to think what we have is more than just a fling—a duty to fulfill because I saved his life. But then I look down at my leggings and sweatshirt and I just can’t imagine it being anything more for him. Suddenly, I’m not hungry anymore.

Chapter Twenty



SANDER SITS ME DOWN IN FRONT OF A BANK OF COMPUTER screens. Videos play on six different monitors. I look from one to the next to the next, my mind trying to figure out where to watch first.

Sander sits down next to me. “I know this looks overwhelming, Miss Martindale. But you only need to focus on one of these screens at a time.

I nod and focus on the screen directly in front of me. “Okay. I’ll start with this one.”

Sander motions to the guy sitting to the side, with a keyboard and his own set of monitors. A video plays, with people walking and talking on the sidewalks of Kaysariyyah.

“What time is this?” I ask.

Sander leans in. “This is about twenty minutes before the incident.”

I nod as I watch the screen. Thirty minutes pass on the screen and then forty, but no one seems remotely familiar. What if the guy had taken off his hat after he turned the corner? I’m not sure if I would recognize him without the hat.

“Where is this camera located?”

Sander points at a shop “It’s the street just east of the cathedral.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t see him in that area.” I turn to the computer guy and speak in Greek, because I guess he

doesn't speak English. "Do you have footage of Istiklal Avenue? East of Amailas Street?"

The man nods and soon the screen switches to a new view. It feels the same as the other video, with people milling about. Leaning closer to the monitor, I watch intently for what feels like forever. My eyes are dry from a lack of blinking. And then I see it. The red baseball hat.

I point at the screen. "That's him."

Sander squints at the figure. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "One hundred percent."

We continue to watch the screen. Sander growls. "We never get a clear shot of his face because his hat is pulled down too far."

The man disappears around the corner of a building and Sander tells the computer guy, Malak, to stop and switch to a different camera. "No. Stay with this one." I wave at the screen in front of me. "He'll be coming back."

The video moves at a faster speed as the computer guy fasts forwards the footage.

"There he is again." I point at the screen and the video slows back down. The man in the red hat moves down an alley way and out of sight.

Sander swears and slams his fist on the table. "Still nothing. He knew what he was doing."

"Hey, wait. I think that's still him." I jab a finger at the screen. A man steps out of the alleyway, but he's no longer wearing a baseball hat. He's added a jacket, but the pants look to be the same, and so do the shoes. He turns, a small piece of red flashing in his back pocket and walks in the opposite direction of the street where the coffee shop is located.

I look at Malak. "Can you zoom in on that? I think he's still got his hat."

He shrugs and the video zooms in slightly, but not enough to tell much.

“Is that as close as you can get?” I say, irritation filling my voice.

He nods. “Yes. These cameras aren’t very high-tech. They’re meant to deter stealing and vandalism.”

“If this were TV, we’d be able to read the manufacturer’s name on the hat’s tag,” I grumble.

Sander leans back in his seat. “Malak, continue tracing his path. We have enough to at least start an investigation into him.”

Malak nods and starts typing on his computer.

Sander pushes his chair out and stands. “Thank you, Miss Martindale. That didn’t take as long as I thought it would. I think we can handle it from here.”

I glance at the clock. I’ve been here nearly three hours. How much longer had he thought it would take?

I stand up and run my hands lightly down the front of my pants, my hands shaking slightly. It’s like I’ve just relived that moment all over again.

Sander must sense my change in mood, because he puts a hand on my arm. “I will see you are protected.”

I nod. “I know you will. Thanks, Sander.”



I PACE the length of my room, unable to sit down and relax.

A knock sounds at the door and I’m relieved that Tyrone is here to help take my mind off everything. Well, everything except for him. He is still a big part of my tension. Not him exactly. But rather the thought of leaving him and trying to figure out what exactly I am to him.

But it’s not Ty who enters my room. Instead, it’s Cora, carrying an armful of clothes. She deposits them in my open suitcase and dips a curtsy, before moving toward the door.

“Excuse me, what are those?” I point to my suitcase. Hadn’t I specifically told her to leave my laundry alone?

She looks at me like I’m slow witted. “They are your clothes, miss. I told you I would launder them. I am just returning them.”

I can see my underwear folded neatly on top of the stack. My face heats at the thought that this maid knows whether I wear boyshorts or thongs. I ball my hands at my side. “I told you, I’m capable of doing it myself.”

She looks nervously at me and then at the floor.

“I never said you could take my clothes.” I’m almost near tears, and I’m not exactly sure why.

Ty knocks on the door and walks in before I have a chance to say anything to him. Seriously? It’s like he has a sixth sense that tells him when I’m speaking with Cora.

He steps into the room and nods to the maid. She obviously takes it as permission to flee the room.

“I’m the one who told her to take your clothes.”

I put my fists on my hips. “And who gave you permission to do that? I specifically told her not to.”

He comes over and grasps my arms gently. “Grace, it’s her job.”

I shake my head. “No. Her job is to do your family’s laundry. Not mine.”

“No,” He shakes his head. “Her job is to attend to any guests of the palace.” He taps the end of my nose. “And that is you.”

“But—”

“Look at it this way,” he cuts me off. “What if you were never allowed to do any lobbying at your job? How would you like that? You would probably assume that your boss didn’t think you were capable. This is no different. It’s what she was hired to do, Gee. So let her do it.”

I blink up at him. Why did he say that about my job? Did he know that all I do is fetch coffee? I just nod at him. “There are more clothes in the bottom of the wardrobe that need to be washed.” I mumble, because even though I understand his explanation, I still don’t like the idea of someone else washing my unmentionables.

“I’m sure she found those.”

I glance at the pile of clothing and realize he is right.

“Besides,” he tips his head to the side. “You’ll thank me when you get home tomorrow and don’t have a mound of laundry to do.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think of it that way.” Oh, man. I really need to apologize to Cora. I think I might have scared the poor girl.

He stares down at my shaky hands, then pulls me into a hug. “Sander told me about the video. He said you seemed tense when you left.”

I melt into his arms, pressing my face into his chest. “It was like reliving that moment all over again.”

He clasps his fingers behind my back and pulls me tighter to him. “I’m sorry it was hard for you. But I hope you know I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I snicker. “Oh? Are you sending Sander to watch over me in DC.?”

He stiffens in my arms.

I lean back and see something in his eyes. “Wait. You’re not sending someone to watch over me in DC, right?”

“I won’t say I haven’t considered it. But no arrangements have been made.”

I want to be mad, but really, I’m just relieved that he had thought about it. What if MSG isn’t caught before I leave? Would he follow me to the US?

I slouch against him, resting my head on his chest. “I’m sorry I over reacted. About everything. I was in a super

controlling relationship not too long ago. Sometimes I react strongly when I feel like someone is trying to control me again.”

He holds me tightly and I try to infuse his confidence into my soul.

“I think,” he whispers into my ear, “that maybe we should work off some of that tension on the climbing wall. What do you say?”

It’s only then I notice he’s in a t-shirt and shorts.

I nod and take a deep breath. “It sounds terrifying, but probably just what I need. Let me change into something more appropriate.” I look back at him. “How high did you say the walls are?”

“I didn’t,” he grins.

Unlike Texie, I didn’t bring workout clothes with me. But thanks to Cora, the leggings I wore last night are clean and neatly folded in the stack of clothes in my suitcase.

“I can just wear my leggings and a t-shirt, right?”

He nods. “Or I can let you borrow some of my shorts.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m good. I can’t bring myself to discover how I look in your shorts. I’m afraid they will fit a little too good.” I cringe.

“And now all I can imagine is you wearing my shorts.” He winks at me. “But your leggings will be just fine.”

I disappear into the bathroom and change.

We walk down a maze of corridors and I’m reminded that I still have no idea where anything is in this place. Someone walked with me everywhere I went today. How long would someone need to live here before they could manage it on their own?

We stop at a set of double doors and Ty pushes them both open. It’s a huge room that opens up to the full three stories of the palace at the far side where it has been outfitted as a climbing wall. Although, the room itself functions as a full

gym, complete with weights, treadmills, ellipticals, bikes, and a lap pool to the far left.

“Holy Mackerel,” I breathe out.

Ty nudges me farther inside and begins to sort through a bin, pulling out various harnesses.

He steps into one, pulling it up around his legs and waist. Then he places a second one on the floor and motions me to step inside.

I look at the harness and then look at the wall. “Are you really going to climb that?” I have no idea what I was thinking when I agreed to this. Climbing should have set off all kinds of alarms in my brain. I guess it just shows how distracted and stressed I’ve been.

“*We* are going to climb that.” He reaches for my hand and tugs me forward so I’m standing in the harness on the floor. He leans forward and pulls it up. Fastening it securely around me, he tugs on the clip in the front.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Just to make sure all the clips are secure,” he gives me a wink. “I don’t want anything happening to my girlfriend.”

My mouth drops open in a most fish-like way. “Your girlfriend?”

He nods. “You are, aren’t you?” He studies my face intently. And there is that vulnerable look again.

I shrug. “I wasn’t sure.”

He pulls me to him and drops his mouth to mine, kissing me with more fervency than he had at the beach. His kiss is both soft, but insistent. Sweet, but passionate. My lips part slightly, and he hugs me tighter to him, deepening the kiss. Everything around us fades away and it is just Ty and me in the whole world.

I have the urge to jump into his arms and wrap my legs around him, just so I can be closer to him. But the lines are already blurred as to where he ends, and I begin.

He eases up and whispers against my lips. “Do you have any doubts now?”

I shake my head. “No. But I also don’t think I can climb anything right now.”

He pulls back and winks down at me. “We’ll take it slow. I promise.”

“Are you talking about climbing or being girlfriend and boyfriend?”

He gives me a little hip bump. “Both.”

We head over to the wall, and he clips a rope that is secured to the ceiling high above, to each of our belts. “Have you ever climbed before?”

“Yeah. We did it as a group activity once.” I don’t mention how much I hated it. It scared the daylight out of me, and I never went higher than about fifteen feet off the ground.

“I know you’re afraid of heights, but I think you’ll do okay at this. If you just look up, it isn’t so bad. And I’ll be right beside you.” He squeezes my hand and looks so hopeful. I almost believe what he says.

Even though my heart is pounding so hard, I think it might explode, I move over to the wall and put my hand on the highest grips I can reach. I smile over at him. Can he see how much this terrifies me? “Let’s do this,” I say like I do it all the time.

Just look up, I say to myself. It is about to become my new mantra for the next ten minutes or however long it takes me to climb this thing.

“Okay,” he says next to me. “Just take it slow.”

I put my foot on one of the holds and pull myself up. I glance down and realize that Ty is right. I can’t look down or I will never do this. I look up for the next handhold, moving slowly up the wall.

Ty is right beside me, my own personal cheerleader. “You’re doing great, Gee. Just a little bit higher.”

I keep my gaze focused on the last black handhold at the very top. It looks like it's at least a mile away, maybe more. "Oh, sweet baby Jane, what am I doing?" I go to glance below, but Ty reaches out a hand.

"Don't look down."

My gaze flicks to him and catches his eye. "That's right. Just look at me and then look up."

How am I supposed to ignore an invitation like that? I give him one last hard look and then glance up to find my next handhold. I grip it and pull myself up. Sweat is running down between my cleavage and shoulder blades. I'm going to be looking so hot when I get down from here. And I don't mean in two ways.

My body sags, but I cling to the wall. I've got to have gone more than I did the last time. Maybe I can just be done.

"Sweet baby Jane?" I hear Ty chuckling next to me.

I glare over at him. "It's not really the time to discuss my choice of cuss words."

"I see no better time than the present." He lets go of the handholds and leans back slightly.

My eyes widen and nearly drop, but he quickly grabs hold again. "No, no, no. Eyes up here."

I grin. "I bet that's the first time you've ever had to say that."

He laughs. "Yeah. Sorry. I didn't realize what I was doing." He motions me to the next grip. "I have noticed your rather unique curse words. Where did they come from?"

I pull myself up and reach up for the next grip. "My mom would never allow us to swear or cuss. She even made a cuss jar."

His frown furrows. "What's a cuss jar?"

"Any time someone said a cuss word, we had to put money in a jar. So my brothers came up with things to substitute for the cuss words. It made my mom so mad, but what could she

do if they took the name of the Clark's baby girl in vain?" I smile at the memory. "My goal was to come up with things that would make her laugh. I think that is where sweet cream cheese came from."

"Sweet cream cheese? I haven't heard that one." He climbs slowly up beside me. My slow pace has got to be driving him crazy.

"I try not to say most of them out loud. People look at you strangely when you start muttering about cheese."

