



# *Devastated*

*Delta Family Romances #10*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**CAMI CHECKETTS**

# Devastated

DELTA FAMILY ROMANCES #10

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# Contents

[Free Book](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[His Perfect Match for Christmas](#)

[Do Claim the Tempting Athlete](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Do Depend on Your Keeper](#)

[Do Tease the Charming Billionaire](#)

[Only Her Undercover Spy](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Only Her Cowboy - Excerpt](#)

[Royal Mistake](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Royal Courage](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Cami Checketts](#)

[Five Free Books](#)

## Free Book

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## Chapter One



Jessica Delta had to escape. She had no idea how she would accomplish such a feat, but she needed to run out of the back door of her beloved grandfather's house and keep running until she somehow outran the pain, the emptiness, the responsibility, and most of all her acute awareness that she could never complete her assignment and was in fact doomed to fail.

When Papa had appointed her Secret Keeper, he'd explained something she hadn't shared with anyone—she was not only destined to protect the weapon, but she would have to fire it. Soon. She, Jessica Delta, the youngest and weakest of the elite Delta family, would be responsible for killing King Frederick, and anyone within approximately twenty feet of him, and she'd have to do it at the exact time she was inspired from heaven above.

No pressure.

Forget the fact that Jessie didn't want to kill anyone, no matter how evil and deserving of death Frederick and his associates were. What if an innocent maid or someone Frederick had captured was in the room when she fired the weapon? She had no way of knowing who she might kill when the time came.

The only thing Jessie knew for certain—she was the wrong person for the job.

It was ... maybe Thursday evening. The entire family, minus the newlyweds Hudson and Kelsey who were taking a

couple days to themselves, and Greer, Alivia, Klein, and Colt who were on duty monitoring the cave, and Emery and Bailey who were on duty watching the cameras and sensors downstairs, were gathered in Papa's spacious living room. Everyone was chatting and eating leftovers from the wedding earlier today.

She'd lost track of time since Papa had been shot and killed. Though Papa had told her it was coming, there was no way to prepare to lose him and be the Secret Keeper and future executioner. Her life had upended.

Had that only been yesterday morning? It shouldn't be hard to keep track of one day, but it felt like a heart-wrenching lifetime of pain had been driven through her head and her heart between then and now.

"You okay?" Her next older sister Maddie sat close to her on the couch and nudged her with her shoulder.

"Not really." Jessie shrugged and forced a smile again. "But what do you do? Keep putting one foot in front of the other, just like Papa taught us."

Papa. She touched the pendant hidden under her shirt as tears stung her eyes. She missed him—his insights, his spirituality, his toughness, his teasing, his smile. If she was honest with herself, she was ticked at him for leaving her. Which was selfish in light of everything going on, but there you were.

Jessie wanted to prove to everybody, especially a particular elite special ops demolitions expert who had joined them last week, that she wasn't selfish or immature. Maybe she was, and she was in no way someone Chief Petty Officer Zander Povey would be interested in. And good heavens, why was she caring about *him* when the world was falling down around her and she was expected to save it?

"You've got this, beautiful sis." Maddie put her arm around her and hugged her. "Papa made you the Keeper because of how incredible you are." Jessie didn't know if it was simply Maddie being insightful or if her worries were

revealed on her face, but her sister added, “And you’ve got all of us backing you up.”

Looking around at her accomplished family members, Jessie realized many of them were sneaking glances at her even as they conversed with each other. Shelly sitting on Thor’s lap. Aiden and Melene snuggled close. Her parents, aunt and uncle, Kelsey’s mom Lori, and Granny Vance teasing with little Mo as they played Chutes and Ladders at the table. Chandler, Kylee, Esther, and Reed cleaning up the kitchen.

Any of her incredible siblings or cousins should’ve been made the Keeper and final line of defense for the world instead of her. Aiden was a Navy SEAL for crying out loud. Esther was a lawyer for the Air Force and excelled at everything she did. Greer could wrestle a mountain lion with his bare hands. Her big brother Colton was as serious and impressive as any man she knew. Maddie was like Black Widow and protected children and families throughout the world taking out human traffickers and drug lords.

Why on earth was she the “chosen one,” as hilarious Thor had dubbed her? She knew he was only trying to make her smile, and she appreciated his humor, but she didn’t want to be chosen. She wanted to be the happy peacemaker and keep everybody smiling and do her part to guard the secret. She sure as heck didn’t want to be the one to fire that weapon when the time came. She had trouble killing spiders or snakes. She second-guessed if all of God’s creatures shouldn’t be allowed to live, even if they were creepy.

She should stand up and share Papa’s instructions that she wasn’t just the Keeper but the one who would fire the weapon. They were already overprotective of her and probably second-guessing if she could fulfill the responsibilities as Keeper. Knowing that she’d have to kill Frederick would flip them all out.

There were too many people she loved in this room. It felt like her beloved family were all as worried as she was, and they were using up all the oxygen.

“I’m going to go outside and get some fresh air,” she whispered to Maddie, instead of stepping up and facing everybody’s questions and fears when she dropped the bomb.

The bomb. Would Frederick really rain nuclear warheads on America if he got the weapon or if Jessie didn’t kill him? She was responsible to keep her family and the world safe from Frederick and his threats of nuclear warfare. Her stomach flipped over and her palms got sweaty.

“I’ll come with you,” Maddie said, grabbing her hands and tugging her to her feet.

“Sorry, sis, I just ... want to be alone. Can you cover for me?”

Maddie nodded and whispered, “Make sure one of the SEALs is watching you.”

An elite SEAL team had invaded their valley a couple weeks ago in a Blackhawk helicopter. They’d been assigned to retrieve the Delta weapon and take it to Area 51. They’d brought Maddie’s Braden with them and Braden had begged their EOD, his friend Zander Povey, to trust him that Admiral Davidson Delta and his family were the only people who could protect the weapon and not use it for their own means.

Surprisingly, the entire team had trusted him. They’d disobeyed orders, and joined the Deltas. It was a huge blessing, but Jessie couldn’t help but wonder if the SEALs were questioning their decision now that Papa was gone and “sweet little” Jessie was the appointed leader.

No. She wasn’t the leader. Her dad and uncle had seamlessly taken over that role and Papa’s many other responsibilities together. They’d been trained for their parts, just as she had. They’d included her in decisions, correspondence, and information like Papa used to. Of course, keeping her name out of the conversations with anyone but family. As the Keeper and executor of the weapon, she had to know and be part of everything. No matter if she’d rather go work with adorable children learning how to form their r’s and s’s with their tongue’s movement and placement in their mouths.

The SEALs had been patrolling the Deltas' valley during and since the wedding. Reed, Esther's fiancé, was the sheriff, and his men had also been invaluable and trustworthy. They'd guarded outside the cave and the mountains during the wedding but were now home with their families or getting some much needed rest and downtime. The sheriff's department also had to keep patrolling Summit Valley, so the deputies and Reed were working overtime. Great guys. Men they all knew and trusted who had their backs and could keep a secret, even from their wives or friends.

Jessie nodded to Maddie that she would make sure one of the SEALs was close by, but she knew they'd follow her as soon as she exited the house. They all seemed extra diligent around her, and she felt like Chief Petty Officer Zander Povey was always watching her. Zander was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome with a quick smile that made his cheeks crinkle in the most appealing way. His dark eyes seemed to glint with humor. Jessie had fantasized about getting to know him since the first moment she'd laid eyes on him. He'd climbed out of the Blackhawk helicopter holding an A.R. like he was born to be a military hero. She'd been holding aloft an 84-pound .50 caliber machine gun, pointing it right at him as he'd seemed the natural leader to her.

He'd been focused on Papa as her grandfather strode confidently to the five men, the four-man SEAL team, and Povey as their EOD expert. On that crisp, terrifying morning, afraid she'd have to gun down American heroes to save her Papa and protect the secret, Zander Povey's dark gaze had zeroed in on her. It had been brief, but she'd seen appreciation and longing brighten his deep-brown eyes before he'd focused back on Papa.

She shook her head. She was going nuts. Chief Povey, as she needed to think of him, appreciated and respected her family, but lately she worried that he'd eyed her with concern, not interest. If she glanced around this room again, she'd see the same concern in her family members' eyes as well. They worried if she was capable of being the Secret Keeper.

*Well, join the club,* she thought.

“I have a question,” Maddie called loudly to the group, walking away from Jessie and toward Thor and Shelly snuggled in a chair hardly big enough for Mo.

Jessie edged toward the laundry room, her shoes and jacket, and hopefully a quiet exit.

“Is Thor or Aiden the biggest simp?” Maddie demanded to know.

Jessie actually smiled as Thor roared his protest. Her male cousins liked to call any man a “simp” who tried too hard to capture a woman’s attention. Thor and Aiden were both tough and outstanding but they’d do anything for Shelly and Melene. It was cute to see all the strong and impressive men in her family so gone over their loves. Her sisters’ and Esther’s men were the same—so tough but “simps” for the women they loved.

“Thor’s the biggest simp,” Aiden called out, “but it’s because he’s so ugly. Give the guy a break. He had to pull out all the stops to get Shelly with a face like that.”

Jessie made it to the laundry room as the room exploded with laughter, and Shelly and Thor’s rebuttals floated behind her. She slipped her shoes on and grabbed her jacket, then quietly opened the door and crossed the dark garage. She dodged dark shadows that she knew by heart—Papa’s truck, Razor, dirt bike, and Harley.

Her foot caught on something and she sprawled forward, but caught herself before hitting the concrete. She looked back and saw the outline of Papa’s mountain bike. It must’ve somehow gotten knocked off the wall where it always hung, and in the craziness of the past two days, nobody had stopped to lift it back up.

Tears sprang to her eyes looking at that mountain bike on the garage floor. Out of place. Never to be picked up and ridden by Papa again.

Everything felt out of place right now. Even inanimate objects missed Papa.

Especially her. She was out of place and missing Papa. Unfortunately, nobody could pick her up and put her back where she was supposed to be.

Papa would argue that she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

“Well, it’s dang sure not where I want to be,” she shot back at the empty garage.

She waited. No response. Quiet. She was alone.

No Papa. Just emptiness and her pain.

Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked to stop them from forming. She was sick and tired of crying. Grasping for something positive, she thought about Papa on that mountain bike.

She and Papa had loved to explore the gorgeous mountains surrounding their homes, using deer tracks on their rides together. He’d always claimed she was fearless. Not anymore. She had so many fears without him here to teach her and smile at her and encourage her.

The rest of her family would be even more concerned if they knew she’d have to fire the weapon soon and also how lost she felt without Papa. Her parents would probably feel hurt she didn’t trust and turn to them as she had with Papa. The rest of the family seemed heartbroken, but it was natural for them to step up and keep going. They’d all sworn their allegiance and were focused on protecting the secret and now protecting her as the sole keeper of the weapon. Jessie had no clue how everyone else seemed able to go on with life when she felt devastated, empty, and scared.

Really, really scared.

What was coming? Who was coming? She didn’t know, but she knew it would be intense. Dangerous. The mercenaries, Frederick’s soldiers, and even America’s best, their own military special ops, would probably be assigned to go after the secret. They’d be looking to manipulate and force her to give them the weapon. She shivered. If only she could

give someone else the power to fire it. But no. She didn't want anyone to feel as overwhelmed and terrified as she felt.

She picked up the mountain bike and hung it on the pegs on the wall. Touching it, she whispered, "Love you, Papa."

Forcing her legs into motion, she went out the side door and embraced the sting of the crisp fall night. Lights danced on the lake from the boathouse, the moon, and Greer's house across the way. She slowly walked along the grass, hopeful Maddie would stop anyone from coming after her.

A shadow moved from behind the pavilion where Papa had held so many parties for the family and the entire valley. She could easily picture him at the barbecue grill or dishing meat out of his prized smokers. He loved and welcomed everyone, and some greedy, despicable mercenaries had shot him multiple times to steal the Delta weapon and make themselves millions of dollars. Anger hit her then, red and hot. She welcomed it. The anger felt a lot better than the sorrow.

The shadow lifted a hand to her, thankfully not speaking. She recognized Petty Officer Manuel Leandro and wondered where the rest of the SEALs were. All watching her and feeling bad for her? Or maybe not. They were ultra-tough and experienced warriors who'd probably seen many violent deaths, and administered even more. She was certain they all knew how devastating and huge the loss of Papa was, but they probably didn't waste time on simple emotions like sorrow and grief. She couldn't understand or relate to them if that was the case, but she was a little envious. She wished somebody would teach her how to eradicate the hurtful emotions so she could be tough and be the Secret Keeper the entire world needed right now. It was so heavy she felt her shoulders bow under the pressure.

She plodded along the thick grass. Sometimes they'd had snow by the end of September, but this year there hadn't even been a hard freeze, so the grass was still green. Papa would've cut it by now, but nobody else had time for such trivial pursuits as cutting grass. Not that Papa had been focused on trivial things, ever, but he'd worked harder than anybody and kept up on everything.



Right now it was more than enough keeping the secret safe and trying to feed and clean up after the crowd now gathered in her parents', uncle and aunt's, and Papa's house. Thor, Colt, Alivia, and Greer also had beautiful homes nearby and had offered to have the SEALs or any of the other family members stay with them. Maddie and Braden were staying with Colt as he and Bailey weren't married yet, but the other three were newlyweds and nobody wanted to interrupt any alone time they might have together in their homes.

The dock stretched out into the calm, peaceful lake. Jessie walked to the end of it, lay down on her back on the smooth wood planks, and stared up at the stars and the half-moon in the navy-blue sky.

"Papa? Are you up there?" she asked.

Immediately she felt silly. Of course he was up there. She wished she could see him and Granny together. That would ease the pain a lot. Was that really asking too much? Just to see them and know they were happy? If she couldn't even have that miracle happen, how could she be expected to spiritually know when she should fire the weapon?

Hot tears stung her eyes and trailed down the sides of her cold cheeks, wetting the hair at her temples. It was hard to close her eyes and not see that evil man shooting Papa right above the bullet-proof jacket, then the unexpected shots from the trees hitting him above his hip, in his leg, and multiple hits to his jacket.

Jessie had been in those trees seconds before. The two snipers must've been on branches, and somehow she'd missed seeing them and saving Papa's life.

She hated the memory of Papa hitting the ground, blood seeping from his wounds. She hated it so much.

She'd gotten to him first, pressing her palms into the wounds until Thor had ripped off his T-shirt and offered it. Papa's eyes had opened, filled with pain, but he'd ignored it like the tough, experienced military man he'd been. He'd focused on her and whispered, "My girl. It's your time. I'm so proud of you, and now I'll be your guardian angel."

Jessie blew out a breath and squeezed her eyes tight, but all she could see were his blue eyes focused on her, so proud, unquestioning, thinking she was the answer to the Delta secret's future and believing she could rise up and kill Frederick at the right moment.

If only she believed that.

Footsteps on the dock yanked her to her feet. She saw black for a second going from lying down to upright so quickly. She responded like she'd been trained, knife out of her pocket and open, ready to fight, cussing herself for not carrying her favorite 9mm Smith & Wesson that was small and easy to conceal.

Her gaze cleared and she focused in on the beautiful deep-brown eyes of one Chief Petty Officer Zander Povey, EOD. Braden had told her and Maddie about all his friend Zander's extra training stints and accomplishments. Zander was highly decorated and impressive. Jessie wished she could only focus on the benefit of having him and the other SEALs here and simply be grateful they'd given up their lives and careers and some of them their families to join in this battle.

But she didn't focus on any of that. She reacted like a girly-girl and felt her stomach do a little flip as she met his dark gaze.

He strolled toward her, an A.R. strapped to his back, pistol on his hip, and she could only imagine the knives and other weapons concealed in his cargo-type pants. The strap of the A.R. across his chest and the T-shirt that fit him perfectly emphasized his well-built chest and arms.

He was incredible. And she needed to control her girlish reactions to him. This wasn't a man who would be drawn to a twenty-three-year-old girl fresh out of college—well, almost finished with the master's program that would benefit many children. Ever her choice of career wasn't tough and impressive like his.

Zander had to be at least thirty to have the ranking and experience he did. But wait ... Braden was only twenty-eight, and they'd both joined as eighteen-year-olds and done their

basic training together. Twenty-eight was only five years older than her. This man seemed to have a lifetime of knowledge and experience in those eyes and those hardened muscles. She shivered just looking at those arms and wondering what it would feel like to touch them.

Sheesh, she needed to get a grip. She was acting like a moony teenager, not the responsible granddaughter of the famed Admiral Davidson Delta and current Secret Keeper of the most sought-after weapon in the world and the only thing preventing nuclear warfare from exploding worldwide.

“Are you okay?” Zander—Chief Povey—asked in a husky but soft voice that seemed to penetrate through her.

He stopped a couple feet away, studying her. Was he doubting her ability to be the Secret Keeper, or was he offering his support?

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “Everything’s pretty heavy right now.”

“I bet.” He offered a grim, understanding smile. She appreciated that smile, but she wished he’d offer a hug.

She rolled her eyes at herself, closed and pocketed her knife, and turned to look out at the water before she did something stupid like try to touch him. Just one touch on that smooth, rounded bicep? *No. Stop it.* He would think she was insane if she trailed her fingers along his arm, then cupped the bicep muscle and appreciated each striation. Goodness, she needed to focus. But it was actually a nice distraction to be worried about his arm muscles and not death and dying.

They stood there in silence for a few beats, her studying the water, him studying her. Would he say something about being sorry for her loss? They’d told Pastor Sam to spread the word through Summit Valley that the Delta family appreciated their prayers and love but wanted privacy at this time. They were planning a small graveside service Sunday afternoon for family only and would have a large memorial service soon. So luckily she hadn’t had to endure friends from school, church, or the valley stopping by to offer condolences. She’d tried to keep up with the messages on her phone, but her response

most of the time was simply “loving” the message with an easy-to-click heart.

She could feel something like nervousness radiating from Chief Povey. That made no sense. This man had traveled the world as an accomplice to elite special ops teams and either diffused bombs or set them. Bullets probably rained around him in situations she couldn't even imagine. What could he be nervous about right now? In the past day and a half, everything had been as quiet as it could be with Papa's loss. Maybe the storm was gathering to take them out and he could feel it with his long experience.

Risking a sidelong glance at him, she saw he was still studying her. He looked away quickly and the silence and tension between them grew. She should head back to the house to get away from this uncomfortable yet stimulating interaction. But she wanted to see why he'd approached her and hear what he wanted to say. Was he going to declare his allegiance like her family had to her as Secret Keeper? That seemed laughable. If her family, who knew how diligently Papa had trained her, were concerned, this guy was probably wondering how to lobby for a new Keeper. He was probably trying to figure out how to keep her safe and keep her from dooming the free world.

“I wanted to say ...” he began, then paused.

Jessie looked at him again, and her pulse quickened. Moonlight glinted off the smooth planes of his face and his dark, wavy hair. He was so handsome. She wanted to run her fingers over his expressive lips, along his strong jawline and then twist them into his hair, tug his head close, and ...

Goodness sakes, she was doing it again. Immature girl with a crush on the experienced, hot military guy who was completely out of her league. A stupid emotional reaction that she needed to stop.

He met her gaze and everything around them disappeared. Her body felt hot all over and she found herself edging closer to him. He reached out and his fingertips grazed her cheek, setting off so much warmth in her chest that she feared she'd

explode. The touch was simple yet gave her so much—acceptance, longing, desire.

His eyes widened. He quickly pulled his hand back and flexed it into a fist, then relaxed it. A muscle ticked in his jaw. He looked out at the peaceful lake and said quickly, “I just wanted to say that death sucks and crap happens, but it’s all inevitable and part of the plan.”

What? She almost laughed at the unexpected words but this wasn’t something to laugh at. Death sucks and crap happens? How insensitive was that?

“Your grandfather was one of the best men out there, so I’m pretty sure the devil didn’t get his soul. Right?”

Devil getting his soul? Heck no, the devil better stay far away from her Papa. If Papa wasn’t in heaven she didn’t want to go there. She glared at Chief Povey. How dare he joke about Papa’s death and soul like this? She’d wondered earlier if these elite military men were calloused to death and dying. Apparently she’d been right. And far from wanting to become calloused herself as she’d thought, she wanted to hit him.

Chief Povey gave a hollow laugh and then pushed a hand through his thick hair. “Sorry, this isn’t coming out right. That’s kind of a joke with Cap and I.” He drew in a breath. “I just want you to know that we’re all on your team. We’re all standing by your side right now. We’re all hoping you can buck up, put the death behind you, and focus on the mission.”

She blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

He looked back at her, but he was focused on the top of her head as if afraid to meet her eyes again. “That’s how you’ll get through it. That’s how we do it. Focus on the mission. Don’t let the emotion affect you. Joke about it and, you know, someday soon the bullet will get one of us.”

Her eyes and mouth both widened. What kind of sadistic, awful jargon was this? She’d been wanting someone to help her get through, but not like this. Forget Papa, push away all emotion, focus on the mission. And the bullet coming to get one of them? She’d take a bullet for any of her family

members, but she couldn't handle anyone else dying. It was the furthest thing from a joke she could think of. She wanted it all to stop. She wanted peace, not more death.

The only way the world was getting peace was if she inflicted the death.

“But not you.” He finally met her eyes and gave her that smile of his that she'd found herself looking for over the past two days. She'd thought before that it made his cheeks crinkle so irresistibly and made her feel like they were sharing some inside joke. She still liked his smile, but she didn't like his jokes much right now. He should probably keep them to himself.

“Not you.” His smile fled, and he breathed out the words in a deep, husky tone, his voice and his gaze suddenly turning to a caress.

The frustration disappeared like somebody had waved a wand, and she instantly wanted him to hold her.

He'd told her to not let the emotion affect her, but he was affecting her and making her feel like she was on an emotional roller coaster—upset at him one moment, wanting him to touch her the next.

She didn't need this complication right now. Her emotions were a big enough mess already.

“We'll protect you.” His eyes swept over. “I'll protect you. You're the focus of my mission now.”

The moment stretched between them and electricity seemed to arc through the air. This man would protect her. She was his personal mission. He'd never, ever desert her no matter who came after them.

She felt that deeply. Despite his weird humor attempts, she was drawn inexplicably to Zander Povey. Maybe Papa was orchestrating this from heaven. Making sure she was taken care of, protected, but most importantly supported and no longer alone. Her family were each willing to step up and take this single-minded protection of her role that Zander was offering, but they all had a significant other to worry about

now and Jessie didn't want to take any of them from the beautiful people they'd found and relationships they'd developed.

As she was wondering how to respond to his declared allegiance, he shifted his weight and then declared with the kind of smart-aleck smile Thor would happily wear on his face, "It's all you now, Jessica Delta. You're the man, or, um ... woman, and ...". His grin grew. "You got this."

"I've got this?" She felt like she had whiplash. From beautifully declaring he'd protect her to giving her the lamest pep talk tripe she could think of? She didn't know if she should laugh at him, hug him really tight, or slug him. His comfort, encouragement, allegiance, or whatever he thought this was, made her want to cry, laugh, kiss him, pummel him, and ticked her off and made her long for him alternately. Was it just that her emotions were completely out of control, or was it that this impressive man might be ultra-accomplished, but he was also a scattered goofball? Could she possibly make him nervous? Maybe the military stud wasn't an accomplished ladies' man.

He kept smiling at her. Was he encouraging her or placating her?

She stepped closer and poked him in the chest. It was as hard as it looked and she might've jammed her index finger, but she didn't give him the courtesy of knowing that. Instead, she unleashed all the angst and frustration building inside her. "Was that your idea of a pep talk?"

"Sure, I mean ...". He pushed a hand through his hair. "If it worked."

"No! It absolutely didn't work. Crap happens? The bullet's going to get one of us? Declaring that you'll protect me and then saying 'you're the man' and 'you got this?' My Papa died yesterday and the devil did not get his soul!"

His face tightened, but he didn't back up. He might be an elite weapon, but she would shove him off this dock if he didn't watch what he was saying and stop toying with her raw emotions.

“You might be immune to death and be able to joke about it,” her voice escalated, “and put it behind you and focus on the mission, but I am not an elite soldier, Chief Povey. I am a woman. I have a heart.” She should stop talking now so he and the SEALs didn’t realize the truth: that she was far too emotional and she really didn’t want to complete this mission. Maybe they’d walk away or take the weapon and put it in Area 51 like they were supposed to in the first place. They’d all given up a lot staying here and supporting Papa.

But now Papa was gone.

“I don’t even care,” she found herself screaming at him.

He stared at her with his dark eyes wide and every muscle tense.

“I don’t care what you think about me,” she yelled. “I don’t care if you leave. I don’t care if I lose your ‘elite support.’” She made air quotes with her fingers. “I will protect the stupid weapon and at the exact right moment, I will kill Frederick with it exactly when I’m suppo ...” She trailed off as she realized what she’d just admitted to him, what she should’ve told her family already.

“Did you just say ...” His dark eyes filled with understanding and concern. “You’re not only responsible for protecting the weapon, but you have to fire it at ... the exact right moment?”

Jessie’s stomach churned. As she met his gaze, she found herself saying, “Yes, I do. And yes, I have no idea if I can kill someone, no matter how evil Frederick is.”

His gaze was very, very concerned. “Can’t someone else fire it?”

How she wished someone else could. But Papa had made certain ... the transfer to her was to be the last weapon transfer. If she died, the weapon died with her. She’d almost prefer that. Except then Frederick would kill everyone with nuclear weapons.

She sighed and shook her head at Zander. She’d happily protect the secret, give her life for it and her family, but to take



life ... it made her feel like she was wrenching her soul apart.

Of course this ultra-tough man questioned if she could do it. She questioned it herself. Yes, she was a Delta and had been trained and molded for a time such as this, but she wanted to crawl in bed and have a good cry. She'd just lost her mentor, grandfather, and one of her closest friends. She needed Chief Povey to just declare he'd support her and give her a hug. Was that too much to ask? Yes, it was. This man wasn't the hugging type. He was the let's focus on the war and the mission, kill the bad guys, and not let emotion creep into it type. Good for him. That wasn't her.

"You don't understand." She rolled her eyes. In what Pollyanna world had she imagined this guy could understand when her own family wouldn't. "Of course you don't, Mr. Macho, Brave, Tough, and Untouchable."

He opened his mouth to say something, but she overrode him.

"Don't worry about it. Nobody understands. I certainly don't expect you to be the exception."

She pushed past him and up the dock, heading for the house. Tears streamed down her face, and she was humiliated and hoping she hadn't already messed up her fabled assignment by losing the support of the SEALs who everybody looked at as a gift from heaven.

She was going to fail at protecting the weapon, or firing it at the right moment. Papa had claimed she'd "know" the exact moment. Yeah right. She knew nothing right now.

Crazily enough, she was more upset about hers and Zander's first private conversation imploding. She wished he had lived up to her unrealistic expectations from the looks and smiles he'd given her before tonight. She'd built him up to be perfectly tough but also perfectly understanding. A man like that didn't exist. Not outside her family, at least.

At the moment, her idealistic dreams of Zander being smashed hurt almost as much as the pain of losing Papa. And that ticked her off even more.

## Chapter Two



Zander pushed his hand through his hair and watched the woman he couldn't get out of his head run up the dock and across the grass. From the moment he'd seen the small, dark-haired beauty with the impossibly blue eyes hefting a .50 caliber machine gun that most men would have trouble lifting and pointing it at him with no fear and also compassion in her eyes, he'd lost his heart and his head. In that tense moment, one trigger slip away from a firefight that would have wiped out him and his four close friends, he'd imagined how fun it would be to tell their children about the first time they met.

Finally, after almost two weeks of being here in Colorado at the Deltas' valley, he'd *finally* gotten his chance to flirt with her, talk to her, help her with the heavy burden she was carrying and somehow show her how attractive and impressive she was to him.

But nope. He'd gotten so nervous being around the beautiful sweetheart that he'd fumbled his words and his encouragement had come out all rambling, disturbing, and weird.

Instead of offering her a hug like he was dying to do, he'd ticked her off and she'd revealed that she not only had to protect but fire the weapon and she didn't know if she could. That was concerning, to say the least. Then he'd made her yell at him and run away. He'd messed this one up. Badly.

His gaze followed her progression across the sweeping lawn. She avoided the crowd in her grandfather's house and

ran into her parents' back door, slamming it shut. Pushing out a breath, he trudged off the dock and across the grass.

“Well, that went nicely,” Captain Zeke Hendrickson said, stepping out of the shadows of the pavilion.

Zander nodded. “Right? She’ll probably be asking me to sneak away and make out by tomorrow night.”

“Yup. I was thinking to myself, ‘There’s a woman who is gone over my buddy Demo.’ How do you keep them at bay with all those sweetly impressive lines?” Cap grinned, enjoying mocking him. “You must practice in the mirror at night.”

“I do. And yes, it’s rough to keep the women from attacking me. The good looks, the impressive bio, the smooth tongue. I mean, charm just oozes from me.” At least he could joke with Cap. Sadly, his attempts to joke with Jessie Delta had come across flat, weird, and offensive. He’d never been so nervous and uncertain of himself. When he’d focused on her blue eyes, the chaos seemed to settle and he thought he could conquer the world with her by his side, but then he’d started spouting crap that he’d meant to be helpful or inspiring but had the opposite effect. He spent too much time around men.

“Seriously, man, I’m sorry you messed that up so bad.” Any of his other friends would’ve slapped him on the shoulder, but he’d never seen Cap initiate physical contact, unless it was to tackle somebody or start a wrestling match. “I’ve seen you looking at her when you think no one’s looking.”

“Can you blame me?” Zander pushed his hand through his thick hair. He needed a haircut, but it was like the sloping grass of the Deltas’ beautiful valley that needed to be mowed. Who had time for stuff like that right now?

“Nope.” Cap pumped his eyebrows. “She’s not only beautiful, but it’s a great combination, the sweet but tough thing she’s got going on. Sensual and innocent. That’s as irresistible as anything I’ve seen in a long while.”

Zander's thoughts exactly. Jessie Delta was so beautiful he got nervous looking at her, so sweet you could feel it radiating from her, yet she'd been trained to fight. Though she was small, every line of her body was strong, appealing, and yes, sensual. He didn't appreciate Cap noticing that and thought it would be quite a shame if he accidentally bumped his buddy into the lake right now.

Jessie seemed like the perfect woman, facing a crazy obstacle that no twenty-three-year-old should have to face. She'd lost her beloved grandfather and now the youngest Delta was assigned to protect the secret weapon, and someday soon fire it.

Had Cap really overheard the conversation? Zander actually doubted it or he would've said something about Jessie not knowing if she could fire the weapon. He was just teasing about the sweet lines. Was it Zander's place to reveal what must be a secret Jessie was keeping? The SEALs had chatted about how and when the weapon might be used, but the Deltas had never confirmed anything but they were to protect it. He highly doubted her family knew what was resting on sweet Jessie's shoulders.

Zander and his SEAL buddies had sworn allegiance to Admiral Delta and to keeping the weapon out of King Frederick's blood-stained hands. Their sources said as soon as Frederick had that weapon it was lights out for America. They'd had to allow the Navy to presume them dead. Zander had been able to get a message to his family that he was on a mission and to keep it quiet that he'd contacted them and was in fact alive. Manuel "Wolf" Leandro, Kyle "Preach" Christensen, and Braden Moyle had done the same for their families, so that was a load off. Zeke "Cap" Hendrickson and Van "Chaos" Udy didn't have families.

They all knew they'd probably kissed their hard-earned military careers goodbye and would most likely be stripped of rank, court martialed, and thrown in prison when they resurfaced from the dead. Unless some miracle happened. With the highly-revered Admiral Davidson Delta being killed it seemed miracles were on short supply this week.

But protecting the Delta weapon had been the right thing to do. Zander and each of them knew it. Zander had his friend Braden Moyle to thank for opening his eyes, and luckily the SEALs either trusted him implicitly or had felt the rightness of this mission themselves.

How to show Jessie that they'd now transferred their allegiance from Admiral Delta to her? Zander wasn't questioning that, despite how she was obviously struggling. Would the other men?

"If I didn't hate touching people, maybe I'd go after Jessica Delta myself," Cap said.

Zander felt a rush of gratitude that Cap shied away from touching anyone and a man could get laid out flat for forgetting that and initiating contact. Zander did not want to compete with the ultra-handsome, highly-decorated, and impressive captain. Cap had been engaged and then dumped a couple of years ago. Besides that emotional damage, nobody knew why Cap was so averse to anyone touching him. They were just careful not to. And they didn't ask.

Instead of shoving Cap into the drink, Zander asked, "Hey, what exactly did you overhear?"

Cap's bluish-gray gaze sharpened. "I was giving you a hard time. I heard your initial lines, but then I backed away. I did hear her yelling that you didn't understand and nobody understood before she ran off."

Zander ran a hand through his hair and lowered his voice. Cap needed to know what the Deltas either didn't know or could possibly be hiding from them. "Jessie not only protects the secret, but she's supposed to fire it at a certain time, and she doesn't know if she can do it." He felt a sting as if he'd betrayed her, but shouldn't knowledge of the weapon and how it works be common knowledge amongst the Deltas?

"You think they all know that?" Cap rubbed at the back of his neck.

"I would think so, but ... maybe not? I'll ask Braden."

“Okay.” Cap squinted back up at the huge houses above them. “Why would they hide something like that from us?”

“No idea. They’re some of the best people I’ve ever met. I don’t see them being deceptive. At the same time they’ve hid this secret from the world for years so maybe it’s hard to trust anyone from the outside? Jessie said she didn’t know if she could fire it, but she also said she didn’t care if she lost our support.” He met Cap’s eyes and his shoulders tightened. “Maybe they’re afraid we’ll leave if she’s not decisive?”

“Possibly.”

Zander respected and liked the Deltas. He wasn’t going anywhere, and he didn’t think any of the SEALs would change their minds. But it was frustrating to have key details held back.

“It’s been a rough couple days for this family,” Cap said slowly. “Her screaming that nobody understands ... maybe only Admiral Delta and now Jessie know what the weapon’s capable of and that she needs to fire it at a certain time.”

Zander liked that theory better than the Deltas keeping them in the dark, but it meant he may have just betrayed a secret Jessie had shared with him in her anger.

“Talk to Braden and then we’ll chat with Joseph and Keith.”

“Okay.”

Cap turned to walk away.

“Cap.” Zander stopped him. “What do you think of assigning me as Jessica Delta’s personal bodyguard?” The idea had come to him as he’d spouted the other stupid stuff tonight. That was the one thing he said that he’d liked—she was the mission now, and he’d protect her. Yes, he’d messed up tonight, but he could help her with this emotionally challenging time, keep her safe no matter who came after her, and support her now and when she had to fire the weapon.

There was the slightly selfish thought of wanting to get to know her, be close to her, and hold her when she needed a shoulder to cry on. But he convinced himself it was a small

part of the equation. And if he was her bodyguard, he'd have to be in control of himself and not get romantically involved until the mission was over.

“Not a bad idea,” Cap said. He rubbed at his neck. “Actually, a really good one. You can keep her safe and make sure we have all the details from the Deltas.” He smiled despite the heaviness and worry pressing around them. “You could also get her to fall for an impressive guy who has no clue how to talk to beautiful women.”

“I'll probably mess that part up.” Not that Cap would do any better. Women chased the tough, unapproachable, but natural hero, and he'd never seen Cap engage or flirt.

“Probably.” Cap's grin grew. “But at least I can try to help a guy out. I'll officially assign you so it's not your idea.”

“Thanks.” Zander's pulse skyrocketed at the thought of around-the-clock protection of Jessica Delta. Yes, he liked this idea a lot.

“Okay. You talk to Braden and see if Jessie using the weapon is common knowledge. I'll set up a time for us to chat with Joseph, Holly, and Jessie. We'll work out the details of you protecting her and call them out about keeping stuff from us if needed.”

“Thanks, Cap. I'd hug you, but ...”

“I'd have to thrash you.”

“There is that.”

Zander patted him on the arm affectionately and dodged a fist aimed for his jaw. He chuckled and jogged away. He heard Cap laughing behind him. That was good. He'd risked his friend coming after him and pummeling him for touching him so casually. So weird how Cap couldn't handle anyone touching him, but he was great, always teasing and keeping things light. More importantly, he was an incredible leader and soldier who never failed at an assignment, was braver than anyone Zander knew, and excelled at combat and marksmanship. The guy had awards dripping from his dress uniform. Recently the Navy Medal of Honor. And he'd

unselfishly given up his exemplary career, more advanced trainings and more successful missions than anybody had accomplished to protect the Deltas and their weapon. Cap was somebody Zander always wanted on his team.

Zander's thoughts returned to Jessie. He'd upset her. He hoped he could make that right. But if he was assigned to protect her, he'd get to stay close. Really close. He had to be able to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth then. He loved the way this was going and hoped Jessie wouldn't balk at the assignment. He also hoped her mom and dad would allow it.

Every one of the Deltas was ultra-protective of Jessie and that protectiveness had nothing to do with her being the Secret Keeper, as they called it. She was well-loved by each one of them. Zander was playing with fire in so many ways by hoping to get close to her. Even though this assignment would probably be the most important one of his career—and the end of his career—he couldn't get thoughts of Jessie and getting closer to her out of his mind. When he'd touched her jaw earlier, he'd thought he'd found heaven. When he looked in her blue eyes, he was both lost and found.

Now to talk her into being interested in him... or maybe he should keep his mouth shut and just kiss her and see how that went. After the mission was completed, of course.

Right now, he had to focus on the mission of keeping her safe from whatever King Frederick sent their way next. Mercenaries, troops of armed soldiers, elite special ops forces.

And he might have to help her complete her mission and kill King Frederick.

Hooyah.



## Chapter Three



It was late Friday afternoon and Jessie had been sent to her room to rest. By her mother. Like a child. She didn't need rest; she needed to figure out if Admiral Gusbane, Chief of Naval Operations, was on their side or a traitor and helping Frederick. She needed to look through that zip drive Papa's coder Thomas had decoded once more and see what additional information she could glean.

The last time she'd had a serious talk with Papa, he'd been concerned about the accuracy and usefulness of the zip drive's information. He'd sent the bank account information on to a trusted associate in the IRS. The man had looked into seizing it, but the account numbers weren't accurate. They could've been changed recently. Who knew what information was correct or who to trust at this point?

During that same conversation, Papa had looked deeply into her eyes and assured her, "Jessica ... I prayed long and hard to *not* make you the Secret Keeper. Colton or Aiden would willingly take this burden and they'd do a fabulous job."

Exactly. They'd do a fabulous job. She wouldn't.

Papa had continued, "Because I adore you so much, I can hardly stand to give you this heavy burden. But I know, I know down deep, and have known for years actually, that you are the Secret Keeper. You are the only one who can be humble, conscientious, and strong enough to take this responsibility and use the weapon at the exact time it is needed. It is a spiritual responsibility unlike anything you'll

ever know. But I've trained you, you've always been close to your Savior, and the good Lord will direct you when the time is right."

No pressure. The good Lord would direct her to kill a man. Papa had quoted a scripture she'd never heard, Psalm 37:9-10. "For evildoers will be cut off, But those who wait for the Lord, they will inherit the land. Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; And you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there."

Papa had explained that she was the avenging angel, and she had to make the wicked man no more so the good people in Banida, Poland, and Germany could inherit their land once more and many people throughout the world could be protected. King Frederick would not stop, and if the United Nations wouldn't step up and stop him soon, it would be time to use the weapon.

She pushed off her bed and paced her room, annoyed with her mom and Colton for ganging up on her and insisting she take a break and upset at herself for taking it simply to avoid an argument.

The peacemaker in her didn't want to die, no matter if she needed it to.

Die? No, fight to keep working and not rest. Not die. She was too focused on Papa dying. No matter if she didn't want to rest; she was tired from the stress and she hadn't slept well last night. She'd mulled over the intense but awkward conversation with Chief Povey until far too late. He drew her in and completely frustrated her, and she'd admitted to him what she hadn't even told her family. She'd been waiting all day for someone to ask her about firing the weapon. Nothing yet. She hadn't told Zander it was a secret. What if he thought it was common knowledge and he and the SEALs were upset they didn't know?

She chewed at her thumbnail as she paced. Too many questions.

"Jessie?" her dad rapped on her bedroom door.

She hurried across the room to yank the door open. “Hey. Everything okay?” Finally, they needed her again.

“Can you come down to the living area?” His blue eyes studied her thoughtfully. Her dad was protective of her like any dad would be, but he also trusted her. He trusted her because he’d seen how diligently Papa had trained her and had been right there helping her excel.

She could hit the bull’s eye of a target with a pistol, rifle, shotgun, A.R., or .50 caliber. She could take down a man twice her size in hand-to-hand combat. She could track, navigate, strategize, and decode. Papa had made sure she excelled in every area. She’d always thought it was because her favorite person in the world loved spending time with her, or because he wanted to make sure she was safe because she was smaller physically than anyone in the family.

Nope. He’d been training her meticulously ... to be Secret Keeper. And more. Papa had trained her to kill. The very thought weighed so heavy on her that she wanted to puke.

She focused on her dad. What was going on that her “rest” had been interrupted? Her mom wouldn’t like that. And why was he looking at her as if she’d been scheming something?

“Captain Hendrickson and Chief Povey have an idea they think you’ll be interested to hear.”

Chief Povey. Zander. She put a hand to her abdomen and hoped her dad didn’t see how even the man’s name affected her. The fact that he was asking to speak with her, with the Captain nonetheless, and her parents ... he was going to ask about her firing the weapon and upset her parents even more. She knew it.

She’d stayed away from him since last night on the dock. Almost an entire day. Nobody would let her take a stint of protecting the cave. She supposed the reasoning made sense. If a mercenary somehow got through the resistance and to the cave, they’d need her to open it.

She touched the hidden pendant. It was smart to keep her safe and in their little valley where there was so much

protection and many eyes watching out for her. Including Zander. Even though he hadn't gotten close enough to talk with her again, she'd felt his gaze on her. And it made her hot clear through every time.

She'd spent the morning training with Colt and Bailey and then she'd worked with her dad and Uncle Keith to respond to condolences from Papa's vast network of military and political friends and associates, cross-referencing with Papa's notes about who had been at Olivet Seamons' party with King Frederick, whose names were listed on the zip drive Admiral Seamons had given to Braden and Maddie, and who Papa had trusted from his experiences. The three of them tried to sort out who was on their side and who was a possible enemy.

In their correspondence, her dad and uncle didn't talk about the Delta weapon to anyone. Interestingly enough, even Admiral Gusbane, who'd sent Zander and the four-man SEAL team to obtain the weapon, didn't ask. So far another special ops team hadn't come after the weapon, but who knew how long they had?

They wanted to keep the Delta weapon from being general knowledge with the military, the government, and especially the public. It seemed King Frederick was doing the same. Though he apparently had a fifteen-million-dollar reward out for the weapon, he didn't seem to want to shout to the world what he was after. It made sense. Someone else stealing it before him would put a cramp in his plans of shooting his nuclear weapons at America while he hid in an unknown location.

Jessie lived every hour in fear that it would be the moment she'd know she had to go use the weapon. At the same time, she wished it was over, King Frederick was gone, the world could have a moment of peace, and she could go back to finishing her master's in speech pathology. What a different life she was living right now. Nobody at school had any clue what she was trained to do or what family emergency had taken her out of the program earlier this fall.

"Are you going to tell me what this idea is?" She cocked her head at her dad.

“They haven’t told me. They asked if they could meet with me, you, and Mom.”

“Oh.” Nerves made her stomach feel twitchy. She wanted to check her makeup and put on some lip gloss, but that was a girly reaction to Zander she couldn’t afford to indulge. Not now. Maybe not ever. An elite special ops demolition expert really wasn’t a great fit for a speech pathologist.

What was a great fit? She hardly knew Zander, but the thought of him being with any other woman made her body tighten and made her want to fight any woman who’d dare look twice at him. Surely a whole slew of women had. He was irresistible. When he wasn’t telling her that “crap happened.”

“Okay.”

Her dad stepped back as she walked out the door. He followed her through the upstairs hallway and down the stairs. She smoothed her features and tried to look relaxed and nonplussed as she left the entryway and entered the main living area.

Zander and Captain Hendrickson both stood from the couch as they entered. Zander’s gaze zeroed in on her with all the power of deep-brown eyes, long lashes, and a connection she needed to ignore.

Jessie pulled her gaze from him with a concerted and she thought heroic effort, nodded to Captain Hendrickson, and walked over to sit by her mom on the opposite couch. Her mom quirked an eyebrow at her, her gaze full of questions and a bit of mischief and matchmaking. Jessie wanted to beg her not to get any ideas. An elite special ops man like Zander Povey, who thought she should just callously get over Papa’s death, wasn’t the guy Jessie should be falling for.

Her dad came and sat by her mom. The two men settled back down and Jessie wondered if she’d ever noticed how glorious it was to watch a man sit on a couch. Zander’s leg muscles flexed as he settled onto the couch and his fit, tall body uncoiled against the cushions, but somehow he looked poised to jump and fight against bad guys at any moment.

“What’s going on, Cap?” her dad asked. He wasn’t snippy or annoyed, but he didn’t have time to waste. Nobody but Jessie really did. Everybody else had assignments at different hours of the night and day and had to fit in sleep and eating and time with their significant other and other family members during those breaks. All she had to do was train, try to help correspond and keep people from coming after the weapon, stay safe, and reconcile in her mind how to kill Frederick and whoever was close to him.

“As I’ve spoken with different Delta family members, I’ve become more convinced that keeping Jessica safe and away from the weapon is the most foolproof plan to keep Frederick from obtaining it. Am I correct to assume that only you can access the cave and remove the weapon?” He looked to Jessie, his grayish-blue eyes looking only for a confirmation.

“Yes,” she admitted.

Her mom put an arm around her. Jessie knew it was both a show of support and a mother terrified of the responsibility and danger surrounding her youngest child. Her mom was tough but loving. She’d been surrounded by the Delta secret most of her married life and trained her children right along with her husband, but she was still struggling with Jessie being the one to take over the responsibility and danger of the weapon.

Jessie appreciated and loved her mom, but she was still a little perturbed from being forced to go “rest” earlier and she didn’t want to look weak in front of either of these men. Especially Chief Petty Officer Zander Povey, EOD. But typical Jessie the peacemaker, she didn’t shrug her mom’s arm off.

She did boldly meet Zander’s gaze and the room seemed to get warm. Very warm. Jessie swallowed hard and hoped no one else saw or felt the temperature spike. She needed to remember the words he’d said that had made her mad last night, but unfortunately she was remembering his fingertips grazing her chin and him telling her he would protect her and she was his mission. His mission to protect, or to hold and kiss?

“Is it also correct you are the only person on earth who can activate or fire the weapon?” the captain continued, yanking her concentration away from Zander and making the entire room feel chilly. So Zander had told him, or he’d overheard.

“Jessie?” her mom and dad both asked at the same time. Her mom’s hand on her shoulder trembled. Of course her family had theorized about firing the weapon and why Papa hadn’t done it, or maybe he’d done it at some point and never told them. Papa was their hero and their loyalty would be to him, always, but he had been very good at keeping secrets about that weapon.

“Yes, I am,” Jessie said, tilting her chin and trying to look brave.

“Jessie.” Her mom hugged her tighter but put her other hand to her mouth.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” her dad asked.

She looked away from her dad’s blue eyes and caught Zander and the captain exchanging a look. Zander nodded to the captain. They’d been worried they were the only ones who didn’t know.

Jessie drew in a breath and met her mom’s worried eyes and then focused on her dad. “Papa told me a couple weeks ago, the same time he appointed me Secret Keeper.” It probably still stung her parents that they hadn’t known she was the Keeper. “I wasn’t ready to have everybody worry even more than they did at the meeting.” The meeting when it had been revealed she was Secret Keeper and her mom had completely flipped out. She wasn’t about to admit she didn’t know how she would kill Frederick. “Papa also explained,” she said before they could ask questions, “that I’d be inspired to know exactly when to kill Frederick, and that it would be soon.”

“Oh, Jessie.” Her mom pulled her hand away. She knew exactly how tender Jessie’s heart was. “How are you going to *kill* someone?”

Jessie heard the captain shift on the couch across from them. She could only imagine what he and Zander were thinking. Would they desert them because of a faulty Secret Keeper? Her doubts and fears tripled.

“I don’t really have a choice,” Jessie said.

“I’m not sure I understand,” her dad said slowly. “Couldn’t you open the weapon and let somebody else fire it?”

Jessie shook her head. She and Papa had gone to the cave and he’d somehow transferred the thumb print and voice scan to her. Then he’d explained he knew deeply that she was the only one who could use the weapon at the right time and for the right purpose. If she died, the weapon would die with her. Maybe that wasn’t the worst option. Except then Frederick could go on killing and terrorizing the world.

“Papa made certain it can only be me,” she said softly. Maybe they could figure out a way to duplicate her voice and thumb print, but when Papa had transferred it to her, she’d known it was her responsibility and destiny. If only she could know she wouldn’t fail at it because of her aversion to cold-blooded murder. Sure, Frederick needed to die, even deserved it, but Jessie imagined she could only kill someone to directly defend her family, like Greer had to do for Alivia, Klein, and Emery.

The silence in the room stretched to far past uncomfortable. Luckily, her mom only coddled her with her arm. She didn’t go off on how Jessie couldn’t, shouldn’t, or wouldn’t fire the weapon. She was certain her parents and other family members would have more to say about her firing the weapon, but for right now they simply absorbed that fact.

“I fear as soon as Admiral Delta’s graveside service is over,” the captain redirected and she was grateful to him for it, “or maybe we don’t even have that long, we’re going to face unprecedented attacks from Frederick’s soldiers, armed mercenaries, and probably our own military.”

The room felt chilly. It was a gorgeous and unseasonably warm late-September day outside. The maple, cottonwood, and birch trees ringing their beautiful lake were turning



orange, yellow, and red. It was a picture-perfect scene as the green pine trees stood straight and tall amidst all that color and the lake and sky were a calm, crystal blue. Would their valley be shattered by attacks and war?

“I agree,” her dad said. “We don’t have my father’s layer of protection any longer. I think his reputation and connections held back people in the American military who might want to seek the secret for the military or personal gain. Plus, the anonymity we had for so many years is disappearing. Secrets are hard to keep once they gain momentum and the weapon is something every military man would like to have for himself or his troops, and politicians would love the power of it.”

Everybody nodded. It was unnerving to think of the secret weapon being talked about and leaked around military and political circles. They might not have entire battalions coming after it as no leader would want it to be common knowledge or risk losing it to another branch of the military if they broadcast it, but enough people knew about it now that they were on a slippery slope of exposure, danger, and attacks they hadn’t previously seen.

“I feel even Frederick, his people, and other rulers around the world had a fear of my father’s power and status,” her dad continued. “I’ve wondered if the man who kidnapped Kelsey and Mo didn’t have the assignment to kill Papa after securing the weapon.”

It made sense. Frederick would want the well-known and widely respected Admiral Delta out of the picture. It was doubtful he knew that all the Deltas were trained like they were. And he had succeeded in killing Papa. Jessie wrapped her arms around her stomach, and her mom tugged her closer.

“Which brings me back to the reason we’ve asked to meet with you.” The captain looked at Zander and something passed between them. Jessie wondered whose idea it was to meet. It almost seemed like Zander wanted to make the proposition, but he felt Captain Hendrickson sharing it would be received better. Why?

“If we can keep Jessica safe,” Hendrickson said, “we can keep Frederick from the weapon, or anyone forcing her to use it. No matter what happens to the rest of us.”

That was an awful thought. Would they all be laying down their lives to keep mercenaries, Frederick’s men, or even their own soldiers from getting to Jessie? She shivered, not sure she could live with that. Papa had laid down his life for them. She’d wondered if she’d have to do the same, but it was far worse to think about those she loved being killed and her hiding out and staying safe.

Her parents both nodded. Her mom pulled her arm back but stayed pressed into Jessie’s side.

“Jessica,” Hendrickson said seriously. “Just to be certain. Even if Povey had blown the safe door, which I have complete confidence he could’ve done, and my SEALs accessed the weapon, we couldn’t have removed it or used it? Admiral Delta designed it so only you, and the key I assume you keep on your person,” the key around her neck seemed to burn against her skin and she barely kept herself from touching it, “are the only ways to access and either use or remove the weapon. Correct? Can you explain exactly what needs to happen so we can cover all our bases to keep the weapon safe?”

Everybody was staring at her. She should respond, should be able to give these people the details, but Jessie had a sudden unexpected and terrifying thought. What if Hendrickson was a fraud? What if his men were? What if they’d come here at Admiral Gusbane’s instructions to get the weapon, no matter what, and when they’d seen all the firepower and resistance from the Deltas they’d changed their game plan? If she gave him explicit details, would he use them against the Deltas?

“Jessie?” her mom questioned.

“Just a moment,” she requested. She’d heard about Braden’s gift to discern what someone’s intentions were and she thought that was incredible. When these men had shown up in the Blackhawk and Zander had told the story of Braden confronting him and begging him not to take the Delta

weapon, Zander had said that Braden had reminded him that he “knew him.” Braden had seen Zander’s goodness. Also, Braden wasn’t on Hendrickson’s SEAL team, wasn’t even a SEAL, and he had already stood up to these men in defense of the Deltas. He could give an unbiased answer.

Jessie looked from Captain Hendrickson to Zander. He met her gaze with his deep-brown eyes, steady and true. She said a prayer in her heart, asking to see clearly. Everyone else in the room disappeared as she and Zander locked gazes. He was impressive. He was loyal. He’d meant it, to his steadfast core, when he’d said he’d protect her last night, that she was his mission. He’d protect her from everyone, even his friend the SEAL captain sitting next to him if he had to.

She felt a pulse of warmth as the truth shot through her. She could trust Zander.

Her dad shifted next to her and took her attention from Zander. She wanted to keep focusing on Zander, but now was not the time for that. She looked at the captain. His gaze was guarded, shut off. His blue eyes were cool, almost a bluish gray, and she had no idea what he was thinking or feeling.

“Jessie?” her mom asked again.

“I can’t answer Captain Hendrickson’s question right now,” she said softly, studying Hendrickson for his reaction.

He cocked an eyebrow at her and she thought he’d make fun of her, but he simply said, “What do you need to answer it?”

She thought about it. She couldn’t get through to Captain Hendrickson’s intentions, but she knew who could, and his reaction and assessment would answer the question for her. “Braden.”

“You want to know if you can trust me?” Hendrickson asked.

“It’s not a matter of want, Captain. I need to know if I can trust you.”

“I can respect that.” He nodded to her and pulled a walkie-talkie off his belt. None of the SEALs had their cell phones as

they'd blown them up in the Blackhawk to support the story of them being killed. Papa had given them each an RT29 walkie-talkie. The preferred military walkie-talkie had excellent transmit signals and the ability to receive weak signals at extreme distances. Hendrickson pushed the button and spoke into it. "We need Moyle at his future in-law's house."

"Copy," a male voice said. She wasn't sure which of the SEALs it was.

Hendrickson clipped the walkie-talkie back on and turned back to her. The silence felt tight, and Jessie was certain she'd offended him. These men had given up everything to transfer to the Deltas' side and now she was questioning his loyalties. It was bold of her, but she had to be certain.

She let her gaze trail back to Zander. He was much easier to look at than the unapproachable too-tough captain.

Those deep-brown eyes were intriguing. His gaze was steady on her, not condemning, not even questioning. She appreciated that. She wanted to get lost in those eyes. Now wasn't the time. Would there ever be a time or would the world end because she'd failed to protect the weapon?

## Chapter Four



Resolve tightened her shoulders as Zander seemed to strengthen her with his gaze alone. How much more could he strengthen her with his hand in hers, working side by side? She liked that idea. Too much.

“Jessica.” Captain Hendrickson pulled her gaze away from Zander. She wasn’t sure what to think of him, but at the moment she was annoyed that he had interrupted her staring. “I have no issue with you sending for Braden to ‘read’ me. I’m a very closed off person and don’t let many people close.”

That was kind of him to reassure her he wasn’t offended.

“Many people, Cap? How about none?” Zander had the nerve to laugh at the captain.

Hendrickson elbowed him.

Her dad smiled. “My nephews have had brawls and wrestling matches on the carpet if you two want to have a go.”

“Don’t you dare encourage that,” her mom threatened. “I just got that new lamp and you haven’t had to redo the sheetrock and paint for almost two weeks.”

Zander laughed at that, and Hendrickson’s expression softened. Jessie even smiled. She was glad all of them could relax a little.

“Why don’t you let people close?” she asked him. It was intriguing and sad. She had all of her family close to her heart and many friends from grade school up through graduate school who still kept in touch. Before she’d left school, she

was hiking, biking, or going to lunch or dinner with different friends and dates most days of the week. She missed those easy days.

“If I let people close, then I’d be more likely to answer a question like that, wouldn’t I?” He arched an eyebrow.

“If you want me to trust you, answer your specific questions about the weapon, that not even my family know by the way, and consider whatever proposal you have, maybe you should give a little and try to open up,” she threw back at him.

“Ooh,” Zander teased. “She got you there, Cap.” He winked at her, as if they were in cahoots. Jessie felt warm all over. She wanted to be in ... something with him.

No, that was the girlie girl in her trying to get out. She was a responsible Keeper of the biggest secret of the century. She couldn’t indulge in girlish fantasies. Not now. Maybe never.

Hendrickson cracked a smile.

Jessie gave him a sassy look that Maddie would’ve been proud of. “Oh, you actually possess a sense of humor.”

Zander laughed loud at that one. She really, really liked him. Was that wrong? Probably with the situation they were in at the moment. Maybe someday, when the weapon was secure. Would that day ever come? Maybe she should let herself get to know Zander. Tell him off for trying to tell her that “crap happens” and she should bury her pain and emotions to get through. Maybe he’d been trying to help her or even impress her with his own mental toughness last night. She wanted to give him another chance, see if they had anything in common, and see if he was as appealing as he seemed right now, or a let-down and source of frustration as he’d been last night.

“Maddie,” her mom cautioned.

Jessie looked at her mom, and then she burst out laughing. She looked back at Zander. “I know I’m out of line when she calls me ‘Maddie’ by mistake.”

“Oh, shoot. I did,” her mom said.

Her dad chuckled at that. “Jessie’s right. Don’t tell Maddie.”

Zander shared a conspiratorial look with her. “Maddie’s the feisty one?”

“Oh, for sure. I’m the angel and the favorite.” She put her hands under her chin and blinked rapidly.

Everybody laughed at that.

She’d been Papa’s favorite. Everybody knew it, and though they might tease her about it, her parents, uncle and aunt, cousins, and siblings all looked at her just as Papa had—like she was an angel peacemaker who could do no wrong. She’d flourished in her role as the happy, bright light in the family, the one everybody wanted to hug and do something nice for. Because they loved seeing her smile and she had usually done something nice for them first.

The memories were filled with sunshine, fun, love, smiles ... it felt like a different lifetime. Like watching Rapunzel on Tangled run twirling through the flowers, so sweet and adorable and unaware that men with big knives and Flynn himself were going to hurt her soon—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Was Zander Jessie’s hero? A very different hero from Flynn as he definitely wasn’t a thief but a devoted, tough, special ops soldier.

She locked eyes with him as the laughter settled.

Suddenly Hendrickson leaned forward, stealing her focus from Zander again. “Jessie. If I wasn’t committed to the Deltas, why would I have given up my military career to be here?”

She eyed him and asked the question that might upset him more. “Did you give it up?”

He shrugged. “I would assume so. Unless this all plays out like a Jack Reacher novel, we save the world, and everything is forgiven in the end.” He smirked. “I’m not planning on that.”

“I understand what you’re saying. I’m not trying to accuse you of having a track phone in your backpack with only

Admiral Gusbane's number programmed in it."

"That would stink," Zander said, giving his friend a look as if to make sure he wasn't corresponding with Gusbane. No. He trusted his friend. It was more a look of, sorry she's questioning you.

"I'm just saying I have to trust you completely. Until I do, I can't answer your question, or agree to whatever plan you and Chief Povey have concocted." She congratulated herself on not calling him Zander out loud. "And I'm assuming it's a fabulous plan, because you are some of the most highly trained people in our military. Correct?"

"We are," Hendrickson agreed. There was nothing cocky about his words, just factual. He tilted his head toward Zander. "Do you trust Chief Povey completely?"

The room went too still again. Jessie focused in on Zander, and as she was coming to see was a troubling thing, she got lost completely in his dark eyes. She nodded and admitted, "I do."

Zander's quick smile curved his lips and made his cheeks crinkle.

"Whoa." Her mom whistled and said in a low tone, "That's an irresistible smile."

"Did you just ..." Her dad broke off and shook his head.

Jessie could only agree, but she wasn't about to voice it. "You see where Maddie gets her sass," she said to Zander instead.