"Give it to me in a sentence. I'm not sure I understand how to use it."

"It's kind of a universal stand-in." I keep climbing slowly but surely. I'm the tortoise from the fable.

He laughs and I think for a minute he might let go again.

"So you would say something like, 'Sweet cream cheese, that hurt!' or 'Sweet cream cheese, would you look at that?'" I look up and I'm surprised to see that the black handhold is only about twenty feet away. I think I can totally do this.

"I will have to remember that one." He pulls himself up so we are even again. "And son of a bee. I'm sure they both come in handy."

"You have the luxury of swearing in Greek when you are in a different country. I think most English swear words are pretty well known around the world." I keep climbing, eyeing that black grip.

He shrugs. "Probably among the younger generations."

I reach for the black handhold and pull myself up to the top. There is a bell, like you see at the front desk of a hotel in older movies, fastened to the ledge of the wall.

"Go on and ring it. You made it to the top." Ty motions to the bell and I slap my hand down on it. I look over at him and it takes my breath away to see the way he's looking at me. "I've never been more attracted to anyone than I am to you right now."

I swipe a sweaty clump of hair off my brow. "Yeah, I bet."

He leans over so he is only gripping one hold with his hand and his foot, and he kisses me. It's quick, and light, but it says so much. "No, really. That you just climbed this whole wall is like the hottest thing I've ever seen. I've never been prouder of anyone."

My face is already warm from the exertion, but now it's on fire. "You may want to hold your accolades. I still have to get back down. And that may not be so easy."

He grabs a pair of leather gloves from his back pocket and hands them to me. "Put those on. Then when I tell you, you are going to close your eyes and slide down the rope. Just don't go too fast or you'll burn your skin."

I nod as I pull them on. They are still warm from his body heat.

"Okay, now don't watch me." I hear the zing of his harness as it feeds the rope through and I know if I look down now, I'll never make it down. They'll have to tranquilize me first. And that will not be pretty for anyone. I stand on the grips and look at the wall, my hand clutching tightly to the rope.

I can still hear Ty making his way down and I really want to look, because I'm sure he looks good doing it. But I resist the urge. I just keep hearing him say that he has never been so attracted to someone. And he was speaking to me, in all my sweaty glory. No one has ever said anything like that to me before.

"Okay. Come down," he calls from below me.

I suck in a deep breath. Closing my eyes, I kick off the wall, white knuckling the rope as my legs wrap around it. I loosen my grip only slightly and feel myself slip. Slowly, I slide then brake, slide then brake. The whole time Ty is shouting encouragement to me.

Finally, just as I feel my toes touch the ground, I feel arms wrap around me. "You're on the ground, Sweet Cream Cheese."

I turn around in Ty's arms so I'm facing him. I look up into his smiling face and grin. "That's SCC for short." I glance up

at the wall I just climbed, and my stomach jumps into my throat. I bury my head in Ty's chest trying to hold back the emotion. I can't believe I did it. Almost as much as I can't believe I'm Ty's girlfriend.

But wait, I leave tomorrow. My euphoria wains. What's going to happen then?

The door opens and Sander steps in. He walks quickly toward Ty, leaning in and whispering to him. Ty grins. "Why don't you tell her, Sander." Ty drapes his arm around my shoulder.

"Thanks to you, the palace police just arrested the man responsible for sabotaging Prince Tyrone's car."

My heart hitches. "Do they know why he did it?"

Sander nods his head. "He's part of the Petroleum Union. He was recently let go and he blames the royal family because they refused to negotiate with them." He shifted on his feet. "I'm sure there is more to it, but that is the preliminary information we have from what evidence was found in his apartment. He doesn't seem to be mentally stable."

Ty smiles. "See? Now you're totally safe."

Maybe from MSG. But I'm pretty sure I'm in greater danger than ever of being hurt by Ty. "Yep. That means I can go home tomorrow as planned?" I look at Sander and he nods.

Tyrone scowls. "You don't need to sound so happy about it."

I put my hand on his arm. "It's not that I'm happy. It's just the way things have to be. We've known it was coming to this." I bite my lip. "What happened to you coming with me?"

His whole face smiles. "Do you mean it?"

I nod. "Can you get away?"

"I'll make sure my schedule is cleared."

What am I doing? This is never going to last. As much as I want it to, we've been living in this private little bubble. What are we going to do when that bubble bursts?

He lifts my chin with his finger. “What’s wrong?”

I smile and shake my head. “I just can’t believe everything that’s happened this afternoon.”

“Maybe we should just relax on our last night here.”

Chapter Twenty-One



WE BARELY SIT DOWN TO EAT BREAKFAST WHEN ANDINO enters the room. He bows. “Your Highness, the king and queen have requested an audience with you.” His gaze flicks over to me and I feel my stomach drop.

We spent last evening planning our trip to DC. He is going to stay at a nearby hotel because my apartment is too small to fit another human being in it. And it’s not nearly posh enough for a prince. But we plan to spend every evening together. For now, the plan is for him to stay for two weeks, but we are leaving things open after that.

I watch Andino’s face. Had the king and queen learned of our plans? I’m sure they disapprove. They may like me fine as a person, but I’m probably not what they envisioned for their son’s girlfriend.

“Miss Martindale is welcome to stay here,” Andino says.

Ah, it’s that kind of meeting.

Tyrone shakes his head. “Today is her last day here. She leaves for DC in the morning,” he smiles at me. “Can’t it wait, Andino?”

“I’m afraid not, Your Highness.”

Tyrone sighs.

“Go ahead, Ty. I can wait here.” I take a small bite of my roll.

He grabs my hand. “No. Just come with me. They won’t talk as long if you’re there.” He pushes out his seat and helps

me as I stand.

He keeps a firm hold of my hand like he is afraid I'm going to run. I have to walk quickly to keep up with him until we stop outside a set of double doors. This place has a lot of double doors.

Ty raps twice and then turns the knob.

The king and queen are in a large sitting room, the windows overlooking a courtyard below. They both look up when we enter, their brows rising and then dropping into displeased looks. "Tyrone."

I pull my hand from his. Being here feels wrong.

Their gazes shift to me, and the queen speaks. "Miss Martindale. You are not needed for this conversation. I'm sure one of the maids can show you back to the breakfast room."

I nod, taking several steps backward. "My apologies, Your Majesty."

Ty grabs my hand, holding it tightly. "I asked her to come. She's leaving in the morning, and I don't want to miss out on any of our time because you feel this conversation can't wait. Unless it concerns national security, she's staying with me."

The king's jaw works, and he scowls at his son. "It is more for her comfort we are worried. But if that does not concern you, Son, then let's carry on." He motions us forward. "Please, sit down."

Ty helps me sit down on the couch opposite his parents and then lowers himself next to me, keeping my hand in his. "What can't wait, Mother?"

The queen throws a newspaper on the table in front of us. It is the Kaysariyyah Post. I don't have a chance to read the headline as my eyes are immediately drawn to the picture on the front. It's Ty and me. I recognize my board shorts and rash guard shirt. Well, and my red hair. We're standing in the water, and his head is lowered as he kisses me.

I suck in a breath and my pulse quickens. Dread fills my stomach. Holy Peter, Paul, and Mary. This isn't good. "I

thought you said that beach was private,” I hiss to him.

Tyrone swears in Greek. “How did they get this picture? We were on our beach.”

“From the angle, I would guess they were in a boat. With a telephoto lens, they needn’t have been close,” Sander says from the other side of the room. I hadn’t even realized he was here.

I pull my hand from Tyrone’s, putting it around my stomach. How had this happened? I finally glance at the headline and the tears form in the corners of my eyes. *Prince Tyrone: Back to his playboy ways?*

But that isn’t the worst of it. My name is printed under the picture. How did they get my name? I wonder if it was the chatty desk clerk from the hotel. I clench my hand at my side. If not for my name, there is a chance no one would realize it was me. The angle gives a better view of Ty’s face. But there is little denying with my name attached.

I shoot to my feet and move to the windows. I don’t even know what to think. I walk back toward the table and eye the paper. *Playboy ways*. I had thought that might be possible a few days ago. But I just can’t believe it now. The look on his face when we were at the top of the climbing wall? That was real. I know it was.

But I realize my main concern isn’t if he really likes me. I know he does. What is most concerning is that we thought we were alone and still someone violated that privacy. And that’s the thing. It will always be like this being with him. He’s a prince, for pity sake. I keep telling myself that, but I don’t think I really understood what that means until now.

Then another thought pushes the other aside. Will this reach America? I grunt to myself. Of course, it will. It was surely all over the internet by now. I lift a hand to my brow, rubbing at the headache forming behind my eyes.

“It doesn’t matter where the pictures come from, Tyrone.” The king growls. “We’ve talked about this. About how

important it is for you to stop with the games and get serious about your responsibilities to this country.”

Tyrone explodes off the couch. “This is not what it looks like, Father. This isn’t a game.”

His father shakes his head. “It never is, Tyrone.”

Ty glares at both of his parents. He runs a hand through his hair as he walks over to me by the window. “Grace—” He reaches out for my hand, but I shrug away from him, unable to stand the thought of someone taking his comforting gesture and twisting it into something sordid.

He pulls back. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You’re a prince. I should have realized this was possible. Probable, even. It was naive of me to have thought differently.” I try to smile, but it won’t come. I look up into his eyes to see my misery and devastation mirrored.

“But *I* did know the risks and I ignored them. This is my fault, Grace, not yours.”

My phone buzzes and I am grateful for the distraction. I pull it from my pocket and stare down at the words on the screen.

Texie: You kissed him and didn’t tell me! I expect a detailed report when you get home. She followed it with three kissing lips emojis.

A picture comes up next. It’s a photo from the Washington Herald. The headline is the same as it is in Atraxia. “Yay, we made the Herald,” I say in a weak voice.

Ty must have been eyes-dropping on my text because he swears again.

“Cursing is not helping anything. I thought we discussed this before you left to show Miss Martindale around Atraxia. Did you not promise not to trifle with her?” The queen stands up and gives me a sympathetic look. This is why they didn’t want me here.

“I’m not trifling with her.” He glowers at his mother. “I really like her. And if she could, I’d have her stay here so we

could continue to date.”

“Yes, about that,” the king flips the paper over. “We know about your plans to go to Washington. And under the circumstances, we cannot allow it.”

“What? But why? Won’t going to Washington with her just prove she isn’t a fling.”

“No. Flings don’t only have to last a weekend, Tyrone. It will just add more fuel to the fire. I’m afraid Miss Martindale will return to the US by herself.” The king stands, looking out over the courtyard.

“We’ve taken the liberty of changing her flight. She departs in three hours.” The queen gives me one last sympathetic smile. “It was lovely meeting you, Miss Martindale. I wish you did not have to leave us under such trying circumstances.”

My breath comes out jerky and shallow. “I should probably get packed, then.”



IT’S VERY EARLY on Wednesday morning when I finally crawl into my own bed for a few hours of sleep.

Airport security in Atraxia had finally put me in an interrogation room until it was time to board my flight because of all the commotion. Strangers tried to take selfies with me. I’m amazed at the gall of some people. Others were more discreet, just trying to capture me in the background. I almost hated the idea of those more.

Ty had only been allowed to drop me off at the airport, which caused enough stir on its own. In the end, I hadn’t even been able to kiss him goodbye, because of all the phones and cameras taking pictures.

Thankfully, once I changed planes in Paris, most people on the plane didn’t know or realize who I was, so I was able to fly

in relative obscurity. It also finally allowed me to cry without fear that it would be recorded or photographed.

My layover in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. was delayed by three hours. So instead of arriving in DC just before nine in the evening, I crawled into my apartment at just after one in the morning.

I lay in my bed, staring up at the ceiling. Why had I allowed myself to like him. If it wasn't so absurd, I may even admit to loving him. But it had barely been a week since I met him. And I didn't even like him that first day. People don't fall in love in seven days.

My brain replays every interaction I've had with Ty and each one makes my heart break a little more. I should have protected myself better. But this is exactly why I wanted to just be friends with him. Leaving a friend is hard, but it doesn't make you feel like your heart has been stomped on. I think what hurts the most is that I have no idea where we stand because we didn't get a proper goodbye.

I was hoping to get at least a few hours of sleep before I go into work. Mr. Wainwright should be happy I'll be in early. He'll get his coffee first thing in the morning. It doesn't make me feel remotely better.

A knock sounds at my door. "Gee, did I hear you come in?"

I let out a loud snuffle.

"I'll take that as a yes." The door to my room cracks open and Texie pokes her head in. "You're home early."

I nod. "The queen changed my flight to leave earlier. After the picture, they thought some distance was best." My eyes fill with tears again.

"I'm guessing you didn't sleep much on the plane?"

"No. But I have to get up and go to work in the morning. Can we talk after I get home?"

"Why don't you take the day off and get some sleep. They aren't expecting you until Thursday morning, right?" Texie

sits down on my bed. She leans forward, sliding her arms around my neck and giving an awkward but very appreciated hug. “It sounds like things didn’t end well. I’m sorry, Gee.” She stands back up and I hear her walk to the door. “The jury should come back with their verdict by lunch, at the latest. Maybe we can go out to dinner and talk.”

I just nod my head into my pillow. I can’t just mope around all day today. It’ll be best if I go to work and focus on that. I do have a project I can get started on.



MY PHONE VIBRATES on my nightstand and the music slowly builds. I crack my eyes open. Ugh. Is it already time to get up? Maybe I should just stay home today. I growl in my throat, hating Def Leppard and their upbeat tempo. Dragging myself from my bed, I head for the shower. Only hot water will melt this fog hanging around my brain.

I let the water pelt my neck and shoulders. Slowly my mind begins to clear. I want to hate Atraxia. To purge all my memories of it and everything that happened there, but I find I can’t.

It’s just the opposite. I want to go back. I run my tongue over my lips, still feeling the tingling of Ty’s kisses. I sigh. Oh, the kisses and the looks. He looked at me the way no man ever has. I will forever love and hate his kisses because they were amazing. But also, because it’s impossible that any other man will be able to come close to competing with Ty’s kisses. With Ty.

I squeeze some face wash onto my hand and rub it roughly on my face. If the commercials are right, in another ten years I will regret this disregard I’m showing for my skin, but for now I don’t care.

My phone chimes and I remember I’m on a schedule. It will not do to be late for work when I had already called in and missed two extra days. Although, can I be late if they aren’t

even expecting me today? I slow my scrubbing down and close my eyes as Ty fills my thoughts.

I hop out, drying my hair and skin with the towel. My phone chirps with a text message. It's probably Texie.

I grab my phone off the counter and lift it up to my face to unlock it. There are four texts from...Tyrone.

I clutch my phone in my hands. I don't know what I had expected, but this wasn't it.

My phone chimes again.

I close my eyes, steadying myself to read whatever he has to say.

I press on his name and the texts fill my screen.

HPT: I know you're in flight, but I just wanted to say again that I'm so sorry.

That must have come when my phone died between Ft. Lauderdale and DC.

HPT: I just checked the flight tracker and I know you've landed. How was the flight home? Sorry, you're probably asleep.

HPT: I've given you time to sleep. Are you feeling better?

HPT: I had hoped we might at least be friends. What do you think?

HPT: If you don't want to be friends, I understand.

I can see his frown deepening with each message that is going unanswered. He probably thinks I'm mad at him. Hmm. When had I come to know him so well?

My phone chimes again.

HPT: Okay. If you don't answer this one, I will leave you alone. I promise.

I type a response.

Me: What does HTP mean?

HPT: What???

Me: The name on your contact. It says HPT. I assumed you added it.

HPT: red faced emoji. I forgot about that.

Me: So???

HPT: Hot Prince Tyrone. Hand covering face emoji

Me: Bawahahaha

HPT: So you haven't slept then, because that response felt a bit mean.

Me: You call three hours giving me time to sleep?

HPT: Sorry. Did I wake you?

I put my phone on the counter and pull on my clothes as I try to respond.

Me: No. I have to be at the office in an hour.

I pause before I hit send. My brain says this is a bad idea. But the rest of me doesn't care. I miss him like crazy. I want to have something with him, even if it is just friendship. I jab the send button on my phone.

HPT: Sorry you have to go back to work so soon. I was worried you might think I am stalking you.

Me: Hey, I'm the crazy stalker, remember.

HPT: Well, crazy at least. Winky face emoji.

I laugh as I snuggle into my comforter.

Me: I don't think you know me at all. I'm not crazy. I'm a weirdo. Geez, get it right.

He sends me a laughing emoji.

HPT: You never answered my question.

Me: ???

HPT: Can we still be friends? Even after I've ruined your life?

Me: You didn't ruin my life. It was the best week I've had in a long time. So I think we can definitely be friends.

HPT: I'm going to fix things, Grace. I promise.

Me: There's nothing to fix, Ty. You can't retrieve every paper in the world that carried the story. Not to mention the internet... And what about everyone who's already seen it? Do you have a mind wiper there at the palace?

He sends a thinking face emoji

HPT: I'm just so sorry.

Me: You can stop apologizing. We're good. I promise.

HPT: Okay. Will you also promise you won't believe the garbage they are printing with the pictures.

Pictures? There's more than one? My shoulders sag, destroying the euphoria that had been building with each message.

Me: As long as it's not true, I don't see the problem with it.

I stare at the phone for a minute until I notice the time in the upper left-hand corner. Me: Crap! I'm going to be late. I'll talk to you later.

Guess it will be a braid day again today.

Another text comes through.

HPT: Have a good day.

I sent a thumbs up emoji.

I stare at myself in the mirror as I quickly apply my makeup. Ty wants to stay friends. But is that all he wants, or does he want more? Because even with the pictures out there, I know I do.

Chapter Twenty-Two



I STEP INTO MY OFFICE BUILDING AND TAKE A DEEP BREATH. This is it. This is the day that things are going to change. I can feel it. I smile and run a hand over my hair.

I may as well get the day started immediately. I go to my desk and find a hot pink sticky note stuck to my computer monitor. The hot pink ones are from Deloris, Mr. Wainwright's personal assistant. In her swirly cursive, she's written—*9:00 meeting with Mr. Wainwright.*

I sigh. I wonder how he knew I was coming in today. But it doesn't matter. I can get the details of the project and start working on it immediately. That'll help distract me. Hopefully.

I pull the sticky note from my screen and boot up my laptop. I had answered all my emails while I was avoiding photos at the Atraxia airport, and it doesn't look like there is anything new of importance.

I drum my nails on the desktop and glance at the clock. What should I do for the next forty-five minutes until my meeting? Maybe if I get the coffees now, it will show Mr. Wainwright that he was correct in his decision to put me on this project. It would show I take initiative and am a go-getter, right? Or it will tell him that my true calling is the coffee fetcher.

I scoot out from my desk as I grab my purse from the bottom drawer and make my way downstairs to the small coffee cart in the lobby. Maybe I won't get the executive's coffee, but I can surely get a hot chocolate for me.

The barista gives me an annoyed look. “Hot chocolate will take like ten minutes. Are you sure you don’t just want coffee? We have chocolate-flavored creamer.”

I’m sure my face is all scrunched up as I look at her. Coffee with chocolate-flavored creamer is not even close to being the same thing as hot chocolate.

“I’ll wait. Thanks.”



HAD I known it was going to take half an hour to make hot chocolate, I would have just gone to the break room and made my own from a packet.

I push through the glass doors of HCF Strategies Group with four minutes to spare. I put my cup on my desk, hoping it’ll still be warm when I come back.

I stand up and run my hands nervously down the front of my dress pants and jacket as I put my purse away and push my chair under my desk. Taking a step forward, I wobble in my three-inch heels. Maybe these had not been the best shoe choice today. I had worn them to give me the height advantage in the meeting, but now I’m wondering if height really matters if I stumble into Mr. Wainwright’s office on unsteady legs, like a drunkard.

I clench my hand into a fist, pushing courage from the tips of my fingers into the rest of my body. Why am I worried? I know my stuff. I am going to get my first project as a lobbyist. And I’m going to kill it and finally show these people what I’m made of.

I smile as I approach Deloris’s desk. She returns my smile, but it is brittle and forced. Even a bit confused. It seems someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.

“What are you doing here? We didn’t expect you back until tomorrow.”

“I was able to finish up early with my witness stuff and so I came home last night. I saw the note on my computer.” Yes, it was a lie, but I didn’t have to come in today regardless of why I came home early, so I don’t feel guilty about it.

“That was meant for tomorrow. Let me check his schedule for today.” She narrows her eyes and types something into her computer. Then she looks up at me. “Have a seat, Miss Martindale.”

I smile again and nod, taking a seat to the side of Deloris’s desk. I glance at her from the corner of my eye. She called me Miss Martindale. We’ve been on a first-name basis for a long time. What’s with the formality? Is it because of this project?

She looks up from her computer screen. “Mr. Wainwright will be with you in a moment. He’s just finishing up a meeting.”

“Thanks,” I smile. I wish I hadn’t left my phone in my purse. At least then I can look like I am doing something. As it is, all I can do is fidget with the cording accent on the edge of my jacket.

Mr. Wainwright’s door opens, and all the partners and executives walk out. Several glance in my direction, but they don’t return my smile. My stomach twists, but I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s because the whole office has had a drink from the grumpy juice this morning.

Deloris looks up from her computer. “Mr. Wainwright is ready for you now, Miss Martindale.”

“Thanks, Deloris.” I walk a few steps and then stop. “I really like your blouse. That’s a good color on you.”

She raises a brow, like she’s trying to tell if I’m lying to her. Finally, she just gives me a half-smile. “Thank you.”

I walk into Mr. Wainwright’s office and sit down in the chair across from him. He stares at me, his hands clasped together and tapping on the desktop. I run my tongue over my teeth discreetly. Do I have a poppy seed stuck in my teeth? Ugh. Why had I eaten the poppyseed muffin instead of the bran? *That was an amateur move, Grace.*

I smile expectantly at him. January in Utah seems warmer than his look. I lean back as far as the chair back will allow. Something's not right.

"How was your trip, Miss Martindale." His tone lacks any warmth and I sense he doesn't really care about my answer. Or maybe he does, and the question is a test. But a test for what?

"It was wonderful," I smile wide, both because of the memories and to hopefully convince him to smile in return. "Except for the whole attempted murder thing. But I'm trying not to let that mar an otherwise great vacation."

He doesn't say anything, nor does he return my smile. This doesn't seem to bode well.

I cross my legs at the knee and clasp my hands around it. Swallowing hard, I look around his office because I can't watch his face any longer. It's only making the knots in my stomach tighten.

"I'm all set to start on that project we discussed." I sound a bit too chipper, but I'm totally in reactionary mode here.

"About the project..." He looks down at a file folder on his desk. I lean forward, trying to see what the name is on the tab. "I was planning to put you on this project." He holds up the folder and I can see the name. I let out a little gasp. Penderhill Plastics. That is a big account. I can't believe my first project is with Penderhill.

I smile at him. Wait. What did he say? He *was* planning? That makes it sound like something has changed. My smile falters.

"However, that was before I saw the *incident* you witnessed in the Harold. I've now decided, and the rest of the executives agree, to make some changes."

His voice does not hold a promotion kind of vibe. I grip the arms of the chair. And what do the photos in the paper have to do with the project? Why did he emphasize the word incident? With the way he said it, I'm surprised he didn't use air quotes.

“Miss Martindale. This company...this vocation we practice here, requires integrity. I expect it from our clients and especially those we employ.”

I nod my head. “I completely agree.” Even though I have no idea what this has to do with my project.

“When we discover one of our own showing a complete lack of integrity, we have no choice but to let that person go.”

I nod again. Totally understandable.

“That is why I, or rather we—all of the partners and managers—feel we have no choice but to let you go.”

I squint at him. “Excuse me?” It almost sounds like he is firing me.

“I cannot trust an employee who tells me they are required to stay on vacation because they witnessed a crime, when in fact they are only staying so they may *play* a little longer.”

“But,” I sputter out. “But I was a witness. Someone tried to kill the crown prince of Atraxia.” I swallow hard and lick my lips. “I was required to stay until the man was identified.” He’s firing me because I stayed in Atraxia? This can’t be happening. This isn’t right.

He scowls at me. “Yes, I saw your forced confinement. It made the front page of the society section.” He stabs his finger at the picture—the one I’m beginning to hate—in the paper on his desk.

“But that picture was taken before I was told I had to stay.”

“We are past excuses, Miss Martindale. My decision has been made. I can’t trust you to tell me the truth. And therefore, I can’t allow you to work here any longer. Please, clean out your desk and leave.” He swats the newspaper to the side, as if it’s his life it has just ruined.

“But, sir—” I can’t move. I just sit there, staring at him. He can’t be serious.

“Must I call security, Miss Martindale?” His sharpness brings me out of my stupor.

I stand and shake my head. Then turn and walk toward the door.

“Deloris will give you your last check on your way out, once she has checked to make sure you have not taken anything that belongs to the company.” Mr. Wainwright calls out behind me.