"Maddie ... I mean, Jessie." Her mom sounded exasperated. "You watch it, little girl."

Jessie laughed, but she didn't like being called "little girl" by her mom in front of these men. She needed them to respect her, and she had no desire for Zander to look at her as a little girl.

The front door opened and closed, and rapid footsteps sounded. Braden walked into the room, his gaze quickly sweeping around. He was a handsome blond with teal-blue



eyes. Jessie had flirted with him last June when he'd come to their valley and attempted to hike to the secret, having no idea what he was messing with. She'd always been impressed with him, and now knew he was the perfect fit for her sister Maddie. He loved Maddie unconditionally and had helped her to see that her Savior loved her too. He showed her sister she could be a warrior and still be righteous and filled with light from on high.

“You need me?” Braden asked.

“Yes,” Hendrickson said evenly. He stood and faced Braden. “Jessie has a request of you. She needs you to ‘read’ me and tell her if I can be trusted and if I’m a hundred percent loyal to the Deltas and to protecting the weapon as per Admiral Delta’s instructions.”

Braden looked to Jessie. He didn’t know her well, but he knew she was deeply spiritual and trusted in heaven above. She had to be, or she’d never know when it was the right time to use the weapon. If only it was done and they didn’t have to go through all of this. She’d played tennis in high school and had absolutely despised warmups. Once she was in the game she could settle, focus, and succeed, but warmups just made her nervous. She was definitely nervous in this warmup phase they were in, waiting to be attacked or to feel prompted to use the weapon as Papa was so certain she would be. If she could even bring herself to give that final voice command was an even bigger question in her mind.

“You didn’t trust what you saw in Captain Hendrickson’s eyes?” he asked.

“It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him,” she said slowly, “but he admitted that he’s closed off and doesn’t let anyone get close. That’s more what I felt. He was choosing to shut me out. It scared me that maybe he’s hiding more than just his desire to be this tough military guy that nobody can touch emotionally or spiritually.”

Braden nodded to her, but Captain Hendrickson’s jaw tightened. The captain looked over at Zander and muttered, “I hope this is worth it.”

“It is,” Zander said evenly. He looked at Jessie, and his dark gaze was warm and liquid. “I promise it is worth it.”

Jessie wasn't sure if he was talking to her or his captain.

“Okay.” Captain Hendrickson literally gritted his teeth. She heard it. What was his deal? Was he scared of Braden seeing that he was double-crossing them, or was he scared of Braden seeing *him*?

The captain stood straight and tall and faced Braden as if he was facing a Naval Discharge Review Board, or maybe worse than that, as if he were facing a firing squad. No. This tank of a man wouldn't be afraid of dozens of rifles pointed his way. He'd probably call out “Hooyah” and face death with his grayish-blue eyes cool and still unable to reveal any emotion to anyone, even the fear of dying. She was relieved he wasn't the man she was drawn to. The poor girl who fell in love with him.

Braden stared at the captain for a few seconds, then said softly and respectfully, “Captain Hendrickson doesn't want any of us to see what he's feeling. He's very good at hiding his feelings. I respect that, but it's hard to know what he's truly about with how expert he is at hiding behind a mask of toughness and professionalism.”

Jessie couldn't live with that. This was life or death, the end of the world if King Frederick had his way. “Captain Hendrickson might need to open up a little so we don't lose the weapon to Frederick and have nuclear weapons obliterate America as we know it.”

Zander looked at her, and his gaze was full of respect. Maybe he didn't see her as a little girl but as a woman who could hold her own, even with tough Navy SEALs. She'd show him she could hold her own with him. Could she?

“Do you want me to tell you more about the weapon and listen to yours and Zander's proposal or not?” Jessie realized her mistake instantly. If she corrected to Chief Povey now, it would probably highlight her slip of the tongue even more.

Captain Hendrickson turned to her. His eyebrow lifted, but it wasn't mocking. It looked like her slip of the tongue made him happy. "I do want you to explain about the weapon, and to listen and agree to our proposal," he said. "I'll try to let down my guard so Braden can 'read' me." He turned back to Braden and muttered, "I thought your gift made it so you could read anybody."

"Not anybody. Most people let their guard down at one point or another, especially when emotions are high. You don't."

"Dang straight I don't. I've worked my entire life not to let people see what I'm truly feeling."

"Yet you want me to trust you," Jessie pointed out, even though the captain was focused on Braden, not her. She wasn't trying to be snide, but she couldn't trust him if neither she nor Braden could get a glimpse of what was going on inside, of what his intentions and goals and allegiances were.

"I need you to trust me," Captain Hendrickson admitted quietly, almost humbly, changing want to need like she'd done earlier. She didn't know the guy could be humble. "Okay, let's get this over with." He faced Braden and as they looked on, both men stood straight and stared at each other for several long beats.

Jessie felt like the staring contest or examination of Captain Hendrickson's closed-off heart would never end. She felt almost bad for putting Hendrickson through this. It obviously was hard for him, but she couldn't let her peacemaker tendencies rule her life in these extreme circumstances. Those tendencies could be strengths in regular life, but in her role as Secret Keeper and their current unstable situation, she had to focus on trust, loyalty, and a team that would fight to keep Frederick away from the weapon.

She let her gaze slide to Zander and dang if his dark eyes weren't focused on her. She blew out a breath. It wasn't easy to focus on serious issues when Zander had a slight smile on his appealing lips. Why was he smiling at a time like this? As she studied him, she realized he was smiling for her. To help

her relax and know that he was on her team, Captain Hendrickson was a great man, and it would all work out.

It would all work out? She usually had oodles of faith. Some in her church groups at college had expressed envy that their faith didn't come as easy and wasn't as strong.

Not right now. Faith was in short supply when the entire evil sector of the world was breathing down your neck and possibly twisting those who should be on your side to betray and backstab you.

Braden nodded to Captain Hendrickson and the captain's shoulders relaxed slightly. Had he passed? Braden patted the man on the shoulder. Captain Hendrickson immediately stiffened and murmured, "Don't touch me."

The tension in the room amped up as Braden raised questioning eyebrows at him but lifted his hand away.

"Braden is only trying to help," her dad said softly, but with a voice of steel. "I don't appreciate you being short with him for doing what Jessie asked."

Maybe the captain wasn't on their team if he could so easily snarl at Braden.

Zander stood and strode to Captain Hendrickson's side. "Cap isn't trying to be short with him. It's common knowledge with his team. Nobody touches the captain. He's very averse to human touch."

This guy just got colder and colder. Averse to human touch?

"I apologize," Captain Hendrickson said stiffly. "I don't like to draw attention to my issues. It's a holdover from ... childhood."

The room felt stuffy and sad. Captain Hendrickson studied a mirror on the wall above the couch Jessie sat on with her parents. Braden looked like he wanted to reach out to the captain again, but thought better of it. Zander begged her with those deep-brown eyes of his to not judge the captain too harshly. It was illuminating and brave of Hendrickson to admit that his issues stemmed from childhood. Compassion filled

Jessie. She'd seen some cases of abuse in her work of speech pathology with some of the downtown schools in Denver. It infuriated her and broke her heart. How anyone could hurt an innocent child was beyond her.

“So.” Captain Hendrickson squared his shoulders and focused back on Braden. “What’s the verdict, Lieutenant Moyle? Am I loyal to the Deltas or do I have evil intent?”

Everyone focused on Braden. Jessie had gained a lot of compassion and respect for Captain Hendrickson, but she still needed to have her concerns resolved and the SEAL’s loyalty affirmed. Or she couldn’t explain how the weapon worked and she certainly wouldn’t agree to whatever plan these brilliant military men had concocted. No matter how appealing EOD Zander Povey was.

## Chapter Five



Zander prayed diligently that his long-time friend Braden would give a good report on Cap and not be offended by Cap's abruptness and issues.

He wasn't as close to the SEAL captain as Cap's own men were, but he'd served enough missions with him to know that he was a loyal patriot, an unselfish leader, and one of the bravest fighters Zander had ever seen. He was the guy who breached the doors that didn't require Zander's explosives. Cap ran toward the fight when bullets were flying and everybody else wasn't sure they wanted to flirt with death that day. Cap never asked for medals or commendations, but he'd acquired plenty of them anyway.

Zander kept finding his gaze drawn to Jessie. It wasn't just how incredibly beautiful she was or how those blue eyes of hers were like twin sapphires glowing appealingly. She was brave as well. She was carrying a heavy burden and she was the youngest member of this impressive family. She'd been hiding the fact that only she could fire the weapon from even her family.

He had wrongly assumed she would let her parents or oldest brother Colt, the impressive doctor, or her warrior sister Maddie, or any of the other imposing Deltas stand up for her. She didn't. She could speak her mind and she could stand up for herself and she wouldn't back down. Even when it was uncomfortable.

"Captain Hendrickson is loyal to the Deltas," Braden said into the silence. "He will do anything he needs to do, including

sacrificing his own life, to keep Jessie and the weapon safe. He's a good man with a warrior's heart."

Zander let out a relieved breath. He'd known all of those things were true, but Jessie needed to hear it from his friend Braden and her future brother-in-law.

"Thank you," Cap said.

"Of course." Braden turned to go.

"Try to stare deeply into my eyes again and I'll pile drive you to the ground," Cap threatened in a low growl. Zander could easily read the hint of humor in his voice, but he didn't know if any of these people could.

He scrambled how to tease off the comment, but Braden grinned widely. "Don't worry. I don't like to stare into other dudes' eyes. I'll save the staring for when it's requested of me, like you just did, and I'll focus on staring into my gorgeous fiancée's eyes."

"Good for you," Cap said. Could anybody else hear the longing in his voice or was Zander imagining it? Cap's own fiancée had dumped him. The captain had finally let his guard down after whatever had happened in his childhood, fallen in love, and gotten burned. Zander doubted Cap would let himself trust a woman that deeply again.

"Do you need anything else?" Braden asked. "Maddie was teaching me some wrestling moves."

They all laughed at that.

"Oh, wow." Joseph shook his head. "It's awkward being the father of gorgeous, grown-up daughters with tough men in love with them, especially when they admit to things I never want to hear about my girls."

Braden pumped his eyebrows at Zander and Zander wondered if someday he'd be privileged to say things that would make Joseph feel awkward. He didn't dare look at Jessie at the moment.

"Sorry, future father-in-law. I was serious. She's teaching me some incredible moves. Have you ever heard of the

honeymooner?”

“Just get out of here,” Joseph grouched.

“It’s an actual wrestling move,” Cap offered.

“Don’t defend him.”

Braden grinned and saluted all of them, turning and whistling his way out of the house. Zander loved Braden. Not only had the man saved his life in Afghanistan, but he was an easy-going, hard-working, funny, and dependable friend and comrade.

“Okay.” Cap settled back on the couch and Zander sat next to him. “Are you ready to answer my question now?”

Jessie suddenly looked nervous. Zander wished he could be sitting next to her, his arm around her, reassuring her that everybody was on her team, but most of all pledge to never leave her side. He snuck a look at her dad’s too-serious blue gaze. He hoped they’d go for his idea.

“The answer is yes,” Jessie said, then clarified, “Only I can open the inner part of the cave and retrieve or use the weapon. Papa transferred the capabilities to me, neither can or will be transferred again. Retrieving or firing the weapon require voice and thumbprint activation in an exact sequence. I suppose someone could try to force me to do it, but I would die first.”

Her parents both looked sickened by that but as if they knew it was true. Zander took it like a hit to the gut. This woman was incredibly brave and impressive.

“I will only fire the weapon when the Holy Spirit prompts me.” She met Zander’s gaze and said softly, “No matter what.”

No matter what. No matter if someone tortured or killed her or threatened those she loved? No matter if he or someone from the family tried to push her to do it early? No matter if Frederick got sick of waiting to obtain the weapon and shot nuclear weapons at America. He didn’t particularly like the “no matter what”. Actually he didn’t like any of this. It was one thing to have assignments this intense and life-threatening in the military. It was quite another to see the beautiful,



innocent woman he was interested in have to assume such a burden.

“I thought so.” Cap looked at him, obviously grateful that they hadn’t been left out of the loop and Jessie was willing to confide in and trust them, even giving them info her own family didn’t have.

Luckily, his friend said nothing about her “Holy Spirit” comment. Cap definitely wasn’t religious, seemed to dislike heaven almost as much as human touch, but he didn’t stop his men from praying or talking about times the Savior had prompted or helped them. Preach had stopped trying to convert Cap years ago.

Zander hadn’t known that about the spirit prompting the Secret Keeper to use the weapon, the thumbprint or voice activation. It explained why Admiral Delta hadn’t simply used it yet. Whatever the weapon was. Jessie had said she had to kill King Frederick. That would be nice. If she could do it. Why did she doubt herself? That was alarming, especially if nobody else could fire it for her.

“At the risk of asking too much, how does the weapon work?”

Jessie gave him a look as if he was asking too much. She glanced at her parents quickly then said, “I have hair and follicles from King Frederick that Kylee obtained at her grandmother’s party. That DNA is used by the weapon to track King Frederick, anywhere he might be in the world. The weapon can fly to him in about twenty minutes if he’s in Europe. It will kill him and everyone within twenty feet of him.”

Her parents looked to be ingesting the information just like Zander and Cap were. It was impressive technology and exactly what the world needed with a dictator as twisted and evil as any Zander had encountered. He could understand a little better her reluctance to fire the weapon. She not only would kill Frederick but those close to him. An innocent maid or driver? One of Frederick’s many women or children?

Zander had heard Frederick's wives were given no choice in marrying him.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. Her trust in him and Cap meant a lot.

She nodded. "None of that is common knowledge. I trust my family explicitly but Papa never shared most of what you know with anybody but me. I feel strongly that it's all right to share it in this circle. Please keep it here."

Zander was again impressed by her spiritual insight and her maturity. She had admitted she didn't know if she could fire the weapon last night on the dock, but he thought she was much stronger and braver than she realized.

"We will take it to our graves," Cap said solemnly.

"Thank you for trusting us," Zander said.

She gave him a flicker of a smile then looked to her parents. They both looked concerned and sick at what they're youngest child had to be responsible for.

"What we'd like to propose," Cap continued, "is that Demo—Chief Povey," he clarified, but they probably caught onto the nickname, "who is highly qualified in not just explosives but defensive strategies, combat, and protection. He has been on many teams in the middle east whose only focus was protection of people or goods and weaponry."

Zander didn't know that he was the only one qualified in this valley to protect Jessie, but he was the most willing and hopefully the most dedicated to protecting her. Maybe that wasn't true. Her loving family members would give their all to protect her, but each of her siblings or cousins had a significant other to protect. Her parents and aunt and uncle needed to be coordinating and working with Admiral Delta's contacts to keep the entire valley and the cave safe. The other SEALs and the competent sheriff's men had better not try to volunteer for his mission. Jessie should be his to protect. And his alone. If she'd agree.

"Demo would be assigned as Jessica's personal bodyguard."

Jessie's eyes widened and her breath popped out. "Um ..."

Cap waited, but when her parents didn't protest and Jessie didn't say more, he continued, "Demo would stay by her side during all hours of the day and night. They will have bags packed with weapons, food, camping gear, whatever they need, to go into hiding at the first sign of trouble. Demo would keep her safe until she is 'inspired' to fire the weapon, or the danger in the valley or surrounding the cave has passed and they can return."

Her dad's brow squiggled at that, and Zander was pretty certain they would get shot down immediately.

"From what I understand, there have been several kidnapping situations already with the Deltas. We can all hope nobody will figure out they should go after Jessica, but every other family member has a significant other right there, watching over them night and day. Jessica doesn't."

"I am Jessie's father. I can watch over her," Joseph said.

Zander's hopes dropped.

Holly reached behind Jessie and touched her husband's shoulder. "Hear them out before you shoot them down. The idea has merit. You can't stick to Jessie like glue all hours of the day and take off if needed. You and Keith have assumed Papa's administrative duties, and it is extremely important you keep talking to any allies and keep any would-be enemies at bay that way."

"I understand that," Joseph said. "And though I like and respect Chief Povey, no man needs to be sleeping in the same room as *my* little girl."

"I'm actually grown up now and the protector of the free world, no matter what Thor wants to think," Jessie said in a semi-teasing voice. "So maybe I could be mature enough to handle Chief Povey." She gave him a challenging look. He couldn't resist smiling, both at her teasing but also because he thought she might be interested in the idea and willing to "handle" him. As a protector. He had to keep his focus on being her protector, but if they had enough time alone, would

he relax and be able to chat easily with her, or would he flub it up like last night?

“Thank you, Jessie, for your vote of confidence,” Zander teased. She could definitely handle him. She could put him in his place and make him long for her to give him any time or attention. He looked at her dad. “If you aren’t okay with me staying in her room, I had another idea. Maddie could stay in her room with her, unless she’s assigned to guard duty at night, and those nights I could sleep on her floor to assure she’s safe. I promise you I would never take liberties where Jessie is concerned, and her safety will be the focus of my every decision and move. I also hope I can assist and comfort her. She has a heavy responsibility and I would be by her side to support her. If she needs that help.”

Jessie raised an impertinent eyebrow at him. Heat filled his body. Maybe he shouldn’t have gone to comfort. That gave him all kinds of visions of holding her close. Her safety first. That had to be the focus.

What if she was willing to let him comfort and strengthen her? He could only imagine hugging her, and after his protection detail was done, kissing her. He hoped the desires brewing inside him weren’t evident to her mom or dad. More importantly, he had to keep those desires in check and keep her safe.

What if it was months or years before the Delta situation resolved? No, that wasn’t possible. Too much was brewing, word was spreading, and either Jessie would be forced to use the weapon or Frederick would somehow obtain it and America would be bombed. That couldn’t happen. Which made him even more determined to keep Jessie safe. He’d asked for this assignment because he wanted to be near her, but also because he thought it was the most important assignment of the moment. Yes, he was invested and interested. Could he hide the too-interested, too-drawn to her parts from her? Especially if they were side by side all day?

“I’d be okay with that,” her dad admitted. He leaned in front of Jessie to meet his wife’s gaze. “What do you think, love?”

Holly studied Zander. He kept his gaze steady and unafraid. He'd faced down insurgents who didn't have the death stare down that well. "You'll keep my girl safe in every possible way?"

Zander knew she meant from himself if need be. He was strong and disciplined. He'd made it through BUD/S training before he'd changed focus and decided to become an EOD. After he achieved EOD he'd pushed himself through other ultra-intense advanced courses to reach the status and training he needed to be a master EOD and assigned to the top SEAL, Navy Ranger, and occasionally Delta Force squads in the world. He had this. Hooyah.

He nodded. "I will. I swear it to you."

She paused and then admitted, "I think it's a good idea. Jessie is extremely tough, brave, resilient, and capable, but two working together is always better than one. Everybody needs a wingman. I also worry some mercenary will try to go after her. Even if they don't find out she's Secret Keeper, she's the smallest and the only one without a partner right now."

"Hey," Jessie protested, flexing her arm, the smooth skin forming a beautiful layer of muscle. His mouth went dry. "I'm more than 'extremely tough.' Papa taught me to be a weapon."

Zander wondered if what she'd said on that dock had only been frustration. Was she afraid to fire the weapon? Was she only acting tough right now?

Her mom half-laughed and hugged her close again. "I know, love, but you're still my girl and I'm going to do all I can to protect you." She looked at Zander. "And right now, the tough guy with the great smile seems like the best route."

Zander smiled. Might as well use it to his advantage. If Jessie's mom liked his smile, was there any chance her daughter did as well? Oh man, it would be hard to keep his focus on protecting her and not falling for her. He had to keep his head on straight, or he might need to rescind his duty before it even began.

"That's the one," her mom said, winking at Jessie.

Jessie's blue gaze was warm on him.

“Okay, knock the smiling crap off or I’ll change my mind,” Joseph said.

That wiped the smile off his face.

“Oh, goodness, jealous man,” Holly said to her husband.

“Love of my life,” Joseph said back, “will you help me find the camping gear and pack the bags of food and supplies for Jessie and Zander in case they have to bug out quick?” He stood, turning his attention back to Zander. “We’ll show you where they are in the garage once we get them ready and you can add whatever else you might need.” He extended his hand to Holly.

“I’m a comin’, I’m a comin’.” Holly squeezed Jessie one more time and stood.

Zander and Cap both stood as well.

Jessie’s mom zeroed in on Zander and said, “Protected in every way. I’m trusting you, Mr. Chief Demo, Special Ops Expert, Master EOD, whatever your fancy title is.”

“You can, ma’am.” Zander kept the smile off his face. This wasn’t a smiling matter, but he appreciated that Holly liked his smile and was so vocal about it.

Did Jessie like his smile? He met her incredible blue eyes and really hoped all of his honed self control was going to stay in place. She was the most intriguing and desirable woman he’d ever been close to.

*The only easy day was yesterday.*

The SEAL motto rang in his head. He’d made a mess of things with Jessie yesterday on the dock. Today he had to keep himself from hugging or getting too close to her emotionally. It was going to be rough.

## Chapter Six



Joseph turned to walk away but Holly apparently had more to say. She pointed at Cap. “And you ...”

“What did I do?” Cap lifted his hands.

“You’re doing a great job, and we’re so grateful you and your men are here.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Delta.”

“But this refusal of human touch is pretty much crap and not healthy.” Holly stepped across the room and into Cap’s space.

Zander’s eyes widened, his gut tightened, and he edged closer to the two of them. Cap would never hurt a woman, but he might strong-arm her and shove her away to keep her from hugging him.

“Don’t do it,” Holly warned him. “Don’t think you’re going to avoid me.”

Jessie stood and smiled. “Just let her hug you, Captain. It’ll go much easier for you.”

Cap’s body was coiled in the fight-or-flight response. Zander had no idea how his friend would respond, but he doubted it would be positive. “Maybe we should give him some time,” he said cautiously.

“Oh, good crap, just hug the boy so we can get stuff done,” Joseph said. “Flirting with Zander about his smile, wanting to hug the captain. What’s next, love?”

She glared at him. “Don’t you tease me.”

He chuckled easily, his blue gaze warm on his wife. Zander had suspected Joseph was teasing most of the time, but he appreciated the reassurance that he wasn’t upset about Zander smiling at his wife or her being intent on hugging Cap. He really liked this family. His gaze strayed to Jessie as it always wanted to. He *really* liked this family. This assignment would be a great one, being close to Jessie, but it would also be tough to keep his focus on her protection and not her appeal.

Holly moved so fast Zander realized he shouldn’t have gotten distracted by Jessie. She had her arms wrapped around his friend’s lower back and was in his space before Zander could protect her if need be. He was concerned Cap would react instinctively and break her arm.

Cap didn’t, luckily. He lifted his arms as if he was walking through a filthy swamp and didn’t want to get them dirty, then stood there like a tough gargoyle who’d been turned to stone.

Holly patted him softly on the back and leaned into him. “It’s okay. I won’t hurt you. You’re welcome here and we all appreciate you and care about you.”

Cap blinked at her. Had he ever had a mother figure say such words to him? The captain knew he was accepted, looked up to, and probably cared about as his squad was loyal to each other, but not like this. There was nothing like a mom hug, and suddenly Zander missed his mom with a sharp ache. He prayed his parents and brothers and their wives were all doing well. He didn’t see them often, but he loved them.

The room was full of anticipation. Everybody seemed to expect Cap to return the hug. Zander wanted to tell them not to hold their breath.

Cap suddenly leaned in and then awkwardly put his arms around Holly’s back, clasping his own hands together as if afraid to relax or touch her too much.

“Good job,” Holly said, easing in even closer.



As Zander watched in amazement, Holly smiled up at Cap and patted his back. “Good job. I don’t want to push you too hard, but we’ll try this at least once a day.”

“Once a day?” Cap croaked out, concern filling his face and his voice, still pressed against her with his hands clasped together.

“Yep. The world might be ending, but mama hugs are still important medicine. You can try to evade me, but I will find you.” She patted him on the cheek like he was a little boy. Cap didn’t flinch, which shocked Zander.

Cap looked down at her and he sort of smiled. “I believe you would.” He released his clasp around her back and stepped away, clearing his throat and not focusing on anyone. “Thank you for your time, everyone. I think this will be a great solution. Zander is the perfect soldier for this job.” He turned and strode out of the house.

“I think that went well,” Holly said after the front door shut.

“If you knew Cap ... that was amazing. I was prepared to stop him from breaking your arm or knocking you to the floor.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Joseph protested.

“Cap would never hurt a woman,” Zander explained, “but his natural reaction to touch is not good. You’re extremely brave.”

“Of course I am. I’m married to this guy.” Holly winked at her husband.

Joseph laughed.

She turned and gave Zander a hug, which surprised him. He missed his own mom back in Indiana even more and Holly was right: mama hugs were definitely a necessity. He looked at Jessie over her mom’s head. A hug from Jessie would be even better. Would that fit in his protection detail duties, or did he need to keep his hands off? If they were in a safe spot, he supposed he could let his guard down. Would that make it easier to let his guard down when they weren’t in a safe spot,

or would that make him more invested and an even better protection? He couldn't riddle that one out. Probably smarter to keep an emotional distance, at least. If he could at this point.

Holly released him and patted his cheek. "Keep her safe."

"Always." He nodded.

She leaned in. "And use that smile on her. It's fabulous."

"Mom," Jessie protested.

"Holly," Joseph joined in.

"Okay, okay, we're going." Holly strode to her husband's side, took his hand, and he teased her about flirting with boys as she teased him about being a jealous old man. They headed to the front entry and down to the basement.

Just like that, he was alone with Jessie. His nerves ramped up. He had to calm down. He would be alone with her often now; it was what he wanted, what he'd asked for. Now he had to figure out how to balance his probably obvious feelings for her with staying somewhat aloof and focused on her protection.

"So." She looked at him and then away.

"So." He gave her his smile, hoping it would work some magic.

She laughed. "Is that going to be your solution every time you're uncomfortable?"

"The Joker-worthy smile? For sure." He waited, but she didn't give him any indication that she was faltering under his smile. "Your mom seemed to like it."

"She is *easily* impressed."

He laughed at that. "Well, she impressed me, getting Cap to hug her. I've seen him maim men for less contact than that."

"Was he abused as a child?" Her blue eyes turned somber.

He shrugged. "What he said earlier ... that's the most I've ever heard him admit." He didn't know if he should share

about the fiancée dumping his friend. It was probably Cap's story to share.

“That’s awful. I hate abuse and hate that he feels he can’t confide in anyone.”

He nodded.

“Well, um, why don’t we line up the food and snacks we want going in those backpacks? If not, my mom will have us eating no sugar, no flour, or something equally disturbing.”

She gave a little fake shudder, and he smiled. She was super cute, and sexy, and appealing, and apparently the protector of the free world. And he was her protector. What a stimulating yet difficult job he’d volunteered for.

“Maybe be careful wielding the power of that smile,” she teased and smiled back, so he hoped she wasn’t serious. He was in a serious profession, but the guys liked to joke and he smiled often. Not smiling at her would be even harder than not saying anything wrong like he had last night and not touching her.

“I’ll try.”

She turned to the kitchen, but he stopped her with his hand on her arm. She had nicely smooth and toned arms. He liked touching them. A whole lot. And he’d forgotten he shouldn’t touch her really quick.

*Focus, dude.*

She looked down at his hand, then back up at him. “Yes?” The tip of her tongue moistened her lips.

He had no idea what he had been planning to say. He just stared at her, awestruck. There was something huge happening to him, something bigger than risking his career, his reputation, prison, and maybe never seeing his family again to trust Braden and the Deltas and fight for them. He loved the sensation of being close to her and anticipating what she would say or do next. Could he ever have the privilege of kissing those enticing lips? Would that be completely out of line? Cap had given him permission. Cap was the captain,

after all. But Joseph and Keith were in charge in this valley. Should he ask her dad for permission to kiss her?

“Are you okay?” she asked him softly.

“I don’t know.” He released his hold on her and nervously pushed his hand through his hair. He was stirred up and doubting if this protection detail was going to work. “You make me a little ... nervous.”

“*I* make *you* nervous?” she asked. “Tough military expert who’s traveled the world is intimidated by a speech pathologist?”

“Well, you are the protector of the free world, so there is that.” He smiled to ease the tension building inside him.

She returned it, and her beautiful smile didn’t calm his nerves. At all.

“Speech pathologist?” he asked. That fit her. “I didn’t know that. Impressive.”

“Not as impressive as your highly decorated military career.”

“It is,” he insisted. “Very impressive.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded and rushed on, “I’m sorry about last night. I was awkward and said ... a lot of things. I just wanted to help. Let you know that we’re all there for you.”

“So did you mean all the stuff about ‘crap happens’ and push past the emotional junk and the devil didn’t get Papa’s soul?” She stared at him, folding her arms across her trim chest.

Dang. Were they going to be back to her yelling at him and storming away?

“I didn’t mean to offend or upset you,” he tried.

She arched her eyebrows. “But you meant the words. You just didn’t want me upset?”

“Well.” He pushed a hand at his hair, but then he gestured back to where her mom had that crazy interaction with hugging Cap. “You understand I’m usually talking to people with the emotional capacity of Cap, right?”

“So do I need to remind you regularly that I’m a woman?”

“No.” He stared at her. “Nope. I need no reminders that you are a gorgeous, irresistible, and inspiring woman.” He was far too aware of all of that and hoped it wouldn’t be his downfall.

Her blue eyes darkened to a smolder that made heat pulse through him. He eased a step closer without realizing he was even moving. “Thank you,” she said in a husky voice.

Did she realize how attractive she was to him? The power she had over him? She seemed so innocent.

“I meant emotionally,” she said. “Do I need to remind you to be careful with my emotions?”

His hand went to her waist of its own volition. They were in a safe spot right now, but was letting down his guard smart? Emotionally? That wasn’t something he worried about often.

She blinked up at him, but thankfully she didn’t draw away. A whiff of sweet peaches and cream tantalized his senses. She smelled incredible. He could bet she would taste even better. He gently tugged her closer as he took another step in. Her hands landed on his chest, and he’d never been so grateful for twice-daily workouts as he was when she blushed, gasped, and said, “Oh my. Those pectoral muscles are almost as great as your smile.”

He might’ve been the one blushing now. He bent closer and whispered, “I’ll be careful with your emotions, Jess. I’ve promised to protect you in every single way.”

“Jess?”

“Is that okay?” He’d given her a nickname, not a huge one, but she’d noticed.

“I’ll think about it.”

He smiled.

Her eyelashes fluttered against her cheek as she blinked, and then she focused the full force of the trademark Delta blue eyes on him. He'd noticed the other family members had them, but none were as entrancing as Jess's.

He couldn't resist her. Not right now. Nobody would expect him to. He circled his arms around her and pulled her in tight to his chest. Her hands wound around his neck and she threaded her fingers into his hair, making good tingles work their way across his scalp and down his body.

"What if you have to protect me from you?" she asked.

Zander was trying to reason out if that was a tease or if he needed to back off and prove he'd keep her safe from him. Prove it to her and to himself. But all he wanted was one sweet kiss. Was that infringing on her safety or not being careful with her emotions? He didn't like that thought, but kissing her if he planned to leave once this mission was done could definitely be toying with emotions. What were his intentions? He was intrigued by and invested in her, but he hardly knew her. He should take a step back and slow down.

But who knew what tomorrow would bring? Frederick might decide to rain down nuclear warfare without obtaining the weapon. He or Jess might be killed defending it. Could he justify that he'd protect her better than ever after one sweet taste of her lips? Just one. The kiss would be a motivator and hone his focus. He leaned closer and pushed any worries far, far away.

Her beautiful blue eyes warmed with anticipation and she arched up toward him.

Footfalls came up the stairs and voices floated to them from the entryway.

Jess jerked away from him and hurried into the kitchen, opening the pantry. "What's your favorite kind of jerky?"

"I've survived on MREs," he said, following her and wondering if his voice sounded shaky to her or just to him. "Any kind of jerky is amazing."

She tossed him a grateful smile as her parents entered the kitchen. Was she grateful he hadn't kissed her, grateful for him watching over her, or grateful her parents hadn't caught them?

He didn't know. He spent most of his days with men. He could pretend he was in control with Jess, but what did he know about women's emotions or taking care of them?

He'd been driven to spend more time with Jess and he'd give up his M4A1 for a taste of those lips.

He pushed a hand at his hair and tried to respond to her queries and her mom and dad showing him what they'd packed in the two decent-sized backpacks.

Focus. That's what he needed. Focus on protecting her and not on how much he liked her.

Focus might be hard to come by with a beautiful woman like Jess Delta as his assignment. But if he couldn't figure it out, he'd have to let Cap assign Chaos, Preach, or Wolf to protection detail. The thought of his SEAL friends staying close to Jess and touching her like Zander longed to hardened his resolve.

Focus.

*Please help me focus*, he prayed. Prayer had gotten him through some tough things both safety-wise and when he was discouraged or alone. He hoped heaven could get him through this one. He'd be walking a tightrope with Jess Delta.

She smiled shyly at him. Falling off the tightrope would be worth it to be close to her and make sure nobody hurt her.

## Chapter Seven



Jessie stayed busy the next day and a half, and Zander was her constant shadow, or companion; she couldn't decide which. He was great to have around, helpful, had great insight and ideas about Papa's associates as she met with her dad and uncle to work through the emails, texts, and phone calls. They spent time with Thor, Greer, and Alivia going over maps and doing bird's-eye reconnaissance of every section of forest between them and the cave, a couple abandoned cabins they could hide in, where the fresh-water streams were, caves to avoid that housed bears and mountain lions, and on and on.

The full truth about the weapon was kept secret, but Jessie's dad asked if he could reveal that Jessie alone could fire the weapon so everyone would know they had to keep her far from the cave until the right moment. She agreed. None of her family members or the SEALs treated her differently or acted like she couldn't do it, but she got some concerned looks that seemed to back up her own insecurities—would she do it? Would she kill Frederick and whatever innocent or not innocent people were near him? She prayed hard for the inspiration to know when to fire, and the ability to complete the task.

Zander stole her attention quite often, and she didn't mind that at all. He was smart, great to be around, fun to talk to, tease with, and look at.

Unfortunately, he also had impressive self-control. He hadn't touched her since the kitchen, besides incidental brushes or taking her elbow to escort her, and he hadn't gotten



anywhere close to kissing her again. She'd been pretty certain he was going to kiss her in her parents' kitchen before they had interrupted.

No matter how she longed for him to hold her and kiss her, it was for the best that he hadn't. When she'd asked if he would protect her from himself, she'd meant breaking her heart, not that she thought he'd do anything untoward.

She appreciated him thinking her career was great, but his accomplishments and achievements were lightyears beyond anything she'd done. She'd heard Braden praising Zander like he was the most impressive soldier in the United States Armed Forces. It should've reassured her that she had the best protection possible. Instead, it highlighted her insecurities. She had Papa Delta's training, but she'd never completed a real-life mission.

Zander didn't seem like he was toying with her. The look in his dark eyes felt very sincere and very warm. It simply didn't seem plausible that a relationship would ever work between them. She was rushing ahead worrying about a relationship when they didn't know each other that well and hadn't even kissed, but she couldn't help herself.

A man like Zander would be on his way back to glory, honor, and military service as soon as this mission was accomplished. She could bet on it. Aiden had been very reluctant to commit to Melene because of the failed marriages and relationships he'd seen on his own SEAL team. He'd told Jessie the divorce rate was eighty percent for special ops forces and it had scared him.

It scared her. And she also realized it was ludicrous to even worry about relationships or divorce rates. The world could end tomorrow. One or both of them could be killed. He might not have a career to go back to when everything exploded, unless it was proven that the Deltas had done the right thing in keeping the weapon secured here and using it at their discretion, not the Commander-in-Chief's. It was terrifying to think of the repercussions now that more people were finding out about the weapon and Papa wasn't here to insulate them with his status, reputation, and connections. Zander and his

friends could be stripped of everything they'd earned and possibly thrown in prison for directly disobeying orders and blowing up a Blackhawk helicopter. Whatever one of those things cost, it probably wasn't something their commanding officer could excuse without repercussions.

Saturday night, the family members who weren't on duty had gotten together for dinner. She and Zander weren't a couple, but it was easy to pretend they were and it certainly felt that way. He stayed close by her side and he was great to be around. Everybody else in her family had their significant other right there, so it felt like they fit right in.

They hadn't talked more about his callous comments from that night by the lake or how he would keep her and her emotions safe. She got the impression he was trying to focus on protecting her, not falling for her. She wanted to tempt him into falling. It seemed silly to even think about it as there was so much going on and so much demanding their time, but if they were going to die tomorrow, maybe they should forget the future worries, and sneak in some kissing time.

Two separate teams of mercenaries had tried to get around the cave's security earlier today. They'd been distracted by the fog, caught, and were currently in the sheriff's jail cells, but that wasn't a long-term solution. The FBI had been great working with Papa to take the criminals off their hands. Most of them already had a rap sheet internationally. But without Papa here, they hadn't contacted the FBI yet. They could use Papa's recent death to guilt them into working with them, but Papa had been an expert on redirecting or evading questions. Her dad and Uncle Keith both worried about letting something slip. They wanted her to advise them on correspondence because of all the time she'd spent with Papa while he was doing it and the fact that she was the responsible Secret Keeper now. Being worried about when and if to fire the weapon was enough responsibility.

It was chilly and dark outside when she and Zander walked from Papa's house toward her parents'. She wanted to ask him to walk down by the lake or up into the woods, but even with Zander as her constant shadow and armed as he was right now,

it was best to stay close to the nucleus of family protecting her. More mercenaries were probably coming and who knew if they'd try to attack the cave, the family, or kidnap somebody else? What if their own military, Frederick's, or some other country launched a full-scale attack? Jessie shivered at the thought.

"Are you cold?" Zander asked.

"No. Just thinking what we'll do if an entire platoon of SEALs shows up."

"You and I will disappear, and I'll keep you safe."

He said the words simply, as if there was no worry, but she wasn't just worried about herself. What if they disappeared and her entire family got killed protecting her and the cave? It was a horrifying thought, and she had to push it away or she'd run to the cave right now and activate the weapon to ensure her family's safety. She couldn't do that or she'd be as self-serving as the people Papa had protected the weapon from all these years. People who thought they would use it for the greater good but ultimately would make the wrong decision because it benefitted them or someone they cared about.

"Is Maddie staying with you tonight?" Zander asked as they approached the back door, pulling her from her stewing.

"Yes. She should be here soon." Jessie wondered what would happen when Maddie had patrol duty at night. It was bound to happen, unless her dad and mom were making sure it didn't so Zander wouldn't have to sleep on her floor. Warmth pulsed through her simply imagining Zander in her room throughout the night. He was an honorable man and wouldn't try anything, but what if he simply held her close for emotional support? Maybe they could share a few long, tantalizing kisses as well. Her face heated.

"Okay. I'll walk you to your door." He opened the back door and gave her that smile of his.

"Your smile is like a weapon, you know," she tried to tease as her knees felt weak and her throat parched.

He chuckled at that, and they walked through the living area. Her parents were already in bed and Maddie had been saying goodbye to Braden, who was leaving to patrol the cave for the next six hours. Zander had slept in the bedroom next to hers last night. Alivia's old room. It was comforting to have him and Maddie so close and her parents downstairs. She also knew all the cameras and sensors they had set up throughout the valley, mountains, around the cave, and even in the main area of the homes would alert them to trouble. She didn't know how someone would find out she was the Secret Keeper, how that would leak, but the protection was nice and she could sleep soundly.

"I don't mean to use the smile as a weapon," he said. "I just hope it will disarm you and make me irresistible."

They reached the entryway and the stairs. She had visions of him pinning her against the railing and kissing her long and slow.

"Who says you're not irresistible?" she tried to tease, but her voice quavered. Any worry about secrets, Frederick, and the world ending was far away right now as she stared into those deep-brown eyes. They seemed to see into her very soul. She was falling for him. It wasn't smart and the timing was horrible, but who could blame her?

His smile was so big she wanted to take a picture and never forget it or the sparkle in his dark eyes or how he made her feel all lit up inside.

She leaned against the railing and he leaned in, resting his hand on the railing next to her, his eyes darkening and the meaningful and smitten look in those eyes shooting fire through her body. He smelled clean and fresh and irresistible. Was this tough, highly decorated, elite soldier really taken with her? He'd said she made him nervous yesterday afternoon before he almost kissed her, and she loved that she could affect him like that. Unless she had no idea what an interested man looked like, Zander Povey was very, very interested in her.

What about the future and him leaving her?

He edged closer and used his free hand to cup her jaw.

Who cared about the future? He was here now.

“I know it’s not smart, but I want to be irresistible to you.”

“Why isn’t it smart?” she asked, leaning into his palm.

“I’m assigned to protect you. I want to make sure I stay focused and don’t risk your safety.” His dark eyes seemed to fill with regret, and she was afraid he’d pull away.

“I think you can let your guard down for this moment,” she said. “We’re surrounded by protection with my family, your SEAL buddies, and the sheriff’s department. We have all kinds of sensors set up that will let us know if anyone’s approaching. We’re safe inside this house.” Was she begging him to fall for her, to kiss her? Yes, she was.

He kept his hand on her face, but a battle raged in his dark gaze.

“Unless you aren’t interested in me or willing to take a chance on me.” She took a deep breath and rushed to say, “Personally, I’ve never met a man as appealing and impressive as you. I’ve never been around a man I want to keep spending every minute with.”

There. She’d done it. She’d admitted how interested she was, and now it was his turn. She wished she could give him a challenging, sassy look like Maddie would, but she wasn’t Maddie, so she simply begged him with her eyes to forget about protecting her, for this moment, and take a chance on loving her.

Zander took a long breath and then admitted in a quiet voice that pulsed through her, “I didn’t know it was possible for a frogman to appeal to an incredible, accomplished beauty like the speech pathologist, expert at hand-to-hand combat and weaponry, and protector of the free world Jess Delta.” His thumb trailed along her cheek. “I shouldn’t admit this, but ... I’d give up every weapon I own if I had a chance with you.”

Her body quivered, anticipation of him kissing her and the sweetness of his words making her happier than she could remember being in a long time. She loved his compliments, but she knew how military men ticked. Giving up their

weapons was like taking away everything they'd worked for and loved. This ultra-impressive warrior was gone over her.

"That means a lot," she told him.

"I shouldn't have admitted that. I need to be focused on your protection." He was trying to remind himself. He held eye contact, but he backed away.

Jessie wasn't giving up that easily. Her world was falling down around her, she'd lost her Papa, and she had a responsibility on her shoulders that no twenty-three-year-old should ever carry. This man with his strength, experience, and incredible smile was a reprieve, safety, and excitement she hadn't ever planned on. She needed him in her life, not just as her protector but as the man she was falling too quickly for.

She rested her hands on his waist and tugged him closer, hoping she could tease him into kissing her. Would a kiss change everything like she was hoping? Bind them together and make him realize he could protect her and care deeply for her at the same time?

"So if you're a frogman," she started with, "I suppose I must give you a kiss and see if you'll turn into a handsome prince." It was such a silly tease, as there'd never been a more handsome or princely man in her life than Zander Povey.

He grinned, and she held on to him so she wouldn't fall over from the effects of that smile. If they somehow miraculously ended up together, and spent sixty years loving each other, would she ever be immune to the effects of that smile? She hoped not. And she was rushing way ahead of herself.

Despite how deeply she felt about him and the sweet words he'd said to her, they weren't a couple and she worried he'd leave as soon as this assignment was completed. They hadn't even kissed. Though she thought her chances of getting a kiss were looking pretty great at the moment.

"I don't know what your kiss would do to me, but I imagine it would be life-changing." He pressed ever closer to her and her body lit up with heat and anticipation, feelings that

were much safer here in the entryway of the house than they would be outside where he'd be looking around to make certain she was safe. "If anybody has the power to turn a lowly frogman into a handsome prince, it would be you, beautiful Jess."

Jessie didn't have any idea how to protect her heart any longer. All day, her previously overwrought emotions had settled with him by her side. He'd silently strengthened her by helping and encouraging her any chance he got. Him shortening her name had made her feel special to him. She'd probably be a mess again at Papa's graveside service tomorrow and even more so when she had to fire that weapon, but at this moment she had Zander on her side and she was in his arms. Nothing else mattered.

She pushed all the worries behind her and arched up closer to him, running her fingers through his hair and loving that he quivered under her touch. This strong, amazing man could be weak for her.

"There's nothing lowly about you, Zander Povey," she said, moving so close that their lips were only a fraction of an inch apart. "And you're already too handsome for your own good, so maybe it's better if I don't kiss you and you stay a frogman." She hoped to tempt and tease him.

He ran his hand along her jaw and into her hair, gently massaging her scalp. It felt incredible and made her tingle with pleasure. No wonder he'd quivered as she did the same.

"Don't leave me as a lowly frogman, beautiful princess. I'll drown without your kiss."

She laughed at his silly words. Was this what love felt like? She'd dated a lot, but she'd never been on fire from simple touches, looks, and smiles. This man had the power to captivate her body and soul. She wanted to commit everything to him. And she hardly knew him.

"I can't let you drown," she said.

He chuckled. Then he said against her lips, every word brushing her lips with his warm, sweet breath, "I pride myself

on my patience and self-control. I told myself I wouldn't get close to you until I was done protecting you, but I can't resist you. I have no pride around you. I'm a humble frogman at your mercy, beautiful princess. Can I kiss you, Jess?"

"Yes," she cried out.

He wasted no time covering the negligible distance and capturing her mouth with his. Rapture and light and warmth filled her. She returned the kiss with all the longing and appreciation she had for him. She wanted him in her life, near her side, kissing her every chance they got. Why hadn't they been doing this every spare minute since he arrived last week?

She clung to him, and he wrapped her up tight and lifted her off her feet. The kisses grew in intensity and she wanted to scream that she loved him and she would never let him go, no matter what. But she wasn't screaming right now. She was kissing him until the sun rose tomorrow.

"Whoa!" Maddie's voice came from much too close. "I guess the bodyguard has new duties?"

Jessie did not want to let him go. She refused to. She clung to Zander as he released her from the kiss and slowly lowered her to her feet. He kept her within the circle of his arms as they both looked at Maddie standing in the foyer and staring at the two of them.

"Um, I hate to interrupt this ... beautifully passionate display," Maddie said, but her voice was cool and she obviously thought it was her duty to interrupt, "but Jessie and I need to get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a very big and busy day."

Jessie adored her sister. She'd looked up to and wanted to be like Maddie for as long as she could remember. But right now, she wanted to punch her. The sisters didn't get in wrestling matches like their crazy boy cousins. Tonight they might. And no matter that Maddie was the experienced warrior and a lethal weapon, Jessie would win.

"I will be up in a minute," Jessie said firmly, giving her sister the stink eye.



Maddie raised her hands and backed up the steps. “Don’t let big sis get in the way of your mac-daddying.”

“I won’t,” she shot back at her.

Maddie gave her a look that said she was going to get an ear full. It ticked Jessie off. She was a full-grown woman and could kiss who she wanted. Zander was the most incredible man she’d ever kissed, and it wasn’t like Jessie gave Maddie crap about her and Braden kissing all the time.

“Goodnight,” Maddie said.

“Night,” they both murmured.

She walked up the stairs. Neither of them said anything until the door shut.

Zander looked down at her, and his grip softened. He gently tucked her hair behind her ear and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? She’s the one who’s acting like a controlling snot.” Jessie tried to talk positive about everyone, especially her family, but Maddie had just treated Jessie like a child and Zander as if he was in the wrong and shouldn’t be kissing her.

Zander cleared his throat, released her, and stepped back.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, transferring her anger from her sister to him.

His gaze trailed over her face, and he didn’t give her that incredible smile. “She’s right. I should never have let my control slip like this. I got caught up in the teasing, how incredible you are, and my out-of-control desire for you, but I’m your bodyguard, Jess. That means I need to keep my head on straight. I have to be focused on any dangers approaching you and how to keep you safe, not on how I can get you alone and kiss you some more.” He pushed a hand through his hair.

She glared up at him. “Well, if you’re my bodyguard, that means I get to order you around, and I’m ordering you to stop being stupid and on some higher plane and kiss me anytime you want to.”

His gaze got intense and warm, and she loved it. He was going to kiss her again, and she could hardly wait. “I would absolutely love to kiss you anytime I wanted.” His voice dropped to a husky whisper. “Now that I’ve had a taste of your lips, I don’t know how I’ll ever get enough. But that would mean all we did all day, every day, was kiss each other.”

Heat filled her, and she eased closer again. “Now that’s a plan we can live with.”

He shook his head and let out a low groan that seemed to rip through her. “Jess ...”

She loved that he called her Jess and not Jessie like everyone else. It felt like he saw her as an adult, not a little girl. An equal. A woman he could fall in love with. Zander was down-to-earth, fun, and she was comfortable around him, but he still seemed like a superhero warrior to her. She was fascinated by him and already falling for him.

He moved in quickly, framed her face with his hands, and rested his forehead against hers. Her breath came in quick pants. She moistened her lips and his gaze sharpened on her as his strong body overshadowed hers.

“I care about you far too much, Jess,” he said in a low rumble that she felt as much as heard.

“I care about you, too.”

“We have to slow this down,” he said, regret lacing his voice. His thumbs gently caressed her cheeks, and she prayed he’d reconsider.

“Why?”

“This isn’t just about you and me right now. Your safety has to be the focus. I won’t be able to protect you if I’m distracted by all the desires to kiss and hold you, flirt with you, and stare into your beautiful blue eyes for hours on end.”

He was staring into her eyes and touching her so tenderly, and she loved it. Would he really make himself stop? His self-control was a million times stronger than hers.

“From what you explained being Secret Keeper involves a lot of prayer and specific insight. You need to focus on that and I need to focus on my job of protecting you.”

She hated his words, but she hated even more that he was right. She didn't want to admit to it or even think about pulling away.

“Once this is all over, maybe we'll have a chance—”

She jerked away from his touch and straightened. He straightened as well, looking down at her with concern in his dark eyes.

“Don't patronize me, Zander.”

“What do you mean?”

“We both know once this is over, you'll be back on some mission saving a democracy or taking out a dictator. You won't settle down in Colorado and date a speech pathologist.” She stared at him, willing him to tell her she was wrong.

He didn't. His jaw worked and he pushed his hand through his hair, but he said nothing.

She nodded, despair coursing through her. “Lie to yourself and say that you need to focus on protecting me and I need to focus on the being Keeper and that's why we can't grow closer. But don't lie to me and claim you're going to stick around, because we both know you won't.” She stepped up closer to him, but she didn't touch him. “My Papa's funeral is tomorrow. He's one of the best men I've ever known. He spent the past thirty years protecting this secret weapon, ready at any time to use it but luckily never having to. But he always, always put his family first. If you can't put me first, fine, but own up to it and please don't claim we can have a future later. With King Frederick still alive, moments like tonight might be the only future we have.”

She pushed past him and raced up the stairs before he could stop her. As she got to the top, she realized he hadn't even tried. She looked back down from the second-story balcony. Zander stared up at her. He looked desperately sad,

but he wasn't willing to do anything about it. He would protect her, but he wouldn't love her. He wouldn't chase after her.

His loss.

And sadly, hers too.

Her parents' bedroom door opened and her dad hurried out. Jessie could see him and Zander from the balcony. Zander turned to face him.

"Jessie?" her dad demanded.

"Up here," Jessie said as Zander pointed up. She met Zander's gaze, longing and regret mixed in his dark eyes.

"Jessie, you've got to see this," her dad urged.

She hurried back down the stairs. Her dad held up an iPad. A paused video filled the screen. She recognized the swarthy face, dark beard and eyes of King Frederick. Her stomach churned.

"What?" she asked.

"Let me show you first," he said.

Zander eased in close to her and her dad as her dad pushed play. She could feel Zander's strong presence reassuring her, but his delicious scent made her want to kiss him all over again.

As soon as the vile Frederick started talking, all other concerns were pushed away. "Greetings, Delta family." His smile was sickening and patronizing. "I've tried to be patient and wait for someone to succeed and bring me the famed Delta weapon, but I'm through waiting. As a demonstration of my power, a small island country will be annihilated by a nuclear weapon in twenty-six hours. I liked the idea of death at midnight. Twenty-six hours from now will be midnight on mountain standard time. Isn't that your time zone?" He smiled again as if he were giving them some gift. "No, there is nothing you can do to prevent this. It is retribution for keeping the weapon from me for too long."

Jessie's heart raced out of control. Some island country would be decimated tomorrow night and there was nothing

they could do? She met Zander's gaze and she could see exactly what he was thinking. There was something she could do. She could go fire the weapon and stop this now.

But Papa had been adamant that she could only fire it when she felt inspired from above.

*Please inspire me, Father,* she begged.

Would she do it? Would she kill Frederick and those closest to him to protect an entire country? Her stomach churned and her pulse raced. She had to. There was no choice of if she could or would.

“After those innocent lives are obliterated, I feel you'll be ready to bring the weapon to me. If you don't, I'll keep taking out increasingly larger countries, one each day, until you're prepared to be reasonable. Don't worry. I have a large supply of nuclear warheads. I won't run out before you give up the weapon. *Auf wiederershen.*”

The video paused on his ugly face.

Jessie leaned against Zander. He wrapped his arm around her waist and held her up. She was trembling and sweating.

“He'll really ...” She couldn't even put voice to it. How many more would die before that monster was stopped? She had the power to stop him. Her reluctance to kill could not factor into the equation any longer.

Her dad's gaze went from her to Zander and back again. He didn't comment on her leaning into Zander instead of him. His jaw was tight and his blue eyes flickered to the screen in his hands before focusing on her again. “He will kill those people, Jessie. Unless ...”

He didn't have to say it. Unless she was inspired to engage the weapon. She could envision herself going through the correct motions, just as Papa had taught her. She could do it. She had to do it.

She searched in her heart, begged heaven silently. Nothing. She shook her head slowly.

He nodded his understanding, though he obviously had wanted a better answer. Zander said nothing, but his silent support meant a lot.

“We’ve got until tomorrow evening. I’m going to meet with Keith and we’ll get Admiral Seamons and some other contacts we trust on the phone. Maybe this will be the push we need for the military to send in elite special ops.”

He studied them. Zander still had his arm around her. Jessie knew normally her dad would hug her to comfort her, but he only said to Zander, “You’ve got her?”

“Yes, sir,” Zander said.

“Try to rest, love,” he said to Jessie. “Tomorrow is going to be rough. It will all work out ... somehow.” He hurried back to his bedroom.

Tomorrow would be rough. That was an understatement. They were burying Papa, and if she didn’t get the impression to fire the weapon or some elite team didn’t get the go-ahead and complete the mission, King Frederick would kill innocent people.

Zander turned her to him and simply held her. Jessie leaned into him. She was too stressed to even cry.

“What do you need, Jess?” he whispered in her ear.

She needed inspiration from above, the assurance she could fire the weapon when she needed, and ... him.

“Just hold me,” she begged.

“I can do that.”

He held her close, and his strength was the only thing keeping her from falling apart.

If she didn’t fire the weapon soon, King Frederick would nuke an entire country. They didn’t even know which one to warn them.

## Chapter Eight



Zander spent a miserable night trying to rest but thinking about Jess in his arms nonstop but Frederick's nuclear threat lingered as well. He knew he should've stayed in control of himself. He should never have kissed her. Now those earth-shattering kisses were all he could think about and all he wanted to spend his time and energy on.

With King Frederick promising to nuke a small island country, Zander needed to be even more focused on protecting Jess and not distracting her from the inspiration she needed to fire that weapon. The elite special ops teams going after Frederick would be a great option. If they could find him and contain the threat before he fired that nuclear warhead.

Despite the dire situation of the nuclear threat and Frederick, he couldn't stop thinking about Jess. Not as the Secret Keeper, but as the woman he wanted to be with. He'd hated the sadness in her eyes as she said that he could lie to himself but asked him not to lie to her. He wasn't trying to lie to her. Maybe they could have a future, if Frederick was ever taken care of, even though it would be difficult and would require sacrifice on both their parts.

Did she think the only way they could have a future was if he gave up his career? Did she expect him to not go back to being an EOD? Did she have any idea how many different specialty trainings he'd gone through? How many missions he'd accomplished? How many times he'd made a mission successful? How many times he'd risked his life? Being an

EOD and working with these elite SEAL teams was what he was made for.

Or was it? What if he had been trained and worked so hard throughout his career so he could be prepared to protect Jess and help the Delta family save the world? What if he'd been created ultimately to find her and this valley, to love the unreal and irresistible Jessica Delta?

He should be more upset with himself for letting his self-control go and kissing her, especially now that King Frederick's direct threat hung over their heads, but he couldn't dredge that up. Not when he'd loved every minute of their interactions and was struggling not to go experience it all over again. Her firm body pressed against him. Her looking at him with those blue eyes. Her teasing and flirting with him about becoming her handsome prince. Her delicious lips lighting up his world.

He groaned and rolled over in bed again, praying for strength and for some of his control to reappear. He knew he had to be strong right now and focus on keeping her safe. He couldn't worry about the future because, like she said, they might not have one.

His assignment was to be Jess's bodyguard, not her kissing partner. Dang, that sucked, but he had to focus from here on out. Frederick was pushing the conflict into overdrive, and Jess would be at the center of it. This was no time to let down his guard. He'd be by her side to protect her. He'd keep her safe and she would hopefully soon be ready to fire the weapon. Love and soft kisses couldn't be on the mission docket right now.

*Help me be strong*, he prayed again.

The sky finally lightened.

Jess and Maddie were both a little standoffish with him and with each other at breakfast. He wondered if they'd fought last night or if Jess was just mad at anybody saying they shouldn't be together. He loved that fire in her. A fire for him. He could match and surpass that fire. Someday.



*You can lie to yourself ... but don't lie to me.*

All the conflict boiling within him was threatening to burst out. He wanted to throw back his chair, rush around the table, drop to his knees, and declare his devotion to her. Not as the Secret Keeper. As the man who loved Jess Delta.

And he shouldn't even be thinking about that with King Frederick ready to kill thousands of innocent people.

He pushed at his hair. It was all a mess. He was a mess.

He met her dad's gaze over his veggie and bacon omelet and could imagine her father would agree that he should keep his lips off her until everything was settled. If her dad had anything to say about it, he'd probably want Zander's lips off her permanently. Jess was the type of angelic perfection whose family, and especially her dad, would think no one was good enough for. They were right. Zander wanted to prove he could be. That meant shelving the kissing desire. Did Joseph know he'd kissed her? His neck heated, and he took a long drink of orange juice.

Joseph and Holly finished their breakfast quickly and headed out. Joseph was going to meet with Keith and Cap and see what Admiral Seamons and their other contacts had to say about taking out Frederick. He'd asked quietly before breakfast if Jess had felt any impressions yet. She'd only shaken her head no. It was a disappointment, to be sure. Was there a point where Frederick killing an entire island nation took precedence over spiritual insight on when to fire the weapon?

Zander didn't want to second guess Jess or her spiritual intuitiveness. The clock was ticking, though, and the threat was ugly.

He forced his focus back to what was happening right now. Holly was going to deal with final touches for the church service and the graveside service immediately following. The pastor who'd married Hudson and Kelsey had agreed to come up and do a service for the family a little after eleven, then the graveside service about noon, and then they'd have lunch at one.

The family usually went down to church service at ten at Summit Valley, but they wanted everyone to stay close today. Zander hadn't been to church in a while. Once they'd gotten here, they couldn't reveal they were alive by showing up at church. He was often on assignments that had him working on Sundays as if it was any other day of the week. He didn't like it, but there was no way to change it.

Unless he gave it all up to never leave Jess again.

*Stop, please*, he begged his own mind.

Zander was a soldier. It had always been his dream and his purpose in life. He couldn't be getting distracted and let down his focus and guard on the most important mission of his life for a simple kiss.

But that had *not* been a simple kiss. Jess Delta could easily become his world.

He, Maddie, and Jess cleaned up breakfast together, none of them saying much. As they finished loading the dishwasher, Jess put the soap in and started it as Maddie wiped down the counter. Zander stacked the rest of the leftovers in the fridge, then turned back to stare at Jess as she straightened. Simply looking at her made him light up inside. No woman stirred and drew him in like she did. No woman inspired him like she did. He wanted to be there for her and lift her.

Maddie tossed the rag into the sink and faced both of them. "Look," she said. "I'm sorry that I embarrassed and berated you two, but what is happening right now is much bigger than all of us. You know that, right?"

Jess just glared at her. "If I told you to stay away from Braden, would you think that was reasonable because 'this is bigger than all of us'?"

"I would," she came right back with. "If I was the Secret Keeper and it was Braden's job to keep me safe, I personally would want his head on straight to do that. King Frederick is going to kill innocent people if you don't fire that weapon when you're inspired to. Is anything more important at this

moment than you being safe, protecting those people, and ending Frederick's reign of terror?"

"No." Jess shook her head. "You're right." She gnawed at her lip. "But what if I don't get my answer and Frederick kills them and keeps on killing?"

Jess was focused on the inspiration to fire the weapon. As she should be.

"You will," Maddie reassured. "You'll know."

"I don't know anything right now," Jess burst out with. Zander thought she was referring to firing the weapon, but she could be referring to their relationship as well. Jess looked at him, and the despair in her blue eyes ripped at his heart. "I'm a complete mess."

Jess brushed past him, hurried from the room and up the stairs, slamming a door.

Maddie looked at Zander. "I am sorry," she said, and though she was feisty as a rule, it looked like she meant it.

"Me too," he admitted. "But you're right." He nodded, strengthening his own resolve. He had to protect Jess and strengthen her to know that she would get that inspiration and she'd fire the weapon at the right time. "I will focus on her protection. She means the world to me, and even though the world doesn't know it, she has the key to protect everyone."

Maddie nodded. "So you agree this is bigger than all of us? Bigger than your desire for my adorable and sweet sister?"

"I do." If only it didn't hurt so much.

"Thank you." Maddie gave him a watery smile. "She means the world to all of us and Braden promises me you'll protect her with your expert skills and your life, if necessary."

"I will."

She looked him over, and then she abruptly turned and walked through the living room and out the back door.

Zander didn't like that the sisters were fighting on this important day. Because of him. Admiral Delta's graveside

service should take precedence for the family. He and the SEALs would protect them while they grieved. Frederick's horrific threat hung over the valley like a black cloud. He hoped the Delta family could focus on their beloved Papa and their grief. They deserved at least a brief reprieve from the heavy burden they all carried.

Zander went up to the room he was staying in. Each of the SEALs had a duffel bag with them when they came to the valley, but he didn't have any church clothes in it, so he simply used the other bathroom upstairs to wash his face, brush his teeth, and try to style his wavy hair. Then he dressed in a black T-shirt and black pants, strapping on his hip holster and his Sauer P226 and ensuring his knives and utility tools were in his pockets. He worried somebody would try to attack at the graveside and wanted to strap on some heavy weaponry, but his place was next to Jess right now and he didn't want to detract from the service. Cap and the other SEALs would monitor the valley and the entire Sheriff's department was up monitoring the cave. Kelsey's mom Lori had been trained on the cameras and sensors in Admiral Delta's basement. She would monitor them and keep Granny Klein with her during the church service and graveside service. Everything would be fine, until Frederick attacked that island tonight, but Zander was still itching to pick up an A.R.

He left his bedroom and paced in front of the bathroom that Jess had sequestered herself in. It was ten-fifty and they should probably get going before somebody came for them.

The bathroom door clicked and his anticipation immediately amped up. He wondered how he was going to keep his distance when the mere thought of seeing her affected him more than kissing other women had done.

Jess pulled the door open and walked out of the bathroom. She stopped and stared at him, her mouth slightly open as if he looked good to her. That was a laugh compared to how she looked to him.

She was absolutely gorgeous in a black fitted dress that showed off her perfect curves. Her dark hair was curled down her back, her makeup done to perfection, highlighting those

gorgeous blue eyes and those lips ... oh man, he couldn't let himself look at her lips.

He pushed his hand through his hair, messing up the attempt he'd made at styling it.

"Oh, Jess," he said in a far too husky and telling voice. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Her eyes lit up. She looked him over and said, "You're pretty handsome, for a frogman."

He smiled at that, and she bit at her lip. Dang, that wasn't good; it drew his attention there. Sadly, he was still a frogman, not her handsome prince. That was good. Focus on being a frogman. Focus on being a soldier. Focus on being her protector.

His gaze traveled over her face again. What would she do if he pinned her against the wall and kissed her until somebody came to separate them?

*Please somebody help me focus*, he begged heaven. He was sure the good Lord and all His angels were trying, but he had to put forth a little effort himself.

He pushed out a breath, ran his fingers through his hair again, and then managed, "We'd better go before Maddie comes for us."

She lifted her eyebrows, her mouth drawing into a pretty bow of disdain. "My bossy sis. I have to love her, or I'll get kicked out of the family."

He laughed at that. "I doubt you're at any risk of getting booted."

She smiled, and it made him so happy. He eased in closer without realizing he was doing it.

"Jess," he groaned, longing and desire battling with his need to keep his distance and keep his head.

She blinked up at him, so beautiful, so appealing. He shouldn't kiss her, he definitely shouldn't let himself lose control like that right now, but couldn't he hold her like he had last night after they'd seen that horrific video? She would bury

her grandfather today and she could probably use the comfort a hug could give. He'd heard Holly had tracked Cap down yesterday afternoon and given him a hug. It had made him smile, but right now, he wasn't smiling. He was longing to touch his Jess.

A door opened downstairs and they both startled. Footsteps moved through the main level.

Jess gave him a smile that wasn't convincing at all. It looked longing and sad.

He stepped back and she walked in front of him to the stairs. He followed, focused on protecting her.

*Protection. Jess safe. The Delta weapon. Secret Keeper. Stopping Frederick.*

He repeated those words like a mantra as he trailed behind Jess, greeted her brother Colton downstairs, and walked across the lawn on a bright, chilly late-September morning to the church service being held in the pavilion.

He stayed by her side and tried to pretend everything was okay and he wasn't a stirred-up mess inside. Jess was his focus and his mission. It was easy to focus on her, but focusing on any threat coming her way was a little tougher as that meant he had to look away often from her gorgeous, captivating face and body in that fitted black dress.

She shivered and he instinctively wanted to wrap her up tight. Just to keep her warm. He held his ground. Barely.

Pastor Sam talked about the Savior living, atoning for our sins, giving His life on the cross, and then picking it back up for each one of them. He promised that because the Savior lived, Papa Delta would rise again as well.

It was a beautiful sermon. Zander was proud of himself for registering any of the words. Jess's arm brushed against his and he was lost for a few delicious seconds.

The church service was almost over and they were singing Amazing Grace when every Delta family member's phone lit up. Joseph grabbed his phone and stood, striding away from the gathering. Keith rushed after him.

Zander saw the Navy SEAL team converging on them.

The other Deltas pulled their phones out but stayed seated. Pastor Sam looked confused but he kept singing. A few others sang as well, but most dropped off. Jess held her phone where Zander could see.

*Unidentified Lexus ES coming up canyon.*

He leaned in closer and whispered, "Let's make our way to your parents' house, just in case."

It was only a single car and might be some friend of the family intent on disregarding the request to let the family have a private service today, but he wasn't taking any chances. Not with Frederick escalating everything last night and the unsettled feelings churning in his gut.

Jess should change out of her beautiful dress and heels into something she could move easily in and stay warm in. He should grab some extra weapons and the backpacks prepared for them to hide out as long as they needed. He'd added some C4 and detonators to his backpack last night. He wasn't sure what he'd need them for but he wanted to be prepared for anything.

She nodded, and they both stood.

The song stopped abruptly as Joseph and Keith strode back to the gathering. The SEALs spread out again and clutched their A.R.s.

"Forgive us, Pastor Sam," Joseph said easily, but his mouth was tight and his blue eyes worried. "Can you say a quick benediction and then Bailey will escort you to Papa's house and your ride will get ready to take you to the grave? We'll be ready for the graveside service in a few minutes. We just have an unexpected guest coming to say hello." His gaze traveled around the group. Everyone knew their assignments. 'Unexpected guest' meant it wasn't a vehicle from town.

"Um, sure." Pastor Sam probably had a lot of questions tracing through his mind. "Would you like to ... sit for the prayer?"

Keith shook his head and reiterated, "Brief, please."

“Oh.” The pastor bowed his head and said a very brief prayer for peace to be on the family and Papa’s memory to live on in them.

The amen had barely been pronounced when the Delta family members scattered. Zander took Jess’s arm and they speed-walked across the grass. He heard some running footsteps and then motors starting. Some of the family would go intercept the uninvited guest and some would take up defensive positions, while others would probably head for the cave to reinforce the Sheriff’s men.

Jess’s heels sank in the grass with each step, slowing them down. He wanted to sweep her into his arms and run. Would that be out of line? No. It would keep her safe.

“Jess.” Zander tugged her to a stop, then bent down and plucked her off the ground and easily secured her alluring, perfect, irresistible body against his chest and in his arms. The breath whooshed out of him.

*Protection. Jess safe. The Delta weapon. Secret Keeper. Stopping Frederick.*

He tried to repeat his mantra, but he was far too distracted right now.

She clung to him, her blue eyes lighting up with a desire that he felt reflected inside him.

“Demo, go!” Aiden commanded from behind him.

The barking command was exactly what he needed. He took off at a fast jog, eating up the distance to her parents’ house.

They reached the back door and he forced himself to set her on her feet, release her, and yank open the door. She hurried inside. He glanced over his shoulder and could see across the distance the silver Lexus with trucks and SUVs blocking its way into the valley. Who was it? What did this mean for them? It was only a single vehicle, but no matter how small or big the threat, he wasn’t taking chances with Jess.

He had to focus on his mission. Protect Jess. It disturbed him that he’d lost concentration so easily. Picking her up had



to be off the docket.

Jess hurried through the main area ahead of him. Zander shut the door and took off after her. He would strap on a couple of A.R.s, in case Jess needed one too at some point, and a weapon belt, then he'd grab the backpacks. The backpacks had handguns and extra bullets, plus his explosives.

His walkie-talkie buzzed as he reached the top landing. He could hear Jess's phone ring as well. He pushed the button. "Povey."

"Keith is asking that you and Jess come to the graveside service not to arouse suspicion," Cap said.

"Who's here?" he demanded.

"Admiral Seamons."

Zander's gut turned over. Admiral Seamons. One of Davidson Delta's close friends, their top ally right now, and a two-star Admiral based out of Great Lakes Naval Station. The threat dissipated. But what was he doing here? He was Kylee's grandfather and his wife had hosted King Frederick in their home. He'd taken two bullets, one to protect Kylee and one to protect Braden and Maddie, and he'd given them the zip drive. That screamed loyalty, but there were red flags with him showing up right now. It felt like a premonition of bad things coming their way. It would be interesting to see how he reacted to the elite SEAL team who'd been proclaimed MIA after their Blackhawk "crashed" in a meadow up by the cave being alive, heavily armed, and patrolling the valley.

Zander looked through his open bedroom door and out the window that overlooked the lake and forest beyond. He searched the sky, but it was bright blue and clear. No Blackhawks descending. Yet.

"He's alone," Cap's voice said on the radio.

That made no sense. No bodyguard? Seamons was a target just like the rest of them.

"Out," Cap added.

Zander pocketed the walkie talkie and waited outside Jess's closed bedroom door. He could hear her talking. She sounded upset.

"Papa trusted him," she insisted.

A pause.

"Braden promises he's good."

Another pause.

"Okay. I'll meet you at the graveside."

There was silence. He rested his shoulder against the wall and waited impatiently. Was Jess okay? It was a stressful emotional roller coaster. From the abrupt instructions to get out of here to everyone asking them to stay. He agreed it would be suspicious if Jess wasn't at the graveside service. But if he felt one premonition of danger from Admiral Seamons, or if the sensors or cameras were tripped again with anyone else approaching, he would take Jess and they would disappear. Even if he had to carry her and somehow keep a clear head.

His mind wandered briefly to holding her in his arms last night. The intensity of her kiss. The love he felt for her.

Love? Was he seriously thinking that word?

Her door opened and just like earlier today, he lost every sane thought and could only focus on the woman standing there. Love? Heck yeah, he could love her for the rest of his days and never complain.

Luckily for her own protection, her eyes were clear and focused. She didn't appear to be wandering back to sweet kisses like he was struggling with. "You heard it was Seamons?"

"Yeah. They want us to stay and not arouse suspicion."

She nodded.

"But Jess ... if anybody else comes, we're gone."

"Okay." She straightened her shoulders and looked as brave, classy, and strong as any woman he'd ever seen.

“You trust Admiral Seamons?” he asked, referring to her phone conversation that he’d overheard.

“I do,” she said. “What do you think of him?”

“I’ve only rarely interacted with him over the years, but I’ve always been impressed with him. Braden trusts him and for me, that’s enough.”

“Papa trusted him, and for me, that’s enough.”

“All right. Let’s head back out, then.”

She strode past him. He wished they could be alone and talk more, but there were too many pressing issues at the moment. He hoped those who trusted Admiral Seamons, including him and Jess, were correct. He hoped Frederick could be stopped before he set off a nuclear weapon at midnight tonight. He hoped he could keep Jess safe.

*Protection. Jess safe. The Delta weapon. Secret Keeper. Stopping Frederick.*

That was what mattered right now. But the whiff of sweet peaches and cream that he got as he followed Jess and held the exterior door for her, and the beautiful smile she gave him before they walked out, were powerful. This woman could easily distract him and have every power over him. If she was safe and the world wasn’t in mortal peril, he’d be happy to give her that power and be distracted by her every moment of the day.

Right now, it was time for the most important mission of his life.

*Protection. Jess safe. The Delta weapon. Secret Keeper. Stopping Frederick.*

Hooyah.

## Chapter Nine



Jessie attempted to climb into the back of Greer's Razor as Zander held the door for her. It was more than a little awkward in the fitted dress and three-inch heels. It might be impossible without ripping her dress.

Zander pushed his hip against the door, swept her off her feet, and lifted her into the seat. Luckily he didn't pull her tight against his chest like he had earlier today, robbing her of all conscious thought and filling her with a sweet ache that only he could satiate.

Their gazes met and got tangled and she willed him to lean down and just give her one soft kiss. There was so much pressure, angst, and sadness surrounding her. She wanted to escape into his arms for a minute and forget it all. His dark gaze was full of the longing and conflict she felt tugging at her insides.

Is this what forbidden love felt like? That seemed far too dramatic, but Jessie's entire life was far too dramatic at the moment. The only thing that felt safe, real, solid, and at the same time deliciously enticing, was Zander.

"Ready?" Greer asked from the driver's seat. Emery was already strapped into the five-point harness.

"Yep." Zander released her, shut the door, and hurried around to climb in.

She fumbled to secure the too-tight seatbelt that went over her chest and lap. It seemed overkill anyway. They were just going around the lake and up into the meadow where Granny

was buried, not on some fun off-road adventure. Fun wasn't part of life right now. Except for when Zander teased with her or touched her. No mountain bike ride, ski slope, or Razor off-roading adventure could compare to that high.

Zander climbed in and then his hands were suddenly on hers. She caught her breath. He wasn't looking at her, which helped her not throw good sense into the forest and kiss him. As he loosened the straps and then secured them over her shoulders and buckled the upper straps into the lower at her waist, his fingers brushed against her several times. Despite the thickness of her black velvet dress, she could feel his touch and got warm all over.

Greer started the engine and moved into the line of the funeral procession. Everyone was either in side-by-sides like the Razor or on dirt bikes. Hudson, Kelsey, and Mo were all on Papa's Honda 450 CR dirt bike. It was adorable with Mo sitting in front of Hudson and Kelsey hugging Hudson from the back. Papa's casket was at the front in a cool glass-covered trailer attached to the back of Uncle Keith's silver and white Can-Am Maverick. Her parents were in the backseat. That sight wasn't happy like Hudson's little family.

Jessie drew in a breath and could finally shift her focus from her too-prevalent thoughts of Zander and her worries over the weapon and Frederick's evil threats to her Papa.

It stunk that everything was in such upheaval they hadn't really mourned Papa. She felt a sting of guilt that she'd been so obsessed with Zander. She hadn't focused on her Papa, his life and legacy and all the wonderful memories and love she had for him. The weight of the world had settled on her shoulders in the past week since he'd died. Papa had shouldered it for decades, all the while worrying about his growing family and how to teach and protect each of them.

No one spoke as they motored with the funeral procession along the east bank of the lake and then up a mountain trail.

She knew two of the SEALs were staying in the valley to patrol, but the other two were at the back of the line in Thor's

new two-person Yamaha Wolverine. A wedding present for himself, he'd joked.

The beauty of the thick forest was lost on her. Some of the leaves had fallen, but there was still a lot of red, orange, and yellow amongst the green of the pines.

They reached the clearing and everyone slowly found a place to park and disembarked. Greer and Zander both hurried around, opened their doors, and lifted Emery and Jessie out of the vehicle. These vehicles were not built for formalwear. Jessie did all she could not to get distracted by Zander's warm, strong touch or his clean, masculine scent.

He looked down at her, and she was amazed by him. He was the perfect hero in her mind. Gently setting her feet on the ground, he kept one arm around her and escorted her over the uneven forest floor toward the gravesite. She appreciated his strength and support and did all she could to not get lost in his touch and shock the entire family, and tick off Maddie again, by turning into him and kissing him.

They approached the site and then Zander released her. She tottered on her heels but steadied herself. He stood respectfully by her side.

She looked over the headstone Papa had made when Granny passed. It was a beautiful gray marble that sparkled in the dappled sunlight coming through the trees. It had both of their names on it, Granny's on her side, Rachel Bradford Delta, and Papa's on his side, Admiral Davidson Delta. Birth dates and death dates and their wedding date.

Papa's death date wasn't burned in professionally like the rest of the dates. Someone had come up here and chiseled it in by hand. Jessie wondered who. She loved it. It was raw and imperfect and spoke of deep love and devotion.

Granny's burial spot was covered with thick, wild grass. Papa's yawned wide open. That hurt. She wasn't ready to have her Papa settled into the dirt. But he was gone, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Jessie looked around at her family, so many people she loved and who loved her back. She was thankful for them, even more so now that Papa was gone. Any of these people could be gone tomorrow, especially with the danger surrounding their family right now.

Pastor Sam walked up next to the grave as her dad, Uncle Keith, Colt, and her male cousins easily lifted the casket and carried it over to the stand next to the grave. Today's service would be simple. They all hoped that when they did the public memorial service, they could have the honors of a fly-by the military had offered and the presenting of the flag to her dad and Uncle Keith, but for today Aiden would perform the three-volley salute and it was enough that the family was all here.

Admiral Seamons stood by Kylee and Chandler. He was in his black Admiral uniform with his right arm in a sling and crutches resting against the tree behind him. He'd gone through a lot lately.

He noticed her and gave her a very solemn look and a nod. It was right that he was here, even if it had caused some stress. If Papa trusted him and Braden trusted him and it looked like Kylee had reconciled with him, Jessie would trust him and be grateful he was here for them at such a time.

None of the family or SEALs would reveal she was Secret Keeper. Even though she trusted the Admiral, she'd keep her distance while he was here to avoid something slipping out in any conversation with her family or him.

"Joseph and Keith have requested that the casket be opened so you can each say your final goodbyes," Pastor Sam began. "Then I will close the casket and Joseph will say a prayer on behalf of the family, after which I will say a few words. Holly and Myrna will sing *The Wind Beneath my Wings*, and Keith will then dedicate the grave."

He stepped over and lifted the front of the casket's lid. Jessie felt ... unsteady. She hadn't seen Papa since he'd passed that awful morning. She knew the body had been prepared and the casket had waited at Uncle Keith and Aunt Myrna's. She imagined most of her family members had gone to have a

private moment, but she hadn't. She could justify that she'd been busy, but truthfully, she hadn't been ready.

Other members of the family approached the casket, said their quiet goodbyes, and moved over for someone else. The only one she saw who didn't walk away with tears streaming down their face was Greer. She smiled at that. Greer was so tough he'd probably never cried in his life.

It was solemn in the clearing. Only the twittering of birds, shuffling footsteps, and sniffles broke the silence. She realized that almost everyone had said their goodbyes. Zander moved closer and touched her elbow. "Jess? Do you want me to come with you?"

She looked up at him, his dark gaze full of concern for her, and nodded her acceptance and appreciation of his offer.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and slowly escorted her across the small clearing. He released her as she hugged her uncle and aunt, then her mom and dad. Then her dad kept his arm around her and directed her toward the casket.

Her breath caught as she stared down at Papa. He looked good, but weird. Not himself yet exactly like himself. His skin was taut and his eyes closed, his hands resting over his abdomen. He was in his dress whites, medals decorating the chest of his uniform, crisp and clean and regal and so Papa.

Jessie stared at him. Tears wet her cheeks, and she bit at her lip to stay in control. What was there to say? How could she say goodbye to the man who'd loved, protected, and taught her all her life? She'd always appreciated and looked up to him, but now more than ever she knew what he'd gone through for all of them and to protect a weapon he'd agreed to protect with his life. Like her, he hadn't asked for it.

"I love you, Papa," she managed to get out. Her dad hugged her tighter, but she focused on her grandfather's beloved face. "Thank you. Thank you for teaching me, seeing the best in me, challenging me, loving me..." A sob wrenched out of her throat and she could say no more.



Her dad turned her into him and held her. She clung to him, wet his suit coat with tears, and wondered how she'd get through this pain.

A warmth washed over her. Her dad's hug, or her Papa watching over her like he'd promised, or the love of all her family members being around her and praying for her and lifting her? It was probably a combination of all of the above.

She lifted her head and gave her dad a kiss on the cheek.

"Love you, my girl," he said.

"I love you."

She pulled back and let her gaze sweep around the family. So many blue eyes, and a few brown and green. All loving her, supporting her, looking to her.

*The first shall be the last and the last shall be the first.*

The scripture that Colt had quoted when the family had found out she was Secret Keeper came so clearly to her mind that she startled, but then she focused on Zander. His deep-brown eyes told her she had this and he would stand by her side. She could lead the family, even though she was the least of them.

Power surged through her. Power from on high. Soon she'd have the impression to fire the weapon. She'd been afraid, uncertain if she could kill Frederick and others, but she knew now that Papa was right. Better to kill Frederick than to let thousands or possibly millions of innocent people be murdered. She didn't want to kill, but she could. She was strong enough. She was brave enough. She had Zander to protect, lift, and comfort her. She had her family all praying for her, fighting for her, and watching her back.

A warm wind swept through the trees, and it seemed to propel her back to Zander. He reached out his hand and she clasped hers in it. The strength of his hand and the warmth of his palm against hers gave her support and steadied her.

They slowly walked back to their spot as her uncle, aunt, dad, and mom each said their goodbyes. The pastor solemnly closed the casket and her dad gave a touching and simple

prayer, a prayer of gratitude and love for Papa, for their Savior, and for this family.

The amens rang throughout the clearing.

Jessie prayed no one would dare interrupt this sacred moment.

Her mom and Aunt Myrna stepped forward and sang the haunting but beautiful *Wind Beneath my Wings*. Tears traced down their beautiful faces, and they wrapped an arm around each other's backs as if to steady and support, but Jessie saw it also as a unity. Her mom and aunt were incredible women. They hadn't known what they were getting into when they married a handsome Delta man, but they'd risen to the occasion and could fight alongside their men and had raised their children to be tough, righteous, hard-working, and filled with faith and love. Papa had adored his daughters-in-law and treated them as his own. And they were. These women were Deltas.

Jessie looked around at the group. All the in-laws and future in-laws were Deltas all the way through. They'd each added strength, variety, and love to the family and the Protection Detail. They'd each give anything and everything to protect her, the weapon, and the family.

Zander squeezed her hand, and she couldn't resist looking at his handsome face. He and the SEAL team had sacrificed deeply to support their family. Could he be a Delta? Her cheeks heated, and she looked away.

The song finished with the touching, "Thank God for you, the wind beneath my wings."

There wasn't a dry cheek amongst the Deltas. Jessie even caught Greer knocking his fists against the corner of his eyes.

It was a fitting song. Papa had been the wind beneath their wings, and now he would be from the other side. With Zander close and Papa lifting her, Jessie would do whatever needed to be done. A soft and warm wind passed over the group.

The pastor's words were filled with faith and hope. Jessie would need a lot of both to get through whatever was coming.

She both dreaded and welcomed it. She was ready to be in the fight, sweating and working hard and focused on winning. Not a win for herself but for all mankind.

Uncle Keith said a benediction and then Aiden shot off the three-volley salute with Papa's favorite Winchester 1895. She clung to Zander's hand, and a current went through her. She looked over at him. He was staring steadily at her as if she'd made the warm current happen and he'd felt it as well.

"You okay?" he mouthed.

She could only shrug. Was she okay? Not really. But at least she didn't want to run screaming and hide under her bed. She was strong. Strong enough to stop Frederick and do what needed to be done.

Zander had his hand covering hers. Her family had her back. Papa was watching from heaven. She would stop Frederick from killing those people.

Now she just needed that inspiration from heaven that it was time to head for the cave. Papa had been adamant she couldn't fire the weapon until she felt it.

*Please help me feel it soon.*

She couldn't let those people die.

## Chapter Ten



Zander had felt something spark between him and Jess at the end of the funeral service. It had traced through their hands. He'd mouthed if she was okay and she'd only shrugged, but there was something different in her eyes. He'd seen it in the eyes of soldiers going into battle. Soldiers who were prepared and determined. They would succeed or die trying. It scared him to see that in Jess's blue gaze. Was the battle coming? What if she was killed? He would not allow that to happen. The only way Jess was dying was a nuclear explosion or some other bomb that took them both out, or if there was no breath left in his body to fight. He tightened his resolve and his grip on her hand. He wanted to love her, but he would protect her and see her through this first.

*Protection. Jess safe. The Delta weapon. Secret Keeper. Stopping Frederick.*

They solemnly left the gravesite and rode back to the valley. He was relieved nothing had happened and nobody had tried to attack during the service. The Delta family deserved at least that much of a reprieve. Actually, they deserved much more. This family should be given the Navy Cross, if not the Medal of Honor. Selfless service with no thought of reward was deeply embedded in each of them.

He glanced over at Jess as they walked hand in hand to the lunch at Papa's house. She'd wrenched his heart and impressed him at the graveside service. She was a strong woman. He didn't think she even knew how strong. He planned to protect, help, and support her, but he knew she

could and would accomplish whatever was required of her, with or without him.

The lunch after the service was delicious, and the family seemed to relax and resorted to some of their former humor and jokes. Thor and Aiden kept everyone laughing, reciting Papa's favorite jokes and taking shots at each other. Admiral Seamons seemed comfortable with the family, happy to be close to Kylee and Chandler, and everyone appeared to welcome him.

The dinner was over and everyone pitched in to clean up when Admiral Seamons approached Jess and Zander, lumbering forward on his crutches.

"Jessie," he said, steadying himself on one crutch and opening his other arm to her.

Jess gave him a quick hug, then stepped back to Zander. Zander automatically put his arm around her, hoping to support her or give her whatever else she needed.

The admiral was generally serious, but he gave Jess a smile like a loving uncle. "Davidson was always so proud of you."

"Thank you." She tilted her chin up. "I was proud of him, too."

"As you should be. One of the best men I've ever known." He looked properly solemn.

There was a pause and then Seamons leaned in a little closer. "If you need anything, Jessie, anything, I'm here to help."

She studied him.

"I have the connections and the power to protect the weapon, stop King Frederick, and whatever else the Delta family needs."

"I'm sure my dad and Uncle Keith will be happy to have the support," she said smoothly.

Zander tensed. His neck prickled. Her words were spot on. Why was the admiral offering help to Jess, the youngest in the

family? Did he somehow know she was Secret Keeper? Would Chandler or Kylee have entrusted him with that secret? They all claimed to trust Admiral Seamons, but everyone was so protective of Jess he didn't know that even the Sheriff's men, who had been admirably committed to the protection detail and the family, knew Jess was the Secret Keeper.

"Of course. I've already told them the same, and most of your siblings and cousins. I just wanted to make sure you knew as well." It was a good cover. Was it a cover? Zander was being overly protective of Jess, and Frederick's ticking time bomb was hanging over their heads, so everything and everyone outside the immediate trusted circle raised suspicion for him.

"Thank you, Admiral. It means a lot that you're here."

"There's nowhere else in the world I'd want to be." His dark eyes looked sincere, but Zander had some concerns.

"Who knows you're here?" Zander heard himself demand.

Admiral Seamons finally looked at him. "Chief Petty Officer Zander Povey, Master EOD." He listed out Zander's full title like a proud uncle. "It's wonderful to see you alive, son. You and your SEAL team accomplices have caused quite a stir."

Zander studied him, weighing his words before responding, "As you can see, sir, Admiral Delta's mission and his family's protection is where our allegiance lies."

Seamons looked from Jessie to him and arched an eyebrow. "I *can* see that."

He was obviously thinking Zander was overstepping bounds. Zander didn't need his approval, and he wanted to make sure the man knew, "And we would all prefer we stayed dead for the time being."

He offered a partial smile. "I can imagine. Your secret's safe with me, son."

"Thank you." Zander bobbed his head. He should probably salute, but it didn't seem like Seamons cared.

“And to answer your question, no one knows I’m here, Chief Povey. I’ve got a friend masquerading as me at the Chicago Retreat Center. All that stress surrounding my wife’s betrayal and arrest and being shot twice finally got to me.” He winked and stood tall despite the crutches.

Zander had to admit ... he was impressed. And he prayed, like everyone else, that Seamons was on their side. The man had taken two bullets to prove it. “Thank you, sir,” he said, and he did salute.

“None of that, son. We’re all friends here.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” Jess said, and it sounded like she trusted Seamons fully as well.

“Excuse me,” he said, lumbering over to talk to Braden and Maddie.

Braden’s face lit up as his admiral approached. It was another vote for Seamons in Zander’s mind. He’d never known Braden to be wrong about a person’s true intentions.

He looked at Jess.

“We’re trusting the admiral,” she said firmly.

“I’m with you.”

“That’s what I need.” She smiled at him and he wanted to be all she needed. Her beautiful face looked drained and her eyes were red-rimmed.

“Did you sleep last night?” he asked, checking to see if this was emotional exhaustion or more.

“Not really.” She grimaced. “You try sleeping with a nuclear threat hanging over you, in a bed with your sister who’s mad at you, and after an unreal kiss that you’ll *never* get out of your head.”

His stomach swirled with heat at the mention of their kiss. Someday. Oh, how he hoped someday.

“Let’s go back to your house. You need to take a nap.”

“Really? You’re commanding me around now, Mr. Bodyguard?”

He smiled, liking her sass coming out. “Yes, I am. I have to protect you from everything and everyone, including lack of sleep.” He didn’t add that she needed peace and quiet to feel the promptings of the spirit telling her to head to the cave. It had to be soon. It just had to. Zander had dedicated his life to fighting for and protecting the innocent. He couldn’t handle the thought of Frederick blowing up an entire nation island.

“I need to help clean up,” she said.

“Really?” He gestured around at the family who was making short work of any leftovers, dishes, and already had the temporary tables and plastic chairs cleared out of the large living room. “Let’s go.”

He didn’t give her a chance to protest. He took her hand and she let him lead her through the living room and toward the front entry.

Her mom stood in the entry talking quietly with Emery and Greer. “There’s my beauty,” she said when she saw Jess, and enfolded her daughter in her arms. “How are you holding up, love?”

“I’m okay. How are you, beautiful Mama?”

Her mom shrugged, lowered her voice, and asked, “Is it time?”

Jess shook her head. Zander felt the disappointment that was reflected in her mom’s face. If she didn’t feel the prompting soon, they’d need to at least head closer to the cave so when she felt it they could move quick and stop all of those people being killed.

Zander released her hand and turned to Emery and Greer as Jess and her mom quietly conversed.

Greer offered his hand, and Zander shook it. “Thanks,” he grunted out.

“For?” Zander cocked his head to the side, appraising the large cowboy. He had to be over six-five and he was fit. Zander could hold his own with any man, but this guy might be a challenge.



Greer's wife, Emery, laughed. "He's the strong, silent type. He's thanking you for giving up your life, your family, and all your hard-earned military advancements to be here for all of us, and especially for Jessie. We honor, admire, respect, exalt, commend, applaud, praise, and revere you for your service to the Deltas, your country, and the Navy, Chief Petty Officer Povey."

"Thank you," he said, humbled by her quick speech. What was with all the synonyms?

"All of that," Greer said, grinning down at his wife as if she were the most perfect human on the planet.

Zander couldn't help but smile at the two of them. "You really don't like to talk?" he asked Greer, intrigued by the cowboy and his adorable wife. He'd heard they had quite the story of him killing her only brother to protect Alivia and Klein and then somehow falling in love when Emery came to avenge her brother's death.

"Nope," Greer said.

Emery cuddled into his side and he wrapped her up tight. She was tiny compared to him. They looked great together. He found himself wondering how he and Jess looked together. Then remembered he shouldn't be thinking about that right now.

"It all works out perfectly," Emery said. "Because I can talk the hind leg off a mule, plus I'm an expert on the English language and know more synonyms than anyone you've ever met. In addition I like, love, revere, respect, and adore this tough, silent, perfect cowboy of mine."

Greer leaned down to kiss her and Zander thought he should probably give them some space. He edged closer to Jess.

Her mom released her as soon as she noticed Zander. "Oh, come on, handsome, give me that smile of yours. I could use one about now."

Zander smiled, and he hoped he made it a good one.

Holly grinned back and then tears formed in her eyes and she hugged him fiercely around the middle. Zander patted her on the back, hoping she was okay. This was a rough day for a family this committed to each other and to a higher cause. Losing their patriarch and the awful threat from Frederick. Everybody had to step up and lead out, yet somehow stay unified and not mess up anybody else's role. They worked well together, but he knew the challenges were only going to get more fierce. In the heat of battle, could they all stay true to their purpose and not let the enemy through when they loved each other so much they might get distracted by that? There was the reason, once again, he needed to be in control of himself around Jess. But this family would probably astonish him in battle because they were selflessly fighting for each other and for their country. It was something to think about.

“Take care of her,” she whispered into his neck, her voice filled with emotion.

“I will.” He looked down at her mom. “I promise you, Mama Delta. I will give my life for her. Nothing will happen to Jess unless my body is scattered in pieces across the valley.”

Her eyes widened and he heard Jess say, “That was a little extreme.”

He looked over at her, hoping she could read his sincerity. “And it's true.”

Jess's blue eyes were solemn. He wasn't sure if she appreciated his declaration, if it worried her, or if she was going to tell him off and kiss him soon. The latter sounded great.

Her mom hugged him tighter, and he returned it. Then she released him and wiped at her eyes.

“We're going to rest,” Jess told her. “Pray for me to know.”

“All of us will,” her mom assured them. She started crying again. Zander had no idea how hard it would be to let your innocent daughter have this kind of responsibility thrust upon her. Holly Delta was tough, but this had to be overwhelming.

She shooed them with her hands as she seemed unable to talk anymore.

Zander waved to Greer and Emery, who were thankfully done kissing, and then put his hand on Jess's back and escorted her out the tall front door.

They walked quietly across the porch and along the sidewalk that connected Papa's house with Joseph and Holly's. It was probably much easier walking for Jessie with her heels on the concrete, but it didn't give him any opportunity to pick her up and carry her. Oh, wait. He wasn't supposed to do that any longer, so the sidewalk was a good thing. Not very fun though.

"Wait up, Jess, Demo," Aiden's voice carried from Papa's house.

They both spun and watched as the tough SEAL ran to them. Zander liked that Aiden had adopted his nickname. His blue eyes were ultra-serious right now. He got in close, real close, and stared at Jess.

"I just got word from my CO and Seamons has confirmed it ... SEAL Team 6 and Delta Force were deployed to find Frederick and his top leaders after Admiral Seamons was able to pull some strings and the President watched the video threat from Frederick."

Zander's eyes widened. That was fabulous news. SEAL Team 6 and Delta Force were unarguably the most elite, well-trained, and battle-tested warriors on earth. He'd worked with both teams and had been blown away by their precision, skill, focus, and trust in each other. Finally, the President had decided to take action. What a relief.

He looked at Jess. Her blue eyes lit up and he could see the burden being lifted. She threw her arms around her cousin's neck. "Aiden, that's absolutely wonderful! How long do you think until we know he's been apprehended and won't kill all the people on that island?"

Aiden didn't return her happiness or her smile. He gently pulled her back and focused in on her. "Jessie. It's not good

news. SEAL Team 6 reports that they cannot find Frederick or his leaders anywhere they are supposed to be. Falsified information and reports from what should be secure sources.”

Zander’s stomach took a nosedive and Jess’s beautiful mouth turned down.

“Even worse, they fear Delta Force is lost. They haven’t reported in since early this morning. Hopefully just ... out of service or needing radio silence ...” He shrugged, obviously fearing the worst.

The hit of disappointment made Zander’s gut churn and his body feel weak. He saw worse reflected in Jess’s blue eyes. If Frederick was taken out, they could hopefully root out the traitors and not have his mercenaries or their own military after the weapon. The Deltas could be safe, and Zander and Jess could have a chance to be together.

“I’m sorry, Jessie.” Aiden gave her a quick hug. “Dad thought you needed to know ... Jessie, we can consider other alternatives. There’s still time—”

“No, there isn’t,” Jess cut him off, standing tall even though Zander and Aiden both towered over her. “I will be inspired when to fire the weapon, Zander will be by my side to help me all he can, and Frederick will be stopped.”

Aiden’s blue eyes filled with respect and hope. “Then you’ve felt ...” Aiden wanted her to go fire the weapon right now. Zander could relate. It was almost a two-hour ride on dirt bikes or in a side-by-side to the cave. Well before nine p.m., they would have to head that direction and pray that the inspiration came to her. Those people couldn’t die when Jess could stop them. Heaven wouldn’t let that happen. Right?

“Not yet.” She shook her head. “Pray for me.”

“Always.”

Aiden’s blue eyes were disappointed but still determined. He nodded to them and then turned and jogged back to Papa’s.

They stood there for a few seconds. “You okay?” Zander asked.

“I doubt I’ll sleep, but I need to change and maybe just lay down and pray and think for a bit,” she said, forcing a small smile.

He nodded. “Anything you need, Jess ... I’m here.”

Their gazes met and got tangled. She didn’t say anything, but he could see the instant her thoughts turned from worrying about when to fire the weapon and the weight of the world and protection of some unknown island on her shoulders to a deep desire to be in his arms and kiss him and forget this nightmare for a few wonderful minutes.

His stomach flip-flopped and his chest grew warm. He wanted her kiss and the connection with her with a burning need, but they had to get through tonight first. He needed to get her inside and lying down, and he needed to do some meditation or something. Where was Preach? Zander could beg him to give him a sermon about self-control, higher purposes, and trusting in heaven’s timing.

Zander took her elbow and escorted her up the stairs and across the porch. She didn’t say anything.

Entering her parents’ house, they walked through the foyer and up the grand staircase. He stopped outside her bedroom door. “Why don’t you change, then I’ll come watch over you.” He hated to have her take off that soft, fitted black dress, but she needed to be comfortable and they both needed to be prepared. Even if she didn’t get the prompting, they needed to be close to the cave well before midnight.

Her eyebrows rose. “You’re going to watch me ... sleep?”

“It worked for Edward and Bella.”

“Excuse me?” Her brow wrinkled. “Did you just reference *Twilight*?”

“Well, it was a very desolate base. And there was only one book anywhere in camp.” He should’ve been embarrassed to admit he’d read that, but it had been a fun distraction and he could admit anything to her. Anything but how much he wanted to hold and kiss her right now.

She laughed. It was great to hear her laugh. “My tough military stud. Reading *Twilight*. When I tell Cap ...”

“Oh, no!” He laughed but a dart of concern raced through him. “If you tell Cap, I’ll ...” He couldn’t think of a threat. He never wanted to threaten her, but he had to follow through with the tease, and he really didn’t want Cap knowing he’d read that. “I’ll dunk you in that ice cold lake.”

“You’re coming in with me,” she teased.

“That actually sounds kind of fun.”

She shivered, still grinning, but then her blue eyes deepened. “So now you’re going to just ... watch me rest?”

“Oh yeah.” He was embarrassed by how husky his voice got. “I can’t imagine anything I’d like better.” He’d like kissing her better, but that had to wait. Right? The second he was alone with her and she focused those blue eyes on him, all his lofty ideals slipped quick.

He’d always been black and white—do things right and stay loyal and true no matter what. He supposed kissing the irresistible Jess didn’t constitute as a moral failure, but he wanted to stay in control and keep her safe, no matter how it strained him.

“It was awkward reading about Edward watching Bella sleep.” She winked. “Let’s not go there. Maybe you should lay down and rest too.”

“I don’t know about that.” Lying down anywhere close to her would not let him rest for a second.

“Did you sleep last night?” She folded her arms across her chest and gave him an impertinent look.

“Not really,” he admitted. He shouldn’t have done it, but he stepped closer and trailed his fingers along her smooth neck, brushing her long hair back. She trembled under his touch and gazed up at him. “I was too stirred up thinking about a kiss with the most incredible woman I’ve ever met.”

The warmth and appeal in her blue eyes about took his legs out from under him. He stayed steady and luckily didn’t fall to

his knees and beg for her to have mercy on his heart. But he did find himself bending down low and softly kissing the thrumming pulse point in her neck.

She moaned, wrapped her arms around his neck, and tilted her head, giving him access to that smooth, lovely neck and all the way up to her face. Self-control? He didn't need to be in control every minute. They were safe here, all the Deltas watching over them, as well as his favorite SEAL team, and sensors and cameras placed all over the valley and in the main areas of each home.

What did it matter if he kissed his way up her neck, across her jawline, her cheek, and then captured those perfect lips with his? Who needed rest? Kissing her would energize him and make him even more committed to her safety. They could kiss the hours away until someone interrupted them, she said it was time to head to the cave, nine o'clock came, the Delta alarm engaged on her phone, or Cap screeched through his walkie-talkie at him.

He slowly kissed her neck, trailing his way up inch by inch, wrapping his hands around her lower back and pulling her body flush to his. She moaned again, threaded her fingers into his hair and massaged his scalp. Tingles pulsed through his head and Jess was the only person who existed in his world. He knew he was lost and in deep, deep trouble. He'd never felt this way. It was incredible, exhilarating, mind-blowing.

He reached her jawline and then her cheek. He edged his way toward her lips, anticipation and hunger filling him. Just a brief sample of her lips and he'd let her rest. Only a taste.

Right before their lips connected, he raised his eyes to hers. What he saw there hit him like a Halligan bar breaching a door. Complete and utter trust. The purest trust he'd ever seen in his life. Jess trusted him to protect her, love her, do the right thing for her and for the rest of the world.

He felt weak, weaker than he ever had in his life. Kissing her might not be wrong, but it could *not* consume him right

now. If he let this go any longer, he'd be consumed and might damage her trust.

He wanted to fully earn the trust that she already seemed to have in him, and he had to keep his own promises to stay strong and protect her. If he kissed her right now with all the passion coursing through him, he might take things too far, ruin her beautiful innocence and trust in him, and he'd never forgive himself.

Straightening, he had to slowly release each finger from his grip on her. She swayed on her heels and suddenly looked confused, lost, and much younger than she ever had. She was so innocent and good. He had to be careful not to lose his head around her. Especially because she needed heaven's inspiration so desperately right now. Maddie was sadly right. This was so much bigger than his selfish need to kiss Jess and grow closer to his dream woman.

He gave her a smile that he didn't feel at all and said softly, "Go change, Jess. You need to rest."

She swallowed, and he barely held himself back from kissing that enticing neck again. Had anything been so hard as this? He'd go through BUD/S training again rather than keep denying himself meeting her lips.

"What just happened, Zander?"

He drew in a breath. He could try to play it off as she was tired, he was tired, but she trusted him and he wanted to be straight with her. She'd told him not to lie to her.

"You are so incredibly appealing to me," he said in a gravelly voice that hurt his throat. "If I kiss you right now, I don't know how I'll ever stop." He looked her over and the blood started roaring in his ears again. Never stopping sounded just about right.

"You have to focus on my protection, not on me." Her voice was sad and hurt him almost as much as pulling away had.

"Yes, but I also have to keep you pure and show my respect and devotion to you. I can't do anything that would



damage your ability to know when to fire the weapon or your trust in me.”

As he said the words, he felt strengthened. He could do this. It would be torture, but he could keep her safe and stay strong. Heaven above would help him.

She studied him and then she nodded. Turning, she walked toward the closet.

He hurried to step back and shut the door, leaning against the wall and trying not to listen to her changing her clothes. He clenched his fists and prayed for help.

Her soft foot treads approached the door, and she opened it. She looked just as appealing in a fitted, long-sleeved running shirt and pants as she had in that incredible dress.

“Come on in and ... watch me, Edward. I won’t make you use the window.”

Zander’s breath rushed out. He wanted to do a lot more than watch her. “I like scaling walls,” he teased, grinning and winking at her, hoping his unsteady voice didn’t betray him.

She half-laughed and then lifted her hands as if in surrender. “I wish you’d rest too, but I don’t think I can bend your will on that any more than I can force you to kiss me again.”

His eyes widened. Did she have to go there? He’d been doing ... well, not good, but semi-okay being strong. “Don’t try to push a frogman around, ma’am. It will end badly for you.”

“My frogman won’t be pushed, no matter how badly his princess wants to keep kissing him and turn him into her prince.” She fluttered her eyelashes, and he knew she was only teasing, but every time she brought up kissing, his stomach heated and his entire body tightened in response.

“Princes are overrated.” He pumped his eyebrows cockily. “A frogman can protect you much better.”

“Maybe this princess can protect herself and only wants her prince to stand by her side.”

“I’m sure the princess could protect herself. But she might realize that a frogman standing next to her could be the support she needs.”

“You’re probably right.” She smiled sadly at him. Turning, she sauntered to the bed, beguiling him with every step she took. She lay down on top of the covers, closing her eyes and stretching her arms above her head and moving her beautiful body around on the bed as if she didn’t even know he was there.

Zander groaned audibly. She opened her eyes and gave him a flirtatious smile.

“Sorry. I didn’t want to make it easy on you to resist me. ‘The only easy day was yesterday.’ Right?”

He almost smiled at her quoting a SEAL mantra, but he was too stirred up inside. The quote was actually perfect. Yesterday had been easy compared to today. Yesterday, he’d let down his guard and kissed her. That memory filled him with heat. He wanted to create that memory again.

Stepping into the room, he shut the door behind him and then leaned against the wall. He didn’t need sleep. He didn’t need to kiss her. He was just fine.

“Go to sleep, Jess. I’m watching over you.”

“I’m counting on it, frogman.”

Him *watching* her or him watching *over* her? She was innocent and beautiful and had no idea how tempting she was to him. He ached to show her through some delicious kisses, but knew it was wrong on so many levels to even think about devouring her mouth right now.

*Protection. Jess safe. The Delta weapon. Secret Keeper. Stopping Frederick.*

He had to be strong until the threat was over. He’d been strong a lot longer than that on many missions. But he’d never had to be strong around the likes of Jess Delta.

## Chapter Eleven



Jessie was feeling regret for stretching out on the bed and trying to tempt Zander to come hold her and kiss her. She knew it was wrong to try to seduce a handsome man, and she knew she needed the spirit more than ever right now. She'd done it partially to tease him, but also because she was reeling from him pulling away from their almost-kiss. She'd been melting in his arms as he trailed his lips closer to hers, making her skin tingle in the wake of his lips.

How could he stop himself that close to a kiss they both knew would be insanely wonderful? She knew Zander was impressively strong physically, but she'd never met anyone with that kind of iron self control. Or maybe she wasn't as tempting to him as he was to her.

All kinds of ideas swirled through her head about how to entice him. Then she thought of everything riding on her shoulders right now. She sighed and forced herself to say a prayer.

*Forgive me for my wayward thoughts. Help me to be strong like Zander. Help me to respect him and to know what he needs, not be consumed with what I want. Help me to be in touch and inspired to know when to go for the weapon.*

It had to be tonight. She couldn't stand the thought of those people dying.

She kept her eyes closed as she finished the prayer, and peace and warmth enveloped her. It had been an exhausting few days. Her Father above would forgive her for being too

invested and passionate for Zander and He'd help her just as He always had. Papa was watching over her as well. She knew it as surely as she knew she was lying in this bed.

She didn't know if she could sleep, but resting would help settle her down and clear her mind. Zander was wise and focused on her and what she needed. She wanted him to stand by her side, be her frogman and her prince, but she also wanted to help and lift him in return.

Opening her eyes, she looked at him leaning against the wall. His eyes had been closed when she'd closed hers, but now they were wide open and focused intently on her. She loved his deep-brown eyes. She loved him. Remorse sprang up inside her again at trying to tease or force him into kissing her.

"I'm sorry," she said. Earlier she'd apologized, but she'd been taunting him, trying to get him to bend to her will and come to her.

"It's okay." He nodded to her. "You don't have to make it easy on me, but resisting kissing you is complete torture."

Her breath shortened. She never wanted to torture him, but him admitting to the same feeling made her appreciate and love him all the more.

"I don't have to make it hard on you, either. You're as tired as I am," she said softly. She picked up the alarm clock on the nightstand and set it for seven. That would give them plenty of time to get to the cave. "Please come lie down."

His gaze instantly got wary, and he shook his head.

"I'll turn away and put a pillow between us if you need. But we're safe here and have lots of eyes and elite fighters watching over us. If I don't feel the impression before nine, we'll need to head to the cave so we're close, and pray I feel it before midnight." She bit at her lip. She couldn't let those people down. If only Delta Force or SEAL Team 6 would find Frederick. Aiden hadn't been very hopeful.

He nodded. "That's exactly what I've been thinking."

"I've set the alarm for seven. We can rest for a couple of hours and then get ready. You have to be ready to protect me.

Despite my teasing, I need you and I want you ... protecting me.” She added the last part, but she needed and wanted him for a whole lot more than that.

Heat flared in his gaze, but he schooled it.

“Please come rest.”

He drew in a breath and then he finally nodded. He walked over to the bed, staring down at her. Her pulse sped up, despite her trying to remind herself she wouldn’t make a move on him.

“You said you’d roll over and put a pillow between us,” he reminded her.

“Oh, goodness, I did.” She wanted him to hold her close, despite how un-smart that was. She’d lost her Papa and was facing the biggest challenge of her life. Was it too much to ask for him to simply hold her like he had last night after they’d seen that awful video? Maybe. Him holding her while they were lying in this bed would be playing with fire for sure.

She lifted one of the long decorative pillows to the middle of the bed, gave him one more perusal to remember how handsome he was, as if she’d forget that, and then she rolled over and faced the wall.

She could hear his breath coming in quicker pants and then his weight lowered onto the bed, shifting the mattress. Her heart raced at that simple move.

“Just for the record,” he said, his voice rough and unsteady. “This was not my idea.”

“The princess forced the tough frogman to do what she wanted?” she asked, smiling and wishing she could roll over and look at him.

“Exactly. The princess is so irresistible, the frogman has no idea how to say no to her.”

That got her to roll over. He was right there, facing her, with only the decorative pillow between them.

“Please don’t,” he begged.

She rolled back over, wanting to honor him and not make this harder than it already was. There was silence between them and despite how tired she'd been earlier, she had no idea how she would fall asleep with him right there, within reach, and all the tension swirling around in this room.

Long minutes ticked by with neither of them saying anything or so much as moving a pinky finger. Neither of them seemed able to regulate their breathing, either.

"This won't work," he said, finally breaking the silence. "I'll never fall asleep like this."

"You said the frogman can't say no to the princess." She bit at her lip, praying he'd just give a little.

"It's a serious character flaw he has."

She wanted to roll over so badly, but feared he'd jump off the bed if she did. "I think it's a beautiful facet of his personality."

"You would."

She laughed.

Silence fell again. She was amazed none of her family had come back to the house yet. It was barely four in the afternoon, too late for a nap, but they both knew what was coming tonight. She was now fully committed to kill Frederick and protect those people and knew it would take all of her physical and emotional strength. She was grateful for this time alone with Zander. If only she could have him just a little closer.

"Zander?"

"Jess?"

She smiled. "First of all, I love that you call me Jess."

"Nobody else does?"

"Nope. Only you, Zander." She waited, feeling so connected to him. "Do you know what your name means?"

"Defender of man," he answered quickly.

She liked that. His name fit him. “Or in this case, defender of woman.”

“The best assignment ever.”

Her chest filled with warmth. “I’m your best assignment?”

“Definitely.”

“Even if I tempt and tease you?”

He chuckled. “I’ve already admitted it’s torture to not kiss you or hold you close, but I shouldn’t admit that I love that you tempt and tease me.”

“Oh, good, because I love doing it.”

“Can you please wait until my protection detail is finished before torturing me again? That stretching on the bed thing. Whew.” He blew out a breath.

Jessie was so gone over him. She wanted to stretch out on the bed and see that look in his eyes again.

“Don’t,” he warned, as if knowing exactly what she was thinking about.

“Just close your eyes,” she teased.

“I should ... but I won’t.”

Jessie didn’t move, but it was fun teasing him. “I’d say I’m sorry.”

“But you’re not.”

“Not really.”

He chuckled and then he said in a fierce tone that pierced her to the core, “You are exactly the woman I’ve hoped to find all my life.”

As soon as the words were out, the room seemed to freeze. Or maybe not, because it was very warm. Incredibly warm.

“You are exactly the man I hoped to find all my life too,” she admitted.

They were both back to breathing much too fast. She could hardly believe she affected a man like Zander. A couple of

weeks ago, he'd seemed like an unapproachable superhero—too tough, far too impressive and accomplished, and definitely out of her reach, but somehow he'd fallen for her just as she'd fallen for him.

If they could only get through this nightmare by firing the Delta weapon tonight and stopping Frederick. She didn't want to stress about a future that might never happen, but she wanted Zander in it.

“What does your name mean?” he asked.

She didn't love the change of subject, but it was probably necessary. “God beholds, or to see before,” she told him.

“I like that.”

“Thanks. Hopefully I can see, or know, and fire that weapon before Frederick fires his nuke at that island.”

“You will.”

She appreciated the reassurance but hadn't felt the prompting yet.

A few beats passed and she shouldn't have, but she asked anyway, “Zander, if I scoot back against that pillow and promise not to look at you, would you just put your arm over me? I just need you close right now.” She didn't want to bellyache about all the fears of being enough and doing the right thing with the weapon, the stress over all those people dying, one of her family members being hurt, how awful it had been to lose Papa, and on and on, but she was sure just a simple touch from him would settle her, comfort her, and help her sleep.

He said nothing except to maybe breathe a little faster.

“If that's asking too much ...”

“It is.” He drew in a breath. “But I think I'm strong enough.”

She laughed at that. “You're incredibly strong. I've felt those pec muscles, remember?”



“I remember.” There was no teasing in his voice and suddenly she remembered, too. She would love to touch him whenever she wanted.

“Okay,” he said. “Scoot back slowly, and no looking.”

She smiled and eased back until her backside hit the cushion. She waited, anticipation thrumming through her. Just a simple touch, Zander’s touch. That was all she needed.

He scooted closer. The pillow kept them apart a little, but his legs still pressed against hers and his warm breath brushed her ear. She was breathing far too fast and not settled at all. His arm came over her side, and then his hand ran along her abdomen and his palm rested there.

Jessie was going to have heart failure. His hand on her abdomen was intimate and beautiful and she could feel him behind her. It took every bit of strength she didn’t know she had to not spin around and kiss him. She wanted to get lost in him and forget all the evil that seemed to be surging toward their valley.

“How’s that?” he asked hoarsely.

“It’s incredible,” she admitted. “I didn’t realize how ... perfect that would feel.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Can you rest?”

“No. Can you?”

He let out a short laugh. “I highly doubt it.”

She smiled. She wished she could gush about everything he did for her—protection, strength, excitement, love, laughter. She should be sobbing from losing her Papa and horrified about what she had to do tonight, but this man took her attention and somehow assuaged the pain and the worries.

“Can you please at least close your eyes and try?” he asked. “I don’t want you worn out tonight.”

That sobered her. In hours, it should be done. Unless she never got the impression to fire the weapon. Papa had been so insistent that she couldn’t fire it without heaven’s help. She’d have to kill Frederick and whoever was close to him tonight. If

she didn't, an entire island nation would be obliterated and then Frederick would keep killing. They'd go through this same stress and angst tomorrow. She wanted it all behind them. So she could be free to love Zander but more importantly so Frederick couldn't hurt, torture, manipulate, or kill anyone else.

She shuddered. It was heavy and awful, but at least Zander was here.

*Papa, please watch over all of us. Please keep our family all safe and help me do the right thing at the right time.*

She cuddled back against Zander, closed her eyes, and knew this man would stand by her side and heaven was watching over them. That was all she needed to know right now. Somehow, the rest would work itself out.

Or maybe not. But then they'd be in heaven with Papa. That didn't sound too bad, as long as Zander was there.

## Chapter Twelve



Zander heard movement and was instantly awake. Jess was cuddled close to his chest, the separation pillow all but flattened between them. Nothing had ever felt so right as her in his arms, but he instantly worried he'd endangered her by sleeping so deeply.

He didn't move, listening to see what had woken him. The light in the room was dim, the sun was behind the mountains, but not yet set. He heard footsteps walking away and realized what had awakened him was just a family member walking along the upstairs balcony. The alarm clock said six-twenty. Not that late, but it got dark early at the end of September, especially this high in the mountains.

He should release Jess and slowly move away. Hopefully she could keep sleeping, at least until the seven o'clock alarm. With all the stress she was facing, she needed every bit of rest she could get.

Jess sighed and cuddled in tighter to him. Her hand rested over the top of his and her hair was like silk against his neck. He breathed in the sweet scent of peaches and cream. Jess's lips far surpassed the taste of any peaches and cream he'd ever sampled.

He wondered why Maddie hadn't burst in here and pulled them apart. As upset as she'd been last night finding them kissing, she'd be livid about them cuddling like this as they slept. Zander would take the cuss-out. It would be worth it for these stolen moments with Jess, and he was cussing himself out for having such a hard time resisting her. He knew she

didn't understand the power she had over him. Jess was too sweet to ever try to wield that power to hurt him, but she was more intriguing and desirable than anything in the world to him.

His other arm was trapped under his body. He shifted slightly and laid it up above her head on the pillow. More silky tendrils of hair ran through his fingertips. Ah, Jess. Was there anything about her that didn't appeal to him?

Would this mess with Frederick and the weapon be over tonight? Could he and Jess have a chance at a normal life then? With him doing covert ops all over the world and her here in Colorado? He groaned aloud at the thought of leaving her.

Jess shifted on the bed and he realized his mistake. "Zander?"

"Hey."

She rolled over, tossed the pillow out of the way, and cuddled against him. He was shocked and absolutely loved having her so close.

"You okay?" he managed to get out.

"I had a horrible dream earlier," she said quietly. "I can't believe I didn't wake you. I must've finally fallen back to sleep."

"I'm so sorry." How could he have been so exhausted he slept through her having a nightmare? "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"You were gone, and I thought you'd left me ..." Her voice caught and he realized she was crying.

"Ah, Jess." He cradled her against him and tenderly kissed her forehead. "I wouldn't leave you." Was that true? He was committed to be with her right now. Would he leave her for missions someday soon?

"Then I realized you were dead."

His eyebrows lifted as she clung to him. Her tears wet his neck and her worries pressed down on him. He wouldn't die.

He was too tough to die. She was probably simply terrified because of all the unknowns, what might come their way, and losing her grandfather so tragically and recently.

He let her cry until she seemed to calm down, and then he whispered against her hairline, “You probably needed that release, to just let it all out and cry.”

She grabbed his shirt in her hand and fisted it. Obviously she hadn’t calmed down at all. He could barely see her face in the murky darkness, but he could feel and hear the intensity. “Promise me you won’t die.”

“Jess.” Her name came out as a stunned sort of laughter. Nobody could promise that. Especially somebody in his line of work.

“Don’t laugh at me.” She grabbed his shoulder and tried to shake him. “Don’t die, Zander. Please promise me you won’t die.”

“Jess.” He stroked his palm up and down her back. “I promise I’ll do everything in my power to stay alive. It’ll be okay. It’s all going to be okay.”

She turned her tear-stained face up toward him and somebody must’ve turned on a light outside the house because he could suddenly see her face more clearly.

“How do you know?” she asked. “I’m afraid nothing will ever be okay or normal or happy again.”

He studied her beautiful face. “Jess. I promise you I will do everything in my power to keep you safe, bring you back to a normal life, and make you happy. I swear it.”

“That includes you not leaving me, ever.”

He wanted to kiss her so badly. He kissed her soft cheek and murmured in her ear, “I’ll do everything I can to not leave you ... ever.”

She let out a half-sob that sounded relieved, worried, and almost happy. She turned her face slightly, and he knew she was going to kiss him. How could he possibly resist her if she

initiated the contact? How could he not lose his mind if they kissed cuddled up on this bed?

Her phone buzzed loudly and his walkie-talkie beeped.

Disappointment raced through him, but also concern. They both scrambled off the bed. She lifted her phone as he grabbed the walkie-talkie.

“Zander,” she rushed out, reading aloud. “Troops have just entered Summit Valley and are headed this way.” She looked up at him with horror in her eyes. “Troops?”