I only nod, as tears prick at my eyes. He thinks I’m a liar and a thief. Well, isn’t that just fan-freaking-tastic.

I walk to my desk with my gaze trained intently on the floor. I can’t look at anyone, knowing they likely know what has happened. Mechanically I open my drawer and pull out my purse, shoving the few pictures and tchotchkes I keep on my desk inside it.

I give my desk one last once-over, only then noticing Deloris standing beside my cubicle.

Seeing that white envelope pinched between her fingers, it suddenly hits me. I’ve been fired from my job. Not laid off. FIRED. Oh, my gosh. I have never been fired in my life. My lips shake and the first tear blurs my vision. I bite down hard on my lip and angrily swipe at the tear. *I will not cry here.* Not until I’m in my apartment, by myself.

Squaring my shoulders, I snatch my paycheck from Deloris’s hand and walk out of my cubicle, completely aware of all the eyes that follow me on my professional walk of shame. Apparently, I’m not the only person who knows how my day is going today. I lift my chin, unwilling to let everyone know how humiliated I am.

I push out of the glass doors and moisture seeps from the corner of my eyes. *No. Not yet,* I beg. If I can just make it onto the Metro. No one will know me there. But my body is still as disobedient as it was in Atraxia. As soon as the lobby doors close behind me, the flood gates open and there is nothing I can do to stop it. Let the ugly crying commence.

The world becomes a blurry haze of blacks, grays and greens. My legs wobble on my stupid three-inch heels and I

just narrowly miss stepping on a dog. Or it could have been a large rat. It's hard to say.

A man stops and asks if I'm okay. "*Do I look okay,*" I slobber out. He wisely backs away. After he's gone, I feel a bit of remorse, but not enough to go after him. Like he'd stop for me again. You know, the whole once bitten twice shy adage.

Somehow, I make it home. I'm not really sure how, but I don't really care. I open the door and throw my purse and the contents of my desk on the couch, heading straight for my bed. I don't even bother to remove my heels or jacket.

I bury my face in my pillow and open the reserve tank of tears. When that well runs dry, I roll onto my side and grab my phone off the side table. I open up the internet search engine and type in my name and Ty's. I roll onto my back before I hit search. Do I really want to know just how many pictures there are and what is being said?

I'm feeling fairly self-destructive, so I push on the little magnifying glass and watch as it brings up website after website. I think that maybe another well of tears is about to open, but they all seem to be lodged in my throat.

I read through each post. The things they say about me are relatively minor. Mostly where I live and where I'm from originally. I have to say, I'm pretty unimpressed with the media's research skills.

But the things they say about Ty are terrible. They make his relationship with me out to be just another salacious fling in a very long line. The man they describe I hardly recognize as the man I spent nearly a week with. I can see it of MA, but not Ty. But the more I read, the more doubts creep in. Was it just a fling?

I drop my phone onto my mattress beside me. My eyes feel as though someone has scrubbed them with sandpaper.

I close them, just for a minute...



A KNOCK SOUNDS at my door. “Gee? Are you in there?”

I try to crack my eye open, but my mascara has stuck several of my eyelashes together. I look like a lady in this old Disney movie my mom loves, called *North Avenue Irregulars*. Through the narrow slit I can see there are only dark shadows in my room.

“Yeah.”

My door slowly opens, creaking quietly on its hinges.

“Oh, man. You look like Hades.” Texie whispers but probably not as low as she thinks.

“Thanks.” I roll to my other side.

“I went to your work to grab you for dinner, but they said you don’t work there anymore.”

I stay curled up on my pillow with my back to Texie. My jet lag has fully set in, and I am too tired and brain dead to think about what has happened.

“Is it true? Did you get fired today?”

I sniff and nod my head into my pillow.

“Why? They can’t possibly have cause.”

“They said they can’t trust me. And there is no place at the company for someone with no integrity.”

Texie sits down on the edge of my bed, making me slide toward her. “Why can’t they trust you?”

I finally turn toward her, ready to tell her the whole story, if for no other reason than to get her to leave. I use my fingers to pry my lashes apart. Interestingly enough, it doesn’t increase my vision all that much. “They saw the pictures of Ty and me in the paper. Mr. Wainwright doesn’t believe that I was forced to stay in Atraxia. He thinks I lied about it so I could stay longer and play.” I use air quotes on the last word.

“But that picture was from before you were told to stay.”

“It’s my word against his.” I bury my head back into my pillow. Apparently, the wells refilled while I was sleeping.

“Oh.” She is silent for a minute. “I can file a lawsuit for wrongful termination. I bet Tyrone and Sander would testify that you are telling the truth.”

I shake my head. Man, it hurts so bad. “They’ll just think he is lying for me. They may give me my job back, because you don’t say no to royalty. But their impression of me is set. It doesn’t matter what Ty or Sander say. Wainwright will still think I lied.”

“You look terrible.” She scrunches her nose up.

“You already said that.”

“Sorry.” She sits back. “What can I do?”

I grab the decorative pillow laying on the other side of my bed and hug it to me. “Maybe when I’m done moping, you can help me beef up my resume?”

“Of course.”

I sit up and push myself back against my headboard “Tex, what am I going to do? No other firm in the area will hire me after they talk to HCF.”

Texie climbs onto the other side of my bed and pulls the covers over her. “Have you told Prince Tyrone?”

I shake my head. “No. And I don’t know that I will.”

“Something will turn up. You just need to have faith.” It’s weird hearing this lecture from her, because I’m usually the you-got-to-have-faith girl. Not Texie.

One side of her mouth quirks up. “Now, you need to tell me more about that kiss.”

I bite the side of my lip. “What is there to tell? It is all right there in color on the front page.”

“Come on. That picture didn’t tell me how it was.” She looks away. “None of them did.”

“You saw them all?” I grunt, but a small grin turns my lips. “Oh, my heck, Tex. It was so good. Every time he kissed me it was different from the last, but each one was amazing.”

“Each one?” Texie squeals. “How many were there?”

I put my finger to my lips. “Three, I think?”

“You think? How could you forget even one?”

I shrug. “My brain is pretty addled right now.” That’s only partially true. My mind is addled, but I fully remember the details of each and every kiss.

Texie rolls over onto her side and watches me. “So where does this leave you two?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I think we’re both trying to figure it all out. Especially after the media blow up. His parents weren’t happy.” I sigh. “I hope we can at least still be friends.”

“Yeah?” She raises her brows and puts her head up on her elbow. “Okay, so if this picture thing had never happened, where do you see things going with you guys?”

“I really like him, Texie. More than I’ve liked anyone else.” I glance down at my hands. “I think it would be easy to fall in love with him.”

She guffaws. “Well, he’s a prince. What’s not to love?”

“Everything but that.” My head drops to the side. “Unfortunately, the prince gig isn’t going to change. It only turns into a king gig eventually.”

She stares at me. “Wait, you’re serious? You think you may love him?”

I shrug. “Maybe? But I feel like an idiot even thinking that. I hardly know him.” I bite my cheek. “Except, I feel like I *do* know him. Better than I ever knew Tanner.”

“Have you heard from him since you came back?”

I hold up my phone. “Yeah. He texted me this morning before I went to work.”

She snickers. “He’s already texted you? Doesn’t he know the rules about waiting a day?”

“He didn’t even wait half a day. I had three messages waiting for me when I woke up.” I gaze down at my phone, so glad that he hadn’t followed the stupid rule. “Maybe the wait a day rule is an American thing.”

She pulls the pillow off my chest and tucks it under her head. “What did he have to say?”

“See for yourself.” I hand her my phone because I don’t think I can read them right now. Both because my eyes hurt and because my heart hurts.

She scrolls through the texts. “Oh, I like him already. He knows his place in the friend hierarchy.”

I laugh. “You liked him before that. Maybe only because he is a prince. But still.”

Texie drops my phone to the side and sighs. “True. His title does make him more tolerable.” She says in her best Mr. Darcy voice. Which really isn’t that good. But I give her props for trying. She is quiet for a moment. “Gee, you don’t have a job.”

I smirk. “Thanks for reminding me.”

She lightly smacks me on the arm. “I’m just saying, if you want to, you can go back. You don’t have to be here for anything right now.”

“Um, I need to be here to find a job.”

She lifts her shoulders. “But do you really? I don’t think princesses need outside jobs.”

I shake my head. “No. That feels like I’m running away from my failures. I don’t need him to be my knight in shining armor and rescue me from my disaster of a life.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want mutual respect. I want him to need me just as much as I need him.”

“Hmmm.” She flops onto her back. “Did you discover if he’s got any brothers or cousins that are available?”

I grin at the ceiling. In spite of her misguided notions about royalty, I love Texie like a sister. I can’t imagine going through this with anyone else. “You already know he has a brother and a sister. But other than that, we didn’t get much into the family tree. Sorry.”

“But is his brother available?”

I give her the I-don’t-know look. “I thought you stayed back and talked with him after dinner that night.”

“It was all small talk. We didn’t get into each other’s relationship status.”

“That’s on you then.”

“If you don’t know the family tree, what good are you?” She sighs but gives me a little shoulder bump. “It’s okay. He’s still texting you, so there’s still time to find these things out.”

“You’re such a doofus.”

She swings her pillow at me, and I dive under mine for protection. “Whatever, Gee. You’re the one who is in love with a prince and came home anyway. I think that makes *you* the doofus.” She sounds like Elaine from *Seinfeld*.

I laugh, peeking out from under my protection. “I am not in love with a prince.”

Texie smiles and wiggles her brows. “Yet.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



MY PHONE RINGS AND I MOAN. HOW CAN MY HEAD STILL HURT this bad when all I have done is sleep for the last sixteen hours? I pick up my phone and see my parents' phone number. It is the fourth time my mom has called, and I have sent them all to voice mail. If My mom hears my voice, she will know something is wrong. And I just don't know if I can bear the disappointment I'll hear in her voice. But I also know that if I put it off much longer, it's likely the next time she rings, it will be my doorbell.

"Hey, Mom." I try to sound chipper.

"Hey, honey. How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you and Dad?" I quirk a brow. I may just sound convincing.

My mom sighs.

Dang it. That is her *something is wrong* sigh. "Sweetheart, is everything okay? You sound stressed. Or maybe it's sad? I'm not quite sure."

She isn't sure, my hiney. I have no doubt that she knows that it is both sad and stressed and several others, besides. She is generally all about letting me open up when I'm ready—unless I take too long. Then she will play hardball.

"It's just been a long week, Mom. Plus, I'm still suffering from jet lag."

"So it doesn't have anything to do with the pictures of you on the internet with that prince?"

Double crap. “You saw them, huh?” Ugh. My mom is completely old fashioned about everything except the internet. While most of the people in their small town still take one of the printed Salt Lake City papers, my mom goes to the internet for her news. She probably has seen stories I still haven’t.

“Yep. The Deseret News picked it up from the Associated Press.” She lets her words marinate in my head. “There was also a piece just about you, because it’s not often a local girl meets, let alone dates, a prince.” She gives an uncomfortable laugh. “I wish you would have told me about it sooner. I felt a little out of the loop when they interviewed me.”

They interviewed her. Well, Peter, Paul and Mary, this is not what I want to hear.

“What did you tell them?”

“What could I tell them, dear. I don’t know anything. I just said it was all very new and that I had no other comments.”

“Thanks, Mom.” My head throbs behind my eyes. Why can’t I deal with this in a few days when I have found some level ground. Or at least after I’ve heard from Ty again. He hasn’t texted me since yesterday morning.

“So is he your boyfriend?” She wants to know more, I can tell, but probably doesn’t want to seem nosy.

“Yes. I mean, no.” He called me his girlfriend before I left. But I’m not sure what he considers us after the interview with the king and queen. In his last text, he asked if we could at least be friends. What exactly does that mean? “I thought that maybe he could be, but then this whole picture thing makes it weird. So now I think we’re just friends.” My voice sounds normal. She’s gotten information that she can think is causing my problems. I may just get out of this call without—

“So then why do you sound so upset?”

Oh, hellfire and damnation! How does she know? It’s like the woman has a sixth sense. Why do I never learn? I should just tell her everything from the beginning.

“Fine, Mom. My boss thinks I lied to him about the reason for extending my trip because of the picture and so he fired

me. I have no job. I'm unemployed. I'm a failure." Tears spring to my eyes. How is there any water left in my body?

"Oh, sweetheart." There is no disappointment, just the comforting voice she's used whenever I have a problem. I should have known she would be this way, and not avoided her. "You're not a failure. It's a misunderstanding. I'm sure once your boss talks to the prince or someone over there in Atraxia, he'll understand, and you'll get your job back."

I shake my head. "No, Mom. I won't because he will never talk to someone *over there*." Everyplace in the world is *over there* to my mom. I gave up trying to make her pinpoint things better a long time ago.

I can practically see her chewing on her bottom lip. "Things will work out in the end, Gracie. They always do. You just need to have faith."

I sigh. "I know, Mom." I close my eyes, just wanting to go back to sleep. "I better go. I've got to start looking for jobs."

"Remember that your dad and I love you, sweetheart. And we are proud of you."

"Thanks. Tell Dad I love him." I pause, feeling a lump forming in my throat. "And I love you too, Mom."

We hang up and I lay there, looking up at the ceiling. I throw the covers back. My brain is thinking too much to get back to sleep.

I hadn't been lying when I told my mom I need to look for jobs. I guess there is no time like the present.



MY PHONE BUZZES as I'm elbow deep in suds. I pull my hands out and wipe my dark pink skin off.

HPT: How was your day?

Me: You don't want to know.

HPT: Oh? But I do want to know.

Me: No, you don't. I promise.

HPT: Is your project at work that bad?

Me: No, the project didn't work out.

HPT: ???

Me: I guess they decided to go a different direction with it.

Yeah, like in the opposite direction of *me*. I wonder who ended up with the Penderhill file?

HPT: I'm sorry. Is that why you're unhappy?

Me: Mostly.

HPT: What else?

Me: Just stuff.

HPT: Come on and tell me. Don't make me call Texie.

Me: You wouldn't

HPT: A gif of David Spade saying *Wouldn't I?*

HPT: Please?

Me. It's not really a texting conversation.

I barely press send and my phone lights up and starts playing *Kiss* by Prince. I know it's a bit on the nose, but it's all I got going for me right now.

He has the video call on, but I only accept the voice call. If he sees me, I'm totally busted. But he looks so good. "Hey, I wasn't expecting you to call." I should have thought this through better. What am I going to tell him?

"You said it wasn't a texting conversation. So talk to me." He leaves his camera on, and I drink in the sight of him. I'm not sure if this is better for me or worse. Seeing him makes my heart ache more than it already did.

The pesky tears that have been so near the surface lately blur my vision, so I can't tell if the dish I'm washing is clean or not. I drop it back into the sink. Soaking can't hurt it. Besides, I need to stall until I can get myself under control, or

he is really going to know something is wrong. “Hold on one sec, okay? Let me grab my ear buds.”

“No problem. Take your time. I’m only calling from across the world.” He says sarcastically.

It makes me laugh-cry. “I’ll hurry, I promise.” I can almost hear the cry on the word promise, but hopefully Ty didn’t notice.

I grab my earbud case off my nightstand and clutch them in my hand while I do a few deep breaths. I can do this. I shove one of the buds into my ear and wait for it to connect. “Okay, that’s better. You still there?” I ask.

“I’m not going anywhere, Sweet Cheese.”

I grin. “Glad to hear it Twelve kids.” As far as nicknames goes, it needs help, I know. But I’m just winging it here.

Ty chuckles. “I’m not sure about that one.”

“Yeah, I was just workshopping it.”

He’s quiet. “What does that mean?”

“Oh, here in the states it’s really popular to put new ideas before groups of people to gage how successful or popular they’ll be. It’s call workshopping.”

“Ah, I see.”

Some jokes just don’t translate well. Or maybe it just wasn’t really a joke. I don’t know. But I’m not going to take the time to analyze it right now.

“I like hearing your voice,” he says.

I put a hand to my earbud ear so I can hear his voice a little clearer. “Yeah, I like hearing yours too.” I sigh. “And seeing you.”

“So what’s wrong? Why are you so sad.” His voice lowers. “Is that why you won’t let me see you?”

I chuckle but it sounds forced. “Who says I’m sad?”

“Your voice.”

I settle into the couch and pull my legs up underneath me, holding my phone up close. Holy Hannah, I miss him. Which is utterly ridiculous. But I can't help it.

"Besides, you said it wasn't a good day."

"Yeah, well, today was fine. I was being melodramatic." That is true. Today was fine. It was yesterday that was an utter dumpster fire. But he doesn't need to know that.

"I don't think you're telling me everything. I thought you trusted me."

Trust. That was the word of the week, wasn't it? But do I trust him with this? I'm afraid he will just go off half-cocked and only make things worse. "I trust you. I just worry that you might do something dumb."

"Dumb? When have I ever done anything dumb?" He sounds fake offended.

"Well, you did insist we play the MASH game. So..." I smile down at him even though he can't see me.

"Don't call my future dumb." He chuckles. "Besides, I think it might be real. Look, I've done it ten more times, and every time it picked you." He holds up a bunch of sheets of paper.

"Well, it will if you put my name in the same place every time and use the same number."

He shakes his head. "I changed it up every time. New number, new placement. We're just destined to be together."

"Now who's the weirdo? Me or the man who's taking his cues from a little girl's game?"

We both fall quiet.

Finally, he sucks in a breath. "I can't force you to tell me, Grace. And I won't go to Texie. But I really wish you'd tell me what's wrong."

I bite my cheek. I can see his cute brow all furrowed and serious.

He will be the death of me. “Okay. But you have to promise you won’t try to fix anything.”

I stare into the phone, and I hear him breathing. Not like creepy breathing, just contemplative breathing. “Fine. I won’t try to fix it.”

“No fixing in any way. I want principle of the law here. Not letter of the law.”

“Fine. I will do nothing about it but be here for you.” He looks so sincere I almost start to cry again. What is wrong with me? I’m like a volcano hot mess.

I sigh. “Okay. I didn’t get the project because I was fired instead.”

Ty scoots forward on whatever he is sitting on and comes close to the phone. “Turn on your camera, Grace. I need to see your face.”

“Look at you rhyme,” I mutter.

“I mean it. This isn’t a faceless kind of call now. I need to see your face.”

I take a shaky breath but press the camera button. I give my perkier smile and a little wave into the camera. “Hi,” I say. Wow, Texie is right. I look terrible.

His shoulders relax a fraction when he sees me. “You don’t know how good it is to see you.”

I nod. “You, too.”

He settles back into what looks like a couch, but not one that I recognize. He must be in his room. “Why did you get fired?”

I look up to the ceiling. Not in an irritated way, but more of a trying-to-stop-myself-from-crying kind of way. “Because he thinks I was lying about staying on vacation longer. And he says he can’t trust me anymore.”

“The pictures.” He runs his hand down his face, his head shaking. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I whisper.

“Please let me call your boss and explain. Or Sander. Or even my dad. It’s the least he can do.” His lip curls slightly.

“No.”

He looks at me though the phone and I feel like he can see through me. “Please, let me fix this.”

“You promised. No fixing. This is my problem and I need to handle it.”

“Okay. But it’s under protest.”

I grin at him. “It’s noted in the record, counsellor.” I flick up my brows and completely relax since seeing his name on my screen. “You sound like Texie sometimes.”

“I’ve been called worse.” He shrugs.

I chuckle. “I’ll be sure to tell her that.” There is something I want to ask him, but I’m not sure how to. Maybe this is a rip off the Band-Aid kind of situation. “So my mom called this morning.”

He looks apprehensive. “And what did she say? She probably hates me for what I’ve done to you.”

I shake my head. “No, actually, she did ask if you were my boyfriend.”

He nods cockily. “And what did you say?”

“That since the photo debacle, I’m not sure.”

His smile drops. “You told me you’d be my girlfriend. Why would some stupid pictures on the internet change that?”

I can’t help my smile. I feel all jittery again, like I did when I was with Ty in Atraxia. Before the photo fiasco. “I just wasn’t sure. Your parents didn’t seem too onboard with the idea.”

His head shakes. “They were just ill-informed. That’s all. They’ll come around.” He stares hard at me. “They’ll have to.”

I want to believe him, but with everything else working against us, it feels like just something else in a long line.

His face lights. “Hey, you don’t have a job anymore.”

“Wow, it’s almost like you and Texie are the same person.”

He smirks. “I mean, you can come back, and we can date here. Like we planned to do in DC.”

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“What? Why not? The only reason you needed to get back to DC was for your job. That’s not a problem anymore.”

“I can’t just run away from my problems, Ty.”

“It’s not running away. It’s running to...running to me.”

I wish so bad I could reach out and touch his face. Smooth the creases on his forehead away. “Just give me some time, okay? I need to do this on my terms, or we’ll be doomed from the start.”

He nods. “Yeah. As much as I don’t like it, I get it.”

A door somewhere around him opens and I hear whispered voices.

“It sounds like you need to go.”

He nods reluctantly. “I don’t want to.”

I put my fingers to my lips and then press them against the screen. “We’ll talk again soon.”

He blows me a kiss. “Goodbye, SCC.” All the doubts that have plagued me since reading the internet articles fall away. I know I’m not just a fling. I know Ty cares about me.

“Bye, Ty.” The screen goes black, and I stare at it for a moment. Now I just need to put my money where my mouth was. Or would it be my mouth where the money is? I don’t know. What I do know is I need to stop being a failure so I can get back to Atraxia. And more importantly get back to Ty.

Chapter Twenty-Four



IT'S BEEN MORE THAN A MONTH AND I WAS RIGHT, NO lobbying firm on the Eastern seaboard will touch me. They call me when they get my resume, and then I never hear from them. I can only assume I am not getting stellar reviews from HCF Strategies. Out of desperation I interviewed for a job today. It's not my dream job, but rent doesn't care about dreams.

My phone rings and I answer it, even though I don't recognize the number. "Miss Martindale?"

"Yes." I don't recognize the voice, although they don't sound like they are older than eighteen.

"This is Mr. Patton from Froth and Go. I just wanted to offer you the job and see if you were okay to start tomorrow."

I bite my cheek. Yes, I interviewed at a coffee shop. Irony sucks. "That's great. Yeah, I can definitely start tomorrow. What time?"

"Great. I need you for opening which means your shift will be from five to one-thirty."

I cough. "Five in the morning?"

"Yes, is that a problem? You did not indicate any scheduling problems when we spoke this morning." His voice gets higher in pitch.

"No, no. I just wanted to make sure I was understanding the times correctly." My master's advisor is surely turning in

his grave at this. But a girl has to do what a girl has to do, right? “So I’ll see you at five.”

“Great, see you then.”

I hang up and look at my phone. It is like the gods think I need a little more humbling or something.

Guess I better check my supply of peppermint and lavender oil.

I don’t make it to my room before the door swings open and Texie pulls Jake in behind her, her other hand waving a paper in the air. She drops the paper on the coffee table. “Have you seen this?” Texie never used to buy a newspaper. But she has been buying them lately so she can show me every picture she finds of Ty. Because the internet doesn’t have enough. It’s not as helpful as she thinks it is.

I glance over but make no move to pick it up. “I only look at the help wanted section. And that’s only when the internet doesn’t pan out.”

Texie drops her purse and jacket on the chair and sinks onto the couch next to me. She reaches for the newspaper as her newest boyfriend, Jake, hovers awkwardly behind the couch. “You should read this.”

I give her a bland look. It is probably a picture of Tyrone with Lady Chloe or some other model-looking woman hanging on his arm. Since we haven’t been seen together in more than a month, and he hasn’t been out with anyone else, old pictures of Ty have been recirculating. It’s so annoying and terrible for my self-esteem when it’s at a low point. Which it has been lately, more than I care to admit.

I roll my eyes at her. I don’t need to see any pictures of Ty. I’ve already taken a hit today. But then I focus on where her index finger points. The picture is of MSG being led into a building. His hands are cuffed behind him.

“The first half is about him trying to kill Tyrone because he blamed him for being laid off from his job. Basically, the guy is unstable, to put it mildly. He’d never see the inside of a

prison here in the states. He'd be sent straight to the psych ward."

Just seeing his face makes my hands sweat. This picture is much better than the one on the security video I watched with Sander. Here, you can see the coldness of his eyes.

Texie's finger moves down the page, marking the beginning of a paragraph. "For her role in saving Prince Tyrone's life, the Atraxian Parliament voted unanimously to bestow an earldom upon the American lobbyist. She will be one of only a handful of countesses in her own right, in all of Atraxia. Along with the title, Miss Martindale will hold a seat in parliament and be given an estate. The date of the ennobling ceremony has yet to be announced. The new countess was unavailable for comment."

I stared at Texie, with my mouth slightly agape. "A title?"

"It will do until you become a princess." She winks.

"I wonder why they didn't contact me?"

Texie eyes me. "Are you sure they didn't? Why would they not have called you?"