Zander had been on so many missions that he prided himself on being almost immune to fear, but he felt fear at that moment. “Troops?” He pushed the button on the walkie-talkie. “Cap, talk to me.”

“Get her out of here,” Cap demanded. “We’ve got birds incoming. Multiple.”

“We’re leaving and I’m going silent.” He turned off the walkie-talkie and put it in one of his cargo-pants pockets. It would vibrate if they needed to contact him.

Blackhawks descending on the valley? Special ops teams or more troop movement? Which branch of the military? Who’d ordered it? Was it a mission for America to get the weapon to use against Frederick, or was it a ploy from Frederick and some admiral on the take like they feared Admiral Gusbane might be? Somebody using the military to secure the weapon for Frederick?

It didn’t matter. It did, but not for him or his mission at the moment. All that mattered was getting Jess close to the weapon so when she felt prompted they could use it to end this nightmare. Unfortunately, with troops and helicopters approaching, they couldn’t risk a motorized vehicle. The hike to the cave was just under four hours. They had five and a half. As long as special ops teams weren’t waiting up there to intercept them. Admiral Gusbane had known to send Zander and the SEALs to that clearing by the cave. How many Blackhawks were headed there?

Jess was tying her shoes. She stood and pocketed her phone. He grabbed her hand and rushed out of her room and into the one he'd been staying in. He strapped the A.R.s and weapon belt across his chest and then they ran down the stairs and for the backpacks in the garage. Her mom raced into the garage from the side door as they were strapping their backpacks on and putting night vision goggles on their heads.

She hugged Zander and begged him, "Protect her."

"With my life," he vowed.

"Thank you." She turned to Jess and immediately started crying.

"Oh, Mama. It's okay. It's okay."

They hugged and Zander checked weapons and pockets in the backpack and tried not to intrude on their private moment.

"Father above, keep my girl and Zander safe," Holly said in prayer, and he closed his eyes and stopped moving. "Strengthen Jessie in her duties and inspire her and Zander your guiding light. Amen."

"Amen," they both echoed.

Zander heard the low thrum of helicopters. Many helicopters. They needed to move.

"I love you, baby girl."

"I love you."

Her mom kissed her cheek, then it looked like she had to pry herself away. "I'll be praying. I'll see you both soon."

"We'll pray for you too." Jessie blew her a kiss and then Zander tugged at her hand and pulled her out of the garage.

It wasn't a moment too soon. He could see the glows of the Blackhawks swooping over the mountains and closing in on their location. Even though it wasn't full-on dark, the helicopters switched their search lights on as they reached the other side of the lake. They were coming in hot. They weren't afraid of the Deltas shooting them down, which he knew the Deltas wouldn't do, but the way they were coming in felt far

too aggressive. It was an offensive mission, which he'd been on the other end of far too many times.

He and Jess pivoted the other direction, running behind the houses and into the nearest trees. It got darker surrounded by thick trees. They switched on their night vision. He could hear the Deltas and the SEALs calling to each other and running. They'd be lining up with their own weapons, just as they had when he and his SEAL buddies had arrived. Was that two weeks ago now? How his life had changed.

He clung to Jess's hand as they found the trail behind Alivia's house and pounded up it at a quick jog. Who knew if the invaders would send trackers after them or how long it would take before they knew they were missing. There would be Deltas and SEALs patrolling the cave and reinforcements headed immediately that way. He'd heard talk after dinner of the next group already headed up to relieve the Sheriff's men who'd been there all day so the Deltas could be at the funeral.

So many thoughts ran through his head as they ran. Practical thoughts morphed into frenzied worry. Their own military wouldn't fire upon American citizens. They'd get boots on the ground and investigate. Right? Unless someone had fed them lies and claimed the Deltas had committed treason and were threatening to fire a weapon of mass destruction to hurt Americans or something far-fetched like that.

*Please don't let any of them get hurt,* he begged heaven above.

If he was this worried with all his experience and it not being his immediate family, he could only imagine what was going through Jess's mind. At the same time, she'd never seen special ops forces take out a village or a camp or whatever target they'd been assigned. They tried not to kill women and children, but anyone armed like the Deltas would be neutralized. An armed rebel had to be taken down.

He pictured Holly standing next to Jess the day he'd arrived, both of them holding those .50-caliber machine guns. He could picture so many of the Deltas standing tall and ready



to defend their homes, and more importantly the weapon and Jess.

Ah, no. His stomach clenched, and he prayed harder. Frederick was ready to fire a nuclear weapon on an unknown island in five and a half hours. Troops were moving through the lower valley and heading for their homes. Multiple Blackhawks had probably already landed. Maybe special ops teams were headed for the cave. How much resistance did they think the Deltas would put up?

He strained to listen over his and Jess's pounding footsteps and quick breaths. She seemed to be in incredible shape, and he was grateful for that. They had to get to the cave as quick as possible, not flirt with that midnight deadline. If Gusbane, who had sent him and his team on their mission, had organized this attack, they would know the cave's location and that meadow his men had destroyed the Blackhawk in. All the other soldiers coming into the valley could be a distraction to draw attention away from the real teams heading for the cave and the weapon. But at least that would mean they wouldn't gun down the Deltas. He couldn't hear the helicopters any longer, but he hadn't heard any gunshots. That was good. That was great.

When they were far enough away, he slowed his steps and then stopped. Turning to Jess, he said quietly, "There were no gunshots."

She nodded. "That's good."

"For sure." He pulled out a water bottle and offered it to her. She took a quick swallow, then handed it to him. He took a longer drink, savoring the cool liquid running down his parched throat. The fear and worrying made him thirstier than even the running. It was cool in the mountains, which was nice for running or hiking. It wouldn't be quite so great when they stopped, but they had plenty of supplies to keep them warm in their backpacks.

He handed the water bottle back, and she took a longer drink. He shoved it back in the backpack's pocket and then focused on her. It was weird to see her with the night vision goggles on, but they sure helped in this dark forest.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“Sorry, stupid question.” He ran his palm up and down her back, trying to reassure her. “Admiral Seamons is there. That’s good. He’ll vouch for your family and help them negotiate and work this out. That’s really good.”

“You’re right.” She took a long breath, then nodded. “Good things. No shots fired yet. Admiral Seamons is there.”

He wondered, though, if Seamons, Keith, or Joseph had the talent that Admiral Delta had. That cool under pressure, you will listen to and respect me, but everybody is my friend kind of guy. It would be hard for most people not to trust or at least listen to Admiral Delta. And he was gone.

“Okay. Do we head straight for the cave?” He wanted to be there well before midnight and before special ops teams beat them there. He had to keep reminding himself nobody else could use or retrieve the weapon without her. But if they had a hope of saving those people, they couldn’t risk a detour.

“Give me a second.” She seemed to be thinking, then she grabbed his arm and begged, “Pray with me, Zander. I’m so upset that I’m getting no impressions or feelings at all except for the overwhelming fear for my family.”

“Nobody could blame you for that.”

“But it’s essential I know when to go to the cave. Papa said I can only fire the weapon with inspiration. I need to know what to do. Help me.”

He’d help her with anything. He extended his hands and she grasped them. Bringing her closer, he rested their clasped hands against his chest and bowed his head over her. “Father ... we need your help. Please protect the Delta family, the SEALs, and everyone in the valley. Please help them to talk things out peacefully. At this time, we need to protect the weapon and keep anyone but Jess from using it.” Maybe it wasn’t possible for anyone else to access it, but he was concerned the impressive special ops teams he’d served with could somehow make it happen. At least SEAL Team 6 and

Delta Force were pursuing Frederick. If only they could find and kill him. “Please help us. We desperately need your guidance, inspiration, and light. Guide our steps, keep us safe, and help Jess to know the exact moment she needs to head to the cave and the exact moment she needs to fire the weapon. Help us save those innocent people in danger. Amen.”

“Amen,” Jess echoed.

Neither of them moved. He waited, praying silently for her inspiration. He wished he could help her more, but she was the key and the Keeper. It was hard to push away his usual tendencies to lead the way. He prayed silently for humility and to trust heaven and Jess. He had faith, but that ticking clock was hanging over their heads.

As they stood there, he instinctively wanted to rub his thumbs along the soft backs of her hands in his grip or raise her hands to his lips and kiss her knuckles. He stayed any movement and focused on listening to the night sounds of the surrounding forest, trying to pick up on any sounds that were out of place.

Reassured that no one was following them for the moment, he returned to praying silently for Jess and staring at her beautiful face in the soft light.

She opened her eyes and squeezed his hands. “Let’s go to the cabin that is closest to the cave but still hidden well. We might be able to contact whoever is guarding the cave, but also we’ll be ready and close by when the time is right.”

“Okay. But the time isn’t right now?”

“No.”

He could hear the disappointment in her voice and felt it course through him. It would be much better to head straight for the cave, use the weapon, and have it done. Then they could go back and diffuse the situation in the valley. Frederick would be dead and hopefully his evil regime more easily stopped. Admiral Seamons would advise the troops to leave. Everything would be good. He and Jess could kiss for a long

time and then see how to navigate their future. A tantalizing future that felt even further out of reach at the moment.

*Not right now.*

He felt his own impression, and it was strong. The time wasn't right. Would it be right before midnight to protect those people? He didn't know. It chafed at him not to go take care of the problem. Zander was a man of action. Patience was far from his strong suit. Unless he was wiring explosives or building a bomb, he rarely sat still.

But he'd prayed hard for Jess's inspiration. She was confident and certain with her answer, and he'd just had it confirmed. He'd have to trust in God and His timing and His will.

He pulled out his compass and navigated toward the cabin she'd indicated. They'd covered a lot of ground running from the valley. If they hiked at a quick pace, they could be to the cabin by nine-thirty and they'd be less than twenty minutes from the cave. Then what would they do? Wait for more inspiration was the only answer. Jess was the person destined to fire that weapon, and he was going to be there for her.

*Protection. Jess safe. The Delta weapon. Secret Keeper. Stopping Frederick.*

It would be rough waiting for the Lord's timing on this one. But he didn't have any other ideas. He'd never been on a mission so important and with no team to back him up. Instead, he was the sole protection of the woman he was falling in love with and the free world's safety was at stake. The angels in heaven would have to be their team.

Whew. That sounded ... idealistic, and not like any mission he'd experienced.

Deep breath in and out. Zander was always confident, some would say borderline cocky, but not tonight. He was humbling himself completely, relying on Jess and on heaven above. It was unnerving.

It was easy to claim you had faith. Until it was tested like his was right now.

He kept putting one foot in front of the other and he kept praying. For Jess.

*Please let her hear Your voice. Please let me be able to protect her, no matter what happens.*

## Chapter Thirteen



Jessie's legs were heavy, her feet sore, and her head pounding. She felt like she was in shape, but they'd moved quick and she was glad they had. Last time they'd stopped, Zander had said it was about nine-thirty and they should be to the cabin soon. She wanted to go look for whoever in her family was on patrol duty right now, but she had to trust in the inspiration to go to this cabin.

Zander kept checking, but nobody was on the designated walkie-talkie frequencies. What did that mean? Were those guarding the cave already in trouble? Did they even know the valley had been attacked? They should. Whoever was in the command center would've contacted them before they went to radio silence. The plan also called for some SEALs and family members to bug out and go reinforce the cave if something as extreme as a force invading the valley happened.

It had happened. The cave should be protected, and the fog that Papa had created to distract and confuse anyone coming would be activated round the clock. She and her family had goggles to get through it. What if the military did as well? Those mercenaries who had failed to get the secret could've shared intel about the fog if someone smart from the military had questioned them in prison.

She couldn't let her worries affect her decision. Her family and the SEALs would protect the valley and the cave. The weapon should be safe. She wanted to go to her family, but she knew Zander would agree. He was hyper-focused on keeping her safe. If the Secret Keeper wasn't near the cave, the

mercenaries couldn't get into the inner section or retrieve the weapon or fire it. She appreciated Zander keeping her safe as the Keeper, but it seemed his obsession was more personal. She loved that, but sadly neither of them could be worried about their growing relationship when her entire world was imploding and possibly *the* entire world would explode. She had to get that confirmation to stop Frederick. Soon. It reassured her that she'd heard the voice so strongly to come to this cabin. At least she was getting inspiration. But what if she didn't get it in time to save that island?

She couldn't think like that.

A small clearing appeared and then a small wood cabin. Jessie let out a breath of relief. At least they could hunker down for a little bit. She kept praying for instruction. She wasn't looking forward to killing anyone, but she wanted it done. The sooner they went, the better. To protect those people and stop Frederick and stop whoever had sent the troops after the weapon. It wouldn't be long before they were sending soldiers to secure it. What would they do to coerce her family into leading them there? Her gut churned, and she said another prayer for their safety.

Zander led the way and then held up a hand. He lifted the latch on the cabin door and swung it open. Jess stepped forward and held the door as he checked the interior. Papa and her dad and uncle had cleaned out and reinforced the small hunting cabins in these woods years ago. This one was an open room with a small wooden table and two chairs, a double bed with a thin mattress pressed against one wall, and a short counter with some cabinets above and below it. There were cobwebs and lots of dust. Jess wondered if they wouldn't do better staying outside. At the same time, she knew these mountains and the dangers. She'd never had a scary encounter with a bear, moose, or mountain lion, but some had, including her sister Alivia and Klein. It was better to be in a structure rather than risk an animal stumbling onto them. What if a human stumbled onto the cabin, though?

"It's ... not clean but clean, you know?" Zander grinned. With her night vision goggles on and not traipsing through the

woods, she got the full force of that grin. She'd missed it.

"You're using that smile to your benefit, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes ma'am." He smiled bigger. "Let me put up some perimeter security and clean the cobwebs out, and then we can have a snack and hunker down until you're ready to move."

She didn't realize he had perimeter security. That was good, and of course he would. He was smart and prepared and she would be lost without him. She could also hear in his voice and felt it clear through: *please don't let it be too long until you're ready to move*. She did not want to flirt with that midnight deadline. Papa had explained that the weapon would take about twenty to thirty minutes to reach its destination, so really eleven-thirty had to be her deadline.

"I can clean cobwebs," she offered.

"You sure?"

"I'm a tough chick."

"I know that."

She smiled and he returned it, but now was definitely not the time to have a moment. He set his backpack on the ground and started pulling stuff out of it. She also set her backpack on the ground outside the cabin. It felt nice to have the pressure relieved from her shoulder blades.

Walking into the small cabin, she grabbed the broom by the door and started going after the cobwebs. When she was satisfied, she set the broom down outside in case spiders were on it. She picked up her backpack and pulled out a couple of water bottles she'd emptied and then grabbed the empty water bottles from Zander's backpack.

He was out in the trees. She approached him slowly.

"Hey." He stood and walked around a tree. "Armed and ready to alert us to any intruders." He smiled and took the water bottles. "I'll go fill these." He'd studied the maps, so he knew exactly where the spring was. It was close, but she didn't like the idea of him being out of her sight.

"Can I come with you?"



“Sure.”

He pivoted and they navigated through the undergrowth and trees to the spring, filled the water bottles, took some long drinks, and then filled them again. It seemed so peaceful in the quiet woods, untouched by the ugliness of Frederick’s killing and threats. Were mercenaries or special ops nearby? They were about half an hour’s hike from the cave here. What if somebody chanced upon them? Her nerves grew, but then Zander smiled at her and gestured for her to walk back to the cabin. Zander was here and she’d felt strongly that they should come here. She had to trust in that.

They made it back to the cabin, carried their backpacks in, sat on the chairs by the table, and pulled out a small lantern and some food. It was a relief to take off the night vision goggles. Jessie was surprised that she was hungry. They’d missed dinner with their nap. She liked reflecting on that nap, teasing and luring Zander in and feeling so safe, comfortable, and happy.

Immediately she remembered how desperately she’d wanted to kiss him.

She looked at his mouth. It was dim in the cabin with only the glow of the small camp light Zander had put on the table, but she could see his irresistible lips. She could see him. He was perfect. Could they let down their guard for just a minute and kiss and hold each other? Kissing Zander would strengthen her to do what needed to be done. It was interesting that a few days ago she hadn’t known if she’d be able to fire the weapon, or how perfectly incredible Zander was. She felt stronger, braver, and more in love than she’d ever imagined she could.

She forced herself to chew and slow, knowing she’d need the energy. She ate the jerky, protein bar, nuts, and dried fruit, chasing it all down with lots of water. On their hike she’d had to stop and pee, so she luckily didn’t have to right now. Zander had taken her needing to pee in stride and been great about it and respectful of her, just as he was with everything.

They didn't talk as they ate. It wasn't uncomfortable. She liked that. Zander stored the wrappers in an inner pocket of her backpack and then pulled something out and grinned. Ah, his smile could light up any dark night. She'd needed to see that smile.

"Mint?" he asked, pulling out a sleeve of mint Mentos.

"Yes, please." The only thing better would be a toothbrush. A clean mouth shouldn't matter at all right now, but it would sure feel nice.

Zander opened the pack and held it out to her. She pulled a circular Mento out and put it in her mouth, chewing on it and appreciating the fresh taste of mint. Zander slid his own mint in and then stowed the rest in the backpack. He still had the weapons strapped to his back and the weapons belt on. She loved the way it made him look so tough and brave, outlining his chest muscles. But he could relax a bit here with their perimeter security armed. Right?

"Do you want to take those A.R.s off?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "I want to be prepared if anyone comes or when you decide it's time to go."

She nodded and appreciated his trust in her. *She* had to decide. He'd support her, even if she horrifically missed that deadline. She supposed that could be the Lord's will, there were times in the scriptures when innocent people died. She sure hoped tonight wasn't one of those times.

She closed her eyes and prayed for inspiration. Nothing came. Dang. Opening her eyes, she focused on Zander sitting next to her in the dimly lit room.

"Yes?" he asked, sounding like a hopeful little boy.

She smiled at that, but shook her head. "No. Not yet."

"Okay." He smiled at her—trying to reassure her or because he knew how much she loved his smile? She wasn't sure.

A few beats passed as they studied each other. His smile turned into a more serious look. An intense, longing look that

made her heart rate pick up. Their one kiss was never far from her mind. There was so much in her mind, she wondered how she had room for the kiss, but it was easily recalled and at the forefront right now. What would he do if she stood, sat on his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him for a good, long time?

Zander jumped to his feet and pushed a hand through his hair. It was almost as if he'd read her mind and was afraid she'd act on her idea.

The rejection and sting of disappointment hit her in the chest. She didn't move as he paced the small cabin.

Finally, she stood. He stopped his pacing and looked at her warily.

"You're not very good at waiting, are you?" she asked.

He chuckled and pushed his hand through his hair. "I should be. In the military it's wait and then hurry up and why weren't you here faster?"

She smiled. "I can't imagine."

"I hope you can't." He turned slightly away from her, clenching his fists at his side and making his arm muscles more pronounced.

She walked up to him. "Are the missions horrible?"

He swallowed and met her gaze. "Sometimes." He nodded. "A lot of times. But it's what I signed up for, what I train so hard for. The targets that special ops teams take out are definitely people that need to be removed from this world. But I'm not the guy who wants to kill just to kill. So it makes it hard sometimes."

She really couldn't imagine. She was grateful men like Zander not only existed but were willing to give their life to protect and serve. He was incredible. But even in the dim light, she could see the killing, as well as seeing his comrades be killed, had taken a toll. It still hurt him.

"You know how my mom forced Captain Hendrickson to hug her?"

“Poor Cap.” He smiled. “It was good for him.”

“Would it be good for you?” She eased closer.

Zander’s breath came out in a rush. “I need to focus on the mission, on keeping you safe.”

“I know that. But you’ve got the sensors armed and until it’s time to go to the cave we’re just here, the two of us, together.”

He swallowed hard and pushed at his hair again.

“Would a hug be good for you?” she asked again. She didn’t want to force him, but he’d admitted back in her bedroom that she was the woman he’d always been looking for. She wanted to be the woman he needed. The woman who could help, love, and heal him.

“Probably,” he admitted, though his dark eyes looked wary, as if he knew a hug wasn’t all she was after.

She stepped in and snaked her arms around his lower back. Zander released a heavy breath and wrapped her up tight. She leaned into his chest, resting her head in the crook of his neck. They simply held each other. He would protect her and she would strengthen him. They were a perfect fit.

“This is a good way to pass the time, right?” she asked softly, not wanting to disturb this peace. At the moment, she wasn’t even worried. With Zander by her side, she could do what needed to be done and her family would do what they needed to do.

“Oh yeah.” He smiled down at her.

She tilted her head up and their mouths were almost aligned. If she arched up or he bent down ...

His dark eyes filled with longing for her, and only her.

“Zander.” She loved his name on her lips. “Defender of woman. Have you ever been in love?”

He stared at her as if weighing his answer. “I used to think I had, but now I know I’ve never truly loved someone ... not before.”

“Before?” she asked.

“Before you.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn't have time to respond in kind or process it too deeply before his lips came down on hers. The kiss started intense and full of desperate longing. She followed his lead and clung to him as they kissed and tried to satiate the need for each other and the fact one or both of them could be killed soon and they may never kiss again.

Then Zander slowed the kiss and it changed to an exchange of devotion, love, and patience. He'd promised her he would do everything in his power to protect her and to stay alive. This kiss confirmed that. He loved her. He was wholly committed to her. They didn't need to rush ahead or take what wasn't there for them yet. But this kiss was a kiss of promise, hope, and a beautiful future.

He pulled back, ushered her head to his chest, and held her. He held her gently but firmly. He was her man, the defender of his woman, and he would care for her. He trusted her and was humble enough to let her lead when she needed and to stand by her side. He was patient and good and true and loyal. Zander was her everything.

They held each other in the dark cabin and she savored the kisses they'd exchanged and the warm, peaceful feeling surrounding them. This was love, not some passionate spark that would burn them or burn out. They'd be there for each other. No matter what.

Suddenly, she knew. Her mind and heart and soul filled with the knowledge. It was terrifying and exciting and ... it was time.

“Zander!” She pulled back. “We've got to go.”

“Now?”

“Right now.”

She released him and ran for the table, sweeping up her backpack by the straps, pulling on her night vision goggles, and heading for the door. Zander was right on her heels.

They burst out of the cabin and into the dark night. She paused and let Zander lead the way. He took her hand and squeezed it, stopping as they entered the trees. She didn't think they had time to stop, but he pulled her closer and said, "Lord, we're putting ourselves and the safety of millions of others in your hands. Protect, guide, and make us more than we are. Make up what we lack. Amen."

"Amen." Jessie loved his prayer. She squeezed his hand and looked up at the sky. A star seemed to twinkle above the exact spot the cave was. Papa Delta watching over them? The twinkle filled her, and she was confident in her inspiration. It was time. She had to protect those innocent people and take out Frederick.

God willing ... they'd succeed.

They took off at a run and she started praying desperately in her heart.

## Chapter Fourteen



Zander was grateful he'd studied and memorized the maps and landmarks and that he instinctively excelled with navigation. They ran through the night. He had to release Jess's hand as they were on no kind of trail. He also listened intently. What if they ran right into a special ops team? He couldn't let Jess fall into anyone's hands. It was rough to think of fighting against his own, but for Jess he would do anything. And he also knew that this Delta weapon was meant to be in their hands—actually, in Jess's hands. He was relieved she'd finally felt the prompting to go to the cave.

He thought he heard something. He stopped, tugged Jess behind a tall poplar tree, and listened.

There it was again. Footsteps. Approaching. He could hear Jess's panting breaths behind him and the sound of it energized and strengthened him. *This We'll Defend* was an Army theme, and he was a Navy guy, but he'd worked with the Army Rangers enough to hear it often and right now he knew he would defend Jess to the death.

He slowly pulled one of his A.R.s off his back, checked the safety, and aimed in the direction the footsteps were coming.

Two people. A man and a woman was his best guess. They walked slowly, obviously looking for something. They had weapons out and weren't messing around.

Suddenly, Jess stepped to the side and away from the protection of the tree.

He held the gun with his left hand and grabbed her with his right.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “Maddie?”

“Jessie!” Maddie’s voice was a hushed whisper filled with relief.

Zander let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding and hurried after Jessie as she rushed to her sister. The women hugged.

Zander couldn’t help himself. He hugged Braden. Then he remembered Braden was not touch-phobic like Cap. That was a relief. Seeing friendly faces instead of those intent on capturing Jess was a bigger relief.

“Hey, man. What’s happening?” Zander needed to know any information he could get to keep Jess safe as they went to the cave.

“Aiden, Thor, and all the SEALs are here patrolling. We’ve seen some special ops teams searching for the cave, but so far the fog has distracted them. I don’t think any of them have the thermal-imaging goggles, all night vision so far. That’s a relief. They haven’t gotten close, and we haven’t had to take anyone out.”

Zander knew his friend would have as hard a time engaging their own men as he would. “Any word from the valley?”

“Not since the initial alarm and then the SEALs showing up here a couple hours later. They bugged out quick and ran double-time to get here, but they said no shots were fired initially, so that’s encouraging.”

“We didn’t hear any either.”

“Is it time?” Maddie asked, looking at her sister.

“Yes.” Jess stood straight and nodded.

“Thank heavens. Take that loser out, sis, and protect that island.”



“Zander and I will head directly for the cave.” Jessie radiated confidence. “If you see anyone else, please ask them to keep the soldiers as far away as they can.”

He loved that she was taking charge. Stepping up like her grandfather had known she would. She had this. Zander was support staff, and that was all right. Better than all right. He was Jess’s support staff. Most important job in the world, and not because she was Secret Keeper, but because she was Jess. His Jess. He was ready. Ready to be in the action and to end this. Then he’d kiss Jess as long as he wanted with no worries about it endangering her or the mission.

“We’ve got it ... and you’ve got this.” Maddie squeezed Jess and then looked at him with those eerily similar blue eyes. “Protect her.”

“With my life,” he told her, just as he had her mom.

She squeezed his arm and then they eased off into the darkness.

Zander kept his A.R. out. “Let’s take it a little slower,” he cautioned Jess. Though maybe not too much slower. He needed to keep an eye on the time. “Stay behind me.”

“All right.”

They found a semi-broken trail and progressed along it, but every chirp of a chipmunk, twig broken by a small animal, or owl hooting made him jumpy. He was more keyed up than he’d ever been on a mission. But usually on missions, everyone with him was highly trained and qualified, and though he cared deeply about them, he wasn’t in love with them or hoping his future was contingent on their survival.

Jess touched his back. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder at her. She held up a pair of goggles. “For the fog,” she whispered.

“Thanks.”

She traded out hers and put the night vision ones in the backpack, and he did the same. The world changed from green hues to shades of white and gray. It was harder going without

the night vision, but it was smart to have these on as he knew they were getting close.

“Hey.” She leaned in close to his ear and whispered, “I know you’re worried, but I can fight, remember?”

How had she read his mind like that? He did know she could fight. He just didn’t want her to have to.

Movement sounded behind them. Pounding footsteps.

No words were needed as he maneuvered Jess in front of him and they both broke into a run. If anybody was getting shot in the back, it was him.

“Stop!” a male voice commanded. “Now!”

Zander and Jess ran faster. Their eyes had adjusted to the thermal imaging goggles, but they didn’t light up the trail like night-vision goggles would. It was disconcerting to be sprinting that fast when the trail wasn’t clear below their feet.

Were the men gaining on them? How many? Was there any possibility he knew them and he could talk them into switching sides like he and his men had? It wasn’t worth the risk and they didn’t have the time. But what if they shot and hit Jess? That wasn’t worth the risk either.

“Stand down ... or we will fire,” the voice called.

His head pounded with the stress of protecting Jess and the sprint they were maintaining along the semi-broken trail in the dark. Should they stop? Should they keep running? Would they really fire?

Shots hit the branches above him and bits of wood stung his head. Jess dropped and he followed her. She army-crawled forward. He was forced to strap the gun onto his back and follow her. It was smart to stay low and keep moving, but the men’s footsteps were pounding along the trail behind them. They definitely had night vision goggles on, and they’d easily catch them.

He needed to get Jess off the trail, take up a defensive position, and take these men out.

They were almost upon them.

“Jess,” he hissed. “Hide.”

“No. The fog.” She pointed ahead of them, and he could see the misty fog swirling over the trail. The thermal-imaging goggles they had on would cut through it, but not eliminate the fog completely.

But there was no way they would make it army crawling.

“We’ve got to run,” he said.

She popped up and ran. Zander leaped to his feet and went after her. Shots fired again, splintering the branches above them. Clearly, the men didn’t want to kill the Deltas any more than Zander wanted to kill them. But they would.

“Stop or we shoot lower,” the voice said, exactly as he feared.

The fog was right there. Twenty feet and they wouldn’t be safe from the bullets, but the men with their night vision goggles wouldn’t be able to see them. At least they’d be harder targets.

From behind, he heard a grunt and then something heavy rammed into a tree. Or somebody? Something else slammed into the ground. Or someone? He didn’t dare look back as he sprinted right behind Jess.

Low commands were issued, but there were also sounds of confusion and what sounded like a wrestling match or a fist fight. Had someone come to their rescue?

They were so close to the fog now. A couple more steps and Jess would be obscured from their vision.

He chanced a glance back and could see a rainbow of human figures duking it out in hand-to-hand fighting. Yes! The SEALs and Deltas had come through! He focused back ahead, knowing they all could hold their own, and fist-fighting was much better than bullets flying. He prayed if he and Jess could use the weapon like she planned to, they could then settle the battle and explain what had happened.

Jess reached the fog. She took her first step in and relief made his steps slow.

Until a large man sprang from the trees and tackled her.

“No!” Zander yelled, flying at them.

Jess elbowed the guy and blood spurted from his nose. Zander grabbed him around the shoulders and ripped him off her.

“Go,” he yelled.

She didn’t look like she wanted to, but she rushed into the fog.

The man slammed his fist into Zander’s gut. He doubled over but refused to go down. Jess needed him and he wouldn’t fail her.

He grabbed the man around the waist and twisted as hard and fast as he could, like throwing a massive discus in the track and field event. The man’s head knocked into a tree branch, and he went down. Zander didn’t stop to see if he was down for the count or if he had buddies nearby.

He pulled in a shaky breath. Holding his abdomen, he sprinted into the fog where Jess had disappeared. A few steps in and he had to slow his pace. The goggles made it possible to see, but it wasn’t crystal clear. He wanted to call for Jess, but he couldn’t give away her position. He prayed he could find her and protect her. He hated the thought of her being alone, unprotected, and facing this insanely epic moment with the Delta weapon and stopping Frederick by herself.

The farther he went, the denser the fog felt, surrounding him like a living thing. An icy cold living thing. The sounds of the fight behind him and any forest noise dampened and then disappeared. It was eerie, and he really wanted to find Jess. Had somebody else gone after her? Was she okay? What if he wandered around and never found her? What if the men out there found her first?

A hand on his arm made him jump. He instinctively threw a punch, but the small person ducked out of his way.

“Zander!”

“Oh, Jess.” He grabbed her and hugged her tight, wishing these goggles cleared the fog a little better, grateful he hadn’t hit her on accident, and grateful she’d waited for him. “You’re okay?”

“Yes. Stay close. We don’t have much time.” He didn’t think she knew the exact time, but her spiritual instincts seemed to be spot on.

She pulled from him, turned, and jogged up the thin ribbon of a trail. He worried about the trail. It was skinny, but it was well-broken. If someone was smart, they could drop to the ground and crawl along it. If one of the men fighting his SEALs stole the thermal imaging goggles, they could follow as well.

They hurried together and he got more used to the unsettling fog, the heavy darkness, the abnormal silence, and the deep chill. He actually welcomed the cold after the heat of the run and the fight.

Jess was with him, and that was all that mattered right now. She could do this, and he’d never leave her side.

She stopped. “This way,” she said. She turned and went through a thick part of the forest that was barely passable.

A granite cliff appeared a few dozen feet later. Zander’s nerves ramped up. They’d made it. Right? From everything he’d studied, the cave door was in this granite wall.

Jess eased along, studying it as if searching for something. A few seconds later, she pressed her hand to the wall. A door creaked open and Zander’s heart thumped quicker. Surreal. Almost like he was in *National Treasure*.

Jess looked back at him. He could barely see her, but he could sense her angst, her fears. They’d made it and she was prepared, but now she had to use the weapon and kill Frederick. He wished he could do it for her, but that wasn’t his role.

*Support. Protection. Loving Jess. Helping her kill Frederick.*

He’d changed his mantra slightly.

Jess stepped into the cave, and he slowly followed her.

“Can I shut the door?” he asked.

“No. The weapon needs a flight path.”

That made him nervous, but it made sense.

He eased into the cave, not seeing anyone approaching, which helped settle his nerves. Slightly.

This was it. No turning back now.

## Chapter Fifteen



Jessie's heart raced out of control and her palms were sweaty as they entered the cave, but inside she was steadier than she'd ever been. Zander was right behind her. He wouldn't leave her side. He'd protect her. That lifted and reassured her more than anything. She didn't like that he'd told her mom and Maddie that he'd protect her with his life. He had to live. That was the most important thing to her.

But first she had to complete the mission Papa had trained her throughout her life to complete, and then she and Zander could get out of here, hopefully dispel the tensions in the valley, and then ... who knew?

As she lifted her goggles onto her forehead, the cave suddenly lit up. Zander had pulled out a light bar headlamp, and the glow helped a lot.

She walked across the outer cave lined with gold bars. Zander gave a low whistle. She hardly noticed the gold on her way to the inner door. She pulled her necklace out and fit the small pendant into the door, pressed her thumbprint into the slot, and spoke clearly, "Jessica Delta, Secret Keeper."

It slid open.

She tried to slow down her breathing, but her heart was racing too fast. She just wanted to get it over with at this point. Tightening her jaw, she walked to where the weapon rested in its case. It was similar to a large black gun case. Zander stayed right by her, not saying anything.

She hadn't asked for this job or to kill Frederick, but he would shoot a nuclear weapon at that island and keep on killing until he was stopped. She knew it was time and she would do what she had to do. As Secret Keeper. As a Delta. As Admiral Davidson Delta's descendent. Heaven had inspired her this far, and she was trusting that light wouldn't leave her now.

She kneeled and pressed her thumbprint into the spot on the handle of the case. It clicked, and she flipped it open. The weapon was exactly how she remembered it. A long, white glider plane with a wingspan slightly longer than her forearm. For all the drama that surrounded it, the weapon wasn't much to look at.

She yanked off her backpack. Pulling Frederick's hair and follicles out of an inner pocket, she inserted them into the slot Papa had shown her. Then she took the special solution that activated the DNA. She filled the slot with exactly five drops and stored the solution back in the backpack. Would the weapon be used again after this? Would *she* have to use it again? She wasn't sure about that, but she'd keep the solution in case.

She closed the panel and then took her necklace and fit it into position in a slot above the cockpit. It hit her how steady her hands were. Now that she was here, there was no hesitation. She needed to press her thumbprint in, turn the pendant a hundred and eighty degrees, push the button, speak the command, and this plane would take off, zeroed in on its target. King Frederick and those closest to him would be dead in half an hour.

She opened the panel for her thumbprint and pressed down. The weapon lit up with a red glow. Red like blood. The blood of Frederick and those near him would be on her hands. What if someone innocent was near him?

Her stomach turned over and suddenly her hands weren't so steady.

It was awful, but she had to weigh the costs. Time was ticking quickly by, and she knew Frederick wasn't bluffing.



He would kill everyone on whatever island he'd picked to annihilate first. If one or two innocent people near Frederick died, it was better than thousands dying on the island.

Zander was standing behind her, pointing his A.R. out the open inner door, but he must've somehow sensed she was struggling. He eased back toward her, gripped the gun with his right hand, and rested his left on her shoulder.

"You've got this, Jess. You felt it was time. You know it's right. Finish this and let's bug out."

His words were confident, to the point, and exactly what she needed.

She held her thumb in place and grasped the pendant to turn it.

Footsteps pounded into the cave. Jessie didn't know if they were friend or foe, but her hand was slick with sweat and she couldn't keep hold of the small pendant. She wiped her fingers on her pants.

"Stop!" a loud, male voice commanded.

"No, you stop," Zander said in a cold, military voice she'd never heard from him.

Should she just push the button, say her name and title, and be done with it?

"Remove your hands from the weapon," the guy instructed, pointing his huge gun straight at Zander. How did he know threatening Zander was the key to stopping her?

He had the same goggles on that Zander and Jess had. Had he hurt one of her family members to get the goggles? No! Her stomach churned in horror. She had to fire this weapon, kill Frederick, and stop him from killing many others. Hopefully they could then end the Deltas fighting with their own military.

She had to finish this. Her mind scrambled instead of becoming clearer with her purpose. She tried to spiritually reach out for her family. Could she sense if they'd been hurt? What if somebody she loved was dead or injured and bleeding to death?

“Do it!” the man yelled. “Or I kill him.”

Zander held his own gun level. “Fire it, Jess. I’ve got the shot and I will take it before he can fire.”

“Who are you?” the man demanded.

“Chief Petty Officer Zander Povey, Master EOD. Who are you?”

Jess could not believe how calm and brave Zander was. She’d lifted her trembling hands up to show the guy she wouldn’t fire the weapon. She couldn’t risk him hurting Zander.

“But you’re dead,” he said, staring at Zander with a mixture of shock and respect.

“Obviously not. I came here two weeks ago to secure the weapon on a mission, just as I assume you’re doing. Admiral Davidson Delta showed me and the elite SEAL team I accompanied that the Delta family are the right people to be responsible for the Delta weapon. They are the *only* people on earth who will wield it responsibly and unselfishly. You can’t trust whoever instructed you to come here.”

Beads of sweat were popping on the man’s forehead. “But I can’t let you kill the President,” the man said.

“Kill the President?” Jessie and Zander both said at the same time.

“You’ve got misinformation, my friend,” Zander said evenly. “We would never harm the President. This weapon is being used to take out King Frederick before he shoots a nuclear weapon at a defenseless island of innocent people.” He tilted his head to Jessie. “This woman is the only one who can fire the weapon, and she has been waiting for the exact moment to do so. Stand down so we can rid the world of the dictator that neither SEAL Team 6 nor Delta Force have been able to capture. We’ve only got a few minutes before an entire island nation die. Do you want that on your head?”

The man’s A.R. shook in his hands. “I don’t know if I can afford to trust you. Let’s talk with Admiral Seamons. He’s on his way. You can wait long enough to talk it out with him. If

he confirms your story and orders the hit on Frederick, I'll stand down."

"Admiral Seamons is who ordered you here?" Zander looked back at Jessie, his eyes full of questions. "What about Admiral Gusbane?"

"Seamons," the man insisted.

Maddie and Braden appeared behind the man. Maddie cocked a pistol and pushed it into his neck. "Drop it, dude. If you interfere with this mission to stop Frederick from killing thousands of innocent people, you are betraying your country and everything you fight for."

For some reason that Jessie couldn't understand, the cold metal of the wrong end of a pistol ready to end his life and Maddie's words calmed the man. He stopped shaking, and he said calmly, "I would never betray my country and I have never failed at a mission."

"Tell us what Admiral Seamons' instructions were," Zander commanded.

"To secure the Delta weapon and bring it to him."

Braden's face twisted in surprise. "Why would he ..."

"We were informed the Delta family will assassinate the President with the weapon and then the Deltas will hand the weapon over to King Frederick."

Maddie barked out a disbelieving laugh. "That's insane. We would never collude with Frederick or harm the President in any way. Do you even know who our grandfather was, dude?"

"Yes, I do. But when he died, the Delta family decided to use the fabled weapon and go a different direction with it."

"Why would we do that?"

"Money. That's what Admiral Seamons explained."

"I can't believe it ... You mean Gusbane, not Seamons," Braden insisted.

“Seamons,” the guy said, shaking his head as if they were all slow or hard of hearing.

“Not Seamons.” Braden’s muscles were bunched, and he was obviously disturbed. No, disturbed probably wasn’t strong enough for the angst in Braden’s aqua blue eyes.

“Is it possible you read him wrong?” Maddie asked him quietly.

“It’s possible. But he’d have to be a master at hiding his true feelings. Trained to do it, actually.”

“I’m sorry, love, but we’ll have to deal with Seamons later. We’re wasting time. Jessie needs to fire the weapon and stop Frederick. Then we need to call off these special ops teams, get back to the valley, and force Seamons to disband his troops.”

“Maddie, Braden.” Aiden’s voice came from behind them. It was getting very, very crowded and stuffy in this cave. Jessie wiped her sweaty hands on her pants again. They needed to clear out so the weapon would have a path or it could hurt one of them as fast as it would move once she engaged it. She was running out of precious time.

“My CO Jake Pitcher is here,” Aiden said. “He’ll help us talk down the other special ops teams. He said Seamons is the traitor.”

“No,” Braden groaned.

Jessie felt bad for him. He’d trusted Seamons when almost nobody else had, and he’d convinced the rest of the family to trust him as well. Maddie was right. They’d have to deal with Seamons later. She’d felt the prompting earlier to run for the weapon. She needed to act and fire the weapon. Now. She wasn’t sure the exact time, but she knew she had next to no time left to stop Frederick.

“Ollie,” Jake barked from behind. “Stand down.”

“Yes, sir.” The man lowered his weapon.

Maddie removed the pistol from his neck and Zander lowered his gun.

“Everybody out,” Aiden instructed. “Zander, stay with Jess. She’s got to finish this, then we can contain the situation up here and in the valley.”

“Is everyone okay back home?” Jess asked.

“I haven’t heard anything yet. I’m sure they’re okay.” He gave her an encouraging smile. “You got this, Jessie.”

“Thanks. Make sure the cave and the entrance are clear.”

“Sure thing.”

She tried to smile, but her lip was trembling and so were her hands. Her head felt too big for her body, and she had hot and cold chills running through her. Could she do this? She knew she could. Now was the time. It seemed as if Aiden and his SEAL commander had cleared the way for her to complete her mission.

Jake’s radio started buzzing on his hip, spouting out words that were broken up. He must have a high-frequency military radio that received transmissions from satellites, but in the cave the signal would struggle to get through. She wondered if it was Seamons checking if they’d secured the weapon.

Aiden ushered everyone out. Maddie gave her a reassuring smile as they left. Braden looked too upset about Seamons tricking him and being a traitor to be thinking about much else.

Zander set his gun down and hurried to her side, kneeling next to her. He wrapped an arm around her waist and she leaned into him. Her entire body shook.

“Jess?” His voice was full of concern.

“I think I ... Zander, I was so convinced it was time, but I don’t feel right.” She was confused, her head ached, and she had cold chills all over her body. What was going on?

“What?” Zander supported her. “Is the weapon hurting you? Let’s get you out of here.”

“No. I have to do this, Zander. I have to kill him.” Nausea rose in her throat. King Frederick was the most evil man on

the planet and he was going to blow up an island if she didn't fire this weapon. She was a Delta and had been raised for this.

She didn't know if she *should* do it. But that made no sense. She was protecting innocent people by taking out one horrific dictator and his staff.

*Please help me*, she begged everyone in heaven who cared.

“Okay. I've got you. Let's do this, then get you home.” She could read the fear in Zander's eyes and felt it reflected in her own. Papa had taught her how to fire the weapon but really hadn't given her all the information she needed, telling her to have faith and it would all work out.

What if the weapon required her to give her life or something insane like that? What if it took out Zander too? She wanted to tell him to leave, but she could barely hold herself upright. Is that why Papa had never fired it? She couldn't imagine her Papa would make her Secret Keeper if that was true. He would've told her. Right? But then it made terrifying sense in a way—Papa having such a hard time appointing another Keeper and putting it off until he was certain he was going to die. It almost seemed like he was hoping he'd be killed before passing it on, assuring the weapon could never be used. But if Papa knew he was going to die, he would've used the weapon and sacrificed himself to protect her.

Her mind was scrambling for solutions as her head pounded and the certainty she'd felt minutes ago disappeared. The confusion scared her. Confusion wasn't from God, peace was. Should she fire the weapon or not?

“Help me, Zander,” she begged.

She lifted her thumb toward the right spot. Zander guided her trembling hand and secured her thumb. Then she took her other hand and tried to twist the pendant into place. That was all she had to do, then she could speak the command as they pressed the button to fire it.

Zander helped her twist the pendant. It was awkward with both of their hands and hers shaking so badly. Finally, finally,

it clicked into place. The room swam before her. She leaned heavily into Zander, afraid she would pass out. She just had to push the other button and speak the command.

Keeping her thumb on the right spot, she lifted her left hand toward the button. Zander's hand guided hers.

“Almost there, Jess. You've got this.”

She had to push the button and say her name and title. Then it would be done. All those people would be safe. King Frederick's reign of horror would be finished.

And suddenly her head cleared, and she knew. She knew it clear through.

She should not fire the weapon.

Yanking her thumb from the spot, she twisted and pulled out the pendant.

“What are you doing?” Zander asked. “Jess, we haven't got time. Those people on the island will die if you don't fire.”

She looked into his dark gaze. He trusted her, but he didn't understand.

“I'm not supposed to fire it,” she said confidently, meeting his eyes and hoping he could see that she was doing the right thing. Even if it seemed insane at this moment.

“Are you sure?” He looked at the weapon, then back at her. Their gazes held and he nodded. “Okay, Jess. Okay.” He gathered her close and held her.

She knew it was right not to fire it, but would all those people die because she hadn't? Would their deaths be on her head?

A loud cheer from multiple people sounded outside the cave. She and Zander pulled apart. “What are they cheering about?”

Footsteps pounded into the cave. Zander sprang to his feet and pointed his A.R. at the opening. Jessie climbed up behind him. Her legs were weak, but she knew she'd done the right

thing and that gave her faith and strength to face whatever was coming.

“Frederick is dead,” Aiden yelled, running into the small room. “Delta Force got him and have captured all the men who were with him. The rest of his leaders are bugging out. He didn’t fire any of his nukes. Jake just got the message.” He beamed and then he looked at Jessie and the weapon about ready to fire. “Jessie?”

Jessie let out a shuddering breath. Zander lowered his weapon and reached for her. She collapsed against him.

“Jess?” Zander asked.

“I’m okay,” she said. She lifted the pendant and hung it around her neck. “Do you realize if I would’ve fired, I would’ve killed whoever was next to Frederick’s body? Probably a large contingent of the Delta Force taking his body back to their COs to prove he’s dead.” She pushed out a breath, not shaky any longer, but kind of shaky at what had been averted. “That’s why I was told not to fire. Heaven was staying my hand.”

Zander stared at her. “And that’s why you weren’t inspired to come straight to the weapon and fire it. You would’ve hurt the Delta Force team who probably found him at about that same time.”

She cuddled into Zander. “No wonder Papa was so insistent about only firing it with the right inspiration.”

Zander’s dark gaze was wide. “And now you feel okay?”

“Perfect.” She leaned in. “And I’d really like to secure this weapon and kiss you for a long time.”

His lips curved up. “We can definitely arrange that.”

Aiden cleared his throat. “All right. You two good to secure the weapon and lock up the cave? Jake is sharing the news and bringing the special ops forces to a rendezvous point a little bit from here. We’ll leave a team patrolling, but we’ll head back to the valley and figure out the situation there and what we need to do with Admiral Seamons.”



There was still danger, but they could resolve it.

“Okay. We’ll take care of the weapon and be right behind you. Leave someone with a vehicle for us. I’m exhausted.” Jessie smiled at her cousin.

He saluted her. “Gotcha. Good job here today.”

“I didn’t do anything,” she said, still awed and grateful for what she hadn’t done.

“Yes, you did. You listened to the spirit and made the right decision at the right time. You did perfect.” His smile was huge. “You were the perfect person for Secret Keeper, Jessie.”

“Thanks, Aiden.” She’d always had her family’s support, but there were times she imagined everybody had second-guessed Papa’s decision. She knew she had.

“Thank you.” He turned to go. “Oh, also reactivate the mist as you leave. We turned it off once Jake found me and talked the special ops teams down. It was such a pain in the butt to get through it and find everybody.”

“All right,” Jessie said.

Aiden walked out, and Jessie wanted to stay in Zander’s arms. She was feeling immensely better but weak from everything they’d been through recently and all the stress. She leaned against Zander and silently prayed in gratitude. The situation had been diffused. It was over ... for the moment.

“Thank you, dear Father above,” she whispered.

“Amen,” Zander echoed, his breath warm against her forehead.

She clung to him. It was over. Zander’s arms were all she needed now.

An impression filled her, stronger than even when she’d known they needed to head to the cave at that exact moment or when she’d known she shouldn’t fire the weapon.

Her hand flew to her mouth and her stomach turned over with the implications of what she’d just felt. Would her family understand?

“Really?” she asked aloud.

“What?” Zander asked, pulling back slightly to focus on her face.

A warm peace came over her, and she knew exactly what they had to do. She was going to have some angry and upset family members, but this impression was the exact reason she was the Secret Keeper.

She opened her eyes and focused on Zander. This was the reason he was here as well. “We have to blow up the cave.”

His eyes widened, but he immediately nodded. “Okay. I have enough C4 and can easily blow it.” He looked down at the weapon they were still kneeling by. “That’s smart, Jess. We’ll move the weapon. Too many people know about the cave now. Really smart. Do you have any ideas where to relocate the weapon to, or do you want to meet with your family about it first? We might need a temporary hiding spot, at least.”

He pushed to his feet and reached for the backpack that contained the C4 and his detonators.

Jessie also stood, but she grabbed his hand. “We’re leaving the weapon in the cave.”

Zander whipped around to stare at her. His dark eyes were full of surprise and questions. “But ... Jess, it’s never even been fired.”

She shrugged. She knew that. It seemed like such a waste, from the people who created it and were killed for it, to her Papa giving so many years of his life and dying because of the weapon.

But she could not deny the prompting and also the relief. The Deltas would finally have peace.

“Jess.” He squeezed her hand and looked deeply into her eyes. “Your Papa and your entire family have dedicated their lives to this weapon. Admiral Delta gave his *life* for this weapon.”

“No. Papa gave his life to protect Hudson.”

He said nothing more but held her gaze, obviously concerned about her decision.

She wavered, thinking about Papa and her family and all they'd done to keep this weapon safe. But Papa had never fired it either. Each of her family members' faces and blue eyes flashed through her mind. All of them giving so much time, energy, and devotion to this weapon. Its creators who'd been killed for it.

It was tragic, but she knew this was what Papa wanted. Knew it deeply. She wondered if this wasn't why she'd been made the Secret Keeper. Papa couldn't destroy it because of his allegiance to the people who'd created the weapon, entrusted him with it, and given their lives for it. But he wanted her to finish this and put this chapter of instability and worry and fighting behind her family. The Deltas would be stronger for what they'd been through, and they would finally have peace.

She could see Papa's smile and almost hear him say, "Good job, my girl." Her guardian angel was watching over her.

Resolve filled her, and she'd never felt so determined about a decision in her life. "The weapon will never be fired, and that's the way it has to be. Think about it. Too many people know about it. The weapon will never be safe after all this, and our family will never have peace." She smiled, relieved and growing more excited about her decision with every passing moment. No matter what she would face when her family members found out. "I got the inspiration, Papa agrees, and this is what needs to happen."

"Okay." His smile was shaky, but then it turned into his normal incredible grin.

Man, she loved that grin.

"All right." He blew out a breath. "Let's blow up the most important weapon in the world that your family has dedicated their lives to." He pointed at her. "I'm a hundred percent with you, Jess, always." She felt that radiate through her. "But

you're telling everybody the news, not me. I can't afford the negative publicity when I need your family to approve of me."

She smiled. She liked that he wanted her family to approve of him.

"Let's do this." Zander gave her a quick kiss and then grabbed his backpack again.

Jessie looked from Zander to the weapon and then back again. She felt light and happy. Her family would finally be free of the weapon. And she could be with Zander.

## Chapter Sixteen



Zander quickly wired the C4 explosives. Jess brought the case, removed the weapon, and set it right next to the charges. Nobody would ever access it again. He could hardly believe it, but he knew Jess was not only right that it needed to happen, but she'd also received the inspiration from above. He trusted her.

He glanced over at her and she met his gaze, her beautiful blue eyes as peaceful as he'd ever seen them. He hurried faster; he could set up this charge in his sleep. Soon, he and Jess would get out of here. They would walk away arm in arm like in a movie scene with the mountain exploding behind them. This cave would be buried under the granite cliff.

He smiled. He wasn't the dramatic type, but he liked the image. Most of all, he liked the image of him and Jess together. He wanted to be with her. Always. Would she relocate to his home base in California? Maybe he'd ask for a change of assignment. Were there any instructor opportunities for EODs in Colorado? Was he ready to be an instructor and not on the front lines?

Finishing, he strapped on his backpack, set the timer, and wrapped his hand around Jess's. "Time to go."

"Thank you, Zander." She squeezed his hand as they hurried into the exterior cave.

"Of course. Hey, should we grab a couple of these gold bars rather than blow them all up?"

He was teasing. Mostly.

“Sorry, love. I feel like all of it needs to be buried. Papa’s legacy, buried and secure. Is that weird?”

They reached the exterior door and exited into the crisp, early morning—or was it night?—air. His watch said eleven-forty-three p.m. Night, then. It was a different scene than the fog and the fear of coming into the cave. They both changed back to their night-vision goggles, then continued walking.

“Not weird,” he reassured her. “I think it fits. But a gold brick would be kind of cool.”

He winked at her and upped his pace. He wanted to make sure they were well clear of the cave before it blew. Where had Aiden left someone waiting for them?

“*Love?*” he added, grinning happily at her. Did she really love him? Was the entire crazy ordeal over? Were they finally safe and going to be together? How soon could he hold her and kiss her for a long time like he’d been dreaming about?

“You okay with that?” she asked quietly.

“Oh yeah.” He grinned, pulling her into his side and squeezing her waist. “More than okay ... love.”

Jess gave the cutest little laugh. Zander had no idea the last time he’d been so happy.

Until a man sprang from behind a tree, ripped Jess from him, and shoved a gun into her neck.

“Seamons,” Zander growled. “Let her go, or I’ll rip you apart.” He couldn’t draw his own weapon and put her at risk.

“Give me the Delta weapon.”

“It’s in the cave. Go get it,” Zander told him.

Seamons looked at them, obviously realizing they weren’t carrying anything large enough to be the weapon. He looked at the open cave door and his eyes narrowed. Greed filled his gaze.

Jess elbowed him and dodged away. Zander leaped to her, pulling her behind him as Seamons fired his pistol. Liquid heat

seared through the side of Zander's abdomen. The force of the bullet threw him back against Jess.

"Zander!" Jess screamed.

Seamons ran for the cave entrance.

"I'm okay," Zander grunted out, regaining his footing and yanking out his own pistol. Blood streamed down his hip. He felt a little lightheaded. He shoved his other hand into the wound to slow the flow, then yelled to the retreating figure, "Don't do it, Admiral!"

Seamons ducked into the cave.

Jess ripped her backpack off and pulled out the first aid kit. She yanked out some squares of gauze. He lifted his hand from the wound and she shoved gauze pads into the flow of blood and pressed. Hot pain stabbed at him. He was losing a lot of blood, but he would be okay. He holstered his pistol. They needed to move.

"It's clean. It passed through," she said. "Are you okay?"

Her beautiful face was swimming in and out of his vision.

"Zander ... Zander!"

"Jess, we've got to ..."

They weren't far enough away from the cave and it was going to blow. He wrapped her up and pushed off with all the energy he had left. The explosion ripped through the night and all he had the time or strength to do was tackle her to the ground, cover her with his larger body, and pray he took the brunt of the debris and rock that would shower down on them.

"Zander!" Jess screamed.

Debris, rock, tree branches, dirt, pine cones, and even shards of the granite wall slammed into his back as he cradled her beneath him. Pain ripped through him.

And then mercifully everything went black.

## Chapter Seventeen



Jessie screamed Zander's name as the mountain exploded behind them and she was buried under Zander's body. Rocks, pieces of granite, branches, and other debris pelted them, stinging any exposed parts of her arms and legs that Zander hadn't managed to cover as he wrapped her up and took her to the ground.

The debris stung like a hundred wasp stings. Some of it cut her, but it was nothing compared to her stress over Zander. *Please say he's alive*, she begged heaven above. She'd asked heaven for far too much lately, but this was the one miracle that had to happen.

Tears streamed down her face as Zander's blood covered her back, warm and sticky and far too much of it. The scarier thing was he was not moving, lying on top of her like dead weight. She was having a hard time catching her breath, but she didn't care about herself.

That stupid nightmare. Had it been a premonition? No! She wouldn't believe it. He would live. He had to.

"Zander," she panted. "Oh, please no. You promised not to leave me!"

But he hadn't promised. Not really. He'd said he'd do everything in his power... and he'd used that power to protect her. He'd stepped in front of her and taken the bullet from Admiral Seamons. He'd covered her with his body like a shield and taken the brunt of the explosion.

No, no, no.



“Jessie! Zander!” Thor’s voice. Oh, thank heavens.

“Thor,” she tried to scream, but her lungs were compressed from the man she loved literally smothering her. Was he breathing? Could she feel his heartbeat? Everything was too loud and chaotic from the explosion and in her own mind to slow down and determine that.

“Zander!” Thor’s voice was full of concern. She’d never heard Thor’s voice sound like that. He was always teasing, laughing, trying to get a rise out of somebody, or he was gooey sweet with his beautiful wife Shelly.

She peeked out from under Zander’s arm and could see Thor. He rolled Zander off of her, catching him before he hit the ground and supporting him on his side. Jessie pulled in a full breath and scrambled up.

“Let’s get some clean gauze on this wound on his side and ...” Thor cursed.

“What?” She pushed her night vision goggles back into place and followed Thor’s gaze. She wanted to curse, too. A wide spike of granite was embedded in Zander’s back. Nausea rose in her throat, and she turned and vomited.

“Jessie.” Thor’s voice was semi-level. She could tell he was trying to calm her. “Get the gauze and then you’ve got to radio for help.” His blue gaze met hers and he nodded to her. “You’ve got this.”

She stood on wobbly legs and hurried over to where she’d dropped the first aid kit. It was buried under some rocks, but she saw the edge, pushed the rocks off, and yanked it out. Hurrying back, she pulled out some large squares of gauze, dropped to her knees, and pushed it into the wound on his side. Thor held Zander on his side with one hand and grabbed some of the gauze with his other, carefully wrapping and pressing it into the wound on his back.

“Can’t we take that out?” she begged.

“Not yet. It can make the bleeding worse and cause more internal damage.”

“But what if ...”

If they shifted him wrong and that spike embedded deeper and killed him or severed his spinal cord. It might have already nicked his spinal cord. It was so close.

“Does he have a pulse?” Thor interrupted her fears.

She lifted her free hand and pushed it against his warm neck, staring at his handsome face, his eyes closed, no smile at all.

She felt his pulse and at least they had that. “Yes, the pulse feels strong,” she reported to Thor.

“Okay. Can you reach the radio in my pocket?”

She nodded, determined to get help as fast as possible. But what if he lost too much blood before then? What if he was already paralyzed or dying? Where was the team who should be monitoring the cave?

*Please, she begged her Father above. Please spare him.*

She fumbled with Thor’s pocket, trying to pull the walkie talkie free.

The low rumble of motors sounded in her ears. She looked up at her cousin. “Thor?”

“Oh, thank heaven,” Thor said. “They must’ve heard the explosion. What happened?” It seemed like an afterthought. The cave had blown and the weapon was gone, but Thor was a hundred percent focused on Zander, just as she was. What would he say when he knew she and Zander had buried the weapon on purpose?

The worst part ... it was all her fault. She’d told Zander to blow the cave and now he might die because of it.

She shook her head at her cousin. She could tell everyone later. Right now, she had to focus on Zander living through tonight.

## Chapter Eighteen



Jessie paced the hospital waiting room, gnawing at her thumbnail, praying constantly, and avoiding the probing glances of all her family members and Zander's SEAL buddies. They'd all arrived over the past few hours to support and pray for Zander.

Various special ops medics, Blackhawk pilots, and his own SEAL friends had pulled off an amazing hoist operation in the dark and had gotten him in the air twenty minutes faster than Life Flight could have reached their location. Every second had felt like an hour as she'd watched the lifeblood of the man she loved oozing out. Transporting him had been a nightmare, and she thought she would have a heart attack as they carefully positioned him and took his body up in a basket. If he shifted wrong in the improvised litter, she knew that spike of granite could kill or paralyze him.

But Zander had made it to the hospital alive. The receiving hospital staff had been stunned to see a Blackhawk land on their helipad, but they'd loaded Zander and whisked him inside. A nurse had explained that they were pumping him full of fluids, would do a blood transfusion, and had taken him into surgery to stabilize him and attempt to remove the granite. If he survived that, they would see what damage had been done to his internal organs or his spinal cord. If there wasn't further repair needed, they would close up both wounds and see how his recovery went. His parents had been called and were being flown in by the Navy. Apparently the Navy, especially Admiral Gusbane, blaming himself that he hadn't recognized Admiral Seamons' deception and hadn't trusted the Deltas,

had been extremely accommodating and willing to do anything the Deltas or the SEALs needed.