I frown. "It's weir—" I stop. "Oh. They may have but I ignored it."

Texie looks at me like I'm an alien or something. "Why on earth would you have ignored it?"

"After I came home from our trip and there was the whole picture fiasco, several reporters from Atraxia started calling me for a comment. After the first few, I just stopped answering numbers I didn't know. I have Ty's number in my contacts, so I wasn't worried that it was him." I shrug, trying not to feel like an idiot. "Besides, why would I think that anyone besides Ty would try to get in touch with me?"

"And they didn't leave a message?"

"I may have deleted them without looking." I grimace. "Like I said, who would be calling me? Reading reporters' messages are almost as irritating as speaking to them."

“Ah, duh. The Atraxian government was obviously trying to call you.” Texie shakes her head at me like she does at an opposing witness in court. But then she grins and lets out a squeal. “Oh, my gosh, Gee. You are a countess!”

I shake my head. “From what the article says, I have to attend a ceremony first.” I lift my shoulders and drop them. “Still just regular old Grace.”

“That’s still really cool, though,” Jake says.

Both Texie and I look back at Jake who shuffles from one foot to the other. From the look on Texie’s face, I’m guessing she only just remembered he is there.

“Oh, hey.” I smile, trying to look upbeat. “And guess who got a job?”

“Really, Gee? At what firm?” She stands up quickly and grabs my arms.

I pull my lip between my teeth. “Not at a firm, really.”

Her face drops. “Then where?”

“Umm. The Froth and Go on the corner.”

“Really, Gee?”

I close my eyes. “I don’t need a lecture, tonight, Texie,” I whisper.

She pinches her lips shut. “Well, I just want to make sure you saw that. If you have any questions, I’m sure that Prince Tyrone can answer them for you. She gives Jake a little shove toward the door. “Jake and I should be going, right Jake?”

He looks at her. “But we already went to—”

She gives him another hard push and a wide-eyed stare. “You said we could get ice cream. Remember?”

He nods, but his face says he doesn’t really remember. “Does she really know a prince? Or is it like a nickname or something?” He mumbles as he walks out the door.

Texie looks at me over her shoulder and rolls her eyes. “Not a nickname. He’s an actual prince.”



KISS BY PRINCE sings out like a siren's song, and I snatch it up. "Why didn't you tell me that your government was trying to reach me?"

"And hello to you too," Ty says with a grin.

I smile and relax into the couch, his voice calming more than any music. "Sorry. Hello. How are you?"

"Better now. How are you?"

"I'm rather stunned, is how I am." I stare at him.

"Oh? And why is that?" He asks all innocently. Like he doesn't know.

I grab the newspaper off the coffee table and hold it up in front of my face. "I just read an article that mentioned something about a new earldom being created and bestowed upon a woman."

He nods. "It's quite the talk around Atraxia." His head tilts to the side. "I've been told she is a rather stunning red head."

My face heats and I smile stupidly. "Why didn't you tell me? We talk nearly every night?"

"My father wanted me to stay out of it. Especially after all the pictures started popping up all over the internet." He sits back in his chair. "When all their calls went unanswered, he asked me to broach the subject with you tonight. But it appears I'm too late."

"A day late and a dollar short, Mister."

He nods. "So it would seem."

I drop my elbow to my knee and my chin into my palm. "I'm not even sure what to think or do."

"I think you should accept it."

I stare at him. "I don't think you are an unbiased bystander."

He watches me. “I am definitely biased.” He grins. “I can already picture you in a tiara.”

“When is the ceremony?”

“It hasn’t been set. They won’t do it until you accept.” He rubs a hand over his chin. “I hope it’s soon. I’m about to fly to DC just so I can touch you. It’s nice seeing your face, but it is also its own special kind of torture not to be able to kiss your lips.”

I totally understand what he means.

“So how is the job hunting?” He asks the question every night. I think he thinks that as soon as I am hired, I will immediately quit and move to Atraxia. He’s going to be disappointed. I don’t know how all this will work out, but as my mom and Texie say, I’m just having faith.

I try to look happy. “Actually, I was offered a job today.”

His whole face lights up. “Sweet Cheese, I knew you would get one soon. I’m so proud of you.” There is a hopeful look on his face, that almost kills me because I know I’m not going to say what he wants me to and disappoint him on so many levels.

I just can’t admit what my new job is. But I know he is going to ask for details, so I try and head him off. “Okay, I deleted all the messages that they left, so can you ask them to call me back? I promise I’ll answer this time.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I’ll pass the word along.”

I yawn. “Thanks.”

“You’re yawning already?” He gives me side eyes.

“Sorry, I haven’t been sleeping well. And I have an early morning tomorrow. Just thinking about it is making me more tired.” I hate disconnecting from him after such a short call, but I also can’t let him ask about my job.

“Okay, sleeping beauty, I’ll let you go.” He blows his kiss and I kiss my fingers and put them to the screen. It’s become our nightly ritual.

“Goodnight, Ty.”

He waves. “Night, Grace. I love you.” And then the screen goes dark.

What did he just say?

Chapter Twenty-Five



I SIT AT THE KITCHEN TABLE EATING A BOWL OF COCOA PUFFS for dinner (can you eat dinner at two-thirty in the afternoon?) My head droops and I nearly fall asleep in said bowl of Cocoa Puffs, when an email notification rattles my phone. My heart gives a little jump, hoping it might be from Ty after the little bomb he dropped last night. Any ideas of sleep had vanished with those three little words. Meaning 4 am came way too early. I'm going to take a nap so I will be wide awake when Ty calls tonight.

I pick up my phone, a huge grin on my face. I know it likely isn't Ty. He never emails me. And I'd already received the email from the Atraxian government first thing this morning. It consists of a rather lengthy form I need to fill out. Apparently becoming a Countess is not a quick thing, nor for the faint of fingers. There will be a lot of typing in my future. I have daymares of my college application essays.

My smile drops as soon as I see the sender's name. Mr. Wainwright? What can he want? I tap on the name to open the email.

Miss Martindale,

In light of the new information that has come to my attention about your involvement in saving the life of Prince Tyrone of Atraxia, the board and I have decided to offer you your job back. We would be honored to have someone of your integrity and bravery working for HCF Strategies Group. Please come meet with me tomorrow at 9 am to discuss your future with our company.

Yours truly,

Jamison Wainwright

Really? He sent an email? I am tempted to reply back and tell him exactly where he can shove his job, but then a whiff of coffee drifts off my hair. No amount of washing has banished the smell. I drop my head onto my arms and release a primal yell at the faux-wood tabletop. I want more than anything to tell him to shove his job. To tell him I don't need his company or sorry excuse of a definition of integrity. But the truth of the matter is, I do. His unfavorable recommendation, up to this point, has been the primary reason I've been unable to find a job in my field. I'm pretty certain of that. But what's to say if I decline the job, his recommendation will be any more favorable? He literally holds me hostage.

When will the fates or gods or whoever it is who thinks I need humbling take a vacation from me and allow me to move on with my life?

My phone dings and I growl. "What now?" I yell at it.

I lift my phone and squint at the screen. The Monster app logo appears in the corner. That's odd. I haven't had so much as a nibble on my Monster profile in months. Has Mr. Wainwright hunted me down there, also?

Texie comes and sits down next to me. She starts on a big case tomorrow, so she took a half day off to 'mentally prepare'. "What's wrong? Why are you yelling?"

I lift my head and stare at her. "I just got an email from Mr. Wainwright. "In light of the new information that has come to his attention," I do my best impersonation of his voice, even though Texie has never met him, "he's offering me my job back."

She sits back against her chair. "He did that via email? What a loser." She scrunches up her nose. "Did you tell him where to shove it?"

I sit up in my seat. "I want to. But I don't feel like I can turn it down without a better option." I hold up my phone. "And now he's stalking me on Monster."

I open the app and hold it out for Texie to see.

She grabs my phone. “Uh, Gee. This isn’t from HCF.”

“What?” I pull it back and look down. I have a request for more information for a Senior Research Analyst and Liaison position. But it isn’t the job that has me staring. It is the company. Or rather the country. The position is working for the government of Atraxia.

I pull up the listing and stare at the skills required. People skills- check, research and analytical skills- double check, educating public through media and advertising campaigns- tentative check.

I look over at Texie. It’s almost as if this job was custom designed for me and my skill set. “They’ve requested further information from me.”

She claps her hands. “Gee. That is so great! What company is it? I saw they were in Atraxia.”

I’m suddenly suspicious. “What have you done, Ty?” I mumble.

“What does that job have to do with Tyrone?”

“It’s for the government of Atraxia.”

Her mouth forms an O. “You think he had them create a job, so you’ll go back?”

“It may not have just been created, but,” I nod. “That’s exactly what I think.” I want to be livid with him, but I just can’t muster it. I mean, I’m irritated. He promised he wouldn’t do anything about my job. Okay, I guess he hadn’t promised not to help me find a new one, just that he wouldn’t do anything about my old job. But this still feels sneaky. And kind and thoughtful. Had he figured out a way to make us both happy?

“That is really sweet, Gee. It’s like the ultimate compromise.”

I nod. “I know. But can I really be happy knowing I was hired only because of who I know?”

Texie snorts. “Oh, are you for real? That’s the way the world works. Hardly anyone is hired strictly based on their skills and qualifications. It almost always comes down to who you know and what recommendation they give you.”

“You think?”

She nods. “I know. I only got my job because of one of my law professors. It’s what you do with the opportunity once you’re given it. And you’re going to ROCK it, Gee.”

I grab my phone and without thinking pull up his number.

Me: Are you responsible for this job listing?

Nothing. I look at the clock. He wouldn’t be asleep already, would he?

I try again.

Me: Hello? Are you there? I hope you’re not out on a hot date.

I almost delete the message, because what if he is on a date? I push the thought away. After being a coffee pusher all day, my self-esteem is currently lagging a bit.

Texie grabs my phone. “Are you texting him? It’s like eleven pm there. He’s probably asleep.”

I grab it back, worried he’ll reply, and I’ll miss it.

I look down and a flock of something that flocks, flutters around my stomach. I see the dancing dots. He’s typing back. How can those dancing dots still make me feel so heady? We’ve been talking for months.

HPT: And good evening to you, too.

Another speech bubble appears right after the first.

HPT: What job listing?

Me: The job with the government? It matches my skill set exactly. Almost as if the job was created based on my Monster profile. Did you have anything to do with it?

HPT: I don’t really have any pull with your government. But it sounds like a good move for you.

Me: It isn't with my government, goofus. It's with YOUR government.

He sent a gif of Michael Scott from the *Office* saying, 'Why don't you explain this to me like I'm five?'

Me: I know your father has been trying to get you more involved. Am I really supposed to believe you have no idea about this?

HPT: Okay. I know about it. I only pointed them to your profile on Monster. Everything after that is on you.

Me: Really?

HPT: Really.

Me: Thanks. I appreciate that.

HPT: Although, after talking to you last night, it sounds like they may be too late.

Me: I'll seriously look at their offer. It has 'perks' my current job doesn't. Winky face emoji.

HPT: This isn't replacing our call, is it?

Me: It better not. Or I may have to fly over there and give you what for.

He sends a gif of a pickle saying, 'what a predicament'.

HPT: You're not being a tease again, are you?

Me: Haha. Maybe a little...

Me: Okay, I'll let you go back to sleep (you were asleep, right???)

HPT: I wasn't asleep. Just doing some Seinfeld homework. Winky face emoji.

Me: I'll quiz you later. For now, I'm going to take a nap so I'm wide awake when you call.

HPT: Sounds good. Love you. Heart emoji

I let out a yelp and toss my phone to Texie.

"What?" She picks it up and starts reading. "Oh my gosh, Gee. He loves you!" She pulls me up and we both hop around

in a little circle screaming like sorority sisters.



I'M SITTING on the couch staring at my phone, not feeling nearly as rested as I had hoped. Twice now, Ty has disrupted my sleep with his parting words. And now he was one minute late calling.

I open my laptop back up and continue filling in the information that was requested by the Atraxian government. I stop on a question. Date of availability...If I put tomorrows date will that look too desperate? Maybe I should put three weeks from now, so they think I have time to give my two weeks notice and then pack my things and move.

But the thought of waiting another three weeks makes my guts hurt. I'm pretty sure most of that is because I miss Ty and the thought of waiting that long to see him, when I could see him much sooner, makes me want to cry. But I can't deny that a small part of it is because I can hardly bear the thought of returning to my barista job. I smell my hair for added fuel to make my decision. As a compromise, I put a date a week away.

Do I feel bad that I may not be able to give two weeks notice? Not really. Mr. Patton, who's really just a pimply faced twenty-one-year-old, will survive if I don't give the full notice. I'm sure he'll be disappointed in my lack of professionalism (I've already disappointed him on my very first day, so I'm sure he isn't expecting much from me). He'll probably be happy to have me go.

Kiss starts playing and I slam my computer screen down and answer the call. "You're late." I say.

He laughs. "Only by two minutes."

I give him my it's-a-shame face. "In two minutes I could accept a date from someone else."

His smile falls. “Two minutes late and you are already looking for another guy?”

I bite my lip. “I don’t know. I guess it depends.”

“On what?” His brow rises.

“Depends on if you really meant what you said in our last two conversations.”

He puts his finger to his lips and taps. “Hmm. What I said? Nothing’s coming to me.”

If I had been next to him, he would surely have gotten a shoulder smack and a stern look. As it is, I can only give him the stern look. “You really don’t know what I mean?” I’m not buying his innocent look.

He shakes his head. “I think maybe you’ll have to be more specific. What was it concerning?”

My nose flares in frustration. He is trying to get me to come right out and ask.

He must see my frustration because he loses the fake innocent look and leans close to the screen. “Okay. You want cards on the table?”

I nod.

He shakes his head. “Only if you put yours there too.”

I swallow. That’s a big ask. Although, can I really expect him to lay his all out while I keep mine all close to the vest? I nod again. “Sounds fair.”

“Okay. I love you, Grace. I want you to come back to Atraxia. I don’t care if you have a job or not. I don’t care if you accept the title or even if you apply for the job. I just want you here with me where I can kiss you. Or I can run my fingers through your hair while you sleep on my lap. I like who I am with you in my life. I just need you, Gee.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I’m kicking myself that I didn’t tell you all this before you accepted your new job.”

I’m sure I’m smiling like an idiot.

He looks at me and leans back in his seat. “So there are my cards.”

I wring my hands in my lap. His cards went much faster than I thought they would. I suck in a deep breath. Who knew cards could be so difficult? “Okay. Cards on the table.”

He leans forward, as if he’s afraid he might miss something.

“I love you too, Ty.”

He releases a huge sigh. Could he have actually been afraid I didn’t? “So what —”

“All my cards aren’t on the table yet.” I look down at my lap.

His brows rise. “Okay.” He says it slowly.

“I started my new job this morning at five.”

“What kind of lobbying takes place at five in the morning?”

“Hey, I didn’t interrupt your card laying.”

He puts his hands up and pinches his lips shut.

“My new job isn’t as a lobbyist. No firm on the eastern seaboard will even call me back. I started work as a barista at a local coffee house.”

His countenance falls, but he doesn’t say anything.

“I miss you so bad it hurts, but I’m afraid if I come there with no job that I’ll never shake this feeling of failure. I’ll never truly be happy because I’ll still feel unworthy.”

He stares at me, and his eyes look glassy. Almost as if he might be near tears. But it’s surely just a trick of the light coming through the video. He isn’t saying anything, and I can’t tell if he is disappointed or if he just plain thinks less of me.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” I whisper.

“You never said your cards were all on the table.”

I release a strangled kind of laugh. “Sorry. My cards are all on the table.”

He nods. “So you love me?”

I release a laugh-cry. There were a lot of cards there to sort through. I guess I can't be disappointed in which cards he tackles first.

“I can't tell you how happy that makes me.”

A small weight lifts off my shoulders.

He glances down for a second and then he looks back at me. “I'm sorry. I just got a text. There's something I need to deal with, so I have to cut our call short.”

I'd be lying if I said I'm not disappointed. “It's okay. I should be heading to bed too. I've got an early morning.” I try for a perky, excited smile. But I don't pull it off. It's one of the downsides to video calls. I can see my own face.

I'm glad he didn't lecture me on how working in a coffee shop was beneath me, or anything. But I'm surprised he didn't say anything about it.

“I love you, Sweet Cheese.”

I press my finger kiss to the screen. “I love you too, Ty.”

And my screen goes dark.

Chapter Twenty-Six



I STRAIGHTEN MY PENCIL SKIRT AS I STEP OUT OF THE AIRPORT doors. I wish Texie was here with me, but a trial kept her back in DC. It looks like I'll be doing this one on my own.

It seems my week and a half timeline was longer than the Atraxin government wanted to wait. So I now find myself back in Atraxia and on my way to a job interview less than five days after I responded to their request for more information.

'Mr. Patton' had indeed been disappointed in my unprofessionalism. After all, he had taken a risk by hiring me when I had no experience. Eye roll.

A large hulking man stands beside a black Range Rover with a sign in his hands that reads, Martindale.

I grin and hurry forward. "Sander? What are you doing here?" I peer inside the tinted windows, but the car is empty. "Where's Ty?" Sander never leaves Ty. He's got to be around here somewhere. We haven't talked as much since we put our cards on the table. He hasn't ghosted me or anything, we still text multiple times a day. But he had been busy with a project or something this last week. And I had been getting ready for my interview and trip overseas.

Sander grins, as much as I've ever seen Sander grin. "Prince Tyrone will meet you after your interview."

My face drops, but I school my features quickly. "You let him out of your sight? Sander, what has come over you?"

“He’s in a safe location and still has plenty of protection. But he wanted me to see that you are safe today.”

I lean in and give him a hug. He stays firmly planted beside the car, making the hug completely awkward. But I don’t care. I get to see Ty today, and that is the most important thing. Well, and this interview. “So you’re my buddy today?” I shoulder bump him. “I put myself in your capable hands.”

He opens the back car door and I slide inside. The tailgate is already open, and my bags are being piled inside.

Kiss sounds at my side. I grab my phone and see Ty’s face, the Aegean Sea visible behind him. He smiles warmly. “Welcome home, Sweet Cheese.”

“I thought you would be here when I saw Sander.”

He shakes his head. “I wanted to be, but I had one last thing to finish up so that I’ll be free to spend the rest of the week with you.”

“Yay. I guess that makes up for it.”

“You ready for your interview?”

I wrap an arm around my middle. “What if I don’t get the job?” The butterflies I’ve been trying to cage since I boarded the plane in DC erupt.

Ty smiles. “Then you can retire to your new estate and become an olive oil maker.”

“Olive oil maker? Is that the industry lingo?” I breathe deeply. “Only if my estate has olive trees. But I can always fall back on my barista experience.” Texie and I had looked over several of the estate portfolios I’d been sent. The one I’m leaning toward does have an olive grove.

He laughs. “You’ll never have to peddle coffee again, trust me.” He blows me a kiss. “Now, go crush that interview.”

“Crush it. Got it.” I glance at the front seat. “I love you,” I whisper.

“Don’t worry about Sander. He already knows we’re in love.”

I see Sander pull his gaze from the rearview mirror. He's trying very hard to look like he isn't listening.

"Well, knowing and having to hear it are two different things."

"Good luck and I love you, Sweet Cheese." He winks at me just as I disconnect the video.

I close my eyes. *Okay, Grace Martindale. You can do this. This job was pretty much made for you. It's yours to lose.* Okay, I'd give it a seven on a scale of one to ten for great peptalks. Although I could have done without the last part.



I SHUT the door of the Prime Minister's office behind me. Placing my hand to my chest, I will my heart to calm down. The interview is over. There is nothing left for me to do but wait. And I intend to do that waiting with Ty by my side.

I push my way out of the central government building, a breeze lifting the small hairs at the back of my neck. Salty sea air assaults my nose and the humidity makes my clothes feel damp. But that is nothing to the feeling of being home. It's weird, in some ways, that I can feel this way about a place I've only spent six days in. Most people don't understand it. But that doesn't make it any less real.

I pull out my phone and call Texie.

"Well?" Texie asks as she picks up.

"I think it went well. They said I should receive a call within twenty-four hours."

A huge breath whooshes out of her. "I'm sure you are the best candidate by a land slide."

"I don't know. I'm just so glad I'm here. Although, I wish you were too."

"Is Ty there?"

I sigh. “No, he sent Sander to pick me up at the airport. He said he has one last thing to finish up and then we can spend the rest of the week together.”

“Sounds romantic.” She goes all gooey on me.

Sander opens the back door. “I heard from Prince Tyrone, and he has finished his business. Do you wish to join him?”

“Uhh, yeah.” Like he needs to ask. Maybe Ty is wrong, and Sander doesn’t know the extent of our relationship. That thought makes my stomach lurch. What about the king and queen? Do they know?

“Very good, Miss Martindale.” Sander nods and closes the door.

The scenery flies by as we drive along the coastline. “I better let you go to bed, Texie. I’m sure you’re tired and you have closing arguments tomorrow, right?”

She yawns. “Yeah. I should go to sleep. But you better call me tomorrow. First thing!”

“Yes, mom.” That reminds me. I need to call my mom and let her know I arrived safely. “Bye, Tex.” I hang up the phone and watch out my window.

We turn off the main street and travel down a narrow, dusty road, the sea staying on my right. Maybe I can just text my mom and call her later.

I type out a quick text and set my phone in my lap, when it rings. I nearly knock it onto the floor, trying to pick it up. An unknown number appears on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Miss Martindale?” The woman on the phone speaks in Greek. “This is Miss Dellis—Prime Minister Gounaris’s secretary. He asked that I call and offer you the job, if you are still interested in it.”

“Yes. Yes, of course, I am. Thank you, very much.”

I look over at the empty seat next to me, wishing there was someone there to share my news with. But I’ll be with Ty soon

enough.

“Have you settled on a home yet?”

I pause. Settled on a home? I love the sound of that. “No. I have not decided on a place yet.”

She shuffles some paper. “Oh, yes. It says you’ll be staying at the palace for the short term. I’ll send the paperwork over tomorrow with all the information you need. I will also enclose my card in case you have any questions.”

“*Sas efcharistó*, thank you very much.”

“My pleasure, Miss Martindale.” The line goes dead, and I stare at my phone for a moment. “I got it. I got the job.” I jump up and down in my seat as much as my seat belt allows, smacking Sander on the shoulder several times.

“Congratulations, Miss.” Sander says. I think he says it as much to try to stop me from hitting him as from actual excitement for me.

The car pulls up in front of a white stucco house I’d seen in pictures that came with one of the portfolios. Why are we looking at houses? I thought Sander said he was taking me to see Ty.

Sander helps me from the car. “Right this way, miss.”

I almost tell him he can leave my bags here because now that I’ve seen it, I don’t think I need to look at another place. This feels perfect. The only thing missing is Ty.

He leads me through a stone archway and into a grassy, green courtyard with the house facing us. The bougainvillea looks just as inviting as they had in the pictures.

I step onto the cobblestone path leading up to the steps and I can’t help but look up at the structure as I walk.

“This place is beautiful, Sander.” I look but he isn’t just behind me anymore.

I stop in front of the door. I have an idea of what is on the other side because of the pictures I’d seen. But still, I’m nearly frozen. This is all just so weird. It’s like I’m having an out of

body experience. I twist the knob and push the door open wide.

A breeze drifts in through the open terrace doors. Do they always keep the doors open? Or maybe they knew I would be touring the houses and they wanted to air them out. Whatever it is, I'm drawn to the view of the Mediterranean. Holy crap. This is what I'll see every day?

As I walk out onto the terrace a movement catches my attention. I turn and suddenly the Mediterranean isn't important anymore. There's a much better view standing beside a potted palm and a trellis of bougainvillea.

"Ty." His name floats out of my mouth. He's here.

"Man, you're a sight for sore eyes, Grace."

All I want to do is rush into his arms. But it's like I'm rooted in place. "I can't believe you're here."

"I was thinking the exact same thing." Without another word he takes a step and I meet him halfway, flinging my arms around him.

As if he can't hold himself back any longer, he drops his head and takes my lips in his. Pulling out my bottom lip, he draws back from me slightly. He releases my lip and drops his head further, kissing along the curve of my neck.

My skin reacts with both chills and heat. His stubble tickles my neck, causing goosebumps upon goosebumps to roughen the surface of my skin.

I shiver in his arms and his kisses travel up to my hairline and onto my earlobe.

I can't get enough of him. It's been so long. Too long since I smelled him. Tasted him. His hands are around my waist, and he pulls me tighter to him. "Oh, Gee." He breathes out against my neck. "How I've missed you."

He finally pulls back, both of us more than a little breathless.

"How did the interview go?"

I splay my fingers through his hair, loving the feel of it. “I crushed it.”

He drops his forehead to mine and chuckles. “I knew you would. Did they say when they would decide?”

I lean my head back so I can see him squarely. “Are you just being polite, or do you really not know any of this?”