“Jessie.” Her mom grasped her arm, pulling her to a stop. “It’s going to be hours until they’re done with surgery and even longer until he’s awake. Can you please stop pacing long enough to tell us what happened?”

Jessie looked around at all the interested, concerned, loving faces. Her family. Would they be upset with her for what she’d done? She’d been so certain it was the right thing, but now Admiral Seamons was dead and Zander might not survive. Emotion filled her throat. She needed another minute.

She sank into a chair and looked around again. It was crazy that they were all here. Family, future in-laws, Zander’s SEALs. Only little Mo, Kelsey’s mom Lori, and Granny Vance had stayed back at the house. The sheriff’s deputies had stayed with them, just in case. Nobody was monitoring the cave and only one of the sheriff’s men was monitoring the cameras and sensors in Papa’s house, just in case a mercenary hadn’t gotten the message that Frederick was dead and the weapon blown up.

Thirty-two well-loved faces looked back at her. Thirty-two people who had risked life and limb, sacrificed careers, and supported Papa, and her, with everything they had. For the weapon ... or for Papa ... or because it was just who they were? Loyal, devoted, hard-working, incredible people who would never get a reward or recognition for their sacrifices. A hardened military family who trusted each other and trusted in heaven above. They’d been literally to purgatory and back.

Would they thank her for making it possible for them to finally have peace and rest? Or would they be livid with her for destroying not only Papa’s life’s work, but theirs too? Would they all be lost without that focus?

“Can you tell me what happened in the valley after we left?” Jessie asked instead, trying to buy some time.

Bailey stood up. “Me?”

Colt and their dad smiled at her. “Sure,” Colt said.

“It was crazy, absolute bedlam,” Bailey started the tale, making it overly dramatic and terrifying. Blackhawk helicopters had swooped down, soldiers spilling out of them armed to the teeth, barking orders at the family as the Deltas’ SEALs escaped. The family tried to distract and keep those troops occupied and then even more troops rolling up the canyon. No way to fight or win without losing many of the Delta family and loved ones.

Jessie found herself smiling and saw many other smiles or sometimes eye rolls as Bailey over-exaggerated the story. Being herded into Papa’s house and kept prisoner like a bunch of cattle. Admiral Seamons admitting that he’d sold out to Frederick years ago and even his wife Olivet hadn’t known. He’d set it up for Olivet to get in with Frederick as well, to get more money and to assure she took the fall with the military or police if anything came out.

Bailey told how he’d used the zip drive to set up people he wanted Papa Delta to investigate and to gain the Deltas’ trust. He’d even set up the shooter at the outdoor restaurant with Maddie and Braden who had shot him in the leg. The gunshot and the injury had been a complete fake. That made sense how he had run at the cave with no crutches.

He’d separated the Deltas back at the house and questioned each of them, grilling them, desperate to find out what they knew about the weapon and how to access it, telling them he already had special ops forces who had overwhelmed the family members who were missing and the weapon would soon be in his hands.

“He questioned everyone but Kylee ...” Bailey’s voice trailed off and she looked guiltily at Chandler’s fiancée. “Sorry, Kylee.”

Kylee smiled sadly. “At least the bullet he took for me at the party was real.”

“He truly cared for you,” Joseph said firmly. “He told me that.”

“Thank you.” Kylee nodded to him and snuggled into Chandler.

There was silence for a few seconds, and then Kylee gave a slight smile and gestured to Bailey. “It’s all right. Finish your story.”

Bailey continued, talking about the troops camping all over the lawn. None of the family being allowed to leave the house and poor Granny Vance about going insane and Mo not wanting to go to sleep and Hudson carrying him around for hours singing to him before he crashed.

“It was a crazy and terrifying night, but as you can see, we all survived and I have lots and lots of good story fodder.” She bowed. “The end.”

Jessie smiled and wondered if she should clap. Bailey sat back down. Colt kissed her softly and drew her against his side. The simple affection made Jessie long for Zander. Would she ever know that level of comfort and familiarity? Would they ever be able to be together without stress and angst? He finally wasn’t fighting against his feelings for her, but now he was lying on a cold hard operating table fighting for his life, not even able to use his strength or all the impressive skills he’d mastered over the years to help him.

*He has his faith.*

She teared up again, appreciating the reminder. *Please heal him.*

“Okay,” her mom said. “Time to tell us what happened. Thor told us about you not firing the weapon and the news of King Frederick’s death coming at just the right moment. Good job listening to the spirit, love.”

Jessie nodded. That’s what it was all about, right? Her listening. Her being the one chosen to make this decision, possibly because she *would* listen. Her boy cousins used to tease her when they were younger that she was small in stature but big in spirit. She hadn’t minded the tease. It had helped her today.

“But Thor has no idea how the cave exploded and what happened to the admiral,” her mom said.

“And I usually know everything,” Thor bragged.

Jessie smiled at him while Aiden groaned. Most of the family simply studied her.

She wasn't a storyteller or given to dramatics, but most of all she didn't know how her family would react. She tightened her jaw and her resolve, but she also twisted her hands nervously.

"After Aiden told us that Frederick had been killed and everyone cleared out of the cave, it was just Zander and me. He was holding me close and suddenly I knew ..."

Everybody leaned forward. So many blue eyes focused on her, with a few deep-brown and green mixed in. Sweat popped on her forehead, but she had been brave in that cave and she knew she'd done the right thing. She straightened her shoulders and raised her voice. "It was one of the strongest promptings I'd ever felt in my life. I *knew* the weapon had to be destroyed."

There was a collective suck-in of breath.

"Wait a minute ..." Colt stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. "That wasn't a mistake? You had Zander wire the cave and blow up the weapon? On purpose?"

"Yes." She tilted her chin up and met her brother's blue eyes. He was confused and probably angry. All of them had taken the Delta Protection Detail seriously, but nobody more than Colt. He'd seemed to live and breathe it, had even built a special room off his garage with all his equipment. Most of her life she had wished Colt was Secret Keeper, and the past couple of weeks when she was designated Secret Keeper by Papa, she had really wished she could let her brother take the responsibility.

But not any longer. She'd done the right thing and she would take their anger, censure, questions, whatever they threw at her. They were all probably questioning their support of her being the Keeper about now. She looked around the room. Cousins, siblings, in-laws, future in-laws, parents, uncle and aunt, the elite SEAL team. Everyone looking at her as if all the stress might have been too much and she'd lost her mind.

Little Jessie. Against all these brave, tough, accomplished people.

“Why, Jessie?” her dad asked, his voice gravelly, his elbows braced on his thighs.

Hudson jumped to his feet and started pacing. He had a lot of energy and it was obvious it couldn't be contained right now. She waited for him to say something, and he didn't disappoint. He stopped in front of her and then kneeled and grabbed her hands, his blue eyes intense. “Jessie ... Papa gave his life for that weapon.”

“No.” Jessie felt strength course through her. She smiled at the cousin she'd been closest to growing up. “No, Hudson. Papa gave his life for you.”

He blinked at her and then he released her hands, jumped up, and paced some more. “You're right. Of course you're right.” He gestured with his hands. “Why does it feel like we just lost him all over again?”

Tears stung at Jessie's eyes. He was right. The weapon, the cave, the secret, the patrols, the special conference room and monitors at Papa's house, all of it was so ... Papa. His life's work. His life's focus. And now it was gone. Useless.

No. Not useless. It had all served a purpose and could continue to do so. She slowly let her gaze travel around the room, focusing on each face that she loved and that Papa had adored. The most important parts of Papa's life had been her cousins, her siblings, her parents, her uncle and aunt, and her. All of them and so many others in the valley and those Papa had served through his military service. That had been his life's focus.

“I hope you can all forgive me,” she said, her voice quavering. “Zander also tried to talk me out of it, but I felt the prompting deeply, and I couldn't deny it. I was meant to destroy the weapon and the cave. It *is* the reason I was made Secret Keeper. Because I don't know if any of the rest of you would've done it.” She maybe shouldn't have had added that last line. It wasn't meant as a shot, but she knew it was the truth.



There were some murmurs, exchanged glances, and Maddie stood, her mouth working soundlessly as she tried to make sense of the information. Jessie knew Maddie was involved with helping to infiltrate and take down some seriously bad people. She probably had a list of people she would like to use the weapon on. In an emotionless tone, she muttered, "You're right, sis. You are absolutely right. There's no way I would've destroyed it."

Jessie shrugged. She didn't think Maddie was criticizing or approving of what she'd done. She was simply stating a fact.

The room was almost buzzing with energy and whispers in pockets around the room. Some of her family members looked at her as if they hoped she was pranking them.

"Huddy." She looked at Hudson. He stopped walking. "I know it feels like we just lost Papa again, but the truth is ... it was a proper burial for his legacy and it was the right thing to do." Her voice got stronger, and she stood and walked up to her cousin, tilting her head back to focus on his face. "This is the only way the Delta family will ever have peace. Too many people knew about the weapon and there would be no shortage of mercenaries, military, dictators, treasure hunters, and opportunists who would be after it. Including our own government."

She looked around the group and could see it was registering with some of them. She wished Zander was here to back her up. He'd believed her so quickly. Was it simply that he trusted her or because he'd felt it too? He'd been there. By her side. Right where he should be. Tears pricked her eyes, missing him, worrying about him.

*Please let him live, she begged heaven above. I need him.*

Her family loved her, and she thought they trusted her, but this was something none of them would have done and it would take a while to gain their understanding. Some might never approve, but they wouldn't question her insight from heaven above.

"Think about the past couple of weeks. All of us," she gestured to Zander's SEAL buddies who hadn't said much,

“and Reed’s men, trying to keep the weapon safe. I was so impressed with all of you, all the hard work and dedication to our family and Papa and the weapon. We would’ve had to keep that up ... for how long? Could we have? Eventually, one of you would’ve been killed or some evil dictator would’ve stolen the weapon. Papa was already killed ... Zander might be dying as we speak ...” Her throat clogged up. She coughed, tried to clear it, but then had to croak out, “When would it ever stop? When would our family ever have peace?”

There was silence in the room.

A side door opened, and a male voice said, “Jess is right.”

*Jess?*

She whipped around to face him. It wasn’t possible, but there he was. The man of her dreams.

Zander slowly walked out, wearing doctor’s scrubs and a big smile. Oh, how she’d missed his smile. His skin was sallow and his dark eyes looked tired, but he was as handsome and irresistible as ever.

Jess’s eyes widened as she heard “Zander!” echo through the room.

She ran to him, wanting to fling herself into his arms but not wanting to hurt him. “You’re okay?”

He nodded and gently wrapped his arms around her and ushered her into his right side. “Just a little tender on the left and apparently I’ve got a stitch or two on my back as well.”

“Oh, Zander.” She laid her head against his shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re just ... walking around. Why didn’t they come tell us?”

He smiled. “Since I was passed out and they were worried about a head injury, they only gave me local anesthetics to stitch up my side and to remove the granite and sew that up. Luckily, the gunshot was clean and the spike didn’t hit anything vital. I woke up while they were closing me up about an hour ago. Freaked them all out. I begged them to let me walk out here and shock you all. Actually threatened to leave against medical advice if they didn’t allow it. Once the blood

transfusion was complete, I got some clear juices down and they'd already pumped enough fluid into me with IVs when I was originally brought in and throughout the surgery. They agreed if I *could* walk out here, they'd let me." He grinned. "Nobody knows how tough and resilient EODs are. Are you shocked?"

"Yes!" Shocked in the best possible way. *Thank you*, she prayed silently, tears of gratitude stinging her eyes.

Her family and his friends gathered around. They started asking questions, all talking at once. Everybody was relieved Zander was okay.

The Delta weapon's destruction and her ruining Papa's legacy seemed forgotten. For the moment.

"Everybody, everybody ..." Colt hollered above the news.

The family finally calmed and turned to him.

"I agree with Zander. Jessie is right. She did the right thing. She was the right choice to be the Secret Keeper."

Jessie's chest filled with warmth. The oldest cousin, her big brother, was backing her up. She wasn't surprised. Colt was loyal to family above all else and would always have her back. She met his gaze, and he smiled and nodded to her.

"I would've been too prideful to listen to a prompting to blow up the weapon," Colt admitted.

Aiden and Thor exchanged a glance and shrugged and nodded at each other at the same time.

"And think about the pieces that fell into place, orchestrated from above," Chandler piped in. "Zander being the one by Jessie's side, the expert at exploding things."

"That's right," Cap crowed. "Taught him all I know."

Everyone laughed.

"They don't know I was only at your side because of how good you kiss," Zander whispered into her ear.

Jessie giggled.

Uncle Keith nodded to her. “Thank you, Jessie, for being humble enough to listen. You did exactly what Papa would have wanted.”

“Thank you for giving our family peace,” her dad said.

“Speak for yourself,” Thor said. “What am I going to do in my spare time?”

“Kiss your wife,” Shelly said.

“Oh yeah!” Thor grabbed his wife and started kissing her.

The family laughed and teased and the SEALs even joined in. Jessie wondered if it would take some of them more time to come to terms with it, but she had done the right thing. And they’d all have to figure out how to live with it.

Hudson and his wife Kelsey approached them. “Hey,” Hudson said. “You two need some privacy?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Zander grinned at her, and her knees went weak.

Privacy? *Yes, please.*

Hudson’s wife Kelsey escorted them through some double doors while Hudson stayed behind to chat with the family. She took them down a hall and then into a classroom of sorts. “I spent some time working here when I was in school. They do first aid and Lamaze classes in here.” She winked. “Enjoy.” Then she was gone.

Zander gently cupped her face with his hands. She clung to his biceps. It felt great to hold onto those beautiful muscle bumps, and she didn’t have to worry about touching any of his recent wounds.

“You’re really okay?” She could hardly believe it. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“Lucky for you, you didn’t.” He grinned.

“So lucky. Actually so blessed and grateful.” She fought the sting of tears and wanted to gush how much she loved him and pray her gratitude aloud. “How did you know I was right

when you walked into the room earlier? You couldn't have overheard that discussion."

He laughed. "I heard you talking when I walked in, and I figured it was the right thing to say. You're always right in my mind."

"I like that."

"Jess ... we haven't had much time together, and I have no clue what's going to happen with my career and assignments after this mess, and I don't want to be presumptuous, but ..."

He grinned at her.

"Oh, using that smile to get your way now?"

"You know it." He looked over her face. "You did call me love earlier today, right?"

"I can't recall that." She pursed her lips. "I'll have to think about it."

He leaned down and she went onto her tiptoes, clinging to his biceps.

"Well, this is risky, then ..."

Her stomach pitched happily. "I can't imagine something risky could scare *the Zander Povey*."

"I can run into enemy fire or fight any insurgent, but asking *the Jessica Delta* to date me is terrifying."

"Date you?" Dating sounded so normal and basic and perfect.

"Well, I'm hoping for some serious dating, but fun too," he clarified with a smile. "Lots of kissing and hopefully a commitment to figure out how to be together always. And soon, a huge diamond ring. I might've snuck a gold bar out of a certain cave and think I could trade it for a pretty impressive diam—"

Jessie pressed her lips to his, cutting him off. He smiled against her lips, then proceeded to kiss her, holding nothing back. Wow, did he hold nothing back! She thought of those tortured, beautiful kisses from before. She'd loved them, but

the purity, commitment, and dedication in this kiss blew everything they'd previously experienced away.

They pulled apart to catch a breath and Jessie said, "Yes, I would love to date you, Zander."

"Perfect. Now maybe we should find a chair. I'm about to pass out."

"Zander!" she scolded and hurried him over to a chair. He sat down. "Are you really okay? What do you need? I'll get your doctor or Colt or Kelsey. A drink? Some food? Another IV or more blood? Do they need to reevaluate you?"

Zander grinned up at her, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. "I'm fine, Jess. A little lightheaded from that incredible kiss and the happy future I'm planning with you. Sitting down is all I need. With you in my arms. Avoiding my left side. And some more kissing."

Jessie tried to protest that he needed help and that she would call a nurse for help, but he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. She had no way to protest as she melted against him. On his right side.

## Epilogue



It was Halloween, and it was a chilly and odd day for a wedding, but Maddie had never done anything traditionally, so why start with her wedding?

The crowd of friends and family filled the new addition to the ski lodge that Alivia and Klein had recently finished for Jace and Ammon Jardine. It was beautiful, a wide-open room with wood beams and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the sweeping Summit Valley below. No snow yet, but it was a crisp, clear fall day.

Jessie appreciated each clear, peaceful day, and today was a great one to see so many friends and family members. It had been over a month since Papa's memorial service. An emotional event with a massive crowd. He'd received full military honors and nobody left without shedding a few tears.

The family was healing, though it was impossible to replace the hole a man like Papa left behind. Jessie missed him. More now than ever, as her family were all busy with their own families. She'd been busy catching up online with all the school she'd missed during the Delta weapon drama, so that helped a little. She'd graduate in December and then ... she wasn't sure.

A few mercenaries had shown up over the past month, found the exploded and burned-out cave, and left. King Frederick's regime had been dismantled after he died and there were only about a dozen of his top leaders who hadn't been captured and arrested. Who knew what hole they were hiding in? The people of Banida, Poland, and Germany were

rebuilding their lives. That would take time, but at least the war was over.

Admiral Gusbane had apologized to the Delta family and offered prestigious assignments to Braden, Aiden, Zander, and their SEAL buddies. Her dad and Uncle Keith also apologized for ever mistrusting him. Braden had chosen early retirement from the Navy. He and Maddie were working with Jasmine Quinn and Sutton Smith to continue fighting against human trafficking and drug lords. Jessie was very proud of them. Zander, Aiden, and the SEALs had only asked to go back to work. Aiden and Melene were making things work with her being in Virginia whenever he was home, but when he went on missions, she'd join whatever humanitarian group needed her anywhere on the globe.

Jessie and Zander talked through FaceTime, text, and email every day, unless he was on an assignment that prevented it. She'd been able to go visit him in Coronado, California and he'd come to visit her twice in the past month. There were some advantages to having a high-up admiral feeling beholden to you.

Jessie focused back on the happy couple. They beamed at each other and were such a perfect fit. She didn't judge Braden and Maddie for their choice of wedding day, but it sure wouldn't be hers. She fantasized about a Christmas wedding, but she hadn't told anybody that. She wasn't even engaged. Despite Zander's tease about stealing a gold brick to buy a diamond ring, she hadn't been given a big, shiny diamond yet. Zander was on a special ops mission currently, so she wouldn't be getting engaged for Halloween either. Maybe Thanksgiving?

Jessie stood in the lineup of bridesmaids with Alivia and Braden's sister Isabelle. She liked Isabelle a lot. It was nice to have a new friend who didn't have a significant other. She kept in contact with her friends from school, but with Zander not here in the valley, being alone was an acute pain. She'd hoped he'd make it back for his close friend Braden and her sister's wedding. He hadn't dared commit one way or another as he'd gone undercover for a mission somewhere in Russia.



The mission must've taken longer than he'd planned. There was always that fear pricking the back of her mind that he'd get killed on a mission, but he'd made it through the Delta mission, so she kept focusing on faith that he'd keep coming back to her.

“Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, for richer or for poorer, as long as you both shall live?” Pastor Sam asked Braden.

“I do.” Braden's teal-blue eyes twinkled at Maddie. He looked very handsome in his dusky blue suit and burnt orange tie. Not as handsome as Zander would've looked, but was it fair to compare anyone to Zander?

“Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, for richer or for poorer, as long as you both shall live?”

Maddie tilted her head, took her time looking Braden over, winked at him, and then said, “I guess he'll do.”

The crowd tittered with laughter.

“Just teasing. Of course I do. Have you not checked out this fine-looking male specimen who can kiss better than Westley from Princess Bride?”

Pastor Sam shifted, but he was used to the Deltas' teasing. Everyone else laughed.

“Well, then,” the pastor said. “We'd better see this kiss. I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

“Yes!” Maddie cheered.

Braden simply grinned, wrapped his bride up tight, and gave her a kiss that looked Oscar-worthy.

The crowd cheered, and Jessie cheered with them. She could picture her and Zander kissing passionately like that. Someday. Hopefully soon. She wanted to be married, though she had no idea how it would go with him gone a majority of the time. That would be rough. But she would never tell him to give up his hard work and specialties. He had given it up for a

while to protect the Delta secret weapon. She was grateful he could get back to doing what he loved, grateful he was healthy and whole and hadn't given everything for the Delta weapon. Like Papa.

She could bet Papa and Granny were watching over them on a beautiful occasion like this. Actually, as she thought about that, she could almost feel Papa smiling down on them, so happy for Maddie and Braden.

Braden lifted Maddie into the air, and everyone cheered.

The crowd surged to their feet, and the congratulating commenced. Jessie chatted and hugged and laughed and kept Thor and Aiden from wrestling during Maddie's wedding and enjoyed the delicious chicken and salmon teriyaki dinner. She wished Zander was here, but she couldn't waste each day pining for him. She would stay positive and happy and hope that someday it could work out for them.

Dinner and dessert and toasts wrapped up. Jessie had given the last toast to the beautiful couple. She finished with, "And Braden, please train diligently so someday you can best my feisty sister in a fight. I've never accomplished such a grand feat yet."

Everyone laughed.

"That's 'cause you're too sweet to pick a fight," Thor called. "You could easily win."

Maddie called out her protests and Aiden threatened to fight Thor on the dance floor.

As Jessie went to interrupt yet another brawl, her mom wisely started the music and the dancing. Thor and Aiden happily went off to dance with their wives.

Jessie didn't want to dance with anyone, but she chatted with many people that she loved. Hudson and Kelsey sidled up next to her. Mo was dancing with Thor and Shelly. He was adorable. The entire Delta family spoiled him.

"Hey," Hudson said. "Can we ask a favor?"

"For sure. Anything for the people who gave us Mo."

Hudson's blue eyes twinkled. "Can I tell her?"

"We haven't even told our moms," Kelsey said in a falsely shocked voice. She pushed at his shoulder, her dark eyes all lit up. Jessie loved seeing all the couples in her family together and these two had gone through years coming to their happily ever after.

Jessie pressed closer to them. The music covered a bit of the conversation. Hopefully no one would overhear. "Are you two expecting?" she whispered excitedly.

"We aren't saying." Hudson grinned happily. "But the fact that Kelsey is extremely fertile bodes well for my chance at those eleven boys. It'll be a full a lacrosse team, so Chandler will be ecstatic."

"Brave!" Kelsey cried out.

He grabbed her and kissed her while Jessie clapped her hands happily together.

They pulled apart and she couldn't stop smiling. Mo was the cutest ever. She could hardly believe they were already expecting again.

"How do you know?" she asked quietly. "You've only been married five weeks." She blushed at what she was asking.

Hudson chuckled easily. "I had her take a test last week, just hoping. I'm the luckiest guy in the world." He picked his wife up and swung her around.

"Yes, you are," Jessie agreed. She was thrilled for them and wished Zander could share this moment with all of them.

"So here's what we need." Hudson got semi-serious.

"Okay ...?" She was intrigued. Hudson always had some kind of crazy plan. She'd often been part of them growing up. It made her feel young and carefree to be in on something with him. Papa had often known about their plans. As long as they didn't hurt anyone or damage someone else's property, he had rarely stopped them. She smiled just thinking about it.

"Do you remember Jason Spackman?"

She nodded. Jason had been a little too flirtatious and cocky in high school, but he'd never bothered her too much. He bothered her a lot now. He'd lied to Hudson and claimed Kelsey's baby was his and caused them four years of separation and pain.

"He had the nerve to show up."

"Here?" That was crazy. The guy must be clueless. "Seriously?"

"Yep. He's over at the refreshment table, pounding shrimp down his ugly gullet. Can you ask him to dance?"

She cringed. "Just don't leave me dancing with him for too long."

"Twenty seconds. Promise." He crossed his heart. He was such a kid at heart.

"Okay. I'll do it for you, but only because I found out about ... the best secret first."

"You're the best." Hudson hugged her.

Jessie waved to them and sauntered around the edge of the dance floor. She saw Jason by the refreshments. He was chatting with Ammon Jardine, who owned the ski resort with his brother Jace.

Ammon saw her first as she walked their way in her silver high heels in the clingy burnt-orange dress Maddie had picked out for all the bridesmaids. He grinned. "Hey, Jessie. You look great."

"Thanks, Ammon. The resort looks amazing."

"Thank you. Alivia and Klein outdid themselves with this room and the suites we added on to the hotel. We're excited for ski season."

"Me too." She gave him a quick one-arm hug. He was a great guy. She'd thought he was after Alivia at one point, but Klein had won. They'd found out Klein had always had Alivia's heart, though her older sister was too tough to let even Maddie or Jessie know that.

“Jessie Delta.” Jason gave a low whistle. “Dang, girl. You grew up to be a hottie!”

Jessie grinned when she wanted to cringe and shove a shrimp into his ugly mouth to shut him up. Actually, she’d prefer using some of the debilitating moves Papa had taught her. Forget being kind or a peacemaker with a guy who had hurt her cousin and Kelsey like this loser had.

“It’s been a long time, Jason. How have you been?” She blinked up at him as if she were flirting.

“Not as good as you, beautiful. Do you want to dance?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He shoved his plate of food at Ammon, who raised his eyebrows and set the plate on the table. Jason grabbed her hand and tugged her out onto the dance floor. Whirling her into his chest, he wrapped her up, his sticky hands lower than they should’ve been on her back.

20, 19, 18 ...

She counted down in her head. Hudson had better keep his end of the deal. This guy was just gross.

“Man, if I would’ve known how fine you were, I wouldn’t have stayed away from home for so long.” He pulled her even closer and whispered, “You want to get out of here?”

... 3, 2, 1.

If Hudson didn’t show up right now, she was kneeing this guy and letting Hudson rewrite his plan. Her cousin was a master at ad-libbing when necessary.

“Excuse me.” Hudson tapped hard on Jason’s shoulder. “Can I cut in?”

“Buzz off, dude. She’s mine.” Jason didn’t even turn to look at him.

“I don’t think so.” Hudson grabbed Jason’s shoulder and ripped him away from Jessie.

Jessie helped, shoving Jason away and telling him, “You’re way out of your league, dude.”

“H-H-Hudson,” Jason stuttered. He looked around at the circle of Delta men who had moved into position while Jessie danced with him, and his chin quivered. Then he held his hands in front of his face. “Don’t hit me. Please don’t hit me.”

Kelsey held Mo in her arms and sauntered up to them, looking gorgeous and confident.

“Kelsey. Um ... wow. I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry.”

“Not yet,” Hudson said, grinning. “But you will be.” He folded his arms across his chest, showcasing his well-defined biceps, and cocked his head to the side. “What did you think would happen showing up here?” Hudson didn’t wait for an answer but called to his brothers, “Bros?”

Aiden, Thor, Chandler, and Hudson’s brother-in-law Sheriff Reed all stepped closer. They yanked Jason off his feet, tipped him upside down, and hauled him ingloriously off the dance floor.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Reed began.

“What did I do?” Jason whined, his face turning red as all the blood rushed to it.

“Really?” Hudson asked. “What *didn’t* you do?”

The men disappeared out the door. Kelsey and Mo stood close by Jessie, watching them go.

“Who was that dude?” Mo asked.

“Nobody, love.” Kelsey kissed her son’s cheek. “Let’s dance. Thanks, Jessie.” They danced off, and Jessie waved. She knew they could’ve done much worse to Jason with Hudson’s fame, money, and talent. She was glad they could close that chapter and move past it.

“Those boys.” Her mom came up, laughing. “Do you think they’ll hurt him?”

“No.” Jessie’s cousins were too honorable to thump a loser like that, even if he did deserve it. “He might spend a few minutes in a jail cell, though.” They both laughed. “Aren’t you glad you had girls?”

Her mom hugged her. “I had Colton.”

“He doesn’t count. Too serious.” She winked at Colt as he and Bailey danced by.

“You look beautiful, sweetheart.” Her dad approached with a drink for her mom, handing it over.

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry Zander couldn’t make it,” her mom said.

“Me too.” Her dad’s eyes twinkled happily. Was he sorry or not? “Do you want to dance?” he asked Jessie.

“You should dance with Mom.”

“He will. Soon. I’m going to enjoy this strawberry lemonade. This marrying off a daughter is a lot of work. Maybe I do wish I had all boys.” She winked and walked over to sit by Aunt Holly.

Her dad took Jessie’s hand and put his other hand formally on her waist. She rested her hand on his shoulder. They waltzed around the dance floor, which was a little weird as “Can’t Stop the Feeling” was playing. Of course Maddie would have upbeat songs at her wedding. She and Braden were dancing happily, seeming unable to take their eyes or their hands off each other.

“It’s great to see her so happy,” her dad said, following her gaze.

“For sure. Braden is definitely the right man for her.”

He nodded in agreement and asked, “Are you happy, sweetheart?”

“Of course,” she said. “I’ve got all my family around. Nobody has persecuted me for blowing up a legendary weapon, I’m graduating with my master’s soon, and my boyfriend is a super talented special ops hero.”

“Who you wish was here.”

“I always wish it, but I’ll be happy and make things great, even if my lover isn’t here.”

“Your lover?” Her dad wrinkled his nose, obviously not liking that wording.

“Sorry. My super-stud who can kiss better than Westley from the Princess Bride.” She stole Maddie’s line, making her dad groan. “Chief Petty Officer Zander Povey, Master EOD,” she clarified. “Have you ever met him?”

“Once or twice.” Her dad shook his head at her. “Have you two talked about how to be together? Aiden and Melene seem to make it work.”

“They do.” She didn’t love the idea of leaving the valley, but it would work out. Somehow.

“Excuse me.” A male hand tapped her dad’s shoulder. “Can I cut in?”

Jessie looked over her dad’s shoulder and cried out, “Zander!”

He stood there in his dress blues, which were actually black, looking irresistibly handsome with the biggest smile for her. “Hi, Jess.”

“You going to wield that smile like a weapon?”

“If it gets me a kiss.”

Her dad let out a long-suffering sigh, but put Jessie’s hand into Zander’s.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Be good to her,” her dad said. It was a standard dad warning, but her dad knew that Zander could and had protected her with his life. He’d never not be good to her.

“Always, sir.” Zander nodded respectfully.

Her dad clapped him on the shoulder and walked over to find her mom.

Zander tugged her close, lifted her off her feet, and swung her around. She laughed happily and wrapped her arms around his neck. He lowered her to her feet, holding her scandalously close. “Ah, Jess. Do you have any idea how much I’ve missed you?”



“Not near as much as I’ve missed you. Now stop complaining about it and kiss me.”

“Gladly.” He grinned and then he kissed her. Wow, did he kiss her! He bent her back and took full and complete control of her lips. She adored him.

“Come on, you two. Trying to take all the attention on *my* day!” Maddie’s teasing voice was much too close.

Zander lifted her up, turning her to face her sister and Braden.

“Hey, man.” Braden and Zander embraced. “Sorry I missed it. I traveled as fast as I could.”

“You’re here now,” Braden said easily, never one to hold a grudge. “Thanks for coming. It means a lot.”

“Congrats.” Zander hugged Maddie. “You are one lucky woman.”

“Don’t I know it?” Maddie smiled happily at her husband. “Buff, Beautiful, Not-too-Bad-at-all Braden is the best husband in the world.”

Braden laughed and hugged her.

“You two go dance and smooch.” Jessie shooed them with her hand. “We won’t steal your thunder.”

“Thank you. You know how I love to be the center of attention.” Maddie blew them a kiss and whirled off with Braden. She couldn’t have cared less about the attention, hyper-focused on her husband. Jessie wondered how she’d even noticed them.

Zander pulled Jessie in close again. Slow dancing with her to “Marry Me” by Train. Jessie’s heart leapt. He was truly here.

“How’d you get here?” she asked.

“Pulled a few strings.” He grinned and tenderly ran his hands along her back, making her tremble. “Told the Rangers I was with that if they didn’t finish the job and get me to the most beautiful woman in the world, I’d have Hudson Delta tell

the entire world on all of his social media that SEALs were far superior to Rangers.”

She laughed at that.

He directed her to a quiet corner of the dance floor and then suddenly they were behind a half-wall and a large potted plant and floral arrangement she hadn't even noticed.

“Zander?” she asked.

He dropped to one knee and grasped her hand, singing along with the song, “Marry me ... today and every day.” He grinned and pulled a ring from his breast pocket. It wasn't even in a box, just a gorgeous princess cut diamond with smaller square diamonds embedded into the band.

She was stunned. They hadn't even talked about logistics of where they'd live or when they'd get married or ... who the heck cared?

“Yes!” she cried out.

Zander stood and kissed her deeply and then pulled back, grinning, and slid the ring onto her finger. He tenderly kissed her finger and then pulled her in and kissed her long and thoroughly. Very, very thoroughly.

She was flushed and so in love as they pulled back.

“I love you, Jess,” he murmured.

“I love you, too, my frogman who's better than any prince.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and they swayed in their private spot, flush with love and the future spread out before them.

“What do you think of living in Coronado and whenever I go on extended missions, we fly you home or to a humanitarian mission with Melene? She told me they have a lot of need for speech pathologists.”

Melene had mentioned that option to her as well. She liked it. With her degree, she could help children and have the flexibility to be with Zander whenever he was home.

“Whatever gives me the most time with you,” she said.

He grinned. “A Christmas wedding? Right after you graduate?”

“If you can wait that long,” she teased him.

He hugged her tighter and whispered huskily in her ear, “I’d get married tonight ...”

A delicious shiver ran through her.

“But your dad threatened me with making me live in that spider-infested cabin up by the cave for a year if I didn’t let your mom plan a Christmas wedding.”

“A Christmas wedding it is.”

“I think all of our SEAL buddies can come.”

“Oh, good. We can make my mom hug Van and Cap. Those two have issues.”

“Don’t we all?” He grinned. “Except you. And lucky for me, you’re willing to put up with me.”

“You are pretty tough to handle.”

“Oh yeah?” He cocked an eyebrow and kissed her softly. “That’s tough on you?”

She moaned. “So tough. I can’t believe I’ll be expected to do that over ...” She kissed him briefly. “And over ...” She kissed him longer. “And over ...” She wrapped him up for a long, delicious kiss and didn’t plan to ever let him go.

“Sheesh!” a little voice piped up from down low. “I thought my mama and daddy kissed too much.”

“Mo!” Jessie bent low and he gave her a squeeze around the neck. “Sorry. I haven’t seen Zander in a long time, and I missed him.”

“Hey, tough guy,” Mo chirped. “Why ya kissin’ my Aunt Jessie?”

Zander laughed easily, swooped Mo up, and tossed him into the air. Mo squealed happily.

“I’m gonna marry your Aunt Jess,” Zander confided to the little boy after he caught him.

“Zander and Jessie’s getting married!” Mo squealed right as the song finished.

A cheer went up in the room, though nobody could see them.

Hudson poked his head around the corner. “Sorry. I’ll just take my loudmouth son.” He splayed his hands. “Toss him here.”

Zander easily threw the boy in the air and Hudson caught him.

“What’d we talk about not sharing the secrets?” Hudson asked in a stage whisper.

“What, Daddy?” Mo asked loudly. “I didn’t tell nobodys about the baby!”

“Did he say *baby*?” her mom said, coming around the corner to congratulate Zander and Jessie.

“Baby?” Aunt Myrna’s voice. “Hudson? Kelsey?”

Pandemonium broke out.

“You better kiss me quick,” Jessie told him. “Mo just bought us some time.”

Zander grinned down at her. “I love that kid.” He brushed her hair away from her neck. “But I’m not going to kiss you quick.” He bent down low and kissed her neck.

She shivered at the beautiful sensation.

“Really, really slow,” he said, taking his time trailing kisses up her sensitive neck.

Jessie wrapped her arms around his neck and held on. Kissing slow? That sounded wonderful. Zander in her life always? That sounded perfect.

She had felt Papa’s presence tonight, but she sure hoped he wasn’t watching right now as Zander cradled her close. His lips met hers, and the world exploded with joy.

\* \* \*

I hope you loved the Delta Family Romances as I much as I loved writing them.

I wasn't ready to let this family go so I set my Christmas series - Summit Valley Christmas Romances here with the Deltas. If you were intrigued by the tough, hands-off, Captain Zeke Hendrickson read on for the first three chapters of his book.

Hugs and thanks for the support,

Cami

### **Delta Family Romances**

*Deceived*

*Abandoned*

*Committed*

*Betrayed*

*Devoted*

*Compromised*

*Endangered*

*Accepted*

*Returned*

*Devastated*

*His Perfect Match for Christmas*

## FIRST THREE CHAPTERS

### Chapter One

Captain Zeke Hendrickson, elite Navy SEAL, the guy who no man could best and no person dared touch, balled his hands into fists to hide the fact that they were shaking. He could storm through any insurgents' camp, take a bullet without flinching, breach a door that had dozens of unfriendlies aiming machine guns at him behind it, and stay calm and focused. Not since escaping from home the day he turned eighteen had he noticed his hands shaking.

Coming back to the Delta families' valley high in the beautiful Colorado mountains to discuss "helping" Holly Delta protect a young woman, and "of course you're staying for Christmas, you're one of the family" had him experiencing nerves he didn't know he had. One of the family? That was a laugh. Why then did it make him strangely happy and not feel like laughing at all?

He rubbed at the back of his neck as he wavered on Joseph and Holly's front porch for far too long. All seemed quiet, but there were eyes, and possibly a scope, on him. He casually catalogued the scenery while looking for the source of his impression.

The valley was vastly different than when he'd left it in late September. First, it was covered with thick, white snow, the lake a slushy grayish-blue and the pine trees loaded with blankets of fluff. He couldn't wait to take a dip in that freezing lake. It had been cold when he'd done his therapy in the middle of the night in September. It would be an iceberg now.

The sun was slanting down from the southwest. It would set soon. There was greenery dotted with red berries wrapped around the porch poles and railings.

The second thing he instantly noticed was the silence. Last time he'd been here as part of the Delta Protection Detail. The valley had been invaded by troops and Delta family members, his own men, and the local sheriff's department were everywhere.

Where was everybody and why did he sense they had security watching him when the Delta secret weapon was no more? He rubbed at the back of his neck again. He could really use Preach, Chaos, and Wolf watching his back, the goofball, cowboy Thor teasing him about something, or his good friend Zander Povey giving him that big smile and quietly protecting him from anyone inadvertently touching him. Zander was an EOD and on an assignment, but preparing to marry Jessie Delta this Christmas. Everybody else was apparently working or busy on this bright December day. Except whoever had eyes, or a target, on his back.

A slight movement and sound and he pinpointed the man's location to Papa's front porch, the house next door. He focused in on it, issuing the challenge for the man to show himself or Zeke would be coming for him.

A security guard he didn't recognize stepped out from the cover of Papa's front porch, answering his question about who was watching him, but creating a whole new list of questions.

They studied each other for a couple of beats. Zeke's mind did its normal cataloguing: Former military, early thirties, blond, blue eyes, six-two, two-thirty, built but Zeke could easily take him, high-quality clothing and gear, comfortable with the L129A1 sharpshooter rifle in his hands. Possibly British? If not it was an interesting choice of weapon for an American.

The man simply glared at him and then stalked off around the back of the house. Hmm. What was that all about? The guy wasn't a threat to him and he was obviously a hired security guard, but Zeke could sense the guard's animosity from here



and he instinctively didn't like him. Lieutenant Van "Chaos" Udy would say the guy had a very "punchable" face. Zeke smiled thinking of his teammate and friend and not minding the idea of punching the security guard.

He could go after the guy for information and maybe a decent fight, or he could knock on the door and he would probably get the entire spiel from people he trusted and was excited to see. Well excited was stretching it. Zeke didn't let himself get excited about much. Emotion and excitement were not a soldier's friend. Either could get a man killed.

Answers and a warm hug that he'd neither initiate or ask for, but somehow appreciated and didn't hate, would happen as soon as he lifted his fist and rapped. It was easy. He just had to knock on this door. He was semi-surprised Holly Delta hadn't been watching for him to pull into their quaint valley and ran to meet him as he exited the rented Accord. Was she simply focused on whatever woman they wanted him to help? With anybody else he might presume they were icing him or testing him but with Holly ... the older woman was tough, brave, but too kind and warm for his comfort level.

He flexed and released his fists, rolled his shoulders back, and prepared for battle. He wanted to laugh at himself. This wasn't battle. Yes, Holly would give him a "Mama" hug when she saw him. The contact always made him extremely uncomfortable, but at the same time he craved the human connection and feeling of unconditional love Holly somehow bestowed upon him with the hugs she insisted on.

Besides the hug that was coming, he couldn't put a finger on what else was making him nervous. That bothered him. Zeke was always in control of the situation and his men. Nerves got men killed quicker than emotion did.

He could blame the security guard putting him on edge but he'd felt it before the guy showed his ugly face or before Zeke arrived in the valley. He thought it might be the fact Holly was asking for help when she was surrounded by impressive Delta family members. These men and women were exceptionally trained and could protect the lady in danger from any threat. Why Zeke? He confidently knew he was one of the best-

trained, highly-decorated, and able-to-execute special ops soldiers in the world, but he didn't know if that was the reason Holly wanted him here or the excuse to get him to come for Christmas.

It was also uncanny how Holly knew he had leave, and unless something huge broke, another assignment for him and his four-mean SEAL team wouldn't be coming until January. He'd planned to custom-make a bunch of new axe-handles to sell on his website, under an identity nobody would ever know about, and spend a lot of time in the gym during the Christmas holidays. Instead ...

Lifting his fist, he rapped hard on the glass front door before he could second-guess it, or twenty-two guess it as the case may be.

Footsteps came much too quickly and he could see the beautiful fifty-something Delta Mom coming into the foyer. Her face broke into a radiant, welcoming smile as if Zeke were the person she had been waiting to see for weeks. He knew that wasn't accurate. Holly made everybody feel special. He was nothing special. Unless you needed a tried and proven soldier.

He shook his head, blew out a breath, and steeled himself. His own mother had hit and belittled him more than his father. They both put on a persona for the church community that they were pious, kind people. He had seen his dad treat his older sister kindly on occasion and he'd heard other soldiers claim their parents were loving and kind. But he had never personally experienced a mother in their own private sphere, where no one else was watching, who was as warm, welcoming, accepting, and loving as Holly Delta.

The door flung open and Holly rushed at him. He instinctively edged to the right, his body already moving to incapacitate her with one quick hit to the back of the neck. No! He forced himself to stop, clenched his fists and his teeth, and impressively didn't react at all as she flung her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely. At least he didn't react physically.

“You’re here! Yay!” She kept right on hugging him. Despite his lack of movement, Zeke closed his eyes, cataloguing the moment for future reference. Nothing was as comforting and like the home he’d never known than Holly’s “Mama” hugs. “Now hug me back,” she encouraged. “You can do it cute boy.”

Cute boy? Zeke had broken men’s arms for much less, but from Holly it wasn’t demeaning. She saw something in him that he doubted was actually there. She somehow saw him—hardened, battle-tested, emotionless, untouchable Captain Zeke Hendrickson as “cute” and as if he had warmth, depth, and ... worth. Worth beyond being an elite, fearless weapon and brilliant and tactical leader of the best SEALs in the world. In his not-humble-at-all opinion.

He shook off the introspection and forced himself to lean into her hug and wrap his arms around her back. He clasped his hands together at her mid-back. He hadn’t been able to release his hands and place them palms down on her back yet. That was a step in the hugging process that he wasn’t sure he’d ever get to. He kept his eyes closed, savoring the solace of her touch. All the hidden anger, remorse, and pain didn’t matter when Holly held him tight.

“Good job, my sweet boy,” she said softly.

Zeke should’ve laughed out loud. He didn’t. He’d been through more elite trainings than anyone he knew, received commendations and praise constantly, and had been awarded many distinguished awards including the Navy Cross and recently the Medal of Honor, but Holly Delta telling him he did a good job hugging her, and intoning she was “his” sweet boy, a part of the family, seemed like the best reward he could imagine.

“And there he is, the elite Navy SEAL captain, hugging my wife again,” Joseph Delta’s voice came from the foyer.

Immediately Zeke released her and drew back. Holly smiled up at him and kept her hand on his arm as he extended his hand and shook Joseph’s.

“Nice to see you, sir.”

“You too, Cap, you too.” Joseph luckily didn’t touch him beyond the handshake and released his grasp quick. He somehow instinctively knew Zeke’s hugs with his wife were unique and nobody else in the world would get away with touching him like Holly did. Or maybe his future son-in-law, Demo, had explained to him.

Joseph gestured into the house. “Come in. It’s bitter cold out here.”

Zeke shrugged. He was wearing a long-sleeved black shirt and black cargo pants. He didn’t notice extremes in temperature much, trained to perform in extreme hot or cold situations and used cold therapy whenever he could to stay in top physical condition and heal some of the strain his constant physical training brought on.

“You have a bag?” Holly asked.

“In the car.”

She gave him a look, seeming to sense immediately that he wasn’t a hundred percent committed to staying. Captain Zeke having a jolly Christmas with a bunch of warm, friendly Christian believers was a bit of a stretch. Now if this young lady had a vicious killer after her, that would be more up his alley.

“We’ll get it soon,” Holly said.

He actually wanted his duffel within reach. He’d forced himself to leave everything but his knife and utility tool in his bag and in the truck. It was unsettling not to be armed with at least his Sauger. Especially with the security guard out there. He looked again but the man wasn’t in sight. It rankled at him that he’d forgotten about the guy while he hugged Holly. The man obviously was employed by the Deltas so it shouldn’t have bothered him, but he didn’t let his guard down. Ever. And he just had.

The family and this valley should be safe and at peace. The danger to the Deltas was gone now that the youngest, Jessie, and his friend Demo, the best EOD he’d ever worked with, had blown up the Delta weapon most of the world had been

after. They had lost their patriarch, the impressive and renowned Admiral Davidson Delta. He knew that still pained Jessie and he was sure the rest of them. It was impossible to fill the hole of losing a great man like their “Papa Delta”.

So why the unfamiliar guard? Something to do with the woman they wanted Zeke to help?

“Thanks for coming,” Joseph said.

“Of course.” He would do almost anything for the Deltas. These people were as unselfish, cohesive, and extraordinary as any family he’d ever met. The American public at large had no idea, but the Deltas keeping their weapon safe from King Frederick had stayed the man from raining nuclear weapons on America. The elite special ops Delta Force had thankfully taken out Frederick and things were somewhat calm on the international front. For the moment. There was always some terrorist or insurgent ready to stir up trouble. Weirdly Zeke liked trouble. Trouble kept him busy and not thinking. Thinking got men killed.

Holly kept her hand on his arm. He didn’t know if she was aware it was making him uncomfortable. She had some theory that she could acclimatize him to touch. He almost smiled at the thought. Maybe if Holly had been around a few years ago, his fiancé Rachel wouldn’t have dumped him while he was on a mission with no outside comm. By the time he’d seen his phone again she’d blocked his number, relocated from Virginia Beach, and left no forwarded address. Rachel had a lot of issues with his lack of emotion or “romance” and she hated his phobia of touch. Who could blame her? Being engaged to a man who never instigated and barely tolerated kissing? Anybody who’d known about the relationship and his lack of dating since would think he was heartbroken. Zeke thought it was more learning a lesson. Romantic relationships weren’t in the cards for a tough old frogman like him.

“Come back and meet our darling Mia.” Holly finally lifted her hand but gestured him through the entry. The sweeping staircase had decorative greenery wrapped around the railing and a variety of tall, skinny, decorated with silver

balls and other junk, fake pine trees arched almost the height of the two-story entry.

Darling? He glanced sharply at Holly. “You said this was a mission.” If she dared try to matchmake him with some girl. He’d have to bug out quick.

She smiled at him. “It is.” Her smile disappeared. “I’ll let her tell you about the mission, or rather nightmare for our angel girl. Come on.” She reached out as if to grab his hand, but seemed to think better of it.

Zeke’s shoulders relaxed a fraction. He’d had about as much touch today as he could handle. When he was here fighting with the Deltas to protect the secret weapon Holly had forced him into one hug a day. He hoped she wouldn’t try for more than that if they weren’t all busy saving the world.

He followed Joseph and Holly through the entryway and into the sunny open living area with two-story windows overlooking the picturesque lake and mountains beyond. He remembered the scenic view. Even though it was now snow-covered, it was just as quaint. They had a huge gorgeous pine tree all decked out in the corner, Christmas-y stuff on any shelf, mantle, or wall that could be decorated, and a fire going. Most people would say the home and view were beautiful, perfect, and appealing.

He stopped walking and felt his jaw go slack as he took in a view more beautiful, perfect, and appealing than anything he’d seen in his vast world travels.

A woman stood from the couch as they walked in. Five-four. Athletic. Civilian. Blue fitted sweater dress with high-quality leather boots. Definitely wealthy. But there his usual analysis failed him. He somehow forgot analyzing and simply focused on the radiance of the woman herself. She had shoulder-length blond hair that framed the sweetest-looking face he’d ever encountered. Her smooth skin and rosebud lips were appealing, but it was the mixture of purity and happiness in her brown-sugar eyes that stunned him. Their gazes met and held and time ceased moving forward.

Suddenly she smiled at him. Warmth immediately filled his body and it felt like Chaos had gotten a lucky hit and slammed his powerful fist into Zeke's sternum. *Push out a breath. Okay. Pull it in. Now back away slowly.* He backed up. He needed to get away from this woman. Double time.

"Zeke ..." Holly was beaming at the woman and hadn't noticed his signs of retreat. "This is Mia Burton. Mia ... Captain Zeke Hendrickson, elite and accomplished Navy SEAL and pretty much the toughest, most highly-decorated, and experienced soldier on the planet."

Zeke should pull his gaze from Mia to tell Holly to tamp down on the bragging, but he couldn't make himself do it.

"Sorry, Cap," Joseph said. "You know she loves to brag about you like you're one of her own."

At least Joseph got it. Zeke had no idea how to respond to the introduction. What was he supposed to say to this captivating and stunning woman? He couldn't think of another option besides escape. This was not a good situation. Beautiful women didn't affect him. Emotions like warm flashes in his body and needing to breathe from a pretty lady's smile couldn't happen to him. He felt like he was soaring on some emotional high just having her smile at him. He couldn't complete a mission if this woman had anything to do with the objective.

Mia bounced across the space toward him and he should've either run or taken her out. He froze. Zeke never froze. It was as if she'd captured him in a snare he'd never been trained how to defend against.

She was pint-sized, but there was energy and power in that small frame that intimidated him.

Intimidated? Yeah right. Suicidal insurgents in Afghanistan hadn't intimidated him. This miniscule blonde was no match for his strength or skills. She couldn't capture or incapacitate him.

Not physically. But what about emotionally?

He pushed that away. There was no time to deal with it anyway as she was right in his space. Close. Far too close. She smelled like lemon candy. He absolutely loved lemon candy. Old-fashioned lemon drops. Pretty much the only good memory of his childhood. A grandma at his church would give him one every week if he'd sit still during children's class. She kept giving them to him even as a teenager. Grandma Hendrickson she'd asked him to call her. He'd stolen her name for his last name. He'd thought she was the nicest woman he'd ever met. Until he met Holly Delta.

The delicious-smelling woman standing in front of him stuck out her hand and used that smile on him. It made him feel strangely weak. He'd never felt weak before in his life. At least not since he'd escaped from his parents' house and joined the military. He'd had so many drill sergeants try to break him, but their belittlement and abuse was nothing compared to what he'd lived with throughout childhood and teenage years. He'd absolutely excelled in the military.

He looked down at the woman's hand and then back into those golden-brown eyes of hers. Were those long lashes real? They were pretty, that's all he knew. Not many blondes had brown eyes, but maybe her hair was dyed. His throat was dry and his pulse thrumming far too fast. He was trying to catalogue but the draw of her made everything off and his head feel too big for his body.

"Zeke," Holly said. "You can shake her hand."

That broke his concentration on the woman and he glanced quickly at Holly. He wanted to ask if he had to, but he could only imagine the answer and asking would make him look weak in front of this beauty. He never wanted to look weak in front of anyone, but the thought of this *Mia* thinking he was weak when he wanted her to listen to Holly's bragging about him and think he was a superhero had him sticking out his hand. Shaking hands was no big deal. He'd learned to do that as an adult and could get through it without making a fuss or obviously cringing and offending the other person.

Her hand slid along his so slowly he felt like the entire world had slowed down, except for his heart that was



thundering out of control and a delicious tingling filling his stomach.

First her fingertips caressed his and then the fingers and finally the soft palm slid across his fingers and palm until they were aligned. Then she gently wrapped her fingers around the back of his hand and held on.

His breath shortened and he had absolutely no clue what he was feeling as he'd never experienced something like it before. He appreciated Holly's Mama hugs and they gave him that odd comfort that he somewhat liked. He could recognize accepting the hugs was a positive thing.

Holding this woman's hand had nothing to do with comfort. Her palm and fingers were warm and soft and it felt like his hand had found the spot it'd been searching for all his life. He didn't move as she held his hand and blinked up at him with those brown eyes of hers, but he realized something in that moment ... he liked her touching him.

That shocked him enough to pull away and clench his hand into a fist at his side. Crazy enough he could still feel the warmth and feminine softness of her much smaller hand. He hadn't really liked it, right? He'd just imagined he had because she was so pretty and seemed nice and soft and feminine and innocent ...

He took a step back. He had no choice. It was either that or he was going to touch her again and Captain Zeke Hendrickson never voluntarily touched anyone. Unless he was fighting them.

"Crikey," Mia said, shocking him yet again, blinking up at him with those big brown eyes and grinning invitingly. "You're a right big and tough one, aren't you now?"

She was British. That shouldn't have surprised him with the security guard outside's choice of weapon, but everything was surprising him today. He thought her accent was adorable. Adorable. Really? If Chaos could get ahold of his thoughts right now he'd never stop laughing. And then Zeke could pummel him. Chaos always put up a good fight. That'd be fun. A lot more fun than the discomfort of this moment.

He only raised his eyebrows. She'd probably think he was a mute but he didn't really care what she thought. Zeke didn't care what anyone thought. Caring what people thought only brought either pride or pain. Both could disable a man, and get him killed.

"He is big and tough," Holly said. "And more importantly he's experienced in all kinds of weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and defense. Zeke will keep you safe."

"Safe sounds ... lovely," Mia said but her voice quavered and her big brown eyes looked ... terrified. "Thank you, Auntie."

"Safe from who?" Zeke demanded, ripping his gaze from her to pin it on Holly. Auntie? They'd get into the relationship later. He needed to know who would dare endanger an innocent beauty like the one in hand's reach. Honestly it wouldn't take much effort at all just to reach out and touch her again. Just to see if it had truly been pleasant or if her appealing looks and smile had influenced him into thinking it was pleasant. He needed to do the research. Then he recoiled inside. Had he just wanted to ... touch someone?

Joseph stepped up and put an arm around Mia's shoulders. She looked even smaller next to the tall, well-built Delta man and it thankfully distracted him from thinking about the unthinkable, willingly touching someone. Research or not, it was a stupid idea.

"Cap ..." Joseph said. "We asked you here hoping you could protect Mia from a vicious stalker. He's recently set his sights on Mia and promised to kidnap her and sell her to the highest bidder on the dark web. The terrifying thing is, we believe he's done the same thing to nine other women now."

If Joseph was hoping to coerce him into being invested, he'd done it. Sell this sparkling sweetheart on the dark web? Not on his watch.

He nodded to Joseph. "Thank you for giving me the opportunity. What details and information do you have for me? The past cases. The notes, threats, and contact the man has had with Mia, or anything else that will help. Do you want

to text or email them? That might be more ideal so I can have the notes to refer to and not waste time talking about it right now. I'll hunt him down and have him to the authorities soon." He looked to Mia and nodded. Yes, he'd capture the refuse of humanity who'd kidnapped and enslaved other women and dared make this woman his next target. Zeke would make sure she was safe and he'd avenge the other women. Turning the spineless scum over to the authorities would be the only hard part. Vigilante justice sounded just right in situations like this. "Don't worry, Mia," he said. "You'll be safe."

He turned to go.

"Zeke!" Holly called to him.

"Cap!" Joseph joined her.

"What?" He turned back.

"The National Crime Agency in UK and the FBI here are working together to track the guy down," Joseph explained. "There are two suspects but they've both completely disappeared. We don't have enough information to send you off hunting for either of them and that's not what we're asking of you. We'd like you to stay here, with Mia, actually at Papa's house where her two security guards are staying. They, and the rest of our family, will keep eyes on the cameras, sensors, and monitor the property. The man has found and taken each of the other women he's targeted. No matter what protection the police have provided or they've hired on their own. We can't have that happen to Mia. We want you to protect her, stick to her like glue, until the man is captured or your leave is up. At which point, we'll have to reevaluate the situation."

Zeke stared at Joseph then he looked at Holly and finally his gaze swiveled to Mia. For Joseph and Holly's parts they looked absolutely serious. Mia was biting nervously at her lower lip. Why was she doing that? He liked to understand why people had nervous ticks, his own was rubbing at his neck. He was surrounded by men most of the time and no man he knew bit at his lower lip like that. It was highly distracting. It made her look ... appealing.

A protectiveness filled him that he had no choice but to act on. He had to keep Mia safe, but he could do that best by tracking the guy down. He couldn't ... hole up in a beautiful house in a beautiful valley with a beautiful woman. He had to look at this mission objectively and unselfishly but he'd go absolutely insane not acting and not moving and ... being trapped with a woman as enticing as this one.

"You want me ..." He began slowly, still focused on Mia. For some reason those three words made her dark eyes light up in the most beguiling way he'd ever seen. She wanted him. Light, joy, and warmth seemed to crash into each other inside his chest. *She* wanted *him*? He'd met a lot of women who wanted him physically. Because of his hatred of human touch, he'd never been tempted to reciprocate. Rachel had broken down his walls but it had taken her years, and then she'd decided she absolutely didn't want him. But Mia seemed to want him, all of him.

He blinked to clear his vision and realized how ludicrous his thoughts were at the moment. He cleared his throat and pivoted to Joseph. What did Joseph want? "You want me to stay here and protect her like a glorified bodyguard?"

Joseph nodded. "I can't think of anyone I'd trust more."

"But she already has security with her and what about all your with-it and qualified nephews, niece, daughters, and son?" he asked. Joseph barely knew him. Sure they'd worked extremely well together those couple of weeks in September, but if this man had any idea how messed-up Zeke was on the inside he'd never want him alone in a house with his niece.

"Remember what you asked me to do with Zander and Jessie?" Joseph came back at him with. Kind of hitting below the belt honestly as Zeke knew exactly what he'd asked of this overprotective father and he didn't want to have to reciprocate the trust Joseph had granted Zander. "Despite how hard it was as a father to allow any man to be so close to my daughter, we both knew that Zander was the ideal choice to protect Jessie because he would stay by her side round the clock and he had a vested interest in her. Holly and I felt this situation could be just as ... ideal."

Ideal for who? “But ... but ...” Zeke gritted his teeth. He hated stammering. He used to do it as a child because he’d been afraid. As an adult he either didn’t speak or he made sure what he said was clear and concise. Stammering was for wimps. He rubbed at the back of his neck. He was feeling wimpy and backed into a corner.

He *had* asked Joseph to allow his friend and Chief Petty Officer, Zander Povey, Master EOD “Demo” to be Jessie’s bodyguard because Jessie was the Secret Keeper, in extreme danger, and Demo had been head over heels for her. “Demo liked Jessie. I don’t like ...” His eyes widened as he realized what he’d just said. He spun back to Mia and held his hands up. “Apologies ma’am. It’s not that I don’t like you, but I don’t like anybody. Please don’t take it personally.”

For the first time her warm brown eyes weren’t sparkling invitingly at him, they were flashing fire at him. He had the feeling he was about to hear an earful of British slang that would curl a proper Brit’s toenails. He didn’t like that he’d hurt her feelings. But this situation was not going to work out. It was better she knew now that he was cold and not interested in her as a woman. That always ticked women off so he found it was easier to get it out right up front.

He should probably back toward the door. One glance at Joseph and Holly said he’d upset everybody now.

He was a soldier. A human weapon. A man of action. He was not a stay by the beautiful woman’s side or a bodyguard of appealing British blondes.

If he could only escape this situation and go find Thor or Greer or one of the Delta men. He’d love a good fist fight about now. Then he’d get back to the Air Force Academy and coerce some gungho pilot to fly him out of Colorado as soon as possible. He hated to let down Joseph and Holly but they could find someone to do bodyguard duty for a gorgeous woman in danger. Most single men in the world would jump at the chance. Not him.

The dangerous part? Hooyah.

The being alone with a beautiful woman? Not acceptable.

## Chapter Two

Lady Mia Burton could only stare at the handsome, too-tough, military machine in front of her. Machine fit much better than human. Captain Zeke Hendrickson couldn't be a mere mortal. More like Rambo, Thor, or maybe the Terminator had strutted into the living room. Just the way he moved was like he owned the world and could best any person in it. It was downright appealing, especially with the danger she had pursuing her.

The only time he hadn't seemed like a human weapon was when he met her gaze with his smoky grayish-blue eyes or when he'd shaken her hand. Then he'd felt real. Too real. The kind of real, flesh and blood bloke that could warm a girl up all the way through. Blimey. Was it stuffy in here?

He'd been stoic and quiet, until his impassioned desire to go hunt down the stalker and his equally impassioned refusal to be her bodyguard. Then the clincher when he'd said that he didn't like her. He'd amended it to that he didn't like anyone but it had felt personal. It had not made her feel too cheery. Had actually shocked her. Mia didn't like prideful people as she'd spent her life dealing with her Duke of a father and his pompous, elite crowd, but she had never had a man not be interested in her. She didn't know if it was her family name, her personal success, her looks, the smile she always wore, or her happy zest for life, but men simply liked her and were nice to her. What was wrong with this cheeky bloke?

In his defense, she hadn't acted like the successful designer and business owner she'd worked so hard to be, converting to a fan girl of the hot military man with her moony looks and stupid line about him being big and tough. Maybe that had been off-putting to him. She'd been overwhelmed by the sheer size and all the muscle on him. She'd been around all manner of sizes of men but he had to be a foot taller than her, twice as broad, and fit. His face and body were blindingly brilliant.

She'd like to touch some of those bulges and see what they felt like, but Holly had warned her he wasn't a touchy-feely kind of guy and she'd seen that as they'd been sharing a brilliant hand shake and then he'd yanked his hand away and

clenched his fist. She wanted to know why he didn't like touch, and she wanted to help him like her touch. She'd felt a delightful spark and a warmth simply shaking his hand. It had been surprising, and made her want to feel it again. It didn't look like she was going to get that chance.

When he'd heard about the mangy git hunting her, Zeke Hendrickson had turned into Rambo, instantly in action mode and going to track the dodgy wanker down and tear him apart limb from limb. The man at that point had become human, all man. This American military genius, according to Auntie Holly, made her stomach fill with butterflies and her knees weak. His need to protect her had been ... blindingly appealing. This was a man who'd protect his lady. That was for certain. If only she could be his.

Okay. Mia bit at her lip. It was time to calm down and stop the fan-girling. Mia was a successful fashion designer and businesswoman. Her company was flourishing, despite the fact that her father, the Duke, had never supported her dreams and would've preferred she not work like a "commoner". She loved her dad, but his theories were not hers. Her mum was as loving yet feisty as her dad was cool and haughty. How her mum adored her dad like she did Mia had no idea. He'd always been good to Mia and she'd caught glimpses of him feeling proud or warm toward her but he'd never acted on any of those feelings. Except when he heard about the stalker.

She didn't have the approval of her dad and she was fine with it. She definitely didn't need the approval of this hot captain. She had more men asking her on dates than she had time to give. They all thought she was fun, beautiful, lively, and some of them probably liked the money and title she would attain some day. She tried to keep that information quiet, but men from England usually knew exactly who she was.

She thought most of the men she dated were ace. She'd just never met a man who captured her interest for longer than a few dates. Her mum either claimed she lacked commitment or she was meeting men who were "fun sponges" and "not equal to Mia's zest for life" in all the wrong places—church,

the gym, the local café—great places to meet nice, lame, normal men obviously.

Captain Zeke Hendrickson wasn't a boring man. Nope. Nothing boring about him. But would he protect her from the famous stalker who'd left *the* letter on her pillow last night? She'd never forget the horror of that moment. Up to that point she'd taken the stupid love notes in stride, turned them over to the police, and promised to not ditch the security detail that her father had insisted watch over her since the notes had begun a month prior.

Last night she'd run out of her flat and straight into Commander Blaine Lewis's arms, rambling and scared and finally willing to take this stalking git serious.

Blaine had his partner call the bobbies and her dad, despite the fact that she'd dated and dumped him last summer he'd held her until she'd pulled away, and thankfully they'd made it to her parent's estate safely. After an elaborate ploy to throw the stalker off her path, she and her dad had taken one of his jets across the pond, running for her freedom, literally, to her mum's best college mate for protection. "If the Delta's can't keep your body safe, nobody can," her mum had declared. Her dad hadn't liked it, the trusting of Americans, but he agreed that the Brits hadn't kept those other girls safe and he'd succumbed to her mum's request, as he always did. The only time the Duke was ever soft was for her mum.

As Mia looked over the captain she thought this brilliant specimen of a man could keep her safe. But then she remembered that he didn't like her. A hot dose of anger, rare for her, made her want to flay him. As if she could.

"You don't even ruddy know me," she spit at him.

He gestured her down with his hands. It had the effect of making all those lovely muscles in his shoulders and arms flex through his fitted long-sleeved, black shirt.

"That's right, ma'am. I don't know you. So please don't take offense that I can't help you. I'm sure you'll be very safe with the Delta family, and your bodyguards, and I'll just be on my way." He actually turned to go.



“Zeke,” Holly’s voice was sharp. “Sit down.”

Zeke looked properly cowed. It was comical actually. His gaze swung for the entryway and then back to Auntie.

“Sit,” she instructed and Mia thought even Auntie’s wild nephews would obey that command. She’d only been around Auntie Holly and Uncle Joseph and their family for a few holidays throughout the years, but she sure fancied them. They were the kind of people you instantly felt comfortable around, and welcomed into their fold. Maddie had been her age and a hilarious friend who she still adored.

Zeke very slowly walked to the couch, and sat, on the edge of it as if he wasn’t staying long.

Joseph and Holly walked to the couch opposite where Zeke sat and gestured her to sit next to him. Oh, he was going to go bonkers over that. The air in the room was tense as she stepped close to him and then gingerly sat on the next couch cushion. The muscles from his neck to his thighs visibly tensed.

Sheesh. She must really be off-putting to him. Had her anti-perspirant or lemon body splash worn off? She should stop drooling over the handsome, fit stud. She had no need or desire to push herself on a man who was repelled by her. That hadn’t happened to her before and she found it very ... disappointing. If she was honest with herself, she was gutted over his rejection. She wished she could believe it was because she hadn’t felt rejection before, but she feared it was because this man was unique and intriguing and the kind of man who could capture and hold her attention like none other had succeeded to do.

“If this git doesn’t want the job,” she said, clenching her teeth. “I see no benefit in strong-arming him into it.”

“Mia.” Auntie gave her “the look”. She and Maddie had found it hilarious that their mums weren’t blood related but they had that same intimidating “Mama” look down pat. “Now, Zeke. Mia’s mum was my college roommate and has been my best friend for life. I would do anything for her and her family. Anything.”

Mia felt her bottom lip quiver. She knew Holly would, and Joseph as well. “Thank you, Auntie,” she managed to get out without becoming emotional. Mia didn’t think she was overly emotional as a rule but being targeted by the elusive “Sneaky Stalker” was terrifying. She’d think his barmy nickname was laughable, but there was nothing humorous about nine accomplished, well-known, and successful women from Britain over the past three years receiving “the note” and within days disappearing, still missing to this day. It hadn’t mattered if the police had provided protection, or if they or their families had hired outside security. The bobbies were going insane. She wasn’t far behind them.

She’d prefer death over being sold and enslaved as they assumed the women had been. Sheesh. That was a cheery thought. Merry Christmas with no peace for Mia right now. The only thing that felt like Christmas right now was Auntie’s beautiful home and this picturesque valley. She prayed inside for faith and strength and for this blinding man to please, please protect her.

“Have you heard of the Sneaky Stalker?” Joseph asked Zeke. Both men were probably chafing with the sap of Mia and Holly’s emotions.

Mia chanced a glance at Zeke and saw his eyes widen slightly as he bobbed his head. “The sicko that’s targeted and kidnapped successful women in Great Britain.” His gaze met hers and suddenly he wasn’t the too-tough military chap who wanted to leave her as quick as he could march on. His bluish-gray eyes got darker and there was a fierceness in them that made her stomach do a little flip flop. This man would protect her and good luck to the stalker getting through him.

She felt Rambo’s declaration of loyalty to her safety all the way through her body. A pleasant shiver traced down her spine and she was happier than she’d been since finding the note. Any barmy git who dared try and hurt her had better be prepared to get annihilated. Captain Zeke Hendrickson was going to keep her safe and nothing had ever sounded so soothing and stimulating at the same time.

“Yes!” She jumped up and threw her hands in the air.

He looked up at her, obviously confused. “Yes?”

“Mia?” Auntie questioned.

She sat down close to him, too close if the stiffening of all of his lovely muscles was any indication. She wanted to grab his hand to comfort him and because the first hand touch had been so lovely, but then she remembered that might put him off. They’d get into his aversion to touch, later. Right now she had to tell him how cheery he’d made her.

“I’m gobsmacked. So grateful. You are the toughest bloke I’ve ever laid eyes on, and Auntie and Uncle have told me about all your success and awards, and to think you’re going to protect me. You really will watch out for me, won’t you?” She blinked quickly to keep from crying. She’d been so terrifyingly gutted. Even with all her dad had done to throw up smoke and mirrors, even with his two best security guards, a former Royal Marine and a former Royal Air Force, staying by her side. Even when she’d gotten safely to the Deltas’s beautiful and peaceful valley, she still had this overriding fear and a pressure in her head that said that man was not far behind. That he’d track her down just like he promised in that awful note. Just as he’d found and kidnapped his other targets. Never to be found again.

“I ...” He shook his head and eased away from her. “I ...” He stood and paced away from them, turning around to face the three of them. He rubbed at the back of his neck and then clenched his hands into tight fists. “I completely agree that she needs round the clock protection and that psycho ‘Sneaky Stalker’ needs to be filleted or locked up, I’d prefer the former, but ...” He looked to Holly. “I’m not that guy. You know I’m not. I train. I fight. I train other people to fight. I plan and execute missions. I capture or kill the target. I can’t sit around with ... her.” He gestured to Mia as if she were a problem. A large problem if the angst on his face was any indicator.

Her happy bubble popped and she fell flat on her face. She hugged herself, chilled all the way through. The dry Colorado winter had nothing on the moist chill that penetrated to the bone in England, but she felt as cold as she had since finding that note on her pillow.

*Run, beautiful. Run and hide. Because when I find you ...*

*The Sneaky Stalker*

The other women had disappeared within days of receiving the now famous note. Some of them had even been in witness protection programs. The two that lasted the longest had hired private bodyguards and left the country. But he'd found them. He'd found every single one of the women that he'd threatened. She could still picture her dad going toe to toe with the lead detective, telling him he wasn't trusting his girl's safety to the "ruddy bloke" who'd let nine poor women be captured, sold like cattle, and never found, and the bobbies hadn't even caught the mangy git yet. Mia had never heard her dad lower himself to such common slang terms. Her mum ... most days of the week. Her dad ... too far above that. Not last night.

The poor man went red and blustered, already intimidated by who her dad was, and then to be called to the carpet must have dug deeply. In the end her dad had prevailed. As a billionaire and a duke he usually got his way. Unless he was fighting with her mum. Mia had never bested him in a battle of wills and she wouldn't even had told him about the stalker's original mailed notes but her mum and the bobbies had both informed him.

The Duke's already impressive team of twelve private security men, all former British military, had brought in trusted friends last night. They'd driven a dozen different motorcades out of her parent's estate where her dad had taken her after they left the station. Some of the teams headed for airports, others for yacht clubs, others for private estates far from Surrey. Her dad had stayed right by her side until he and four of his most trusted security guards had delivered her to Joseph and Holly. He'd told them he was leaving Commander Blaine Lewis and Lieutenant Charlie Portsmouth and he expected the Deltas to work with them to protect his little girl.

Mia had chafed at his tone and his terminology, she was not his little girl any longer, and the fact that Blaine would be part of her security detail. The Deltas hadn't flinched. They'd promised the entire family would watch over her and taken it a

step farther. They were bring in the most impressive military man they knew to ensure her safety. Her dad hadn't been certain an American would have training more impressive than his Commander or Lieutenant, but he'd surprisingly not only agreed, he'd assured he would pay any reward they named for them and the man. Joseph and Holly refused any kind of money, which surprised no one, but said they would pass a reward on to Captain Hendrickson. Her dad had agreed, and thanked them. Apparently his only daughter's life in danger had humbled him. She loved her dad, but humble had never been associated with his name and she could count on one hand the number of times she'd heard him say "thank you". Her dad had hugged her fiercely, the opposite of his usual crisp hugs done to please her mum, and he'd left, hoping to throw the Sneaky Stalker off even more by he and her mum being at their home this Christmas season.

Mia shivered and rocked slightly. It was all so heavy and serious and at Christmas time. She actually would be thrilled to spend a Christmas in the Deltas gorgeous valley with this fun and huge family, so opposite her own, but seeing her dad so intense, not proper or arrogant, had scared her almost as much as that note had. Tears pricked at her eyes. She was gutted thinking about that awful note, the poor women who'd been taken, her mum at home worrying night and day.

She and Mum should be organizing Christmas presents for hundreds of children who would go without if she couldn't deliver. It was the one time of year that Mia took off completely from work. Since graduation from university she'd spent the past six Decembers finding deserving families who didn't ask for aid but needed it desperately, shopping for the perfect presents, and then delivering them. She blinked quickly at the thought of those poor little ones, but the tears still trailed down her face.

Zeke's eyes widened and he backed up, holding up a hand as if to protect himself. "No. Please don't. Not tears."

Mia sprang to her feet and stormed up to him. He held his ground, but she could see how he was worried she'd touch him or something.

“What do you expect me to do?” she demanded, overwrought with all the emotion. “Just let that murderer take me, sell me to the highest bidder and then ...?” She’d tried very hard to not think about the ... what then. Too horrifying and disabling.

He leaned toward her, which surprised her. His eyes got that fierceness in them again. “Nobody is going to take and sell you. Not on my watch.”

His words rang in the air like the most beautiful promise she’d ever heard. Their gazes were caught, and she didn’t want to ever look away. She found her hand raising toward him. She wanted to touch one of his muscles, reassure herself he was real and he really could protect her from a monster as depraved as the Sneaky Stalker.

Zeke flinched away from her hand and stepped back. That stung. He looked at Uncle Joseph.

“You’re in?” Joseph clarified.

“Yes, sir.”

Joseph stood and nodded to him. “Good man.”

Mia thought normally Joseph would clap him on the shoulder. He looked like he was moving to, but thought better of it. The no touch thing was so foreign to her. It should be weird and it was off-putting, but she also found it intriguing. A challenge really. Not that she would admit that to anyone.

“Okay, let’s talk logistics.” Joseph escorted him over to the table and they sat, flipping open a laptop and started discussing security systems, how the stalker had followed his usual pattern of flirtatious or romantic notes mailed to the other women until the final note on the pillow that was the same in every case, the possibility of it being a copycat, what they knew about Thomas Pederson and Alden Wilson, former flings of hers who had both disappeared which was the only exception in this case, how the stalker found the other women, qualifications of her security guards, the extra help the Delta family would provide so her guards could sleep, eat, and exercise, which the Deltas were already prepared to do

because of protecting the Delta “weapon”, whatever that meant.

Auntie stood by her side, wrapped an arm around her waist, and they simply watched the two men discuss for a bit. It made her mind spin. She could design clothing that women and reviewers would go crazy over, and manage an international business, but security details? Not only out of her reach, but it made her queasy.

Holly inclined her head toward the kitchen. They walked together. Mia looked over her shoulder. Zeke was studying her. His expression was closed off and completely indecipherable. He was going to protect her. Nobody would get through that tank of a man.

But that didn't mean he was happy about it or that he “liked” her.

What would it be like to spend the holiday in that man's very un-Christmas-like presence?

She shivered again. Whether from concern or because of how intriguing he was, she wasn't certain.

### Chapter Three

Zeke was reeling at what he'd agreed to. Protection detail. For a gorgeous British woman in extreme danger. The Sneaky Stalker was a filthy animal but he must be incredibly smart as well. It appeared to be a game with this guy. For over three years now he'd gotten around police protection, witness protection programs, and private securities. He'd captured every woman he'd threatened to, and the women still hadn't been found.

He snuck a glance at Mia as she and Holly pulled out some leftovers from the fridge and warmed them up. The stalker wasn't getting to Zeke's woman. His hand balled into a fist. Mia caught him looking at her. She gifted him with a smile. He didn't return it. Turning back to Joseph's schedule on the computer, he rubbed at his neck. Had he just thought of her as “his woman”? He needed to control his thoughts or he might stupidly act on them. Would he get the chance to touch her

again in the course of protecting her? Probably. It would be good to know if her touch was truly unique and actually felt good to him, but he'd keep his distance like he always did.

“Thank you for planning this out,” he said. Every hour was scheduled with either one of Mia's security guards or a Delta family member monitoring the exterior perimeter and the security sensors and cameras that were in a basement room of Papa Delta's house. Zeke remembered the setup and schedule well from being here in September. But now he wouldn't be rotating through the protection detail. Now he'd be shadowing a gorgeous woman. Hooyah. No. Not hooyah. The opposite of hooyah. Danger he couldn't fight or win against if he let her trap him with those deep-brown eyes of hers.

“Of course.” Joseph focused the Delta blue eyes on him. “You'll stay by her side night and day and the rest of us will take care of everything else.”

Night and day? *Night?* “Joseph?” His voice was sharper than it needed to be. Well, maybe he should've made it sharper. “Night?”

“Maddie's not here to stay in the room with Mia like she was with Jessie.”

Joseph's daughter Maddie was an impressive warrior. Zeke wished she was here. He rubbed at his neck and snuck another glance at Mia. That dress fit her ... really well. Did she have her clothing custom made? Rich people anyway.

“We took the liberty of moving an extra twin bed into Papa Delta's master suite,” Joseph told him.

They'd have their own beds but still ... Zeke closed his eyes. He'd slept in barracks, berths, racks, bunks, tents, caves, or open air with soldiers all over the world. Sometimes they'd been far too close and pushed against him while they slept. That had been rough but he'd gotten through. On military assignments. This was just another assignment.

He didn't let himself look at Mia. She looked and felt nothing like any assignment he'd been around before. Had he



actually liked touching her hand? It concerned him, especially as he'd almost unwittingly touched her again.

“Come eat,” Holly called. “And then we'll walk you over to Papa's, introduce you to the security guys, and let you get settled in for the night.”

Why were her eyes twinkling at him? Zeke's jaw tightened. This was a serious situation, but he had the uncomfortable feeling Holly was match-making him with her adopted niece. She wouldn't dare. Would she? Holly seemed to care for him and think the best of him, but first of all she'd know he wasn't interested, and second of all nobody would want to match someone they loved with him. Holly was a positive sweetheart but she was mature enough to know that damaged and intense warriors like Zeke would only hurt a charming woman like Mia Burton. Not that he'd ever hurt any woman physically, but emotionally he was stunted and he would have to be strong, and probably hurtful, to keep his distance.

He and Joseph stood, walked over to the long kitchen bar, and waited for the ladies to go first then they each loaded up plates with reheated roast, potatoes, veggies, and homemade rolls with butter. They sat at the kitchen table where Holly and Mia already had ice water, silverware, and napkins waiting.

“Thank you,” Zeke said then dug his fork in. It smelled almost as good as Mia had, and he was starved. He hadn't eaten since he left Virginia Beach this morning. No peanuts on the military flight he'd hopped.

“Zeke,” Holly admonished in a soft but firm tone. “Prayer.” She held out her hand to him.

Zeke was chagrined and dropped his fork immediately. He hated prayer time. Growing up his dad had said every mealtime and bedtime prayer as the “patriarch” of the family. Zeke couldn't remember a prayer where his dad didn't beseech heaven for help for his wayward son and list all of Zeke's shortcomings. At least his family hadn't held hands during those never-ending sermon prayers.

He knew the Deltas were religious but he'd luckily escaped most of the group meals and family prayers when he'd been here before. He and the other SEALs had stayed at the Admiral's house, which had been stocked with lots of food options and quite often the family would bring them plates loaded with delicious food since his men were usually on patrol duty when the family had a joint meal.

He swallowed and looked at Holly's extended hand. She and Joseph and Joseph and Mia already had hands clasped and were watching him. Mia's brown eyes were intrigued, and concerned, by his reluctance.

Holly nodded to him and reached out, trying to help out obviously. Zeke gritted his teeth and quickly clasped her hand in his, tight.

"Okay, relax it a little bit," Holly instructed.

Shoot. He softened his grip and thought he could tolerate this much contact through a prayer, as long as the offering over this meal was a lot briefer than any of his father's had been.

"Now Mia's hand." Holly tilted her head toward Mia.

Blood pumped far too quickly through Zeke's body. He looked at the sweet, beautiful face of the blond woman at his side and then at her extended hand. Did they have to make this so hard? Couldn't people just bow their heads and get the obligatory ritual over with?

Mia's welcoming look started to slip. Holly squeezed his hand. Joseph looked at him as if he had some serious issues. He did. They should know that. Their daughter was marrying his friend Demo. Demo or Jessie should've explained to them this was a bad idea to bring him here and thrust him in intimate and uncomfortable situations like praying and holding hands.

*Don't show weakness*, he commanded himself. He closed his eyes and reached out blindly for Mia's hand. He'd rather not look at the viper as it touched him.

Their hands connected and Mia must have been an expert on this hand holding thing. She confidently secured their palms together and wrapped her soft fingers around the back of his hand. His breath shortened and he realized instantly this was not a viper. This delicate but firm touch was the complete opposite of a viper. Unless it was being disguised and would bite and poison him soon.

Zeke didn't dare open his eyes, but the sensation of warmth and his hand being in the perfect spot against Mia's almost overwhelmed him. He had no idea what Holly said in the prayer. He had no idea what was happening to his hand or his body. Without thinking about it, he wrapped his own fingers around Mia's delicate hand and knew somehow ... it would all be okay. Maybe he'd even be okay. He'd never felt such peace and security.

The prayer must've finished because he heard amens. His eyes sprang open and he released both women's hands as quickly as he could. He tried to forget the sensation of touching Mia. It was probably over-inflated because she was in danger and he felt responsible for her. Plus, how often had he held hands with exquisitely beautiful women in his life? Not since Rachel. Rachel had worked at a supplement store off base that carried a few things he couldn't get on base. She'd chased him for almost two years, slowly wearing down his barriers until he'd gotten comfortable with her, and he'd eventually assumed that must mean he should date her. When she said they should get married after dating exclusively for a year, he'd been terrified but agreed. While he was on a two-month deployment she'd met someone else and changed her mind about him. He'd gone back to single status with a sense of relief he'd never shared with anyone. He was responsible for his SEAL team and he cared for those men as much as he was capable of caring. It was a sense of relief to no longer be responsible for Rachel and a future family. As he thought back he could never remember any touch with her feeling like the two times he'd held Mia's hand. He'd learned to tolerate Rachel's touch and it hadn't repulsed him but he'd never encouraged it. Mia's touch made him warm and happy and somehow looking for a reason to touch her again.

Picking up his fork, he concentrated on his food. Despite being reheated it was delicious. Everything was savory and well-seasoned, the meat tender, the veggies still firm but soft, the roll was what blew him away. He loved homemade rolls. His mom had always made gritty wheat bread that stuck with you for hours. He'd had to retrain himself to eat wheat as an adult. He still didn't like it.

Holly's roll with butter seemed to melt in his mouth. It made sense as Holly was as sweet, warm, and kind as his mom had been cold, belittling, and sadistic.

Luckily the other three were having a conversation about each of Joseph and Holly's children, getting Mia up to date. Colton and Bailey were just home from their honeymoon and happily settled in their house in the woods not far from here. Klein and Alivia were busy with numerous homes under construction and helping take care of his Granny Vance who stayed alternately with them or Thor and Shelly who lived next door, both houses were up by Colton's. Braden and Maddie were traveling the world protecting families and children from crime lords and traffickers. Zander and Jessie would be married at Christmas. Currently Jessie was with Zander in California but she'd be home soon. Zeke smiled to himself. Happy for his friend Demo to have found his perfect match in the sweet but brave Jessie.

They moved on to asking about Mia's parents. It was a short conversation, "Mum's as feisty and fun as ever, rocking the pickleball court and the charity lunches. Dad's ... well you know Dad, he means well and we love him but he is a pompous Duke. You can't expect him to be fun or interesting."

Zeke paused in his eating and looked over at her. First, her family wasn't perfect like the Deltas and second, her dad was a pompous ... Duke? "Your dad's a duke?" he asked, thrusting himself into their conversation.

She looked at him with her golden-brown eyes. Why did she look embarrassed? "And proud of it."

"Do I call you ... Lady Mia?" He tried to tease but this piece of information made him even more uncomfortable.

He'd protected some royalty at different times throughout his career. They were pompous and made sure he knew they were far below him. Mia didn't make him feel like that though.

"Please don't." She laughed. "My mum hates being called Duchess. But she and my dad fancy each other and he never reminds her that she doesn't have royal blood. Though he does expect her to attend certain functions with him, he doesn't even get upset when she 'acts like a commoner' or when she teases him. Usually he's too busy to notice her."

His eyebrows lifted and he saw Joseph and Holly exchange a look. "That's ... nice of him to not get upset?" He often felt that people were from a different world than him as it appeared most people weren't raised by two-faced, hypocritical, narcissistic, pathological liars disguised as religious zealots. But she had truly been raised in a world he could never comprehend.

Mia laughed harder at that. "My dad doesn't know the meaning of 'nice' but he's a good man, loves my mum, donates his fortune generously, as long as it doesn't affect his bottom line, and is respected and fair in his political and business dealings. Plus he plays a mean game of cricket." She grinned. Her grin was perfect in his mind.

It was a lot better than he could say of his dad, but it was telling she didn't say her dad loved her. She didn't look like she wanted to dwell on what her father was or wasn't, so he racked his brain for something else to ask her and came up with, "Do you help your dad with his ... business and cricket, or play pickle ball and attend charity lunches with your mom?"

"Mum," she corrected. "Neither actually." She took a drink of water as if trying to decide how to answer him. "Except for in December when I take the month off work and my mum and I buy and distribute toys to hundreds of children in Surrey," she looked sad to be missing out on that which made him like her even more, "I design clothing."

He looked over her sweater dress and felt his neck heat up. He'd already noticed how perfectly it fit her. Custom made.

By her. Her career fit her. Unique, creative, and fun. “Good for you.” Which was obviously not the correct answer as she gave him a placating smile and focused on her dinner.

“Mia,” Holly sounded exasperated. “You saying you design clothing would be like Zeke saying he’s an enlisted soldier. You’re the best designer of women’s clothing in the world!”

“Ah, Auntie.” Mia smiled. “You’re such a love.”

“Well you are. She is,” she told Zeke. “The girls and I each have dresses from her for church and special occasions. And of course every bit of her active wear we can get our hands on. Sometimes it takes a while shipping it across, but most Nordstrom’s and Macey’s carry her dresses and business casual now.”

“Auntie,” Mia sounded exasperated with her, “if you don’t buy direct from my site you can’t use the discount code for friends and family.”

“Well I don’t use it anyway. Your biggest fans should want to pay full price. Discount code,” she muttered then focused on Zeke again as Mia raised her hands helplessly to Joseph. “She’s ‘Mia Forever’,” Holly continued. “Have you heard of the brand?”

Of course Zeke hadn’t. “Um ...” He lifted his hands helplessly. “I just wear what the Navy gives me.”

Joseph chuckled at that and Mia smiled but Holly didn’t. “Well, let me show you.” She hurried over to the desk Joseph and Zeke had been working at and plucked up the laptop.

She came back and sat the laptop between them on the table, sitting back down, clicking on Safari, and typing. Her face lit up. “Oh, Mia, that cashmere sweater is gorgeous. Ooh I need the pink one.”

“Thank you. The pink would be gorgeous with your coloring.”

“I’m ordering that.” She gave her husband an imperious look. “Don’t you tease me about it.”

“I wouldn’t dare.” He smiled. “I’m sure I’ll love it on you.”

“Well you dang well better.” She grinned and then turned the computer toward Zeke. “Look,” she demanded. “Look at how gorgeous her designs are. Unique but flattering. Comfortable but classy. I’m just in love with everything you design, sweetheart.”

“Thank you,” she said again.

Zeke thought she might be blushing. He knew he was turning red. He tried to look at the pictures of beautiful, too-thin, tall women posing in different dresses, sweaters, clingy pants, and business suits. He was sure the designs were incredible but he felt idiotic and uncomfortable staring at all these women. He hoped he’d looked for long enough when he raised his eyes to focus on Mia.

“Very nice,” he said.

“Very nice?” Holly repeated. “That’s all you’ve got to say?”

He turned beseeching eyes on Holly. She’d always had his back before this moment. “Incredible, alluring, mind-blowing, outstanding, brilliant,” she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

Mia laughed. “I don’t expect a tough career military man to know or care about women’s clothing design, Holly.” She went back to eating as if it was no big deal.

Zeke looked at Holly and shrugged. Not sure why he even cared that he’d messed that all up. She patted his hand and he only flinched.

“Sorry, Zeke,” Holly said. “I should know not to push you.”

Zeke wished he wasn’t such an obvious loser right now. How could he be this elite fighter, confident to take out a dictator and his minions, but put him in front of a beautiful, accomplished woman and he flubbed it all up?

He concentrated on his food, wishing he'd taken more to keep him busy longer. He needed to focus on the job not the woman. That was the only way he'd get through this assignment.

\* \* \*

Find *His Perfect Match for Christmas* [here](#).



Do Claim the Tempting Athlete



## Chapter One



Eve Jewel bent low and kissed her daughter Paisley. “I’ll come get you for lunch in three hours,” she promised.

“Okay, Mama. I’ll be having the time of my life doing my work.” Her blue eyes lit up as she winked with more sass than any four-year-old should possess and sauntered away to join her friends at Eve’s gym’s play center. Eve always felt a sting of guilt for leaving her daughter while she worked but Paisley loved the gym’s daycare and the workers all adored her.

“Don’t worry about her,” Abbie, her play center manager, said. “She’s the happiest little girl and everybody loves her.”

“Thanks, Abbie. I just hate missing out on any time with her.”

Abbie nodded with understanding. Her own daughter was now at the daycare with her, but she used to work as a receptionist at a local dental office and had to leave Shay every day. Her husband had MS and worked from home. Eve knew they were struggling financially and her husband wasn’t healthy enough to help much with their little girl. Eve paid her as generously as she could.

“I know how that goes,” Abbie said.

Eve raised a hand, watching Paisley organize a game in the play kitchen with several other children.

She backed out of the play center’s door, having a hard time taking her gaze off of her darling girl. Though Eve still dealt with disappointment with herself and resentment against Mark for charming her into thinking she was in love at

eighteen, whisking her away to Vegas, and immediately getting her pregnant, all the while planning on stealing the inheritance she wouldn't receive until twenty-five—she'd never regret having Paisley. Her little girl was the best part of her life.

She ran into someone as she backed out of the door. Whirling, she found herself face to chest with a well-built man. “Oh, excuse me.” She glanced up and the oxygen sucked from her lungs as she stared into perfection. The man had blue eyes that could rival the Jewel family's eyes in brightness and clarity, as well as a well-trimmed beard that complimented the strong planes of his face. He was smiling at her and the deep dimples in his cheeks, visible even through the facial hair, softened what would have been a face far too much like she'd always imagined Apollo would look like.

“Sorry I didn't see you,” he said, holding his phone up. “Texting and walking.”

“Should be illegal.”

He slipped his phone into the pocket of his shorts and leaned even closer to her. “Eyes as pretty as yours should be illegal.”

Eve's stomach hopped happily at the compliment but she forced herself to not fall into the trap of *his* beautiful eyes. “Empty compliments will get you nowhere.” She surprised herself by saying the line much too flirtatiously with a welcoming smile that clearly told him she wanted more empty compliments. Her sister, Rachel, and her sassy sisters-in-law would be proud. They always gave her a hard time about never giving any handsome man a chance to flirt.

“It wasn't empty,” he insisted. His gaze seemed sincere, but what did she know? After her one failed attempt at a relationship, she'd focused on getting through college in under three years while also being pregnant and having an infant and then toddler underfoot. When she graduated, she searched the country for the perfect spot to raise her little girl, then secured a loan from her dad to buy this gym in Golden, Colorado.

She'd almost paid that loan off in the past two years. She loved her gym and her work as a personal trainer.

She lifted her eyebrows in an obvious challenge, compliments like that were always empty and were usually the prelude to an even more empty and meaningless dating fling. A single mom didn't have the time or energy for that kind of relationship.

She backed away then spun on her heel and headed toward the weight room. The main floor of her gym housed a two-story massive weight and cardio room, the state of the art locker rooms, the daycare center, racquetball courts, basketball courts, and indoor pools. Upstairs, the areas that weren't open to below housed separate rooms for aerobics, spin, and Pilates/yoga, as well as personal training rooms, offices, and a juice bar and deli.

She heard him walking behind her but chose not to stop. She had a personal training appointment that she was already pushing being late to. There were always plenty of fit and handsome men in her gym—she knew how to stay strong. Raising Paisley was her priority. Sure, she got lonely, but she had a great family to support her and interact with when she needed adult communication.

She'd almost made it to the weight room when he touched her arm. Spinning, she folded her arms across her chest. "Can I help you?" She said it pleasantly. Eve rarely got snippy with anyone, but she didn't have time to flirt.

He nodded. She would've thought he was a very serious guy if his blue eyes hadn't been twinkling. With his tall, muscular frame, maybe six-four or five to her five-eight, and that mischievous glint in his eyes, he reminded her of her brother Caleb, about ready to play a prank or "sturdy trick" on someone.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm new to the gym and wondered if you could show me around?" He glanced down at the fitted t-shirt she had all of her employees wear. The Fitness Spot emblazoned on her chest.

“Oh, shoot! I’d be honored to, but I have a personal training appointment at nine. I’ll find someone else to give you the tour.” He should’ve already received an in-depth tour when he signed up for the gym unless her employees weren’t doing their jobs. But she was certain her employees were doing their jobs. It hit her—he was trying to get more time with her. She shouldn’t have been so irrationally happy that he was being obvious about it.

“Don’t do that,” he said. “I’ll lift some weights while I wait for you.”

“I have an appointment at ten also.”

“Popular trainer.”

Eve lifted her hands and shrugged. What was she supposed to say? She tried to turn as many clients over to the other trainers as possible but many people insisted on her and then they told their friends about her. She got results and didn’t waste time and many people appreciated that.

“I’ll lift until ten-forty-five, shower, and meet you right here a few minutes after eleven.”

“Do you always get what you want?” she asked, partially annoyed he wouldn’t take no for an answer and partially impressed at his tenacity.

“If it’s something I really want.” He shrugged. Even though she was surrounded by muscular bodies every day she was impressed with the strength and definition in his shoulders.

“And a tour of the gym with me is what you really want?” she challenged.

“Yes, ma’am.” His voice came out deeper and made her heart race faster.

Eve smiled at him and shook her head. “Fine. I’ll see you right here a few minutes after eleven.”

“Right here?” He pointed at his feet, his dimples growing deeper as he grinned at her.

“Not an inch to the left or the right,” she shot back.

He chuckled, tilted his chin to her, and sauntered past her to the free weights. Eve kept her mouth closed but she let herself watch him walk away. He looked good, really good. Was he an athlete of some sort? He was like a walking billboard for fitness. She was glad he'd chosen her gym.

Suddenly, she felt someone standing next to her. Eve turned to find her client. "Trudy," Eve greeted her warmly. "Ready to work?"

Trudy was staring after the man. It was then that Eve realized she hadn't even asked his name. She needed to shift into trainer and owner mode when she gave him the tour. It was time to stop flirting and start being friendly but professional.

Trudy's mouth was slightly open as she watched him pick up sixty-five-pound dumbbells and start with lateral raises.

"Trudy?" Eve questioned, passing a hand in front of her face.

Trudy blinked but didn't stop staring. "Do you *realize* who that is?"

Eve shook her head. She let herself look and fully appreciate the striations in his arms as he lifted. She liked that he wore a comfortable t-shirt and not a ripped-up tank like some guys did, trying to show off. It was still more than apparent how muscular he was. "Tough guy with a nice face?"

Trudy rolled her eyes. "Nice? You call that manly beauty and absolute perfection, *nice*?"

Eve laughed. "Maybe it's more than nice. Let's get you warmed up." She directed her to an open area with mirrors and mats and started her on inchworms.

Trudy glared up at her as she performed the exercise. "Only you would insist on inchworms when I could be staring at Beckett Tanner. What is that beautiful man doing in Golden?"

Eve glanced over at the object of Trudy's drool. Beckett Tanner. It fit him. She liked it. She was dying to beg Trudy for info. Who was he? Why was it surprising he was in Golden?

Golden was a cool town,—only twenty miles west of Denver, nestled against the mountains, a beautiful spot with a trendy downtown, and with a river running through it. She loved this town. Even more so now that Caleb and Luke each lived less than thirty minutes away with their wives.

“Plank,” Eve instructed Trudy.

“For the love of men, let me at least do something standing up so I can gawk at him.”

Eve laughed and shook her head. “Okay, squats.”

“Thank you,” Trudy breathed. Trudy had never thanked her for any exercise before. She was a matter-of-fact thirty-year-old who worked hard but didn’t gush about much of anything. She squatted deep with perfect form but her gaze was focused on Beckett, who was now doing an overhead press. Eve glanced around and it seemed like half of the late-morning crowd was goggling at Beckett as well. She rolled her eyes and focused on her client, pushing her through an intense workout. The entire time, though, her gaze strayed to Beckett almost as often as Trudy’s did.

Several times she caught him looking at her. He’d give her a dimple-revealing grin before returning to his exercise. He was definitely appealing, tough, handsome, and he’d been fun to tease but she prided herself on the fact that she wasn’t begging Trudy for information about him—no matter how badly she wanted to.

Trudy finished twenty burpees and dropped onto the mat, sweaty and obviously exhausted. “Let me catch a breath,” she begged.

“Sure. Then twenty pushups,” Eve said.

Trudy groaned. She rolled over and stared up at Eve. “You seriously don’t know who Beckett Tanner is and you aren’t even going to grill me with questions?”

Eve’s eyebrows lifted and she shouldn’t have but she glanced over to where Beckett was currently using the cable machine for a triceps pulldown. Whew! Those triceps were nicely formed, popping beautifully for her to gawk at.

“I’ve noticed him checking you out,” Trudy said before she rolled over and started into pushups. Eve felt her face flush. Trudy had noticed too? She put a hand to her cheek and forced herself not to look at him again.

Trudy finished her pushups and Eve couldn’t think what she was supposed to do next. Trudy glanced up at her. “Eve?”

“Um ...” Her mind raced but all it could see was Beckett, smiling at her with those blue eyes and those dimples that showed even through his short facial hair. Why did he try to cover up dimples that beautiful? Who was he that had Trudy so interested? Well, Trudy was probably interested because he was so good-looking but he must be famous too. She should be thinking about how great this was for her gym, but all she could think about was how great it was for her personally.

“How about we do some rows on the cable machine?” Trudy grinned up at her.

Eve gave a very uncharacteristic giggle.

Trudy jumped to her feet. “Let’s go.” She raced across the weight room, fluffing her short, dark locks with her fingers as she went.

Eve followed her client. What choice did she have? There were two cable machines placed side by side. One was empty. The other was occupied by Beckett.

Trudy reached the machine and moved the pin to ninety pounds. Eve lowered the handle and traded out the bar for the rope, hyperaware that Beckett was close by. Was he staring at her? Was he thinking it was her idea to race over here? Not that she minded, but she didn’t want to look like she was chasing him.

She straightened and Trudy grasped the rope just as Beckett finished his own set of rows, released the rope, and glanced over at them. When he caught Eve’s eye, his polite smile turned into a full grin. “Hey,” he said in a deep, throaty voice that made her warm all over.

“Hey,” she managed, lifting a hand.



Trudy released the cables and put one hand on her slim hip. “Beckett Tanner, as I live and breathe. Hello.” She stuck out her hand.

Beckett extended his hand and shook hers. “Nice to meet you, Ms. ...”

“Trudy Gunnell.” Trudy grinned and licked her lips. “Very nice to meet you. What brings you to Golden?”

“I have a home here,” he said evasively. He glanced past her to Eve and also extended his hand. “Nice to meet you, Ms....”

Eve figured she couldn’t be rude to a client of her own gym. She put her hand in his and felt a strength and peace radiate through her. This was a man who would be there for her. This man would never ditch her when he found out she hadn’t received an inheritance from her father. She startled and would’ve pulled her hand back to stop her crazy thoughts but he held on to her hand and stared at her, waiting, waiting for what?

“Your name,” Trudy hissed, making her feel like a complete idiot.

“Oh ...” Eve blushed furiously. “Eve Jewel. Nice to meet you.”

Beckett held onto her hand. “Beckett Tanner, but you can call me Beck.”

Trudy sighed beside her.

Eve pulled her hand back and focused on Trudy. “Rows,” she said.

Her client rolled her eyes but grabbed the rope.

Beck smiled and nodded to them both. “Bye, Trudy,” he said.

“Bye,” Trudy said breathlessly.

“See you at eleven,” he said to Eve, focusing his blue gaze on her and making her knees feel wobbly.

“See you,” she said just as breathlessly as Trudy.

He strode away to the free weights area and neither woman moved as they stared after him.

“That is a perfect specimen,” Trudy murmured.

Eve shook herself from the Beck-staring trance and adjusted the weight on the cable machine. “I think you can take a little more weight on the row but take it nice and slow.”

“You don’t agree that he’s a stud?” Trudy asked, turning back and taking the rope from Eve to start executing the row.

Eve shrugged. “I’d prefer not to objectify him.”

Trudy chuckled. “Stay on your high horse and I’ll drool and objectify.” Her mouth twisted in a frown. “If only he’d look at me like he does at you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Please tell me you’re not that closed off to the male species. I’ve heard how men ask you out and you claim you can’t date clients. But come on ... Beckett Tanner was checking you out hardcore. Oh, wait ... he asked *you* to call him Beck.” She winked. “Give that handsome man a chance, for me if not for yourself.”

Eve couldn’t resist darting a glance at Beck. He looked in the mirror and caught her gaze, giving her a grin that she felt was meant only for her.

She bit at her lip and turned away as Trudy muttered, “Point proven.”

## Chapter Two



Beckett Tanner tried to focus on his workout but it was near impossible with the gorgeous trainer in the same weight room. He'd stared at her as he lifted and occasionally was rewarded with her meeting his gaze and gifting him with her incredible smile before she glanced away. The other woman with her had no such innocence, staring brazenly at him. Beck was used to that, being a well-known NHL player, the only heir to his eccentric grandpa's fortune, driving a two-million-dollar, one-of-a-kind car, and being featured on far too many magazines claiming he was "the most eligible bachelor", and other such bunk. All of this complied together had brought him more attention than he wanted from women of all ages. Just yesterday a fifteen-year-old had hit on him at a sandwich shop. He'd kindly told her he couldn't go out with her because he was old enough to be her father. Not quite true, but the encounter had still made his stomach turn.

He focused on a lateral raise as Eve said goodbye to her nine o'clock client and started into a warmup with her ten o'clock training appointment. This client was a man, close to Eve's age. A well-built guy who was probably attractive, if Beck were to classify another man as such. His eyes narrowed as the guy said something and she smiled sweetly, revealing slight dimples in those smooth cheeks.

Beck felt a possessiveness flair in him that was both unfamiliar and undesirable. He didn't want to feel jealous when he hardly knew Eve, and the interaction between her and her client was most likely innocent. The guy brushed against her and Beck straightened, ready to throw gloves. Instead, he

dropped to the mat and pumped out twenty pushups. It was better if he couldn't see them but a light, tinkling laughter floated to him anyway, causing him to feel weak and hot all over. Eve's laughter. He knew it as well as he knew his own hockey stick. Her laugh was as sweet and appealing as the rest of her.

He glanced up at the clock. Ten-forty. He wouldn't mind lifting longer but he'd told Eve he'd be showered and ready to meet her for his tour at eleven. It would probably be better for him not to shoot daggers at the man Eve was training anyway. It wasn't as if he had any right to be by her side.

Checking her position one last time, disappointment surged through him. She was so focused on her client, touching his back while he executed deadlifts, that she didn't even glance Beck's way. He knew trainers often touched their clients to remind them to keep proper form but he still didn't like seeing Eve touch another man. He headed for the locker room, responding to some female greetings as he went, wishing Eve was simpering over him as so many other women did.

Looking around he was impressed with the clean, spacious locker room. There were various hot tubs, a steam room, and heated tile beds in the relaxation area. He headed for the showers, enjoying the private spacious shower with a therapy head. His shower at home was nicer but this wasn't anything to complain about. Maybe he'd lift from nine to eleven-thirty every day until the regular season practices started in August. He could shower here and see if he could talk the beautiful Eve Jewel into lunch each day. It was early June so he'd have two and a half months to try to get her to fall for him before he had to be at practice and team workouts in Denver, not hanging out at the hometown gym.

He left the shower, got dressed, and looked at himself in the mirror. He was being a little obsessive about this woman that he didn't even know—worrying about her laughing with another man, thinking how he'd talk her into dating him, planning his day around spending more time with her.

He straightened his shoulders and studied himself. His mom had taught him to be humble and not get too high on himself. She always used to say: “You’re blessed to be talented, smart, handsome, charming, and wealthy. And by darn you’d better be a humble hard worker too, or I will *break* you.” He smiled to himself, thinking of her shaking her slim finger at him as she said it then laughing and hugging him, dissolving any concern of her claiming she’d “break him”.

He brushed his hair and his teeth and then stowed his stuff back in his locker, dropping his cell phone and wallet in his pants pocket.

He was Beckett Tanner. It was time he listen to his mom’s voice, stand up tall, and show this lady exactly who he was.

Striding confidently from the locker room, he spotted Eve standing alone across the open foyer of the gym, next to the stairs. She turned his way and her gorgeous smile lit up her blue eyes. He felt like he’d been slammed into the wall and somebody was jabbing their stick into his solar plexus. Beck was immediately humbled, ready to grovel for any attention she’d toss his way, and uncertain that any man on earth was worthy of such a woman. It wasn’t just her external beauty, she radiated a sort of calm and peaceful feeling that seemed to speak to his soul.

He stumbled across the foyer as if it were his first time on skates, but he was on solid ground. Reaching her, he smiled like a besotted sixteen-year-old. “Hey.”

“How was your workout?” she asked.

Completely pushing his luck, he rested his hand against the stair railing and leaned in closer to her. She looked up at him so sweet, so radiant, so incredible, he knew he had to get to know her. What good was being a successful hockey star and an heir to billions if he couldn’t date the woman of his dreams? He hadn’t even known she was the woman of his dreams until he saw her two hours ago.

“I struggled,” he admitted.

She leaned back against the stairs and stared up at him. Those blue eyes sparkled like sapphires. Did he know any poetry about blue eyes looking like precious stones? Maybe he could make something up about her being a jewel like her name. Would she laugh at him if he started spouting poetry? What was happening to him? His teammates would be laughing themselves silly if they knew his crazy thoughts.

“Why’s that?” she asked.

He wanted to touch her so badly, brush her long ponytail over her shoulder or touch the smooth skin of her cheek, but he knew he had to slow down. Simply because he thought she was incredible didn’t mean she felt the same. “There was this exquisitely beautiful personal trainer with the most intriguing blue eyes,” his voice was low and husky and she hardly blinked as she stared up at him. “She stole all of my attention and made it difficult for me to focus on my workout.”

Beck held his breath, hoping he had some favors left with his favorite guardian angels— his parents and grandmother. Hopefully they’d send some good vibes down from heaven and nudge Eve toward him.

Eve blinked up at him and then snapped her fingers. “Ah, Melissa is a doll.” She inclined her head toward the weight room. “Would you like me to introduce you?”

Beck leaned closer, inhaling her clean, sweet scent. “I am *not* talking about Melissa,” he murmured. Didn’t she realize he couldn’t even see another woman with her filling up his every thought?

Her eyes traveled over his face and his hopes rose, but then she slid away from him and the staircase and walked toward the weight machines. “We’ll start our tour with the weight room. You seem to know your way around the equipment.”

Beck groaned but followed her. The tour was much quicker than he would’ve liked and Eve didn’t rise to any of the flirtatious bait he tossed out there. She was friendly but professional. They finished their tour back in the foyer near the staircase where it had started.

“Well, that’s it,” Eve said, spreading her hands. “Any questions?”

“Would you please to go to lunch with me?” he asked before he could stop himself.

Her eyes softened and warmed but just as quickly a shutter seemed to cover them. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have a standing lunch date.”

His stomach dropped. “I can’t compete with this ‘standing lunch date’?” he asked bravely.

She gave him an almost flirtatious smile. “You’re cute, but nowhere near as cute as my lunch date.”

With that she headed for the stairs, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. “Thank you for choosing to join the Fitness Spot. We’re thrilled you chose to work out here and hope you’ll love our gym.”

Beck watched her go, feeling confused and frustrated. This probably wasn’t the time to admit it to himself but he couldn’t think of a woman who’d ever turned him down, ever. He also wasn’t trying to be big-headed but other gyms he’d worked out at had been ecstatic to have the walking billboard of a professional athlete choosing their gym. They had often gushed over him almost to the point of embarrassment. Eve had acted very... unimpressed. It was possible she had no clue who he was, which was fine. But... he wanted to impress her and to win her away from whoever her standing lunch date was. He was nowhere near as cute? Ouch.

He went to retrieve his bag from his locker and slowly walked out into a beautiful June morning. The trees were all green and full. Clear Creek was choked with late spring runoff. He walked the block down to the river and sat down on a bench to think, staring at the roaring water.

A standing lunch date? Cuter than him? She didn’t think he was as attractive as her date. That stunk. Who did she go to lunch with every day? A friend, a boyfriend, a ... husband? Horror rushed through him. She was married. She hadn’t been wearing a ring but women often didn’t at the gym. It was the

only thing that made sense. And he was cuter than Beck... much cuter.

He pushed a hand through his hair, sick to his stomach. She was married. Reaching down, he picked up a rock and hurled it at the rushing water. Of course she was married. There were enough smart men in Colorado to assure that a woman as perfect, sweet, and intriguing as Eve Jewel wouldn't just be sitting around single, waiting for Beck to show up and convince her to date him.

There was one way to find out. Ripping out his phone, he Googled Eve Jewel. Some pictures of her came up and he withheld a sigh of longing. What was happening to him? Sadly there wasn't much information, almost as if she worked to stay out of the spotlight. There were a lot of pictures, social media posts, and articles about her siblings. Caleb Jewel played lacrosse for the Denver Outlaws and had been framed for murder a year and a half ago. Joshua and Luke Jewel were both wealthy and in the spotlight a lot. Two of the female Jewel in-laws owned *Cosette*, a successful perfume company. Seth Jewel was an X-games star on dirt bikes and snowmobiles. Eve's sister Rachel had been burned in an explosion and received a lot of attention about a year ago.

The only real information he could find on Eve was a few pictures of her with her siblings, a video of her telling off the media after Rachel had been injured, and a little clip from the local paper, the Golden Transcript, about her buying the Fitness Spot. So she owned the gym? Interesting. And very impressive. She seemed young to own a gym, which made it even more impressive. There was nothing about a husband and Jewel looked to be her maiden name. She and her siblings all shared the same brilliantly blue eyes. He started relaxing a little bit, at least he hadn't gotten crazily invested in a married woman. Yet she could be engaged or dating someone seriously. What was a "standing lunch date" anyway?

His phone rang, distracting him from stewing over Eve. He stood and started to walk the mostly-shaded river trail, sliding his phone on. "Papa," he greeted his grandfather.



“Beckett. My boy,” Papa’s voice boomed back. “Are you well?”

“Always, sir. And you?”

“I’m old, cranky, I hurt all over, and my doctors are ticking me off.” He grunted with disgust.

Beck held back a laugh, barely. Always the same with his grandpa. He was always real. Beck loved it. “Sorry to hear it, sir.”

“Don’t get old,” Papa warned.

“I’ll do my best, sir.” Beck chuckled.

“Don’t make fun of me,” Papa warned even more sternly. “Now I don’t have time to waste, so listen up.”

Beck always smiled when he said that. You’d think at eighty-eight Beck’s Papa would slow down, but he was still heavily involved in his various mortgage brokerages and he also liked to be well-informed on politicians so he could decide in his mind who was honest and doing their best for the people and then he’d throw insane amounts of money at them.

“You turn twenty-seven in August.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you settled down and married before your birthday.”

“Married?” Beck yelped and stopped walking, facing the river. “Excuse me, sir?” His grandfather had been opinionated through the years about Beck’s education and upbringing. He insisted on Beck not being spoiled, “growing up to be a Tanner”, and being a hard worker, but he’d never indicated that he wanted him married. His dad was an only child and so was Beck so there were a lot of expectations placed upon him, but not like this.

“You heard me, don’t act all shocked.”

“Well, sir, I wouldn’t mind getting married someday.” Eve’s face flashed through his mind. He’d been yanked in by her calm confidence. The peace that radiated from her really

spoke to him, an anchor he could appreciate and was drawn to since losing his parents. “But why don’t we set a reasonable time frame? Thirty sounds like a good round number.” Didn’t all those silly movies about a man having to get married set thirty as the deadline? Maybe in three years and a couple of months, the right woman would stride across his path. Maybe Eve Jewel was that woman, but he wouldn’t know that in two and a half months. Marriage was a serious, huge commitment.

“No!” his grandfather shot back. “I’ve been praying hard to Grace and your parents and I feel all inspired. My angels have spoken. I’ll be dead soon and I want you settled and happy before I join your dad and mom and my Grace. Twenty-seven’s a good number, you’ve got over two months and some pretty determined angels on your side, do your part and get to work.”

Beck was shaking his head. He often felt his parents and grandmother’s spirits close by as well, but none of them would support Papa in this kind of craziness. Trying to force him to get married before his next birthday? Papa had never shown signs of dementia but apparently it was manifesting itself. “No, sir. I love you, Papa, but I’m not rushing into marriage to appease you.”

“If you don’t, I’ll give each of my companies to their respective CEOs.”

“Good, they probably deserve them anyway.”

“And,” Papa continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “I’ll donate all my individual properties, including the family homes, the jet, and *all* of my investments and savings to ...”

Beck waited for Papa to say which cause those billions of dollars and assets would go to. Had Papa already researched a worthy cause? When he didn’t speak up, Beck felt a rush of hope. He wouldn’t receive the money for his own foundation, and it would stink to lose his family homes and all those memories, but he could still help many children.

“Papa,” he said earnestly. “I’ve done a lot of research on the best children’s charities that give close to a hundred

percent to the children. Would you like me to send you the lists I've compiled?"

"No," Papa's voice was stern and unyielding. "I have a charity I'm going to give it to if you don't get married. Save the Hyenas."

"Save the Hyenas?" Beck asked incredulously. His dreams of helping dashed again. "Is that really a cause?"

"I saw it on Facebook," Papa declared. "Just looked it up again when you decided to be an ungrateful whelp and not get excited about getting married like I know you should. Save the Hyenas is legit."

Beck returned to his walk along the river trail but it was more of a storm. "Whatever," he said angrily. "Do whatever you want with your money, you earned it." Beck didn't need the money. He earned a great salary with the Colorado Avalanche and he'd been investing in stocks and mutual funds since he'd started cleaning his dad and granddad's offices back in elementary school. He had millions of dollars in various investments and a great home of his own.

The only problem was he had spent a lot of time researching and he'd known exactly what he was going to do when he received all his family money, billions of dollars in assets, property, and liquid cash. He had it all mapped out to donate everything but the family homes and the jet to his favorite children's charities, saving only enough to start a foundation of his own. Every year from the time he was ten years old until her death three years ago, his mom had taken him on a church humanitarian mission and they'd always chosen to work in orphanages or be with children. His foundation would focus on trips like that, working with churches to find worthy volunteers who had the desire but not the means to help. His foundation would provide everything they could for the workers and the children in need.

It had hurt too much to go without his mom these past few years so he'd focused on helping children locally. But he'd dreamt of using all that money to further his mom's dream and help the little children he'd fallen in love with on those trips.

They were innocent, happy, and loving, even if they had so little food their bellies hurt, slept in the dirt, or didn't have a family to love them. He wanted to bring needed love, attention, and relief to those kids.

It wrenched something deep inside him to take away the dream of helping so many children, almost like having his mom ripped from him again. It would also sting to say farewell to the homes in Newport Beach, California; Tuscany, Italy; Victoria, Minnesota; and Kauai that he'd grown up in. He had so many great memories with his parents in each of those places.

The least important thing was the jet, but if he was honest with himself, he'd still miss having a private jet at his disposal. The Boeing 747-8 was one of the most luxurious jets in the world and Beck loved it. But at the end of the day it was his granddad's money and the man could do what he wanted with it. Papa always did exactly what he wanted anyway, Beck didn't know why he'd gotten his hopes up. *Please say he's joking about the hyenas*, he prayed.

"Beckett! Don't you say 'whatever'. Don't you dare take that tone with me," Papa demanded.

"You're the one telling me I have to get married in two months. That's insane."

"Well, you do. I feel it deeply, and don't you tell me it's insane. You've had enough of this playing around, dating for fun, being the hockey superstar, driving around in your Bugatti like you're the king of the world. It's time for you to settle down with a beautiful angel, like my Grace, and have a passel of kiddos. Don't be stupid and only have one like your daddy and I did. That one might disappoint you."

Beck rolled his eyes. He and his father had both worked hard to surpass Papa's expectations, but he loved to throw out barbs like that if Beck wasn't doing exactly what Papa thought he should. As he stormed up the asphalt trail, he missed the beauty of the trees and Clear Creek, which was more of a river than a creek in his opinion. He tried to smile at the children on

bikes and scooters as he passed and not just plow right past them.

“I’m serious about this, Beckett.”

“I don’t doubt you are, sir, but I don’t believe you’ll give your fortune to Save the Hyenas. Who even likes hyenas? They’re the villains in Lion King.” He tried to keep his tone light, but he was peeved. His grandpa could and would give his fortune to the hyenas, or almost as bad, to politicians who told him what he wanted to hear. It was still Papa’s money and his choice, but Beck also had a choice. The old man had no right to tell him to settle down. Papa had gotten married at thirty-nine after seeing the world, and securing his fortune. Grandma had been thirty-eight, a retired actress. Their age was the real reason they’d only had one child. He wasn’t sure what his parents’ excuse was. His mom used to say when you’d created the perfect child, who wanted to tempt fate again?

His mom. She would side with him on this one, maybe. She’d actually told him once she wanted him to not wait too long to get married. She’d told him to find the right one and have lots of babies for her to spoil. Too bad she and dad had been killed three years ago in the small propeller plane Dad loved to fly.

“It’s the hyenas, or you married and happy. I promise you I’ll make those hyena lovers happy if you’re not going to be.”

“I believe you, sir.” His grandpa was both determined and full of integrity. He didn’t make empty threats. Though he believed in tough love, he usually didn’t throw around too many threats. Beck truly did love the guy and would miss his last family member when he passed. He was just supremely annoyed with him right now.

“I know you’re a bleeding heart, Beckett. All those trips with your mom to orphanages and the videos she sent to me showed how you lit up around the kids, how happy helping them made you. Nowadays you’re always participating in some charity event to help the children, bringing a kid out on the ice to make their day, and other junk like that. It’s admirable. I love it about you, son, that tenderness for little

ones. And now I'm going to use it against you. Would you truly rather the hyenas get *your* money instead of all those children you could help?"

Beck gripped the phone tightly. The hyenas. His stomach tightened in anger. His grandfather would do it too. If Papa wouldn't use all that money to help children couldn't he at the very least choose dogs or penguins or an animal that people *liked*? Hyenas. Sheesh, he was getting more and more eccentric every day.

"Sir, I can't get married in two months. I'm not even dating anyone." Again Eve's beautiful smile and incredible blue eyes appeared in his mind but she hadn't even seemed interested in him and for all he knew she was already married or engaged.

"You can and you will. I'm getting the will changed. Don't push me on this."

Beck had no response. Papa had made up his mind. Beck would honestly try to find someone. It wasn't that he was opposed to marriage. He'd been dating since he was fourteen when he realized he liked girls, a lot. He just hadn't found that certain someone he wanted to spend the rest of all eternity with over the last twelve years of dating. How was magic going to happen in the next two months, no matter what Papa insisted that his angels had told him? Insanity. His grandfather had officially lost his mind. It was horrible, but Beck wondered if he could challenge the will. The children in need definitely deserved all that money over the stupid hyenas.