He gives me a shocked expression. “I know nothing, but what you tell me.”

I grin. “Prime Minister Gounaris’s secretary just called to offer me the job.”

“Yes.” He picks me up and twirls me around. “I’m not surprised. You were the best candidate.” Telling Ty my news is way better than telling Texie. I’m so glad he’s here.

“How did you know? I thought you weren’t a part of it.”

He shakes his head. “I wasn’t. But I can’t imagine anyone better suited for the job than you.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask him. “This is one of the houses I was sent the portfolio for.”

He looks around. “I know. It’s one of my favorites. When I saw it was one of your options, I thought you might prefer it.” He drops a kiss on the tip of my nose. “We can see the others, if you like, but I think this one just feels like you.

He puts his arms around my waist and pulls me tighter to him. But he does not lean down to kiss me again. He stares at me, as if he’s memorizing every freckle.

I put my hands on his chest and feel his heart hammering beneath my palm.

Ty leans in and gives me one more fierce kiss on the lips. “There is something I have wanted to ask you for months.”

I lean my head back, looking at his face—admiring that small dimple at the side of his eye. “Oh? I’m here. I thought all your dreams had come true.”

“All my dreams but one.” He reaches into his pocket, while keeping me pressed tightly against him, and withdraws a

blue ring box. “Grace Martindale, will you marry me?”

I smile down at the platinum setting holding the large, princess-cut emerald with two baguette-cut diamonds on each side. I let out a gasp and glance up at him as he slides it onto my finger. “I thought you’d never ask!” I put my hands on his cheeks and pull his lips to mine.

He picks me up and twirls me around the terrace as the breeze carries our laughter out to sea.

Epilogue



BARAK

The guests mill about, forming a line on either side of the terrace doors as the happy couple prepares to leave for their honeymoon ‘to an undisclosed location.’ Grace’s parents and siblings (she has five brothers. Five!), along with their families have all come for the wedding. Texie stands at one of the doors, talking with my cousin Cordon.

My mother and father, the king and queen of Atraxia, dance with each other only a few couples away.

Everyone looks so happy. Even my sister Helena is smiling and dancing.

The wedding planner claps her hands loudly and the room quiets. “The time has come for the prince and princess to take their leave.”

People line up on both sides of the doorway either blowing bubbles or throwing rice as Tyrone and Grace run down the aisle, hand in hand, laughing and waving as they disappear around the corner. Even now they are probably getting into Tyrone’s Jaguar and driving off into the darkness. It sounds more poetic than it really is.

I sigh and roll a small piece of rice between my thumb and forefinger, a frown drawing down my lips. It’s not that I don’t like Grace. I really do. She’s great for Tyrone and is completely different than any other woman he’s dated.

It’s more about how this is affecting me. I sit down at one of the cloth covered tables and stare at the grains in my

fingers.

“Hey Barak.” Texie, Grace’s best friend waves and sits down at the table next to me.

I jerk my head up, the rice falling to the table. “Hey.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “What’s up? You’re like the only person here that isn’t laughing and having a great time.”

I smile mechanically. “Nothing’s wrong. I *am* having a great time.” Or I was until my father said that we needed to talk. That phrase is never good, whether it comes from a girl or a parent.

“Wow, if this is you having a good time, I’m not sure I want to see you having a bad one.”

I let out a small laugh. Texie is a funny lady. She and Grace are very similar in that respect. “Sorry. I just have some things on my mind.”

She pulls me to my feet. “Come on. Come dance with me. I hardly know anyone else here. And your cousin, Ezio, has had too much to drink and is getting handsy.”

I grudgingly let her pull me to my feet and drag me to the dance floor. The band is playing *I’ll be There for You* by Bon Jovi. The whole night was a throwback to the eighties in music. Both Tyrone and Grace love the old rock and hair band groups.

I wrap my arms around Texie’s waist, and she steps in close to me. We’re both swaying to the music. Her scent drifts up to my nose. A mixture of peaches and some high-end perfume.

Maybe it’s time I start to look for that special someone. I know that is the conversation I’m about to have with my father, so maybe it will go easier if I preemptively tell him that’s my plan.

Texie lets out a small laugh, and I look down at her. “What?”

She steps out of my arms. “The song ended. It seems those thoughts are still preoccupying you.”

I shake my head. “Sorry. Let me make it up to you. Dance the next song with me?”

She glances over at Grace’s family. “Maybe one more. But I think the Martindale’s are heading back to the palace soon. I should probably go with them.” She grabs my chin between her fingers and jiggles my head. “I just hope when the right girl comes along, you are more attentive.”

I look down at her. Maybe Texie is the right girl. I mean, if Tyrone can be so head over heels in love with Grace, maybe the best friend is the one for me? I look down at her and notice her smile. And not just any smile. It’s an ask-me-out-and-I’ll-definitely-say-yes kind of smile. But it isn’t directed at me, but rather someone over my shoulder.

I maneuver her around the dance floor, hoping to catch a glimpse of who can earn such a smile from her. I look over and notice Cordon is speaking with his father, my uncle.

He’s leaning against a high table, his gaze on his father. But every so often his eyes flick to Texie and a hint of a smile appears.

She sighs. Okay. So Texie is obviously not the girl for me.

She thinks she is the girl for Cordan, and he seems to agree.

I swallow and bristle slightly. Never has a girl been focused on someone else when she was dancing with me. I mean, I’m a prince. Cordan is just the younger son of a duke. He isn’t even the heir. Granted, he’s handsome and athletic. But still—

The song ends and I step away this time. “I hope I wasn’t too terrible a partner.”

She swats me across the upper arm. “Of course not. I can understand how you feel, though. I love Tyrone and everything, but things are going to be so different from now on. I mean, Grace and I won’t even be living in the same country. Which is weird, right? She didn’t even like your brother when they first met. And now she’s moved across an ocean and married him.”

“Yeah. But you could always move here. We have law firms that I’m sure would love to have you on their staff.”

Texie’s eyes flick to Cordan on the other side of the room, but quickly return to me. “Yeah, well I have thought about it. But I think it will take more than just Grace living here for me to uproot my whole life.”

I flick my eyebrows up at her. “Perhaps there is someone else who could help convince you to stay?”

She bites her lip and tilts her head, like she is preparing herself to give me some bad news. “I think we should just be friends, Barak. It just feels too cliché for the best friend to marry the prince’s brother, you know?” Her eyes held sympathy.

Does she think she just broke my heart? The initial sting of her being more attracted to Cordan than me eases. And if I’m being honest. I feel nothing when I see Texie. She’s pretty enough, but there is no spark.

I grin wider. “I was thinking of Cordan. But thanks for letting me down easy.” I wink at her, and her face turns a dark crimson color. Ok. It eases the sting a lot.

Her hands fly to her face. “Oh, my heck. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed—” Her gaze flicks back to Cordan. “Why would you say that Cordan could convince me to stay?” She laughs awkwardly, twisting at a stray lock of hair at the side of her face.

“Because I have eyes.” Is she seriously going to try to deny that she is attracted to him?

“Am I that obvious?” She groans. “Ugh. I am such a hipster doofus.”

I squint at her. “Hipster doofus?”

She waves me away. “It’s from an old show called Seinfeld. Have you ever heard of it?”

I nod. “Yeah. I think it’s one that Grace and Tyrone watch a lot.” I don’t get a lot of the humor, but my brother and his

now wife, think it is hysterical. I guess that is what love does to a person?

A throat clears behind me, and I turn to see my father.

He smiles at Texie. “Pardon me, Miss Kincade, I know you are dancing with my son, but might I have a word with him? There is something we need to discuss, and I’m afraid it cannot wait.”

Texie smiles up at me. Was it enough of a smile that I can convince my father that Texie and I are involved? Just long enough to get him off my case?

“Of course, Your Majesty.” She looks over at Grace’s family who seem in no hurry to leave. “I will just go see if there are any desserts I haven’t tried yet.” She takes several steps away. “Thanks for the dance, Barak.”

My father motions toward the doors leading out of the ballroom. “I think it best if we talk privately in Tyrone’s office.”

“Come on, Father. Is this really the time or place for this discussion?”

He nods and increases his pace. “Yes. You know I am leaving first thing in the morning for China. This discussion needs to take place now.”

I sigh. *Fine.*

We enter the study, and he shuts the door behind me, motioning for me to take the seat opposite him as he moves behind the desk.

I take a deep breath. I may as well take the offensive and end this discussion before it even gets started. “Look, Father. I know now that Tyrone is married, you and mother would like to see me in a similar situation. Let me just say that I totally agree, and I have already made great strides. Miss Kincade and I—”

His brow crinkles in confusion. “Miss Kincade? I should think you would want to look elsewhere, Son.”

I scoot to the edge of my seat. “Why? I should not think the whole American thing would be a problem after Grace.”

His face smooths and for the second time tonight, I get the breaking bad news head tilt. “It is not because she is an American. It’s because she is in love with another man. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

I squint at him. Who did he think Texie was in love with? “Who is it?” I challenge him.

“Cordan, of course. You would have to be blind not to see the way she looks at him. And though Cordan hides it well, I believe he feels the same way. That is why I suggest you find someone else.” He clears his throat again. “While I am pleased you have decided to take this seriously, your love life is not the reason I wished to meet with you.”

My brows rise high on my head. “Oh?”

He shakes his head. “Since the incident with your brother and the severed brake line, I have decided I want someone from the royal family on the security committee. Not just to attend meetings, but to play an active role in both the security of our family and that of our country.”

Why is he telling me this? Does he want me to fill in for Tyrone while he is gone?

“I wish for you to fill that position, Barak. You are a sound thinker and do not tend to act rashly. I think you would be a great benefit to the council.”

My mouth drops open. “Me, Father? Are you sure? I would think Tyrone is better suited.”

My father’s eyes widen slightly. “Tyrone is impetuous. And while I think his marriage will help that trait in him, I still do not think him right for this position.” He stares at me intently. “No. I want you to take it.”

“What will it entail? Attending meetings now and then?”

He shakes his head. “No. You will work closely with all the security forces, including the military. I have already seen to it that you have an office in the Armed Services Building.

We are also moving the Security Council there. Your position will be second only to the Minister of Security.”

What is he saying? That I now have a job? Like an eight to five, everyday kind of job? Why is he acting like I should be pleased with this idea?

“I’m afraid the minister is not what you would call approachable. I’m hoping you will be able to fill that role. That people will feel comfortable speaking with you about security concerns.” He smiles at me. “You have always been good at that, Son.”

I just stare at him. Is this optional? Because I think I’d like to pass.

He gives a firm nod. “Good then. You will report to your office first thing on Monday morning.” His shoulders drop as if he is relieved. “I feel better knowing you are doing this, Barak. Thank you.”

Thank you? Had he even asked? Or had I said I will do it?

He stands up. “Let’s return to the party, shall we? We don’t want the ladies to miss us.” He pats me on the back and then squeezes my shoulder. “I did notice Lady Chloe paying you close attention. Could there be something there, now that you know Miss Kincade’s leanings?”

I bark out a laugh. “Lady Chloe? She is only lowering herself to the brother of the heir, because the heir went and married someone else.”

My father looks at me like he doesn’t understand the problem.

“No, Father. There will not be a connection with Lady Chloe.”

“Very well. Your mother will be disappointed, not about Lady Chloe in particular, only that there is not someone who has turned your head.”

“Now that I have a full-time job, who has time for women?” I grumble.

Author Notes

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *The Problem with Princes!* I had so much fun writing this book. I think most every little girl at some point in time imagines what it would be like to date or marry a real life Prince. This was just a version of my fairy tale. And it was so much fun to bring it to life on these pages.

The country of Atraxia is a product of my imagination. However, several of the locations mentioned were based off of real places. Most of them are located in Greece. The Hilltop Monastery and the private beach are both actual places in Greece.

The Lobbying firm and Coffee shop mentioned in the story are not real companies nor are they intended to be modeled after any specific company. Any similarities are purely coincidental.

Thanks again for reading!

Mindy

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About the Author

Mindy loves all things history and love, which makes writing romance right up her alley. Since she was a little girl playing in her closet “elevator,” she has always had stories running through her mind. But it wasn’t until she was well into adulthood that she realized she could write those stories down.

Now they occupy her dreams and most every quiet moment she has.

Her kids are used to being called names they have never heard and they now use words like vexed and chagrined.

When she isn’t living in her alternate realities, she is married to her real-life Mr. Darcy and trying to raise five proper boys. They live happily in the beautiful mountains of Utah.

You can connect with her on her website mindyburbidgestrunk.com.



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