He reached the point where the trail split, going over a bridge or arching up the other direction toward the small college. He took the bridge option and then headed back down on the opposite side of the river, past the city's water supply.

"Beckett?" Papa sounded tired. "I wouldn't do this if it wasn't for your own good."

"Papa ..." Beck tried to reason with him. "Rushing into marriage is not smart. You've always taught me that it's a forever commitment. I need time to find the right person, to date long enough to make sure she doesn't have any issues."

“That’s the problem, right there. You young men wanting to find some perfect model. *Everybody* has issues, everybody has junk hiding in their closet, but if you love the Lord, love each other, and have the guts to commit to something besides hockey, you’ll be just as happy as Grace and I were, as your mom and dad were.”

“My mom and dad dated for years before they married.”

“That’s cause your dad was stupid and slow and had commitment issues. I could go on, but don’t make me badmouth my own blood about how he was a wimp about marriage. Grace and I dated three weeks and knew it was right. Married a month later and happier than anybody had a right to be.”

Beck was passing the RV park now. He’d love to stay here with his own wife and family, right on the river with a park nearby, and head up into the mountains every day for hikes, but he had to find that wife first. Everybody had issues? Well, that was probably true, but he wanted the right woman for him with issues that Beck could handle.

“Papa, it’s not like I don’t want to be married.”

“Not sure I believe that one. I’ve seen the pictures of you with empty-headed, big-chested, hair-color from a bottle, redheads.”

“Papa! You can’t judge women like that.”

“Who’s gonna stop me? Two months and ten days to find your woman Beck, or the hyena supporters are going to be howling like hyenas.” He laughed like a hyena at his lame joke and hung up.

Beck slid his phone into his pocket as he stormed down the trail toward the lower bridge, back into town and to his car. Married in two months or the hyenas got the inheritance he’d hoped to use to help millions of children.

If only Eve Jewel was available and interested in him. He shook his head and pounded across the bridge. For the first time since his sixteenth birthday—when the old man had told him he had a big present for him and walked him slowly

through his glistening shop full of dozens of beautiful Bugattis, Lamborghinis, and Maseratis then cackled as he handed him the keys to a twenty-year-old, rusted-out Civic—he really hated his grandfather.



## Chapter Three



Eve saw lots of glimpses of Beck Tanner over the next week at her gym. He caught her eye and gave her inviting glances often as she was training a client, but she'd been booked back to back throughout each morning and hadn't had a minute to approach him before he disappeared about eleven-thirty each day and she always went to lunch with Paisley at noon.

She woke at four-thirty a.m. every day, did her own weight or cardio workout in her small home gym, which was ironic as she owned the best gym this side of Denver, but she didn't want to be away from Paisley any more than she had to. Then she'd shower and work on responding to emails, marketing, or bookkeeping for the gym until Paisley woke up. They'd have breakfast together and head to The Fitness Spot.

Usually after lunch, she might have one or two more personal training appointments but she'd focus her time in her office upstairs of the gym on employee issues or training and whatever else she needed to wrap up for the day. By three or four she and Paisley would head out to spend the rest of the day together.

She'd Googled Beck that first night she met him after Paisley had fallen asleep. Even the pictures of him online took her breath away. When she realized he was a star defenseman for the Colorado Avalanche, an heir to billions, and looked like a superstar easing out of his beautiful car in pictures, it made more sense why Trudy, and it seemed every other woman in the gym, couldn't keep their eyes off of him. That wasn't completely fair though. Beck would've probably

received all of those longing glances simply because of how attractive and fit he was. Plus he really appeared to be a nice guy, not a cocky gym rat. She'd noticed him helping people with equipment, joking with young men who looked at him with idol worship, and even helping one of the older ladies to the pool area for her therapy workout. It was an honor to have a professional athlete and weight-lifting advertisement like him at her gym. She wanted to gush about him and to him, but that wasn't her personality, at all.

Eve found herself becoming obsessed with the man, watching for him at his usual workout times between nine and eleven-thirty, Googling him after she put Paisley to bed and watching videos of him playing hockey—he was singularly impressive on the ice—and unfortunately seeing numerous pictures of him with a lot of different women, often helping them into that gorgeous navy blue and silver car of his. He seemed to prefer redheads with generous bosoms. Dang. Her dark hair did have natural copper highlights but she was sadly lacking in large chest measurements, too thin and muscular her mom would say.

A week after she'd first met him, she was walking backward out of the daycare after dropping off Paisley when she ran into someone solid. Whipping around, she felt her stomach give a happy lurch when she realized it was Beck.

A warm smile lit up his handsome face. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey yourself.” She felt her own smile growing.

“You’ve been busy,” he said. “First time I’ve seen you alone in days.”

“You’ve been waiting to catch me alone?” She arched an eyebrow, her stomach hopping happily.

He nodded.

Eve wanted to question him about why he'd want her alone but she wasn't very proficient at flirting. She was trying to remember the last time before she met him that she had even cared to flirt. “Here for your daily abuse?” she asked.

He nodded. “Gotta stay in shape for hockey season.”

“Oh... you play hockey?” She tried to play it cool and not reveal she’d Googled him far too often since he’d appeared at her gym.

“I’ve been known to skate a time or two.” He smiled as if he knew exactly how obsessed she was becoming with him.

“That’s... nice.” She was an idiot. Nice? He was spectacular, intriguing, impressive, mind-consuming. Nice?

She turned and started walking toward the main area and the weight room. She was training Trudy at nine o’clock. Beck fell into step beside her. She glanced up at him. She loved that he was as tall and built as her brothers. It made her feel like he could protect her from the bad things in the world—mostly Mark showing up again. During her pregnancy, she pushed through as much schooling as she could before her daughter was born. At times she’d fought loneliness and even longed for Mark to reappear. Now she hated him completely and dreaded the thought of him coming around and possibly seeing Paisley. She’d worked hard to stay off of social media and away from any paparazzi that tracked her family, to protect Paisley from her weasel of a father.

“Do the team trainers orchestrate your workouts?” she asked.

“They send suggested workouts in the offseason but they don’t own us until we go back to practice the end of August.”

They entered the open gym foyer with the skylights above the two stories and the focal point of the staircase. Trudy was walking in the front doors.

Beck put a hand on her arm and Eve stopped walking and stared up at him. He leaned slightly closer and lowered his voice, “Are you married?”

Eve’s eyes widened. Why would he ask that? Was this the time to tell him she had been married? For one long, horrific week. “No.”

“Engaged?” His blue eyes were intent and she felt like she was being interrogated. She wished she knew his motive.

“No.”

“Dating someone seriously?”

“Hey you two,” Trudy trilled out. Eve hadn’t even heard her approach, so focused on Beck and his questions. She stared into his beautiful blue eyes and wondered: Did he want to date her? That would make sense why he’d be asking these questions. Her heart threatened to beat out of her chest and she couldn’t hide a happy smile.

Did Beck know she had a daughter? Would he be interested in her if he did? She’d been asked out a lot since Paisley had been born, and even more often people tried to set her up with their neighbor, cousin, brother, etc., but she was focused on her daughter and hadn’t been tempted to date. She was tempted now. What would dating look like with a rambunctious almost five-year-old in tow? She was getting way ahead of herself. Just because Beck was asking her personal questions and looking at her so intently didn’t mean he’d want to date her.

Trudy cleared her throat and Eve finally tore her gaze from Beck. “Hey... sorry.”

“Hi,” Beck said, raising a hand.

Trudy looked back and forth between the two. “No worries.” She gave them a knowing smirk. “I can warm up by myself. Give you two a minute to finish...” She swirled her finger between the two of them, “whatever this is.” She winked and walked away.

Eve blew out a breath and glanced back at Beck. “I need to go.”

He nodded. “I understand but... can you answer my question first, please?” His voice lowered. “I’ve been dying to know for a long, lonely week.”

Eve smiled, though if the online pictures were accurate at all, this man was rarely lonely. “I’m not dating anyone.”

He let out what sounded like a breath of relief. “I forced myself not to be the stalker-type and made myself leave every day at eleven-thirty when I wanted to wait around and see who

you went to lunch with. If you're not dating anyone, who do you have a 'standing lunch date' with?"

Eve bit at her cheek. He was interested in her. It was thrilling but terrifying. What should she do about it? "Do you want to know?"

He smiled and nodded. "I do. I really do."

Eve was nervous but she wanted to be brave. She tried to be as brave as her amazing older sister Rachel who conquered her fears of showing her scarred face to the world for the man she loved. Eve took a deep breath and said, "Why don't you meet me right here at noon and I'll introduce you?" This was big. A man she was intrigued by was going to meet her daughter. This hadn't happened in... wait, this had never happened.

Beck nodded quickly. "I'd love to meet... your lunch date... I think."

"I think you'll like her."

His smile burst through. "It's a her? Oh, man." He chuckled. "I've been tormenting myself over the past few days and thinking I should stay away but not wanting to and..." He pushed a hand through his hair. "A her is nice."

Eve was getting an adrenaline rush better than jumping off a cliff at Lake Powell from simply talking to him, knowing he was interested in her and had been "tormenting himself". "She is a nice girl, but also... sassy."

"I can handle sassy."

"We'll see." She smiled and tilted her head toward where Trudy had gone to warm up. "I'd better go."

"I'll be waiting right here at noon."

"Not an inch to the right or the left," she teased.

He chuckled. "I'm memorizing this spot."

She grinned, lifted a hand, and hurried to Trudy.

"Whoo-ee, girl, you are the luckiest woman this side of the Mississippi."

Eve pushed at her ponytail. “It’s just lunch.” And with her four-year-old, hilarious but also unpredictable daughter. How would Beck react to her having a daughter? If he wasn’t great about it, she’d simply walk away with Paisley. She glanced at him and realized walking away would already hurt.

“Well make sure you make it more than ‘just lunch’, Trudy advised.

“I’ll try my best.” Yet Eve not only wasn’t an expert in flirting she wasn’t sure she should be meeting Beck for lunch. Life was good for her and Paisley: simple, fun, safe from Mark and the media— there were no complications. A man like Beck Tanner would definitely complicate life.

She looked up and he was squatting with a barbell loaded with forty-five-pound plates. It seemed like their eyes were drawn to each other as he straightened out of the squat and stared right at her. Her stomach hopped and her cheeks got hot. He met her gaze with the most appealing smile. Complicated? Definitely. Worth it? She didn’t know yet.

\* \* \*

Beck waited by the staircase, exactly in the spot he’d been earlier this morning, just as Eve had instructed. He smiled greetings to other gym-goers passing by. It was almost noon and he was going to lunch with *the* Eve Jewel. He was as nervous, excited, and happy as a rookie playing for the Stanley Cup.

He’d gone the rounds with himself the past week— wanting to wait for her after her training appointments, wanting to stalk her and see who her lunch date was with, wanting to pull a favor from the realtor who’d just helped him find his house in Golden and find out where she lived and then stake out her house. He’d forced himself to calm down and give it some time. He was still peeved at his grandpa and he didn’t want to pull Eve into that situation, which he realized was a little messed up. He should be begging her to date him, seeing if she could possibly be the right one and moving on

quickly to date someone else if she wasn't. A little over two months and the hyenas got the fortune instead of needy children. Beck refused to get married if it wasn't right, no matter where the money was wasted. His grandpa was such a... dipwad sometimes. Dipwad wasn't strong enough but he was trying to quit swearing, at least in the offseason.

He didn't want to mess up what could be something beautiful with an incredible woman like Eve by worrying about his approaching birthday and the guillotine hovering over his neck.

Forcing those troubles away he thought about beautiful, sweet, intriguing, irresistible Eve. He could hardly wait to spend time with her. It was only lunch, and someone else would be with her, a close friend he'd assume. He was definitely, definitely taking advantage of this opportunity to spend time with her. Hopefully he could win the friend over and she'd help him in his pursuit of Eve.

It made him shake his head at himself that he'd been torturing himself the past week about her "standing lunch date" and it was with another woman. A sassy girl. Beck smiled again. Despite the angst over the situation with his grandpa, he felt lighter and happier than he had since hockey season ended, no, since before he lost his parents. The anticipation of being with Eve was like waiting for Christmas morning. He'd have to focus on the friend as well, include her in the conversation, make her feel important so she liked him and encouraged Eve to date him. There was a fine balance though, under no circumstances did he want Eve to think he was interested in her friend. For some reason, every other woman had fallen to the wayside and it was all Eve for him. Had Papa planted these seeds with his angels directing him to force Beck into marriage, or were his parents watching out for him above and had set Eve in his path right when his Papa made his insane marriage demands?

He sensed movement behind him and spun to stare through the open staircase toward the back hallway. Eve walked toward him, smiling shyly, and carrying a little girl, maybe four or five. The child was a beautiful, miniature Eve. Eve was

a mother. It hit him hard yet also took a second for the truth to sink in. Eve was a mother. This darling child was her standing lunch date. No wonder she'd said her date was much cuter than Beck.

A myriad of questions followed the reality of the situation settling in. How old was Eve? Where was the father? Hours ago she'd told him no husband, no fiancé, no boyfriend, right? Did she have support from her semi-famous family, friends, a church group, her ex, or was she raising her daughter all alone? Would she let Beck help her? Okay, he needed to slow down and not scare Eve off but this was just about perfect in his mind.

Eve's gaze was apprehensive as if she were worried if he'd accept her daughter. She shouldn't worry about that. His grandpa had been accurate about how much Beck loved children. He cared so much for children he'd most likely end up married in the next two months, simply so he could help millions of hungry and neglected children with all of that money. Children energized him, made him laugh, could make him happy even when he was desperately missing his parents or dwelling on the fact that he was all alone in this world besides his teammates and his grandfather, and that cranky old grandfather wasn't going to be around for much longer. Beck would rather spend time with children than anybody in the world, well with the exception of Eve.

She walked up to him and Beck grinned at the little girl and extended his hand. "I'm Beck Tanner. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The dark-haired, blue-eyed child grinned impishly, revealing soft dimples. "You have dimples in your cheeks. That's funny!"

"So do you," Beck said, gently poking one.

She giggled louder then reached out her hand. "Paisley Jewel. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Beck laughed and shook her soft little hand. "Is she four or fourteen?" he asked Eve.



“I’m almost five, thank you very much.” Paisley pushed out her lower lip.

“Apologies, Princess Paisley. Of course, you’re almost five.”

“Princess Paisley.” Paisley lifted her thin shoulders and grinned. “Yes!”

Eve smiled at him and hefted Paisley higher on her hip. “You’ve started something now.”

“I hope so.” He opened his arms. “Can I carry you, Princess Paisley? You’re almost as big as your mom.”

Paisley wrinkled her nose, looked him over, and flung herself at him. Beck caught her easily, holding her in the crook of one elbow. She was much lighter than he thought she’d be. “Which restaurant are we going to for lunch, your highness?”

Eve let out a soft groan next to him but when he looked at her she was smiling softly at the interaction.

Paisley’s eyes widened and she looked from Beck to her mom. “We get to go to a *restaurant* for lunch?”

Eve started walking toward the front door and Beck glanced around, noticing some patrons and employees watching them. Eve must not be wanting everyone to gawk at their interaction, or maybe she didn’t want anyone to know she was dating him. Dating was stretching it but that’s where he hoped this was heading. He’d been nothing but impressed by Eve and now to find out she had an adorable, sassy daughter?

“Yes,” Eve answered her daughter as they reached the front door and Beck hurried to push it open and hold it with his free hand so Eve could walk through first. “We’ll walk to a restaurant close to the gym.”

Walking was good, for some reason he wasn’t ready to reveal his two-million-dollar Bugatti to Eve. He liked how unassuming she was and didn’t want to scare her away by his very attention-grabbing car.

Paisley clapped her hands together happily. “Can I have grilled cheese?”

“Sure, love.”

Paisley grinned up at Beck. “I love me some grilled cheese, all gooey and delectable. Scrummy.”

Beck burst out with laughter. What four-year-old said delectable and scrummy? Wasn't that British slang?

“Delectable? Scrummy?”

“I told you.” Eve shook her head. “Sassy.”

“That's me,” Paisley chirped.

“Where did you learn ‘scrummy’?”

“My Uncle Luke and Aunt Mar took me and Mama to Park City to snow ski. We got to meet Heath and Hazel Strong. Do you know them?”

He shook his head, no.

“Well they're the bestestest and Hazel is an English lady, and she says scrummy so I say it.” She shrugged her thin shoulders.

They walked along the sidewalk as Paisley chattered like she was a teenager. Beck assumed it was hanging out with adults all the time that made her so mature.

The sun was high and bright but it wasn't too hot, maybe seventy. With Eve by his side and Paisley cradled in one arm, her skinny arms wrapped around his neck as if he were her father, Beck felt more like a champion than he had when his team won the Stanley Cup. His thoughts were racing out of control, wanting to know about Paisley's real father, but instead of grilling the obviously-private Eve with questions he asked, “Where to?”

“We like Café 13. They have a light lunch and delicious salads.”

“Perfect.” Light lunch? He could order a couple of meals or eat again later if he needed to. No reason to explain he didn't do any “light” meals. “What do you normally eat for lunch, Princess?” he asked as they walked down Main Street.

“Peanut butter and jelly on high-protein bread with lots of veggies on the side,” she said. “I like it, but grilled cheese on bad-for-me white bread is better.”

“For sure.” Beck snuck a glance at Eve. She seemed comfortable being by his side and with him holding Paisley.

Paisley talked about the benefits of grilled cheese versus peanut butter and jelly as they entered the light-filled café, ordered, and Eve headed for a booth in the corner, glancing around quickly as if to make sure no one was watching them. Beck found that interesting, but he didn’t mind being alone with her. Eve didn’t say much but Paisley made up for any shyness on her mother’s part. Was Eve shy or simply reserved or horrifically not interested in Beck? He tried not to think about it too much and focused on the little girl telling him all about her famous Uncle Caleb who played lacrosse for the Denver Outlaws.

“I love lacrosse,” Beck told the little girl. “I think it’s a tough, fun sport to watch but I’ve never been to an MLL game or played it myself. Can I go to a game with you sometime?”

Paisley’s eyes lit up but Eve looked a little... concerned. Beck was going to have to take this slow. Sadly he didn’t have the luxury of slow. Not if he had any hope of meeting his grandpa’s demands. What if his grandpa truly had an inspired premonition he’d meet someone like Eve? Maybe being married in two months wasn’t insanity. He pushed that drama out of his mind and focused on the two beautiful ladies with him.

“For sure!” Paisley cheered. “Then you could meet Aunt Emily and Krew. They’re the bestestest.”

Beck grinned, wondering if everybody was the bestestest. He wanted to meet Eve’s family. All of them. Large families had always fascinated him but it was more than that with the Jewel family. He wanted to know more about Eve through her family.

Eve’s Thai chicken salad, Paisley’s grilled cheese and fruit, and Beck’s chicken street tacos and Reuben sandwich arrived quicker than he wanted them to. He wanted to extend his time

with these two. He remembered his manners but ate and chewed quickly so he could talk with Eve more. Paisley was fully focused on her food and giving these cute little moans with each bite. Maybe Beck needed to try grilled cheese out again. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten one.

He leaned closer to Eve. "How's the salad?"

"Delicious. Would you like a bite?"

"Sure." It was beautifully intimate as she took his fork from him, stabbed some chicken, lettuce, green onion, peanuts and dressing on the fork and actually fed it to him. He liked the Thai flavor and the chicken was really good but he preferred his Reuben sandwich to the salad or his tacos.

"It is delicious." His eyes lingered on her mouth as he said it. "Would you like a bite of either of my meals?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, this is much more than I would normally eat for lunch."

"What would you normally eat for lunch? Peanut butter and jelly?"

She smiled and looked at Paisley who'd set her sandwich down and was stacking her fruit like a pyramid. "No. I have a cheese stick, almonds, and 'lots of veggies on the side'." She smiled fondly at her daughter.

"Every day?" Beck asked.

"Except for Sundays."

"How do you not starve to death?"

She shook her head with a smile. "I have a lot less mass to maintain than you."

"That's for sure."

They each took a bite and then he got brave and asked, "What would it take for me to get a blanket invite to your 'standing lunch date'?" He paused and she didn't respond right away. "We don't have to go to a restaurant every day if you prefer a cheese stick and 'lots of veggies on the side'." He winked. "I could bring a picnic, get you your cheese stick, and

Paisley her peanut butter and jelly. Whatever you want.” He realized he was sounding a little desperate so he stopped, and waited, and waited.

She took a drink of her water and met his gaze. “You’re okay with me... having a child?”

Beck nodded, surprised that she would even question if he was okay with Paisley. The little girl was hilarious and sassy and cute. “I think she’s great.”

Eve’s gaze slid to Paisley who had shoved a large bite of watermelon in and was chewing happily, liquid dribbling down her chin. Eve dabbed her daughter’s chin with her napkin and then ate another bite of her salad. Beck was about going insane waiting for her decision. As she quietly ate her salad, he forced himself to resume eating but for the first time since the weeks following his parents’ tragic death, he’d lost his appetite. What if she didn’t answer him? What if she wasn’t interested in him or she was so protective of her daughter that she wouldn’t bring an unknown man into her life?

They finished eating, cleaned up, left a tip, and were walking back to the gym before he dared ask again. Paisley was skipping slightly ahead of them. Beck put his hand on Eve’s lower back. She sucked in a breath and her eyes darted to his. She looked apprehensive but also affected by his touch. He felt strong and brave like he’d just scored a hat trick, simply being close to her and touching her warm, firm back.

“About that standing lunch date...” He let it linger, hoping he wasn’t pushing his luck. Maybe he needed to give it a few days, keep giving her flirtatious glances at the gym, and hopefully finding time to talk with her to get her more comfortable with him. It had to be a large act of trust to allow an unknown man to be around her daughter, especially with how private he sensed she was.

Eve seemed to lean a little closer to him. “I think it would be okay if you were included.”

Beck punched his free fist in the air. “Yes!”

Eve laughed softly. “I take it that makes you happy?”

“Very.”

“Why do you want to be with us so badly?”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Eve drew a little bit away from him and Beck knew his answer hadn't been the right one. There were many reasons he wanted to be around this pair. “But it's not just about how beautiful you are,” he rushed to say. “You have a very calming, intriguing personality and Paisley is adorable and fun.”

“Sassy,” Eve said.

“That too. I've only recently moved to Golden and most of my friends are in Denver and most of my teammates are traveling during the off-season and my parents died three years ago so...” He cleared his throat, knowing he'd gone too far. He wished he hadn't admitted that to her. He wanted Eve to want to be with him because he appealed to her, not because she felt sorry for him.

“You're lonely,” she said quietly, compassion making her blue eyes even deeper.

He hadn't realized he was lonely, that his dates lacked meaning and he was searching for the connection to family, the connection he'd lost when his parents died... until he met her. “Yes,” he admitted. “But it's more than that. I'm drawn to you and I think Paisley is great. I'd love to spend more time with both of you.”

She tilted her head. “It's surprising to me that you'd be lonely with all the pictures I saw of you with redheads and all the attention you get from women everywhere you go. Why choose a single mom who doesn't care to date or flirt?”

He kind of liked that she had Googled him, but it was the first glimpse of jealousy and lack of confidence he'd seen in Eve. She was obviously reserved but she had this innate self-assurance that seemed to shine from her. It may have been from her impressive family, her faith in a higher being, or

simply being beautiful and successful her entire life. Whatever it was, he wanted to restore it and quick.

“I’d choose you every time,” he said sincerely and earnestly. “Because you’re the most intriguing, smart, beautiful, and at peace woman I’ve ever met. Please let me spend more time with you and Paisley.” *I don’t want to go another day of my life without seeing you, hearing you laugh, fighting for the chance of securing a touch, or in my happiest dreams a kiss.* Whew, he was in deep and quick. Was this his angels in heaven pushing or simply how incredible Eve appeared to be?

Eve pursed her lips, not seeming impressed with or swayed by his compliments. Paisley ran back with a dandelion. “I picked you a pretty, Mama.”

“Thank you, love.” Eve took the flower and bent to give her daughter a kiss on the cheek. A surge of desire rushed through him. Not simply physical desire, though that was part of it. With Eve it was only part of the picture though. He desired her spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. From the little he’d seen, she was the entire package to him. He wanted to be near her and Paisley, wanted to see if he could be part of their lives. He said a quick prayer to the good Lord and his parents and grandmother. *Please let her give me a chance.*

They all walked to the gym doors and Beck still didn’t have an answer. No woman had made him work like this, especially not for a simple lunch date. He was about ready to ask again, make a complete simpering fool of himself, when Eve turned to him and said, “Standard lunch date. We each take a turn paying and choosing the place, or bringing a picnic. I’ll bring a picnic tomorrow.”

Beck was thrilled with her declaration but wanted to argue about the administration of it. His family may have been old fashioned but his parents had taught him to be a gentleman and he wanted to woo her with how chivalric he could be. He might need his impressive car and maybe some videos of him playing hockey to sway her to him.

He sensed now was not the time to argue so he simply nodded. “I can’t wait for my cheese stick and peanut butter and jelly.”

She actually laughed. It was light and happy and as beautiful as the rest of her. Paisley laughed as well, though she obviously didn’t know why they were laughing. “I’m glad you’re a simple man,” Eve said.

“For you, I could be just about anything,” he said in what he thought was his charming tone.

That wiped the smile from her face. “Lunch date,” she reminded him. “No empty flirtations, no one-night stands.”

Beck’s eyes widened, he wasn’t interested in a one-night stand, but he only said, “It wasn’t empty.”

She stared at him. “We’ll see.” Then she took Paisley’s hand and hurried toward the gym. “Thank you for lunch.”

“Thank you,” Paisley chirped.

“Of course, my princess,” Beck said to Paisley.

She giggled. Eve gave him one more serious, almost concerned glance and then they disappeared inside the gym. Beck was smitten. Too bad Eve didn’t seem to feel much of anything toward him. Winning her heart would take a lot of work. He walked slowly to his Bugatti, wondering if he was willing to work so hard because Eve and Paisley were so incredible, because Eve was a challenge unlike other women who rushed to be in his arms, or because his grandfather’s ultimatum was hanging over his head. He definitely didn’t want to marry an empty-headed woman like his grandfather had claimed he always dated. His grandfather and Eve had referenced him always dating redheads. He was drawn to them, but Eve’s dark hair glowed with copper highlights and he’d never been so invested in any woman. He suspected he’d already fallen head over heels for Eve. Sadly he doubted in two months that she would return the favor.



## Chapter Four



Eve couldn't say that Beck scared her. The fact was he downright terrified her. And not simply because he was famous and might bring the media down on her, exposing Paisley to online pictures, and possibly leading to Mark finding them. It also wasn't that she feared Beck would hurt her or Paisley physically, but he could destroy them both emotionally. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was just a challenge to the impressive, playboy hockey star and as soon as he won her heart he'd move on. Paisley was young enough she'd probably heal okay and someday forget how fabulous Beck was. Eve didn't know that she ever would.

Eve sometimes wondered if she could claim she was healed from her ex. No matter how pathetic that made her, as Mark was not worth any of the pain he'd caused her. Was she insane to let another man into her heart? Maybe. Was she completely lame to be thinking so seriously about Beck when all they'd had was one lunch date? Probably.

Paisley talked of little else that night or the next morning but her new friend, Beck. To hear Paisley tell it Beck was as strong as Uncle Isaac, as funny as Uncle Caleb, as smart as Uncle Josh, as brave as Uncle Seth, as "hot" as her newest Uncle Abe, and he smelled as good as Uncle Luke. Luke smelled incredible because his wife Mar and Isaac's wife Cosette owned their own perfume company. All the other descriptors fit too. Oh my, Eve and Paisley were both in trouble.

Eve couldn't help but think it was adorable how smitten Paisley was with the tough, impressive, confident, handsome, and obviously successful Beckett Tanner. Yet what would happen to both of them when he found another large chested redhead to date? Eve felt instant guilt for being jealous of every well-endowed redhead.

She packed a huge lunch for Beck, using high-protein bread, lean turkey, cheese, avocado, and lots of fresh veggies on the sandwiches as well as nuts, cheeses, and veggies for side dishes while Paisley ate her breakfast and prattled on about Beck. It was hard to not get completely enamored herself, simply from the way he looked at her with those incredible blue eyes. Paisley falling for him so quickly made it even more difficult.

It bugged Eve that she was suddenly lacking confidence and thinking she couldn't possibly be the woman a man like Beck Tanner would pursue. Men stared at her, flirted with her, and asked her out all the time. It wasn't as if she didn't know she was attractive or desirable. Sadly, Mark's desertion always reared its ugly head and made her doubt her value as a wife to anyone, as well as doubting the sincerity of every man besides her brothers and dad.

She pushed it all away as she loaded Paisley and the lunch into her Cherokee and drove the short distance to her gym. She loved her beautiful neighborhood on the west side of Golden—she'd always felt safe and welcome there. Her house was a gorgeous two-story colonial. It felt good to have bought her own house, to have almost paid off her gym, to be successful without her five million dollar inheritance that would come in eighteen more months. Mark had married her for that five million dollars, then dropped her like a hot rock when he found out she wouldn't get it for seven more years. Served them both right. She'd been stupid and naïve, not listening to the Holy Spirit's gentle caution or even giving her family a chance to warn her away as none of them had ever met Mark. Mark was a selfish jerk and the signs had been there but she rushed in thinking she was in love. But she had got Paisley out of it and that was all that mattered.

She walked hand in hand with her daughter into the gym, kissed her goodbye, and hurried to meet her first appointment. Beck came in a few minutes later than usual. He caught her gaze and gave her an irresistible grin. She couldn't believe how much she loved dimples on a man. They had the effect of softening his otherwise completely manly, tough, handsome, incredible face.

"Eve?" Her client, John, was staring at her, and then he easily followed her gaze to Beck.

"Oh, sorry." Her face and neck heated up as she realized he'd completed an exercise and she'd been distracted by ogling Beck. "Lateral raises. Forty-fives, please."

He obediently grabbed the weights and slowly lifted but his dark eyes seemed troubled. He was a nice guy, an accountant in Denver about her age. He'd asked her out and she'd explained that she didn't date clients. That one always came in handy.

"You do realize he's dated every redhead this side of Kansas?" John gritted out as he strained to lift the weight.

Redheads. There they went tormenting her again.

"I'm not that into social media," Eve said. Usually, she wasn't into social media. She'd looked at it plenty since she'd met Beck. "Shelve the weights and twenty burpees please."

He arched his eyebrows but obeyed.

Eve let her gaze wander to Beck again. He was using the cable machine for upright rows but her stomach dropped as she saw a gorgeous redhead in tight, ultra-short shorts flirting with him. Eve looked away quickly. Redheads. She'd never felt much jealousy in her life. In high school, she'd had plenty of boys after her then she'd fallen hard and fast for Mark on her senior trip and married far too young and quick. After that, she'd cut herself off from dating completely and focused on Paisley. She didn't like feeling all jealous and grumpy and wanting to sneak into redheads houses at night and dye their hair black. Oh, my.

She concentrated on her client and somehow got through until noon. She hurried to pick up Paisley from the kids' care. Rounding the corner to the back hallway she sucked in a quick breath as she saw Beck waiting for her, leaning casually against the wall. He looked simply... incredible. His golden-brown hair was brushed away from his handsome face. His dimples were on fine display. His blue eyes twinkled happily as if he could hardly wait to spend time with her. Eve's stomach did a little flip. Was this really happening? Was she ready? Could she trust him? She knew most men were great guys, unlike Mark, but her ex had done a number on her.

"Hey." He pushed away from the wall and strode quickly to her. Reaching her, he tenderly swept her long ponytail off her shoulder. "I've been waiting for this lunch like a four-year-old waiting for his first hockey stick."

She smiled. "Because that is every child's desperate wish."

He shrugged. "The smart kids."

She laughed and Beck's face lit up. "I love your laugh," he said, his voice deep and sexy.

He leaned closer and Eve's eyes widened. What was he doing? The more important question as she found herself arching up while he leaned down: What was she doing?

Beck's gaze traveled over her face as tender as any caress and then his large palms cupped her cheeks. Eve shivered with anticipation and delight at his warm, tantalizing touch and the smoldering look in his blue eyes. He could look at her all day and she wouldn't complain. As he lowered his head and their lips were moments from connecting she decided he could look at her all day, after he kissed her good and long.

"Mama! My Beck!" Paisley's happy voice rang out from behind them.

Beck whirled around and away from her, and Eve hurried to take Paisley from Abbie's arms.

"Sorry," Abbie whispered, her face flaring red. "Paisley said she saw you and you always come at noon and so I

walked her out..." Her voice trailed off as she stared at Beck. "Wow. You really are Beckett Tanner."

Beck smiled and extended a hand. "I really am. Nice to meet you..."

Paisley launched herself at Beck. He easily caught her, giving her a huge grin and a hug before transferring her to his left arm and shaking Abbie's hand.

"Abbie Lower. My husband's a huge fan. So huge. I took him to a game for his birthday present last year and they treated us so nice, probably because of the wheelchair and..." Her voice trailed off and her face turned red again. Abbie did not like to draw attention to her difficulties.

Beck's face filled with compassion but he kept his big smile as he said, "I'm so glad to hear that. Is he a fan of anyone particular on the team?"

"Mostly you."

"Ah, I love it." Beck nodded. "I'll get you a jersey and some tickets for next season if you'd like." He seemed to sense how embarrassed she was.

"Oh, you don't have to." Abbie tugged at her shirt. "But he'd love it."

"I'll bring them tomorrow. It was great to meet you."

"You too." She waved to Eve and Paisley. "See you in an hour, pretty girl." Abbie disappeared back into the daycare.

Beck looked down at Paisley, pulling a funny face. "Doesn't she know you're Princess Paisley?"

Paisley giggled. "It's okay. I can be pretty and a Princess."

"Ah, that is true. You're definitely both." He winked at Eve. "Both of you are."

Eve felt heat rush through her. Since Mark she hadn't allowed herself to be swayed by honeyed tongues or empty compliments, but Beck had told her twice his compliments weren't empty. The scary thing was, she believed him.

Beck rested his hand on Eve's lower back and escorted them out through the gym. Eve tried to ignore the interested looks they got. Sometimes she worried that his popularity would bring social media attention to her and Paisley. Luckily it was the off-season and Golden was a laidback town, no paparazzi hiding to expose the handsome hockey player and his latest date. Was that all she was? His latest date.

She pushed those worries away and focused on the heat his hand created on her back. She couldn't remember a man's touch feeling this incredible, but maybe she'd just been out of the dating game too long.

"Thank you," she said to Beck as he swung open the gym door and they walked out into the sunshine. "That means a lot to Abbie."

He nodded. "Is her husband paralyzed?"

"MS."

He pulled in a quick breath. "She's so young."

"So is he. Their little girl, Hannah, is adorable, only two."

"Wow, that's rough. I'll bring season tickets, a jersey, and a bunch of other junk."

"Thanks." She led him to her car, popped the back, and pulled out the small cooler and another sack of non-perishable food.

Beck tugged the cooler from her hand. Paisley prattled on about what games she'd been organizing and playing this morning with her friends as they walked across the river to nearby Lions Park.

Eve laid out the food on a vacant picnic table in the shade. It was perfect as it was out of the way, the playground blocking someone seeing them from the road or parking lot. They wouldn't attract attention, but they could easily watch Paisley on the playground. Paisley quickly devoured her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and went to play on the slides and climbing equipment nearby. Eve had only picked at her turkey sandwich but Beck had devoured two large sandwiches,

all the nuts, a high-protein yogurt smoothie, and a bunch of veggies. He was like her brothers, loved and demolished food.

Paisley was close enough that Eve could hear her girl's cute chatter with the other children, but she also felt almost alone with Beck. She lost all her brave and focused on her lunch and her daughter, basically ignoring him even though they sat side by side at the picnic table. It was June fifteenth tomorrow and the table was only partially shaded. Sweat trickled down her back. She wasn't sure if it was from the heat or the feelings the man sitting next to her stirred in her.

"Eve," he said softly then waited until she looked at him. His blue eyes were warm on her face. "Thanks for letting me be part of your standing lunch date."

"Of course. Sure." She wondered if she was a rotten mom. She always loved time spent with Paisley but the past two lunch dates had been the most exciting lunches she'd ever been part of. Was she simply craving adult interaction? That didn't make her an uninvested parent, right? If only she had somebody to ask. Only Caleb had a child—little Krew who was six when Caleb married Emily a year ago. But Emily and Caleb never seemed to crave a minute away from the adorable Krew. They had taken a two-week honeymoon where the grandparents each spent a week with Krew. She wished she could ask them if they ever felt guilty for wanting time alone together.

"Paisley is a lot of fun," he said, still studying her.

Eve checked Paisley's position, squealing down a slide and then racing up again with her newfound friend. Paisley instinctively trusted everyone and made friends everywhere she went, whereas Eve tended to keep to herself. Did Paisley take after Mark that way? Eve hadn't known her ex-husband well enough to really say. He'd schmoozed her into thinking he loved her, but she wasn't sure if he was naturally friendly like Paisley. She'd hated how he treated some people like waitresses or service workers with contempt as if they were below him. He'd always showered Eve with compliments, which was why Beck's compliments sometimes threw her off.

“You’re a lot of fun too.” Beck’s voice drew her head around again but his words didn’t sit right with her.

She gave a derisive snort and was surprised how annoyed she suddenly was with him. Maybe her instincts were off and he was a smooth liar like Mark. “I’m not fun. I’m a too-serious stick in the mud.” Those had been part of Mark’s ugly, final words to her. She’d also heard plenty of times from Caleb and Seth growing up that she “worried too much” when she’d urged caution as they made homemade bombs and fireworks or did crazy tricks on their dirt bikes, snowmobiles, skis, or wakeboards. All her brothers were very kind and protective of her but she knew it was Rachel who was the fun one.

Beck’s blue eyes widened in surprise. “That’s not true at all. You do have a calming personality but you’re a lot of fun for me to be around. I love how you tease me.”

She stared at him, searching for deception. Would he make her fall for him like she’d fallen for Mark and then ditch her when he realized she wasn’t a millionaire yet and her dad didn’t give handouts? Beck didn’t appear to need money but she hadn’t suspected Mark did either.

“Thank you,” she finally murmured. She liked the way she could tease with him also so maybe that line from him was genuine.

“Why don’t you believe me?” he asked in a low voice.

Eve could hear Paisley’s sweet voice but she still checked on her before turning back to Beck who was, unfortunately, waiting patiently for her answer. She laced her fingers together and leaned forward, focusing on Paisley not him. “I married young and it didn’t go so well. I have a hard time believing any man could be genuine with me.”

It was out. She’d said it. If Beck knew the level of trust she’d just put in him by admitting that much he’d be stunned. Eve took shallow breaths and squeezed her hands more tightly together.

“I’m so sorry your ex hurt you,” Beck said simply. She looked at him and his gaze was slowly traveling over her. “He



was an idiot to walk away from you.”

“Because I’m beautiful?” She shouldn’t have been so snide about it but she didn’t want to just be another pretty face. Mark had only wanted her for her beauty and family money. She didn’t want that with Beck, not that Beck seemed to need money but you never knew. His fancy car was probably worth more than most people’s annual salary. Maybe he loved fancy toys, was in debt up to his ears, and wanted an easy way out. She pushed those thoughts away, hating that she’d even had them.

Beck was more serious than she’d seen him. “Your physical beauty is only a bonus to the picture that makes up Eve Jewel. You exude a strength, confidence, and peace that I’ve never seen before. You’re intelligent, kind, well-spoken, and even though you don’t believe me, you’re very fun for me to flirt with.” He finally smiled.

Eve looked down at the table, her face flushing with pleasure. “Thank you.”

He put one of his hands over both of her joined ones. The joy of him touching her lit her up all the way through. “Thank you for allowing me to be around you. You’re an incredible lady, Eve Jewel.”

Eve should’ve and could’ve returned all the compliments and then some but as it was she could hardly find her tongue. She simply sat there and savored his hand on hers and his closeness until it was time to head back to work. Beck Tanner. She’d never met a man like him. He was almost as impressive as her brothers, and that was saying something.

## Chapter Five



Several perfect weeks passed, perfect in Beck's mind at least. July came and Beck should've been more worried about the approaching August sixteenth deadline, when his family fortune would go to the hyenas instead of children in need, but all he could think about was Eve.

Beck worked out every morning from nine to eleven-thirty, showered at the gym, and then went with his two favorite girls to lunch. A standing lunch date. In the afternoon he'd practice at an indoor skating rink and catch up on emails from fans, sponsorship deals, and his investments. He was still spending his evenings and nights alone unless a teammate or friend called to have dinner, go to a movie, play basketball or tennis or something. He wanted to be spending more time with Eve and Paisley. He wanted a standard dinner date, a standard movie night, a standard go to the ice skating rink, the zoo, the park, the lake, anywhere, he simply needed to be with the woman and girl who had captured his heart.

Friday they had a picnic lunch at the nearby city park by the river. Paisley made friends and played on the park equipment, only eating when Eve insisted she took a few bites. Beck and Eve had time alone to talk about how she started her gym and how he got into hockey, starting ice skating at two years old on the lakes in central Minnesota. They walked back to the gym after their hour together, Paisley holding both of their hands and them swinging her as if they were a young family. They were almost to the gym when Beck got brave. "Hey, I've been thinking."

“Don’t do that, it’ll hurt your brain,” Paisley chirped, her cheeks dimpling.

Beck laughed, swept her off the ground, and turned her upside down. Her pigtails brushed the sidewalk as she squealed. “How’s that feel on your brain?” he asked.

Eve grinned beside him. Beck had to work hard to earn laughter from Eve but she smiled easily. He loved her sweet, innocent yet alluring smile.

“Put me down!” Paisley demanded.

Beck swung her over to the grass and laid her down. “How’s that?”

Paisley scrambled and reached her arms up. “Throw me, Beck.”

Beck complied, sweeping her into the air and tossing her. She couldn’t weigh more than thirty pounds. After throwing her a few times, he held her in one arm and said, “You ready to go back to your job?”

Paisley had made sure to inform him that she was in charge of the play center and it was her job to make sure the “little kids” had fun. He loved being around children and helping children, but as an only child with only a couple of older cousins on his mom’s side, he hadn’t spent as much time around children as he would’ve liked. Still, he thought Paisley had to be the most amazing little girl and he was falling hard and fast for her beautiful, intriguing mother. Maybe his grandpa wasn’t as crazy as he’d thought and the angels had told Papa that it was Beck’s time to settle down. He’d happily settle down with these two, but first, they had to start going on dinner dates and somehow he had to get Eve alone and kiss her. That thought made his mouth go dry.

“Yes, sir.” Paisley sighed dramatically. “I mean, the kiddos need me, right?”

“For sure.”

He glanced askance at Eve, struck by the beauty of her blue eyes, but wimped out and asked Paisley instead, “Hey Princess, do you like going to lunch with me every day?”

“Of course, kind sir.” Paisley giggled.

“What would you think about dinner every night together and maybe doing some other fun stuff together like ice skating, swimming, or boating?”

“Yes!” Paisley cheered. “I’ve always wanted to ice skate!”

Beck couldn’t have loved her answer more. He looked to Eve. She was studying him as if she had to ascertain exactly what his intentions were before she committed. Did she not realize how invested he already was in the two of them? Did she think he was only a temporary addition to their lives? How to convince her of just how serious he was... If his grandfather had his way, Beck would be proposing soon. If he told her all, would she run from him? It definitely wasn’t the most romantic move: “Hey, I think you’re great, and by the way, I need to be married in... about six weeks or the hyenas are going to be not just the ugliest and most creepy, but also the richest scavengers on the savanna.” No, that little tidbit was something he should probably keep between him and his grandfather. Maybe at their twenty-year anniversary, he could tell Eve and they’d have a good laugh about it. He’d better slow down right now and talk her into dating him first.

They’d reached the gym and they stopped outside the front doors. Beck looked to Eve. “What do you think?”

Her gaze flickered from him to Paisley and back. “You’re okay with...” She lowered her voice. “Both of us?”

“Of course.” He loved being around Paisley and wouldn’t want to leave her out, though there was a part of him that dreamt of getting Eve alone.

Eve blew out a slow breath but finally said quietly, “Okay.”

Beck threw Paisley into the air and caught her as she squealed happily.

“I think she said yes!” And he was thinking about her saying yes to a marriage proposal already. He needed to slow down those thoughts before they ran away with him.

“Yay!” Paisley cheered.

Beck set Paisley on the ground, grabbed Eve around the waist, and lifted her into the air. She cried out in surprise and then laughed, a beautiful, light laugh that had his heart soaring with happiness. Paisley laughed with her and Beck grinned.

Eve rested her hands on his shoulders as he held her aloft by her waist. “You’re crazy, you know that right?”

“Crazy for you,” he said impulsively.

Eve’s smile slipped and her blue eyes grew far too serious. “We’ll see,” she murmured.

Beck lowered her to the ground, concerned all over again. The guy she’d married must’ve done a number on Eve to have her be so untrusting. Beck pushed the worries from his mind. They were going on a date tonight. Somehow he’d prove to Eve that he’d never betray her and that she was the one for him. It’d only been a few weeks but he felt the rightness of being with these two clear through to his bones. Paisley reached up to him. He picked her up and she grinned happily. He was pretty sure Paisley was on board. Now how to convince her beautiful mother?

## Chapter Six



Eve's fingers trembled as she slid into skinny jeans and a blousy, polka dot shirt. Beck had texted to wear pants and bring socks and sweatshirts. She assumed they were going ice skating. She didn't care what he had planned, she simply wanted more time with him, but still, she was scared. The fear infuriated her. Beck was a good man—a great man. She enjoyed being around him and she was learning to trust him. Still, Mark's handsome face made its unwelcome appearance in her mind and she could never forget his parting words, "I never wanted you, only your money. The only reason any man would claim to love you is your family money and your pretty face because you're the most boring stick in the mud I've ever been around."

She swallowed hard to keep the ugly emotion from choking her. She focused on her face as she put on some simple makeup. Could Mark be right and there were only two reasons a man would want her? Her pretty face and her money? Beck gave her sweet compliments often, but many of them were focused on her calming personality or the fun time they had flirting and simply being together. Did he really think she was fun? He brought out a happy side of her that was different than the happiness she felt with her family and even with Paisley. She always allowed her siblings and Paisley to be the fun, sometimes almost feeling like a spectator. With Beck, she felt like she was center stage and could soar with the stars. He gave Paisley plenty of attention while still making Eve feel important, valued, and even fun. How did he do that?

The doorbell rang and she heard Paisley yell, "I get it!"

Eve grabbed her phone and rushed through the loft and down the stairs. Paisley was swinging the door wide and screaming, “My Beck!”

Eve reached the landing in time to see Beck lift her daughter into the air, making her giggle. He held her in his arms and Paisley sweetly framed his face and exclaimed, “I’m so excited! This is going to be the best night of my life!”

“I’m excited too.” Beck shifted Paisley to his left arm and focused on Eve. “Ah, Eve.” He didn’t say she was beautiful or anything but she could see it in his gaze.

She smiled. “Hi, Beck. You look great.” She meant it too. He filled out a Henley-style shirt and dark wash jeans perfectly.

“Not as great as you.”

Eve blushed.

“My mama’s face is like a work of art’,” Paisley quoted.

Eve blushed deeper as Beck’s eyebrows went up. “That’s true, Pais. How does she come up with this stuff?” he asked Eve.

Eve knew exactly where she’d heard it. Some dork coming out of the gym a couple of afternoons ago had been flirting with her and tried to get her to go out with him by saying that line.

“Some yellow-haired guy said it.” Paisley shrugged.

Beck’s brow furrowed and the look in his blue eyes said he should be the only one giving Eve compliments. She reassured him with her gaze that he was the only one she trusted to compliment her. Beck’s face softened and he gave her the most appealing smile. Eve’s breath caught. He was proving impossible for her to resist.

“Let’s go eat,” Paisley demanded.

“Dinner first then?” Beck focused back on Paisley.

“Yes, sir! I’m a starvin’ Marvin,” Paisley said.

Eve grabbed the backpack with her and Paisley's sweatshirts, socks, gum, snacks, and lip gloss, and walked onto the front porch as Beck held the door. "Nice place," he said.

She nodded. "Thanks. We love it here."

"Do I get the tour later?" Something in his throaty voice brought her head up. Later as in after Paisley was in bed and they could be alone? Surely he wouldn't push her that fast, would he? She hadn't spelled out her trust and commitment issues but this was their first official night date and she was being pretty trusting simply letting him know where she lived. There was no way she'd invite him in and give him the tour. Beck seemed great, but caution with men outside her family circle had become a way with her.

"Maybe in a few weeks," she said.

Beck's eyebrows lifted, but all he said was, "Okay."

Beck easily lifted Paisley's car seat and carried both it and Paisley to his car. He set Paisley down to secure her car seat in the back as Eve gaped at his car. "Are you sure you want to put a car seat in that? I can drive."

He chuckled. "It's just a car."

Eve wanted to argue with him. She'd never seen a vehicle as beautiful as this sleek four-door navy and silver machine. Her brothers would know exactly what kind of car it was. Eve only knew it was pretty, and the man who drove it was irresistible.

They loaded up and drove to Abejas. Beck made sure to get a private table in a back corner, which she really appreciated. Apparently he'd noticed she didn't want the media, or anyone else's, attention. Except for his. She couldn't have imagined a month ago that she would risk media exposure to date anyone, but she couldn't resist more time with Beck.

They ate a delicious meal in the trendy restaurant. Eve had the salmon and it melted on her tongue. She felt a little underdressed, especially when some beautiful women in



skintight cocktail dresses rushed to their table and asked for pictures with Beck. He obliged and Eve kept her smile in place; at least they weren't redheads and at least they weren't interested in pictures of her or Paisley.

Paisley was her adorable self, talking nonstop to Beck, telling the waiter that her grilled cheese was "delectable", and helping Eve relax and enjoy the night. Beck was attentive to both of them and Eve hated how she held back with him. If she couldn't trust a man as kind, open, and impressive as Beck, would she ever be able to trust anyone? It was more than obvious that Beck was invested in the two of them. Why couldn't she let her issues go and trust him?

After dinner Beck took them to an indoor ice skating rink. Paisley was enthralled and so excited as they put on their sweatshirts, socks, and skates. The place was empty besides them and a couple of employees.

"Is it usually this quiet?" Eve asked Beck as they walked awkwardly through the lobby where they'd rented skates for her and Paisley and toward the doors to the rink. Well, she walked awkwardly. Beck was a natural on skates. He looked incredible, so tall and tough and obviously in his element. Even on the squishy lobby floor while carrying Paisley, he didn't so much as wobble. It was just Eve who was waddling like she was pregnant and afraid she'd fall before she even got on the ice.

Beck looked around. "Well... when you rent the place out it's this quiet." He pulled open the door to the arena and cold air stung her cheeks. It wasn't horrifically cold like a Colorado winter but she still shivered.

Eve shuffled through, glancing around at the bleachers and the glass wall surrounding the rink. Beck opened another door and led them onto the ice.

"Do you normally rent the place out?" she asked.

"I've noticed you like things quiet." He shrugged as if it weren't a big deal but it was a big deal, to her.

Her eyebrows lifted but she didn't have time for a follow-up question, or even to thank him, as he escorted her onto the ice and immediately her skates wobbled underneath her. Eve held on to the wall and watched as Beck set Paisley on her skates, bending down and keeping his hands under her arms. "Okay, Princess Paisley. We're going to start skating, but I'll hold onto you."

"Thank you, Sir Beck," Paisley said all sweet and giggly. Eve was glad her daughter was enjoying herself and hoped she could keep a smile on her own face and not end up with bruises all over.

Beck looked over at Eve and his brow squiggled. "Maybe I need to hold on to your mama too."

Eve waved him off, even though she was grateful that he'd noticed and was concerned about her. "I'm fine. It's just been a few years. I'll hold on to the wall and get the hang of it again while you teach Paisley."

Beck looked like he wanted to argue but he simply nodded and skated forward bent over so he could support Paisley. Eve thought it was sweet and Beck was even more appealing to her, sacrificing his back to teach her girl.

She shuffled behind them, slowly remembering how to push off and glide as she kept one hand on the wall in case she fell. She realized some women would've wanted their dates full attention but for her watching Paisley laugh as she skated fully supported by Beck was exactly what she would've requested.

Beck and Paisley glided by several times and Beck would softly encourage Eve while Paisley would remonstrate her. "Go faster, Mama! Let go of the wall, stop being a wimp!"

Eve would simply smile and wave them on. By her second turn around the ice she was gaining confidence and left the wall. Beck and Paisley had stopped flying past and Beck was patiently teaching Paisley how to push off and how to glide. When he seemed to feel she was ready he took her by one hand and as Eve approached them he reached out his other

hand to Eve. “I think our Princess has got it. Shall we go together?”

Eve smiled and took his hand. They skated slowly around the rink with Beck as their anchor. They hadn’t gone twenty feet when Paisley’s feet shot out from under her and she only missed slamming her head into the ice by Beck holding her up with one arm. Beck released Eve, steadied Paisley, and they started out again. Paisley gave a little scream a few seconds later as she must’ve dug her toe into the ice and she lurched forward. Beck rescued her before she face-planted. Thank heavens for his quick reactions and expertise on the ice.

Paisley ripped her hand free and planted them on her little hips. “I got to do this myself, Beck. You can’t be babying me if I’m going to be the Ice Princess.”

Beck smiled but his blue eyes were concerned. “Let me hold your hand a few more times around then you can do it yourself.”

“No.” She stuck out her chin and pushed away from them. Her skates flew backward and she flew forward like Superman.

Eve cried out louder than Paisley did as her daughter sprawled on the ice. Beck got to her quick, lifting her up and checking for injuries.

“I’m okay,” Paisley said as Eve hurried as fast as she could on her skates to their sides. Luckily Paisley hadn’t scraped anything, though her palms were a little red. “Apparently, I suck at this,” the little girl moaned.

Beck laughed, but Eve felt she had to say, “We don’t say suck.”

“You don’t, but sometimes I have to.” Paisley stuck her tongue out but Eve didn’t reprimand her when she saw the tears in her eyes.

“This was supposed to be the best night of my life. My first date with my Beck and my mama and the whole thing stinks! I’ll never be the Ice Princess.” She added to the dramatic line by flinging her hand over her eyes.

Eve was trying to think how to encourage her daughter and not make Beck feel badly if Paisley hated ice skating, obviously his passion, when Beck spoke up. “Well, Princess. Sometimes things do suck and sometimes we fall, but what do we do to make it better?”

Paisley stared at him and shrugged. “I don’t know. Go get ice cream?”

Eve and Beck both laughed. Beck gave her a happy smile and said, “I love your laugh,” before turning back to Paisley. “We will definitely go get ice cream, but first I want you to try a few more times. Learning something new is always hard, but if we keep trying we’ll be proud of ourselves for giving our best effort.”

“What if I always suck?” Paisley asked.

Beck shrugged. “Then maybe ice skating isn’t your thing, but we’ll never know if we don’t try.”

Paisley regarded him as Eve waited. It was a hard balance as a parent, trying to give your child experiences, guide them to be successful, and learn to work hard, without being too demanding or having unrealistic expectations. She liked Beck’s approach, try to learn something new, and give it your best effort but there was no shame in it not being “your thing”.

Nodding, Paisley said, “Okay, I’m going to keep trying... will you hold my hand?”

“I’d love to.” Beck grinned at Eve. “Can I hold your hand too?”

She smiled back and put her hand in his. The warmth and strength of his grip were like an anchor. She realized right then that she not only liked having Beck around, but she was also coming to depend on him, to need him. A dart of fear rushed through her but she ignored it. Beck could be hiding things, he could be lying to her like Mark had, but then again he might be exactly as genuine and wonderful as he seemed to be. She’d never know if she didn’t try just like Paisley trying to ice skate. Eve just prayed she wouldn’t get slammed metaphorically to the ice and give up completely because it

hurt so bad. Her pain would be much worse than a bruised knee or bottom.

The three of them skated slowly around the rink. Paisley had a few more crashes but she kept getting back up and trying again. Eventually, they were skating quicker and more confidently. Eve was proud of Paisley and grateful for Beck and his patience with her girl.

As Beck drove them home, Eve thought about him asking earlier for a tour of her house. She'd said in a few weeks and she thought that might be smart to slow things down between them. Some of her siblings had fallen in love with their spouses quickly but Eve wasn't going to follow that pattern. She needed time and reassurance that Beck was genuine and open with her.

A rebellious part of her hoped Paisley would fall asleep and Beck would have to carry her girl up to her room. Then they'd walk out in the hallway, Beck would lean in, his blue eyes hyper-focused on her and...

"I think she's asleep," Beck whispered as they pulled into Eve's driveway.

Eve's stomach flipped and her heart raced as the fantasies in her mind started to become a reality. She glanced back at her darling little girl, her head lolling to the side in her booster seat. Should she suggest Beck carry her up to bed? Would he kiss Eve after?

Beck put his fancy car into park. Her family had a lot of money, but she didn't think she'd ever been in this nice of a vehicle. He jumped out and hurried around to get Eve's door. Eve slid out and Beck was right there. He was a large man and towered over her, but his size made her feel safe and treasured. She smiled up at him. Maybe he didn't need to carry Paisley to her room for them to have a minute alone.

Beck trailed his fingers through her hair and cupped her shoulder with his hand. His thumb circled along the bare skin above her bicep and delicious shivers filled her.

"Eve," he murmured, leaning closer.

Eve found herself discarding her usually cautious nature as she arched up toward him.

Beck's lips turned up in a slow, appealing grin. He ran his hands down her back, taking his time as if he savored each moment of touching her. When his hands reached her hips, he cupped them and easily pulled her flush against him. Eve let out a soft moan of desire and Beck's eyes deepened to midnight blue. His lips were a breath away and she could almost taste their deliciousness as the scent of mint and his soft cologne wrapped around her as surely as his arms.

"Beck! Mama!" Paisley called from the backseat. "I need to pee!"

Beck and Eve both laughed, though Eve's laughter was definitely unsteady. She'd wanted that kiss, wanted it badly. Beck released her and moved quickly, opening the rear door and getting Paisley out of her car seat. Paisley ran for the front porch. Eve followed her.

"I'll get the car seat," Beck said to their backs.

"Thanks." Eve typed in the code on the front door and Paisley rushed in and for the main floor bath. Eve turned back to Beck as he carried the car seat and her backpack, setting them both next to the front door.

"Thanks for a wonderful night," she said, staring into his bright blue eyes and wanting him to lean down, capture her mouth with his, and push away all her worries about relationships and commitments. Would she know from his kiss if he was fully committed to her?

"Thank you." He rested his hand on the door frame and leaned closer. "Can we make it a standing dinner date?"

She grinned. "If we do I have to pay every other night."

His brow furrowed. "No. I've tried to be forward-thinking and all of that with lunch but dinner is pushing it too far."

She laughed. Beck's gaze deepened and he leaned down so close she could smell his warm cologne. "Thank you for gifting me with your laugh."

Eve swallowed hard. She'd laugh all day long to have him look at her like that.

This was it. It was finally their time. Eve got brave and rested her hand on his chest, savoring the strong muscles underneath his shirt. Beck pulled in a quick breath, gave her an appealing grin, and bent toward her.

Little steps pattered down the hallway then Paisley was pressing against her leg, staring up at them. "Whatcha doing?"

Eve shook her head and stepped back. "I'm thinking it's time for bath, scriptures, and bed."

"With songs," Paisley said.

Eve nodded. "With songs."

"With Beck?"

Eve's breath caught as Beck looked at her so hopefully. She wanted to invite him fully into their lives. She wanted it almost as badly as she wanted his kiss. She simply wasn't ready. More time. That's what she needed. They'd had a great time at lunch the past few weeks, but this was their first real date. She couldn't bring him into her home and have him share in the bedtime routine. A careful mother didn't do that, no matter how amazing the man was.

"Maybe another night," Eve said.

Paisley started to protest but Beck's blue gaze was understanding, even though there was a longing in his eyes as well. "For sure," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow for lunch, Princess Paisley."

Paisley gave a hefty sigh and reached her arms up. Beck bent and gave her a hug then he straightened and surprised Eve by giving her a hug too. He brushed his lips across her cheek and she drew in a quick breath, desire and warmth rushing through her.

Beck smiled as if he knew exactly how he affected her and that she was yearning for more and more of his touches, especially his lips on hers.

"Thanks for tonight," he said. "I'll see you soon."

“Thank you,” Eve said.

He backed away and Eve and Paisley watched him go. As he backed out of the driveway in his beautiful car, Paisley sighed, “I love that man.”

Eve’s eyes widened and she realized how much danger she and Paisley were in. As she got her daughter ready for bed, she prayed in her head, “*Please let Beck be amazing as I think he is*”. The alternative wasn’t possible. It would devastate her and her daughter.



## Chapter Seven



Beck, Eve, and Paisley ate lunch and dinner together every day over the next three weeks. Eve insisting on cooking at least half the nights. Beck loved the way she cooked healthy yet substantial, flavorful meals. He complimented her over and over again on any dish she made.

On Sundays, they went to church together and barbecued in his backyard. Saturdays they spent most of the day together at the lake on a boat Beck had rented, in his backyard pool, or at the ice skating rink respectively. Beck loved their time together and prayed he was making Eve feel secure enough to welcome him fully into their lives. Though he'd spent time in her house she still hadn't invited him to share in the bedtime routine, or been alone with him so he could finally kiss those inviting lips.

He had three weeks left until his birthday deadline mid-August. He pushed that from his mind often. As he was getting dressed in Eve's gym locker room on Tuesday mid-morning his phone rang. The screen read Papa Tanner. He smiled but also felt a shot of apprehension. Papa would love Eve and Paisley but he would not understand why Beck hadn't proposed yet. Three weeks to go. The mere thought made him sweat. He hadn't even kissed Eve yet and he wasn't certain he had her complete trust. There was no way he was going to rush their relationship and risk losing the most amazing woman he'd ever met.

"Papa," he greeted him, buttoning his shirt as he rested the phone in the crook of his neck.

“I’ve been waiting impatiently for a call. Have you found your wife?”

Beck pulled out his hair gel and brush from his locker. “I’ve met someone, Papa. I think you’ll love her.”

“I knew it! I’ve been praying hard to the saints above, mostly your mom and dad, and my sweet Grace. I figured the good Lord was too busy for an ornery, old coot like me but those three had to help out, especially since they inspired the idea in the first place. When’s the wedding? I hope before August sixteenth.”

Beck pushed out a heavy breath, grateful the locker room was quiet late morning on a weekday. It touched him that his grandpa would pray for him but he didn’t think his parents or grandma would want him to rush into marriage, no matter what Papa thought his angels had told him. Even with a woman as amazing as Eve. “About that... I need more time.”

“Don’t you give me excuses,” Papa huffed. “I told you my parameters and I told you I wasn’t budging. August sixteenth or you lose the inheritance.”

“Papa.” Beck set his things on the counter and stared at himself in the mirror. He knew women thought he was handsome and with his success and financial situation he could probably have his pick of women who were only interested in those things. He could probably also look and find dozens of kind-hearted women who would marry him to help the children. He wouldn’t do it. He wouldn’t settle for anyone but Eve. It wasn’t an option. “Eve is amazing but she’s got some... trust issues. I can’t rush her into marriage. You have to give me more time.”

“Time is something neither of us has the luxury of at this point. If she’s the right one she’ll understand the need to rush.”

Beck’s temper flared. “I won’t do it. I’m not pushing Eve into marriage for your money.” And no way did he want Eve to think that was why he was dating her. “Those ugly hyenas can have your billions of dollars.”

Beck thought he heard movement from another section of lockers, but he was too focused on his grandfather's stubbornness to pay much attention to anything but the phone call.

"I'm giving it to them then," Papa said.

"Fine. Do it." Beck's gut churned. How could the old man be so stubborn? So many children Beck could've helped. It hurt him deep down, but he wasn't going to marry Eve for money. He hadn't even kissed her. He loved her and he was going to take things slow because that was what she needed. *He loved her.* The thought took him by surprise even though he knew it was true.

Papa pushed out a disgusted sigh. "I'll keep praying you can step up and be a man before August sixteenth. If not, the will is changed."

Beck held on to his self-control, but just barely. "Papa, being a man means doing what's best for those I love, and taking things slow with Eve is what's best for her."

"I've always done what's best for you," Papa contended with him.

"Really? Special ordering me the car of my dreams, but only giving it to me after Mom and Dad were killed? As if the Bugatti could replace them?" Beck sucked in a breath. He'd never even gone there in his mind let alone flung that at Papa.

"You don't know what you're talking about. You think I was trying to replace them? I was just trying to show you how much I love you, not replace them with an inanimate object, no matter how badly I always knew you wanted that exact car. I'd ordered the car a year before they died. It was the only one of its kind and took them almost a year to build it to perfection. I was trying to plan how to give it to you, and then they died. I didn't know how else to show you how much I love you."

Beck heaved out a tired breath. He knew his papa didn't lie or beat around the bush. He appreciated the words but they

didn't bring his parents back and they didn't make this marriage push any easier. "Papa. I know you love me."

Silence hung between them for a few seconds and Beck wished he wasn't having this conversation in the locker room of the gym.

"And because I love you I know the time is right," Papa continued. "I feel it. This girl is right. Marry her. Save your fortune from the hyenas. Be happy, my boy."

"Papa, please. She needs more time. You don't understand what she's been through. She needs privacy and to take things slow."

"Time is the one thing you don't have, Beckett. Show her you love her and propose. She'll be ecstatic."

"No." He wouldn't do that to Eve. She wasn't ready and he might lose her forever if he tried to rush her into marriage.

"Then my money goes to the hideous hyenas." Papa hung up then.

Beck grunted in frustration and shoved his phone in his pocket. Papa was a good man, but it'd always been his way or the highway. Not this time. Beck was going to put Eve first and pray his grandfather would at least be reasonable enough to give his money to a worthy cause. It was out of Beck's hands now. Eve and Paisley were his focus now, even more important to him than hockey. He smiled in the mirror despite the frustrating conversation. He was heading to lunch with them soon and then he and Abbie from the daycare had schemed for him to get a dinner date alone with Eve tonight while Paisley played at Abbie's house. He might finally get that kiss he was craving.

He was happy and in love. He loved his grandfather—the man had been there for Beck throughout every event in his life. Yet if his grandfather couldn't respect his decision to put Eve first, it wasn't Beck's problem.

## Chapter Eight



Eve heard the doorbell as she was strapping on her sandals and her stomach filled with happy bubbles of anticipation. She heard Paisley running for the door and singing, “My Beck, my Beck!”

Eve hurried out of her room and down the steps as Paisley flung the door open. Her song changed to a scream of, “Krew!”

Eve grinned as she reached the foyer and Caleb, Emily, and Krew walked in. Krew and Paisley hugged—it was adorable. Krew towered over Paisley at the very mature age of seven and he was patiently hugging her as if it was his cousinly duty as she clung to him.

Eve hugged Caleb and Emily in turn. They all smiled at their children as Paisley talked a mile a minute to Krew about her “work” and how she was the Ice-skating Princess and her Beck.

Caleb bent down and scooped her up. “Where are my hugs and who is ‘my Beck’?”

“That’d be me,” a deep voice said from the open doorway.

Caleb whipped around to face Beck. Eve smiled as Beck grinned, tilted his chin to her, and said, “Hello beautiful,” and then extended his hand to Caleb. “Beckett Tanner,” he said. Whew, just seeing him impressed her, and made her blood run hotter. She wanted to kiss each of his dimples, after she kissed his lips.

“Caleb Jewel.” Caleb’s response wasn’t exactly cold, but he wasn’t going to welcome some unknown man into their family circle. He especially would not give any man his blessing to date his little sister, without giving him a hard time. He still liked to torment Rachel’s husband Abe.

Paisley leapt from her uncle’s arms toward Beck, who caught her easily. “Hi, Princess.”

“What is this?” Caleb protested. “I thought you were my girl.”

Paisley shrugged adorably and wrapped her arms more tightly around Beck’s neck. Eve had seen her little doll in Beck’s arms plenty over the past six weeks but she never tired of it. Beck was so strong and tall and Paisley was so cute. Beck was dressed nicer than usual tonight in a white button-down shirt and dark pants. He looked amazing. Luckily she’d opted for a summery, floral dress so she wouldn’t feel underdressed next to him.

“Sorry, Uncle Caleb,” Paisley said, “but I’m Beck’s princess now.”

Everyone laughed, but Caleb gave a fake glower. “I am *not* okay with this.” He glanced at Eve. “Why haven’t we heard a word about Beckett Tanner and somehow Paisley is now his princess?” He said it teasingly but there was a grain of truth that made it hard for Eve to hold Beck’s gaze. She talked to her family regularly but she’d avoided their requests to visit, getting pretty creative in her excuses, since she’d been spending every evening with Beck. She hadn’t told any of her family members about dating Beck, not even Rachel.

“You stop it, you hear?” Emily pushed at Caleb’s shoulder, her beautiful Southern accent giving a lilt to her voice. “Play nice and maybe we’ll score tickets to his next game.”

“Oh yeah!” Krew cheered. “Be nice, Pops!”

“Next game?” Caleb’s brow squiggled.

Emily rolled her dark eyes. She was exquisitely beautiful with her smooth brown skin, black hair, and sparkling eyes.

“He’s Beckett Tanner. Top defenseman of the Colorado Avalanche.”

Caleb stared at his wife. “How do you know that? I thought lacrosse was the only sport you followed.”

Eve laughed and Beck grinned at her. “Caleb’s a superstar lacrosse hero,” Eve explained then blushed as she remembered Paisley had told him that on their first lunch date together.

Beck nodded and grinned at her before turning to Caleb. “I’ve watched some of your games online. Very impressive.”

Caleb nodded as if their praise was expected but he grabbed his wife around the waist and pulled her in. “How do you know who Beckett Tanner is? We haven’t been to a hockey game.”

She gave him a quick kiss and tapped his chest playfully. “Mylee has a poster of him in her workout room.”

Caleb finally laughed. “Mylee would.”

“Your neighbor?” Eve asked.

“That’s the one.” Emily grinned. “Bless her heart, she has an obsession with professional athletes. Her poor, poor husband.”

Beck was looking a little concerned. Probably wondering if Mylee was a stalker.

“Don’t worry,” Caleb said. “She’s harmless, and she has good taste.” He pushed a hand through his hair. “She has multiple posters of me.”

Eve and Emily laughed. “Your overconfidence is not winning you any points, mister,” Emily said.

“You adore me and you know it.” Caleb dipped her and kissed her thoroughly.

“Here they go.” Krew rolled his eyes and looked at his younger cousin. “You wanna go to eat at the place where they dive off cliffs?”

“Sure!” Paisley clapped her hands happily.

Caleb finally let Emily up for air and back on her feet. “Let’s go, kids,” he said.

Emily looked slyly at Eve. “We’ll give you and Beck some alone time.”

“What?” Caleb protested. “I didn’t say that.”

Eve’s stomach swooped. Though she’d love to be alone with Beck, she didn’t know if she was ready. They’d spent time together almost every day for six weeks but Paisley was always there to keep things light. What if he tried to push her for commitment or asked about Mark or went for a kiss? Her body warmed at the thought of that. Okay, the last one wouldn’t be a bad thing, except she hadn’t kissed someone in five years. What if she was terrible at it?

“We don’t need alone time, we’ll come with you,” Eve said quickly, too quickly if the deflated look in Beck’s eyes was any indicator.

“Yeah,” Paisley spoke up. “My Beck and my mama want to come with us.”

“I did have reservations at the Capital Grille,” Beck said quietly.

“What?” Eve choked. The Capital Grille was very expensive and very high end. “You were planning to take Paisley to the Capital Grille?”

Beck ducked his head. “Abbie offered to babysit.”

Conflicting emotions rushed through her: how sweet it was that Beck would want to get her alone and take her to a fancy restaurant but at the same time how presumptuous it was of him to think she’d leave her daughter and be alone with him.

“In my defense,” he said softly. “It was Abbie’s idea.”

Emily was watching them both with slightly arched eyebrows. “Well, I think it’s a wonderful idea. But sadly for whoever Abbie is, Caleb, Krew, and I get to spend the evening with Paisley. You’ll call and let her know she can have a raincheck?” she asked Beck. He nodded, a sparkle in his blue eyes. Emily took Paisley from Beck’s arms and said, “Say



goodbye to Beck and Mama, sweet honey child. We'll see them soon."

"Bye, Beck! Bye, Mama," Paisley said.

Eve walked to her daughter and barely got a kiss on the cheek before Emily gave Eve a push toward Beck. She stumbled into Beck's arms and the oxygen seemed to disappear from the room. She couldn't catch a breath but she could smell his yummy cologne and the feel of his muscular body pressed close to hers made her warm and lightheaded.

Beck held her against his chest and smiled. "I like your sister-in-law," he whispered.

Eve couldn't help but let out a giggle Paisley should've claimed.

"What is going on here?" Caleb demanded of his wife. "Did you just push her into his arms?"

"Oh, hush you," Emily shot back at him. "You wouldn't complain about somebody pushing me into your arms." She put one hand on her hip and gave her long hair a sassy toss.

"Yeah, but you're my wife." Caleb jutted out his chin stubbornly. "Eve is my innocent sister."

Eve felt her neck get hot. Her family insisted she was innocent and it seemed that none of her brothers would trust her with a man. She didn't blame them as she'd made the worst choice possible in her first husband.

Emily set Paisley on her feet and sauntered up to her husband, patting him on the cheek. "You've got to let her grow up, love. She can't stay innocent forever."

"I say she can." Caleb's blue eyes flashed.

Eve extracted herself from Beck's arms, her face flaring red. She was the farthest thing from innocent. Did they not realize that she'd been married and had a child? "Okay, Beck and I are going to go now."

Caleb and Emily whipped around to face her and Beck, their feud apparently forgotten. Caleb snaked his arm around Emily's back and Emily blew them a kiss. "Have fun y'all."

“I thought you only blew me kisses,” Caleb growled, pulling her in tight against his chest.

“I do a lot more than blow kisses to you,” she said back, laughing.

“Oh, my,” Eve tried to interrupt their constant flirtations. “Are you actually going to take care of our children?”

Caleb waved her away. “They’ll have the best time of their lives.” But he didn’t seem able to tear his eyes away from his wife.

“We will, Mama,” Paisley reassured her.

“Bye, Aunt Eve.” Krew waved them off. “I’ll take care of Paisley,” he said all cute and seven-year-old mature.

Caleb growled something that sounded like, “Later,” to Emily. She grinned. He released her and picked up Paisley. “We’ll focus on our children one hundred percent.”

“Thank you.” Beck put his hand on Eve’s lower back and escorted her out the door as she gave one last wave to Paisley. He walked her to his fancy car and helped her in. Neither of them said much as they drove into Denver to the restaurant. Eve clasped her hands together and felt nerves assault her. What if they had nothing to say to each other? What if they only worked as a couple when Paisley was around? She loved that Beck was so fabulous with her daughter, but she wanted to have a relationship with just the two of them. Her daughter was her world, but she was aware that sooner than she wanted her little girl would grow up and go out and conquer the world, leaving Eve sadly alone.

## Chapter Nine



The valet opened Eve's door when they arrived at the restaurant and then took the keys from Beck. His eyes glistened with anticipation as he looked at the car. "Is it really a Bugatti Chiron?" the young man asked. "I'd heard there was one owned by Beckett Tanner but then other people claimed there was only a prototype and the pictures online were doctored."

Beck smiled. "It was specially made." He clapped the young man on the shoulder. "It's okay. It's insured."

The man's eyes bugged out. "Oh, sir, I'll be so careful with it. I see a lot of nice cars, but nothing like..." He trailed off and his jaw went slack. "You *are* Beckett Tanner."

Beck nodded and stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you..."

"Michael Young," the young man said, obviously in awe and slightly agitated as he shifted his weight quickly from foot to foot.

"Michael," Beck repeated.

Eve noticed as Beck pulled his hand back he had left money in the guy's hand. She loved watching the interaction but snuck a glance for anyone taking pictures.

"Thank you, sir, it's truly an honor." The kid seemed so awestruck, Eve had to hide a smile. The maître d' was waiting for them to escort them inside and they both gave Michael a quick wave.

They walked into the restaurant and were taken immediately to a private corner table. Eve appreciated Beck's thoughtfulness, as always for not making her be front and center with his superstar status.

Beck pulled out her chair as the maître d' welcomed them. He introduced their waiter who was waiting with bottled water, made some menu recommendations, and took their drink orders before leaving them.

Eve glanced at Beck over the menu. "Do you ever get used to the royalty treatment?"

"It's not about me." He chuckled. "People really like the car."

Eve thought he was more impressive than the car, but obviously the car must be nice from the way that kid had reacted. He'd heard about Beckett's car? Specially made? She didn't think even Joshua and Luke had their cars specially made and they were both billionaires. "Tell me about your car. I'm sadly behind on my fancy car knowledge."

He smiled. "You have knowledge about things much more important than cars."

She laughed.

"There it is. I'd walk across hot lava to earn that laugh." His gaze became a sexy smolder that had her wishing they were completely alone, and not at all worried about if she and Beck worked without Paisley in tow. They would be just fine, more than fine. She suddenly didn't care if she'd forgotten how to kiss. With Beck, a kiss would be incredible no matter what. She knew it.

"The car," she reminded him when she wanted to reach across the table and kiss him.

He leaned back in his chair and started into a story about his grandfather. "My papa's a crusty old guy but... he loves me. He has dozens of cars *almost* as nice as my Bugatti." He winked, obviously proud of his car yet she didn't sense he put much stock in worldly objects. He'd handed the keys to that

kid and said “it’s insured” as if it wouldn’t hurt him if the car got wrecked.

“At every single milestone in my life, Papa would walk me through his glistening shop full of old, restored cars and new, incredible supercars: Bugattis, Maseratis, Lamborghinis, Aston Martins, Rolls Royce, Bentleys.”

Her eyes widened as he ticked them off.

“He teased me, tempted me, I was certain that on one of my special days he’d give me one of his prized vehicles—getting my driver’s license, as a side note after that memorable walkthrough he had an old, rusted Civic waiting out front for me. Laughed himself silly when he handed me those keys.”

Eve laughed. “Oh, my. He sounds like a character.”

“You have no idea.” He pumped his eyebrows and continued with the list, “Graduating high school, graduating college, getting my master’s degree, making my first million on my own investments,” Eve found that reassuring, if he was talking about making his first million he wouldn’t be after her money. “...being offered the contract with the Avalanche, winning the Stanley Cup,” Beck continued. His eyes grew a darker shade of blue and he trailed off for a few seconds before continuing, “It was the day of my parents’ funeral that the car that I’d researched and dreamt about for years was delivered to my driveway. My Bugatti Chiron was perfect, even down to the navy blue with silver accents—Papa must’ve tracked my search history before he had the company custom-make what was only supposed to be a prototype.” He toyed with his water glass then took a long swallow. “So now I have a one of a kind vehicle that only means something to me because it’s how Papa showed his love. I’d rather have my parents back any day than have that car.”

Eve wished she could take his pain away. She put her hand over his. “I’m so sorry, Beck.”

He nodded, what else was he supposed to do?

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

The waiter came and took their orders, interrupting the private moment. After the waiter left, the conversation continued with more stories about Beck's parents and grandparents. Eve shared stories too, mostly about her siblings and their growing up years. Beck's grandfather seemed very eccentric and hard-nosed but it was obvious that Beck loved him. Eve was grateful he could share about his parents and appreciated the level of trust that must have taken for him, especially the story about the car.

Their food arrived, but Eve was captivated by Beck's stories and their conversation. She hardly even tasted her filet mignon and veggies. They rarely had time to just talk and she enjoyed each moment of it. After dinner, he took her to the botanical gardens that were luckily quiet tonight as there wasn't a concert or wedding. They held hands as they walked slowly through the dimly lit, lush gardens. They stopped next to a pond and sat on a bench.

Eve's heart was beating faster as she was almost a hundred percent certain he was going to kiss her. He turned to her and gently cupped her cheek with his palm. Studying her, he slowly moved closer. Eve stared into his blue eyes. His warm cologne washed over her. The setting was perfect. This man was perfect, at least to her.

And suddenly, unexpectedly, and against everything she wanted, the doubts and unexplainable fear reared its ugly head. Her chest constricted, her palms grew clammy, and horrible thoughts filled her head. What if Beck was a charming liar like Mark had been? What if Beck, or Mark, weren't the problem at all, but her?

Beck's lips were almost upon hers when she turned her head. His lips brushed her cheek. Several long uncomfortable moments passed, only her labored breathing and the twittering of birds breaking the silence, before he murmured, "Eve?"

She swallowed quick, leaned away, and shook her head. "I'm so sorry, Beck. I'm... not ready."

"Okay." His voice was full of disappointment, but he took a breath and said, "It's okay. We can take it slow." He studied

her. “I need to know though... Do you want to date me, Eve? Or have I pushed you too fast, setting up this time to be alone?”

“No! I mean yes. I love being with you. Of course, I want to date you.” She blew out a breath of frustration. Why was she acting like this, treating this amazing man like he would hurt her when she knew he was good through and through? “Thank you for taking it slow. You are almost impossible for me to resist.” That was too true but obviously didn’t explain why she’d just turned her head instead of kissing him.

“Why resist me?” He winked but she could see the vulnerability in his blue eyes. He was as invested as she was in their relationship, in her, and in Paisley. It would hurt him if it didn’t work out. Maybe not as much as it hurt her, but she was damaged goods. He was whole and amazing. Despite losing his parents, he was clearly well-adjusted and emotionally stable. She wished she could say the same about herself.

“I’m sorry.” She clasped her hands and stared at them. “I’ve been trying to resist you, having a hard time trusting you, because of my ex.” She met his gaze and admitted, “He broke me.” That sounded pathetic but it was the truth.

Beck took her hand and murmured, “Can you tell me about it?”

Eve studied him, wondering if he could possibly understand the level of trust she was placing in him sharing this story. Her family obviously knew parts but she hadn’t wanted them to know how stupid she’d been and how much Mark had hurt her. She’d tried to act like it was a silly fling or rebellious stage and her beautiful Paisley was all that mattered. Paisley really was all that mattered, but Mark had gouged her from the inside out. He had made her question every unrelated man’s intentions since. Could she share everything with Beck? His blue eyes were so sincere and his touch so warm and comforting.

She took a deep breath. If she couldn’t trust Beck, they couldn’t develop a relationship. For the first time in five years, she wanted a relationship with a man. An amazing man. Beck.

“Mark and I met on the beach of Hilton Head when I was barely graduated from high school. I was on a senior trip with a group of friends. He was charming and he had this ability to get me to spill things I’d never told anyone and make me want to be... more important than I was.”

Beck’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand what you mean by that. You’re the most important person in my world.”

Eve gave him a watery smile, willing herself not to cry. “Thank you, Beck.” She paused and said, “I guess what I mean is I turned into a bragger of sorts. I let slip how wealthy and accomplished my family was, how we all got a five-million-dollar inheritance, and all the amazing stuff my siblings and parents and I had done.” She was the most reserved Jewel sibling. Eve had more in common with her more serious and oldest brother Joshua than her crazy twin brothers, Seth and Caleb. She’d assumed Mark was making her open up and be more outgoing, but he’d been digging information to use to exploit her.

She rolled her eyes and clasped Beck’s hand tighter. “Next thing I knew he’d talked me into flying to Vegas and getting married.”

Beck’s eyebrows dipped. “Without talking to your parents?”

She nodded. “None of my family ever met him.”

“What?” Now his eyebrows lifted. It would’ve been comical if she weren’t so humiliated by this conversation and scared to share it.

Eve forced herself to keep talking. “We were married such a short of time, basically just had a three-day honeymoon in Vegas. I thought we’d go visit my family after but when he pried for more details, anxious to get the money rolling in, obviously, I had to explain.” She could remember how excited his face had been asking her when the money was coming and then how infuriated he got when she told him the whole truth. “I told him that I had never and would never ask for any help from my parents or my siblings and I received no annuities or monthly checks, and worst of all in his mind, I wouldn’t get



any inheritance for seven more years. He got mad.” Her voice lowered and she swallowed, remembering his rage—kicking furniture, punching walls, screaming at her. “Really mad.”

Beck gripped her hand tighter. “Did he touch you?” he asked in a deathly quiet voice.

“No. He kicked and punched inanimate objects and yelled at me, calling me a ‘boring stick in the mud’. He said that the only reason any man would marry me was because of my pretty face and my family money. Then he walked out of the hotel room. I never saw him again. I went back to the wedding chapel before I left Vegas and was able to get the marriage annulled.” The part she left out was waiting in that hotel room for three long days, praying he’d return. Misery and humiliation like she’d never known when she finally admitted to herself he wasn’t coming back and she forced herself to go and annul the marriage. She never would’ve told her family about any of it if she hadn’t later discovered she was expecting Paisley. Her family had of course been too kind and understanding, even with the sparse details she’d shared. She’d never told anyone as much as she was telling Beck. She wondered if he understood the level of trust she was placing in him.

Beck released her hand but gently grasped her shoulders. He turned her to face him and said in a gravelly voice, “You realize he was a liar?”

Eve rolled her eyes. “Well, sure, to trick me into marrying him when he only wanted my money.”

“Yes, but also claiming the only reason a man would want to marry you is your pretty face and your family money.” His voice deepened. “There are many, many reasons a man would want to marry you.”

Eve’s stomach swirled with heat, and the fear she usually felt when she even thought of marriage disappeared like a poof of smoke.

“I would want to marry you,” Beck said in a sincere tone, “because you’re kind, thoughtful, an incredible mother, smart, fun to be around, spiritual, a talented businesswoman, hard-

working, committed to family...” His eyes traveled over her. “The fact that your face is the most beautiful face in the world and your body is so gorgeous I have to fight myself not to stare open-mouthed like a hormonal teenager, has very little to do with why I would want to marry you. The fact that your family has money has *nothing* to do with your incredible appeal.”

Eve was pulling in quick breaths. She realized Beck wasn't actually proposing but it felt like he was. She wanted to return all of the compliments and more. She never thought she'd find someone so incredible, kind, fun, hard-working, successful, and most important, committed to her and her daughter. The fact that he was irresistibly handsome in every aspect of the word didn't really factor in either. Though it was a nice bonus.

She threw caution to the wind, framed his face with her hands, and pressed her lips to his. The kiss was short but powerful. Eve felt an overwhelming light and joy rush through her.

Beck pulled back and studied her for half a second, searching her gaze, asking if she was ready to commit to him and only him. She nodded in response to his unasked question. Beck grinned, lifted her off the bench and onto his lap, and proceeded to kiss her as if the world was going to end. The kisses were thorough, awe-inspiring, and made her tingle from head to toe. Apparently there was nothing wrong with her kissing ability or maybe the more accurate truth was that her lips and Beck's lips were meant to be locked, creating sweet magic together. Whatever the answer was, she savored each second of the equation and the solution. Beck plus Eve equaled extreme joy.

## Chapter Ten



Beck went through the next day with the biggest grin on his face. He and Eve had a picnic lunch with Paisley and he stole a quick kiss goodbye when they returned to the gym and Paisley's head was turned.

That night Eve cooked dinner for him and then they went on a walk along the Clear Creek River Trail. He loved doing things with her that many of his friends would think were mundane and boring. He wanted more than anything to be fully invited into she and Paisley's lives. He loved both of them.

Eve had been very cautious before she finally shared with him and then kissed him last night. Each night before she'd said goodbye to him basically on the front porch. Tonight as they returned to her house she said, almost shyly, "Would you like to stay for scriptures and prayers?"

Would he ever? "I'd love to."

They went inside and he waited while she gave Paisley a bath and then his two girls came back down the stairs. Eve gifted him with her beautiful smile and Paisley ran to him, jumping onto his lap. Her hair was wet from her bath and she had on soft pajamas that said *Pretty Princess* and had crowns printed all over them. He kissed her forehead, inhaling the sweet scent of baby lotion. "You ready for bed, Princess?"

"No." She put out her bottom lip. "I want to stay up and watch *Cinderella* with you. But Mama says no." She sighed

dramatically. “Well not a hard no, a maybe on the weekend no.”

Beck hugged her, grinning. She was so much fun and even more important, Eve was letting him completely into their lives. Forget Papa’s billions of dollars, all he needed was these two. Together he and Eve would find other ways to help children throughout the world. He already did with his charity events and bringing kids in need to hockey games and down onto the ice.

“That sounds like a good plan,” he said.

“Okay.” She pushed out a huffy little breath that made him laugh. “*If* you read me scriptures *and* some Junie B. Jones right now.”

“Not so bossy, little miss,” Eve said.

“Please,” Paisley added.

“I’d love to read to you.” Beck gave Eve a smile and held Paisley as they read a few verses of Luke and explained them to Paisley. Then he read a chapter of her silly Junie B. Jones book. Paisley giggled so often he’d pause in his reading to enjoy her laughter and she’d admonish him, “Keep reading.”

He caught Eve’s tender glance on them as he was reading and lost his place. His mind drifted back to their incredible kisses from last night. Would he receive more tonight? How soon was too soon to beg her to marry him? His need to rush had nothing to do with Papa’s inheritance and everything to do with not wanting to walk away from these two, ever. He belonged here, taking care of and loving both of them.

“Beck?” Paisley’s sweet voice interrupted his musings. “You stopped reading again.”

Beck chuckled and Eve’s sweet laughter joined his.

“I think Beck is getting tired.” Eve winked at him, letting him know that she didn’t believe for one second that he was “tired”, and she knew he simply craved more time alone with her. Since she’d trusted him with her story last night, and he’d told her exactly how impressive she was to him, it was like a flood gate of confidence had rushed through her. She’d always

seemed competent and confident, but now she glowed. The trust she placed in him made his own chest jut out a little more.

Abbie had promised to take Paisley one night this weekend when Caleb and Emily had trumped her babysitting offer last night. Abbie claimed she owed him for the season tickets and all the paraphernalia he'd given her husband. Beck didn't want anybody owing him anything but he was already planning a date that would be fun and private, ensuring Eve was in his arms most of the night. A hike into the gorgeous mountains east of them where a candlelight dinner would be waiting, then dancing in the moonlit trees, and more kissing than he'd ever experienced.

Beck faked a yawn. Paisley looked disappointed but she perked up when Eve said, "Maybe Beck can carry you up to bed and sing to you."

"Okay!"

Beck stood, swooping Paisley into the air. She giggled and clung to his neck. He waited for Eve to walk in front of them then easily carried Paisley up the stairs, tucked her into bed, and then knelt next to Eve at Paisley's bedside. Their shoulders brushed, and even though he was on his knees, he felt like the king of the rink.

"Would you pray?" Eve asked.

"I would love to." Beck said a short but heartfelt prayer of gratitude for this blessed day, for Paisley, and for Eve, asking a blessing on them and their home.

When he finished, he and Eve stood together.

"Stories of Jesus," Paisley requested.

Beck looked to Eve for help. "I don't know that one."

Paisley stared at him as if he had two heads. "What one *do* you know?"

Beck thought of songs his mom used to sing and grinned. He started to sing in a deep tone, "Oh you can't go to heaven in a limousine, cause the Lord don't sell no gasoline."

Paisley giggled and he continued with the song, the verses out of order but Eve and Paisley's smiles said they didn't care. He got choked up a little bit as he sang, "If you get there before I do, tell my friend I'm coming too." It always made him think of his parents and grandma, especially as his mom had loved this song. Eve's eyes got bright as if she knew exactly what he was feeling. He didn't think she'd lost anyone close to her but she was so compassionate and understanding. He finished with belting out, "I ain't gonna grieve the Lord no more." He thought if he could have Eve and Paisley in his life he'd walk the straight line to heaven without a bit of grief for the good Lord, only praises of gratitude for allowing him the gift of being with these two.

"Kisses," Paisley prompted when he finished.

Eve bent down and kissed Paisley's cheek. "Love you, baby girl."

Beck bent down next and brushed his lips across her forehead. "Goodnight, Princess."

"Love you, Beck!" she sang out happily.

Beck swallowed down the emotion and smiled. "I love you too."

He put his arm around Eve and they walked out into the hallway and then down the stairs. He wanted to sit on the couch and kiss the night away but Eve kept walking toward the front door and he didn't say anything. He understood she still had some reservations about moving too fast and he wouldn't push her, no matter that he could've missed sleep to hold her in his arms all night.

The night air was crisp and cool as only a summer's night in Colorado could be. He inhaled slowly and said, "I love it here."

"In Colorado?" she asked as they stopped on the porch.

"Yes." He glanced down at her. "But mostly here with you and Paisley. Thank you for letting me be part of the nightly routine." His throat got thick and his voice automatically deepened. "Part of your lives."

Eve nodded, biting at her lip as if controlling her own emotions. “Thank you, Beck. I loved hearing you read to her, your prayer, and especially your song.” She slid her arms around his neck and Beck’s chest swelled as his heart raced faster. “When Paisley said she loved you I thought I’d cry. Thanks for being so wonderful with her.”

“She’s easy to be wonderful with.” Beck bent down closer. “You’re even easier to be wonderful with.” He smiled. “At least I hope you think I’m ‘wonderful’ to you also.”

She gave him her clear, beautiful laugh and Beck knew he hadn’t been this happy since his parents died, or maybe ever.

“I do, Beck.”

Beck lit up. He imagined her saying those words so sweetly in front of a preacher. It might have been his grandfather’s fault that marriage rested so heavily on his mind, but the more likely instigator of dreams of marital bliss was in his arms. He’d never wanted to be married before and now he couldn’t imagine being married to anyone but Eve.

He bent and kissed her, softly at first, but the need for her grew quickly as she let out a sweet whimper of pleasure, dug her fingers into his hair, and pulled him in tighter.

Footsteps approaching on the sidewalk registered somewhere in the back of his mind and then a throat clearing. Beck ignored whoever it was and kept on kissing, but when the throat cleared loudly again he reluctantly pulled back.

Eve gave him a longing look before turning to face whoever was waiting for their attention. Beck caught her lips tightening in disbelief and her blue eyes filling with horror before she whispered, “Mark?”

Beck whipped around to face the man. The weasel had slicked back dirty blond hair, a pretty boy face with pale blue eyes, and a tall, lean build dressed in business casual.

“Eve,” the man breathed out, looking up at her on the porch, his eyes raked over her possessively, disgustingly. This man hadn’t earned the right to look at his Eve like that.

Beck felt like he was in the hockey rink with his team's honor being threatened if he didn't act. He released Eve, threw down his hands to toss his gloves to the ice, forgetting he didn't have gloves on. Rushing down the steps, he slammed his fist into the man's face. The loser crumpled to the ground, crying out as if Beck had pummeled him with multiple hits, not just one. *Come on.* Beck knew he hit hard, but he would've much preferred the guy trying to fight back so he could hit him some more. This jerk had hurt Eve deeply and he deserved pain, lots of it.

Beck stood over him, waiting for the guy to straighten or get mad and fight or something. Mark simply stayed on his knees, clutching his face, and moaning in pain.

Beck looked to Eve for guidance. She stood on the porch, white-faced, not moving. He didn't know if she was upset he'd hit the guy or upset the guy had shown up here. Beck decided it was the latter and bent down low. "You are not welcome here. If you ever try to hurt Eve again I'll hurt you much, much worse than a simple jab to the face. Get out of here... now."

The guy finally scrambled to his feet, clutching his hand to his eye as if Beck had poked it out with a hot poker. "I'll sue you," he threatened in a whiny voice.

Beck chuckled darkly. "You're trespassing on private property and I don't think you want the wrath of the Jewel or the Tanner families coming down on your scrawny neck for how you've treated Eve. Get out of here."

Eve had said her family never even met this loser. He could imagine how Caleb would react to the guy. Beck raised a threatening fist, knowing he'd have Caleb's support. "*Don't* make me ask again," he growled low and threatening.

The guy's eyes widened, he cast one more glance at Eve, turned, and ran for the silver Lexus parked at the curb. Beck turned back to Eve. His brow wrinkled with concern. "Are you okay?"

She gave a little whimper, darted down the stairs, and threw herself against his chest. Beck caught her easily and



held her as silent tears streamed down her smooth cheeks. He stroked her hair and whispered what he hoped were comforting words. “It’s okay. I’ve got you. He’s gone,” over and over again. He was relieved that she’d run to him and wasn’t mad about him getting physical and punching the guy, but he was very concerned that simply seeing that loser had this effect on her.

Finally, Eve pulled back and dashed away the moisture from her face with the back of her hand. “Sorry. I don’t want you to think I care about him, at all. It was simply the shock of seeing him and...” She reached up and kissed him, she tasted of salt and his dreams of happiness. “Thank you. Seeing you punch him was the best thing ever.” She tilted her head. “Well, not the absolute best. Seeing you with Paisley in your arms is the absolute best thing I’ve ever seen.”

Happiness rushed through him and the love he felt for her could not be contained. He tugged her in close and proceeded to kiss her until they were both gasping for air. Resting his forehead against hers, he said, “Seeing you smile... that’s the best thing I’ve ever seen. Hearing you laugh... that’s the best thing I’ve ever heard. Holding you close... that’s the best thing I’ve ever felt.”

She smiled tremulously.

“I love you, Eve.” He felt it clear through and hoped she knew how sincere he was.

“I love you, Beck.”

The emotion rising in his throat would have been humiliating in any other circumstance. Beck didn’t care. He loved her so much he would grind all his man cards into the ice in front of his teammates if that’s what it took to show her what she meant to him. Luckily, she went onto her tiptoes and kissed him, distracting him before he did lose those man cards by tearing up or breaking down completely. He hadn’t felt pure, sincere love since his parents had died. He returned her kisses and then some, filled to bursting with love and happiness. Eve and Paisley were his—his future, his love, his happiness. Nothing would take them away from him.

## Chapter Eleven



Eve finally forced herself to give Beck one last kiss and head into her house. She should've been terrified that Mark had reappeared in her life, but with Beck around what was there to worry about? She was proud of her own reaction to Mark. She'd been a mess for a few seconds, but Beck had quickly helped her see what a pathetic loser her ex was. It felt as if Mark had no hold over her anymore and she could soar with Beck holding her hand.

She hummed Beck's silly song about not riding roller skates to heaven as she got ready for bed. She was scrubbing her teeth with vigor and bent down to spit. Rising up with a smile, she gasped when she saw a dark shadow out in her bedroom.

Dropping her toothbrush, she whirled around, trying desperately to remember where her cell phone was. In her purse? On the dresser? Had Paisley been playing with it earlier? She had to call for help. Beck! He'd save her, but he was probably home in bed already.

The shadow approached and if she were alone she would've slammed the door but Paisley was out there. She stood up straighter. She was strong and she would fight to protect her daughter.

"Eve," the man said softly, finally revealing his face in the light from the bathroom. His eye and cheek were red from Beck hitting him.

“Mark.” Eve didn’t know if she was relieved it wasn’t some random intruder, or more terrified that it was Mark. Yet even when he was angry enough to punch holes in the wall of their hotel room he’d never hurt her. That was at least some reassurance. “What are you doing? How did you get in?”

“Remember how you told me the code you and your family all use? Your dad’s birth month and year. 0858.”

Eve was disgusted with herself, thinking about all the things she’d told him. As she looked into his pale blue eyes she couldn’t believe she’d been so naïve as to trust him. She could see in his countenance—it was obvious to her now that she had some world experience and her testimony was deeper and brighter—Mark was dark and evil. How had she not seen it? She tried to give herself some slack. She’d been eighteen and never felt love and flattery like his before. She knew she shouldn’t be so hard on herself, but she was. Where was her phone so she could call Beck? She’d love to see him knock Mark to the ground again.

She edged out of her bathroom, walked across her bedroom, and flipped on the light, looking around for her phone. “What are you doing here, Mark?”

He splayed his hands and put a simpering expression on his face. “I’ve ached for you all these years, Eve. When I saw all the media about Rachel being burned and then Caleb being framed for murder, I kept trying to put you from my mind but I couldn’t do it any longer. So I tracked you down.”

“I want nothing to do with you.”

Mark took a few steps closer. She held up a hand and he stopped.

“Please, Eve. We were young and I made so many mistakes. You have to know that you were my first love and as the years have passed I realize that you’re my only true love. No woman can compare to you.”

“What do you want now, Mark? I still don’t have my inheritance.” She gave him a fierce glower that would’ve had even her brothers backing up.

He did back a step but he looked imploringly at her. “It was never about your money, love.”

She harrumphed in disgust. “Save it, Mark.”

“It wasn’t.” He stepped forward again. “I didn’t feel worthy of you. I was mad at myself for not being enough for you. I wanted to earn my way, make something of myself, and then I knew I’d be worthy of you. I’m a successful accountant in Savannah now. I can provide well for us.” He glanced around. “Not that you aren’t doing well for yourself, this is a beautiful house. You’re not... married to that guy?”

“Not yet.” She raised her eyebrows imperiously. She and Beck were nowhere near being engaged but they’d both said they loved each other tonight. “I don’t want anything you have to offer, Mark. You need to leave.” It was amazing how he could try to twist what happened between them. What a narcissistic liar.

She started toward her bedroom door, praying he’d follow. He did, but he moved quicker than she’d expected, catching her in the hall and grabbing her elbow. “Eve, please.” He stared into her eyes, probably assuming it was a beseeching look but all it said to her was: “I’m a politician who would lie to his own mother to get what I want, stab her in the back, and do it all with a smile on my face.”

“My Beck,” a sleepy murmur came from just down the hall. “Mama.”

Eve’s heart slammed against her chest, but her body felt frozen. “Paisley,” she murmured. Breaking from Mark, she hurried to her daughter’s room and looked in the open doorway. Paisley was still in bed and looked to be asleep. She’d probably been dreaming.

Mark crowded in behind her and stared at their daughter sleeping in her princess room. Eve hated how he tainted this room. This was her and Paisley’s house, their sanctuary. He had not right to be here.

She whirled to face him. “You need to leave.”

He was staring at Paisley, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "She's mine," he said simply.

"No, she's not," Eve insisted.

Mark looked back and forth between Eve and Paisley for a few seconds and then he moved quickly. He grabbed her by the shoulders, pulled her into the hallway, and pushed her against the wall. Eve's breath rushed out and her heart picked up again. He stared into her eyes and she tried for a poker face, praying he wouldn't see the truth.

"She's mine," he repeated with a glower of triumph in his eyes. His red eye and cheek would've been almost comical if she weren't so upset. "I have a daughter."

"She's not your daughter," she reasserted.

"Oh, yes she is." His eyes turned mean and cold. "You stole her from me. All these years. I should've known. I should've been with her."

Eve couldn't take anymore. "You deserted me when I was expecting her," she said through clenched teeth. "You are not on the birth certificate and you have no rights. You try to come near her and I will have you arrested. I'll be filling out a restraining order in the morning and changing the codes on my doors. Leave... now."

Mark actually released her and stepped back. His eyes were wide with surprise. Eve had never been so calm and focused as she was right now. She'd never really stood up to anyone, even when she turned men down for dates she always used some excuse. Her brothers had always watched out for her with their brawn and Rachel had protected her with her sharp tongue. She adored her siblings, but it felt good to stand up for herself.

Mark looked her over as if gauging how serious she was.

"Right now," she said even more firmly, pointing for the staircase.

Mark backed up and said, "This isn't over, Eve. You hid her from me and I have rights."

“No, you don’t.” She folded her arms across her chest and stood straighter. She was a fitness pro and a mama bear and he was a slimy wimp. She could take him out any time she wanted. “And unless you’d like to be arrested, or get punched in the face by me, and by my stud of a boyfriend again, dang that was fun to watch, I suggest you go back to Savannah and keep Colorado on your do not travel list.”

Mark visibly swallowed and then turned to scuttle down the stairs. He was obviously afraid of Beck but he also seemed afraid of Eve. She followed him down the stairs, waited for him to exit the front door, and then turned the deadbolt. She wanted to call Beck or one of her siblings but instead, she found her phone, in the living room couch cushions where Paisley must’ve been playing with it, and called a twenty-four-hour locksmith. The codes on the doors were getting changed tonight.

Eve had taken care of herself and Paisley for the past five years, but she didn’t know that she’d ever felt so brave and strong. She smiled as she thought of Beck. He’d given her strength. He loved her. Mark couldn’t hurt her ever again.

## Chapter Twelve



Eve woke early the next morning even though she'd been up late waiting for the locksmith to finish and then had a hard time settling down, checking on Paisley and kissing her cheek and forehead repeatedly throughout the night. She did a weight workout in her exercise room, showered, and made Paisley pancakes for breakfast.

Her darling girl skipped down to the table in her princess nightgown. "Cake-cakes! I love you, Mama!"

Eve hugged her tightly. "I love you too, doll."

They headed to the gym after Paisley ate and got ready. Eve felt a dart of trepidation as she dropped her girl off at the daycare. She knew she was being silly but something had her unsettled. Mark wasn't stupid enough to kidnap Paisley, right? He could try to prove paternal rights but that would take time and money. She doubted he cared about her or Paisley unless he thought they could bring him money. He was probably long gone.

She met with her first training appointment, Trudy, but noticed the second Beck walked into the gym. Her face lit up with a happy smile. He caught her eye and returned her grin. Eve wanted to be alone with him and tell him everything that had happened with Mark. She knew he'd be proud of her for being so strong and she could hardly wait to kiss him and hear him say he loved her again. She wondered if she should've called him last night or this morning. Would he be upset that she hadn't? She wasn't very good at this dating stuff but she felt certain Beck wouldn't get upset with her. She also knew

he'd protect her, trust her, be there for her, kiss her until she wanted to beg him to marry her. Her stomach swooped. Where had that last thought come from? Maybe someday she and Beck could talk marriage, but it was definitely a long, long way off.

"Somebody is whipped," Trudy said, grunting through a clean and press.

"Oh, yes, I am," Eve admitted.

"Ooh-ee." Trudy set the weighted bar down and wiped her forehead with a chilled towel. "You are the luckiest woman in Colorado."

"Maybe in the nation," Eve said, winking. She caught Beck's gaze again and felt her cheeks go red. Had he heard her? She'd tell him that herself, she'd yell it to the world.

She forced Trudy back to work. The time went slowly as she trained Trudy until ten then a young mom named Lolly until eleven. Beck caught her eye often and sent the most appealing smiles in her direction. John was her eleven o'clock appointment and the man acted really strange. He was irritable and seemed like he wanted to tell her something but then he'd clamp his lips shut and push through a lift with a huffy breath. Every time he caught her gazing at Beck he'd mutter something indiscernible.

Finally, Eve asked, "Is everything okay, John? You seem... off."

He set down his weights and stared at her. "Are you dating Beckett Tanner?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Are you going to marry him?" he demanded.

Eve stepped back. "We just started dating. It's not that serious, as in marriage serious." She felt guilty the instant she said that. It was serious. They'd told each other they loved each other. Yet she was pretty marriage-phobic after Mark. But she also knew Beck was nothing like her ex and she was grateful he was willing to take it slow for her.



John seemed to settle down. “Oh, okay. I don’t want to badmouth anyone, but if it gets serious... please talk to me before you commit to anything.” He cast another glare Beck’s way.

Eve wondered if he was just jealous because she’d turned him down for several date offers. She couldn’t imagine anything he could say that would not cast Beck in a positive light. She was grateful when they finished and John went on his way.

She hurried to her office to put on lip gloss and spritz on some body splash then speed-walked back down the stairs and toward the daycare. Beck was already there, holding Paisley as she talked a mile a minute. Abbie stood nearby. They all glanced her way as she approached and Eve loved Paisley’s happy cry of, “Mama!” and she loved Beck’s warm, appreciative glance. Seeing her girl in this strong, incredible man’s arms was perfect. It felt so right. He felt so right.

Beck walked to her and stole a quick kiss. “Lunch?”

She nodded. “Can we get takeout from D’Deli and go to the park?” It was actually Eve’s turn to provide lunch and she usually made a picnic but she had been tired and off this morning. She knew Beck wouldn’t care what they ate, as long as they were together.

“The park?” Paisley clapped her hands. “That’s my bestestest place!”

They shared a smile, thanked Abbie, and headed outside. They grabbed lunch and found a spot at a picnic table close to the playset where they could watch Paisley play and still talk.

The story of Mark coming back last night spilled out quickly. Beck was furious at Mark but reassured Eve she’d done exactly what she should’ve done. They forgot all pretense of eating as Beck pulled her in close and kissed her forehead. “I’m so proud of you. You’re such a strong, brave woman.”

Eve cuddled into him. “Thank you.”

“Next time... please call me so I can hit him again?”

Eve laughed. “There won’t be a next time, sorry.” She smiled up into his blue eyes and cupped his cheek with her palm. “Have I told you that I love your eyes?”

He gave her a smoldering look with those eyes. “Not as much as I love yours.”

“Have I told you I love your lips?” She stole a quick kiss.

“Not as much as I love yours.” He kissed her longer.

“Have I told you how much I love your beard?”

“Not as much as...” He trailed off and then laughed, revealing the dimples she loved underneath that beard. “You got me.”

Eve pushed at his chest with her free hand. “Your compliments were completely insincere. You were just parroting.”

He bent down close. “I’ll show you what’s sincere.” Then he was kissing her and she wasn’t going to stop that to tease him.

They smiled at each other as they pulled apart and both instinctively turned to look for Paisley. Eve’s gaze swept over the large playground, searching for the dark hair and the pink t-shirt. “Do you see her?” she asked Beck, not really concerned. There were so many tunnels and tube slides and playground objects to hide behind.

“No.” He stood and said, “I’ll take the right side.”

Eve loved him so much. Paisley was going to tumble out of a slide any second or they’d hear her happy voice talking with another child, but Eve loved that Beck took watching her little girl seriously as she also stood and started skirting the playground to the left.

Eve carefully looked inside the slides and tubes and behind the obstacles. That flash of pink shirt and contrasting dark hair wasn’t appearing. Her stomach started feeling a little squeamish and her gaze darted over to the river. Clear Creek was a lot tamer this late in the summer, without the spring runoff, and Paisley loved going to one of the many areas

where manmade steps went down into the water, but she wouldn't go on her own. Eve had warned her far too many times.

Beck met up with her and shook his head tightly. They both looked to the river and Eve's stomach plunged. "She wouldn't, would she?" Beck asked.

Eve shook her head. "I don't think so. I've drilled it into her head that she can't go there without me."

She heard a light laughter and her head darted up. Disappointment slithered through her as she saw it was a little blonde girl in a blue shirt. Yet she'd noticed minutes ago that Paisley was playing some chase game with that girl and her blond brother who looked to be a couple years older. She hurried over to them. "Were you playing with Paisley?" She tried to smile encouragingly so as not to scare them.

"Yeah," the little boy said. "We were playing hide and seek in the tubes and slides but then she went with her dad that way." He pointed to the west across the park. There was a community center there and a parking lot adjacent to it. She couldn't see Paisley or some man this kid thought was her dad.

"Her dad?" Her stomach felt like it would fall out. Her dad? She looked up at Beck for help.

"Did he have blond hair, looked like a weasel?" Beck asked the kid.

The little boy shrugged in confusion.

"Yellow hair?" Eve clarified.

"Yep."

Beck took off at a sprint over the playground and across the grass. Eve followed, panic making her breath come so fast she felt lightheaded and dizzy as she ran.

"No!" Beck roared as they approached the parking lot and a silver Lexus pulled out, heading north. Beck sprinted after them but the car sped up.

"Please no, please no," Eve screamed out in anguish. Her baby girl. Her daughter. The light of her life. Gone. Had Beck

gotten the license plate? What could they do to find her? She dialed 911, knowing the police were their only hope now but the terror of Paisley being gone with Mark consumed her.

Beck was still chasing the car but it was growing farther away. Eve wanted to collapse and sob, but she had to stay focused and do all she could to help the police find Paisley. She prayed desperately in her heart. She knew she couldn't survive without her little girl.

## Chapter Thirteen



Eve was certain her world had collapsed. Her legs barely supported her as she tried to think logically. The phone rang twice and an eternity seemed to pass before the call connected.

“911, what’s your emergency?” the operator said.

“My girl... kidnapped,” she got out. A flash of movement to her left caught her eye. Was that a pink shirt and dark hair?

She whirled and saw Mark scurry from behind a huge tree trunk, carrying Paisley the other direction toward the visitor’s center. Beck had chased after the silver car and was too far away to help.

“Stop!” Eve screamed. “Mark!” She ran their direction. Mark cast a glance over his shoulder and upped his pace. Even though Paisley was still in danger, the sight of her gave Eve hope. At least she wasn’t speeding toward the unknown in a silver Lexus.

“Mama!” Paisley cried out, wriggling to be free of Mark’s arms.

Eve ran faster than she’d ever run, gripping her phone with slick fingers. She’d talk to the dispatcher after she caught Mark and hit him harder than Beck had last night. How dare he steal her daughter?

Mark skirted behind the building. Did he have another car there? Had that even been his car that had disappeared? Was Beck still chasing that car? She didn’t have time to look for Beck as she made it around the side of the building. Some

overgrown bushes snagged on her shirt and tugged at her. Eve pushed on, yelling for Paisley.

She tripped over something and went sprawling. She heard Paisley crying for her and tried to scramble to her feet. A whoosh of sound had her glancing to the side. She saw Mark chuck a log at her forehead. Eve went down hard, pain shooting from her head. The world around her swirled and all she could see for a moment was black. The pain was so intense she feared she'd vomit.

“Mama!” Paisley screamed.

“You hid her from me for five years,” Mark yelled at her. “Now you're going to have to pay to get her back!”

Eve struggled to her knees, everything was spinning. She could hear Paisley's cries growing fainter, but she couldn't get to her feet. It hurt too much. No! She couldn't let her daughter down.

“Eve!” Beck wrapped his arm around her and lifted her to her feet. He was here. Her hero. Her protector. He'd save Paisley.

She was so dizzy, she leaned heavily against him, but she couldn't afford to be weak. “Paisley,” she begged him, pulling away and leaning against the building. “Save her.”

Beck released her and took off. Eve's vision cleared and she saw Beck hurtling after Mark and Paisley. She forced herself to cling to the building and shuffle after them. She'd lost her phone somewhere. Would any other help come? Hadn't anyone at the park seen Mark kidnap her daughter?

She came around the rear of the building and a small parking lot in time to see Mark shove Paisley into a black SUV through the driver's side door and try to jump in himself.

Beck reached him, grabbed his arm, and yanked him back out. Eve kept moving forward. She had to get to her girl. Mark screamed in horror as Beck slammed his fists into the jerk's face and body. Mark kept knocking back into the car and bouncing back into another hit from Beck. Mark slid to the

ground and put his arms over his head. “Stop! I’ll leave them alone!”

Sirens cut through the air and people appeared around the building. Eve glanced over as a mom, holding the blonde girl in the blue shirt told her. “We called the police. Are you okay?”

Eve nodded her head. It hurt. She wasn’t okay but Paisley was and that was all that mattered. “Thank you,” she managed.

Beck stepped over Mark, growling, “Stay down.”

Mark looked up at him and just whimpered.

Paisley scrambled out of the vehicle and into Beck’s arms. “My Beck, my Beck,” she cried over and over again.

Eve found renewed energy as she straightened and walked a wobbly line to the two people who meant everything to her. Paisley was clinging to Beck’s neck and he was patting her back and saying something to her. He saw Eve and his eyes widened. He rushed her way.

“Eve!”

She held up a hand, wondering how bad she looked. At least there wasn’t any blood but she was sure she’d have bruises. “I’m okay,” she murmured.

Beck jogged to her. He pulled her in close and she laid against his strong chest, encircling one arm around his back and wrapping her other arm around Paisley.

“Mama,” Paisley cried. “You okay?”

“I’m okay, sweet girl. Are you okay?”

“He said he was my daddy and wanted to give me a present. Then he tried to steal me.”

“The scum,” Beck growled.

Eve’s head had been clearing and the pain calming but the anger at Mark made the ache rear again. How dare he? She forced herself to just hold on to Beck and Paisley, instead of going to kick the loser while he lay there like the wuss he was.

“Thank you for saving me, my Beck,” Paisley said.

Tears slid down Eve’s face. Beck’s strength was holding her up now and he had just rescued her daughter. “Yes, thank you,” she managed.

“I love you, Pais,” Beck said. “I will always watch out for you.”

“I love you,” Paisley said loudly, smacking his cheek with her lips.

Eve’s heart swelled in her as she glanced up at the two of them.

Beck gently kissed the side of her forehead that wasn’t throbbing. “I love you,” he murmured.

“I love you. Thank you, Beck.” She needed to gush out her gratitude but that was enough for now. Tonight she’d show him exactly how much she appreciated him.

They clung to each other in their little circle as more people arrived to gawk and then police cars flooded the scene and uniformed officers started to sort out the mess. Eve was so relieved and so in love with Beck. She owed him everything, and never wanted to let him go.

\* \* \*

Beck waited very impatiently after the EMTs cleared Eve and then the police had to separate them for questioning. He only knew he had to have Eve and Paisley back in his arms. He didn’t think that he’d ever forget the terror he felt after realizing Eve’s psychotic ex had stolen their girl. Their girl. Beck and Eve’s girl. It was true. No matter what, he had to be with Eve and Paisley. They were his and they all belonged together. Now to convince Eve of that.

The police finally released them. One of the officers came in and explained that Mark had confessed to kidnapping Paisley hoping for a ransom from Eve’s family. They also found the silver Lexus Mark had rented. He’d paid a seventeen-year-old to drive away on his signal as a distraction.



Beck was grateful the guy's plan hadn't worked. He couldn't stand the thought of Paisley scared and confused without her mom or Beck.

The police took them back to the gym to get their cars, Beck caught a glimpse of Eve staring longingly at him. He thought it might not be too difficult to convince her that they all belonged together. They drove together in his Bugatti to Eve's house. They'd get her car tomorrow. He would sleep on the couch. He wasn't going to leave them, not tonight, not ever.

It was early evening when they walked tiredly inside. Beck turned to Eve and she did exactly what he'd hoped. She flung herself at him and held on tight. Paisley wasn't about to be left out as she said, "Hold me, my Beck."

Beck grinned, swooped the little girl up, and easily held her in the crook of his right arm as he held Eve close with his left. When Eve pulled back, rather than confess his undying love and his desires to marry her and adopt Paisley he said, "Do you want to take a bath and Paisley and I will order takeout and find a movie to watch?"

"Do I stink?" she teased with a sweet smile on her lips.

Beck chuckled, grateful she could tease after what they'd been through. "You smell delectable," he smiled, "I just thought you might want to relax. That was quite a hit you took to the head."

"Nowhere near as hard as the hits you gave Mark." Her voice sounded thick with emotion. "Thank you, Beck. Thank you so much."

Beck searched her blue gaze. Maybe it was time. "I will always be there for you, Eve."

She smiled tremulously and her eyes brightened before tears spilled over her dark lashes. Beck's stomach plummeted.

"Why you making my mama cry?" Paisley demanded.

"I didn't mean to," Beck rushed to say.

Eve held up a hand. “No, these are good tears. I love you, Beck.” Her voice got low and fierce. “You promise you’ll never leave us?”

“Never.” He swallowed hard and said in what he hoped was a level tone because he was so full of love for her and Paisley that he was afraid his voice would crack. “Marry me, Eve, please.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed the prettiest little bow.

“I know it’s quick and I know it’s crazy, but I want to be with you two. Always. I can’t stand one more day without knowing you’re mine, one more night without you sleeping next to me.” The words were so sappy his teammates would’ve died laughing but he’d say sappier ones if it would convince Eve of his sincerity. “Please, marry me.”

Eve bit at her lip. Her gaze darted to Paisley and lingered there as if trying to decide what was the best thing for her daughter. He wanted to reassure her that he would love and provide for both of them, raise Paisley as his own, he already felt like he loved her like a father, but he forced himself to wait. The moments passed and he didn’t know how long he could stand the wait. He loved Eve completely and couldn’t imagine ever wanting to be apart.

She finally met his gaze. Her blue eyes were warm, lit up, and so inviting it was all he could do to not kiss her and then ask the question again.

“Yes,” she said, breathlessly, beautifully. “Of course, I’ll marry you, yes!” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him until Paisley pushed her face against Beck’s cheek.

“Stop,” Paisley begged.

Beck chuckled. “Sorry, Pais.” He wanted to kiss Eve for a long, long time but luckily Paisley went to bed around eight-thirty. He could control himself until then. He did have to ask though, staring deeply into Eve’s eyes. “Soon?”

Eve laughed and that glorious sound filled him up. “Tomorrow?” she said.

Beck's insides overflowed with a warmth that was partially the physical desire Eve stirred in him, but mostly the desire to be the man worthy of her. She loved him and she wanted to marry him tomorrow? He could hardly believe it. Especially as he'd sensed many times that she needed to go slow, learn to trust him, and really know he would be there for her. "Are you serious?"

She laughed again. "No."

He felt the letdown but it was okay. He could be patient, for Eve. He could wait a year if she wanted to plan some fancy, huge wedding. He'd hate it, but he could wait.

"Isaac's not in the country," she said. "Some secret Special Ops mission."

She wanted her family there, of course, she did. "It's fine, love. We can wait as long as you need."

She gave him a mischievous grin that filled him with happiness. "But I'm pretty sure he's got time off next weekend. What do you think of August sixteenth for a wedding date? That's Saturday, right?"

The warmth that rushed over Beck now was close to an explosion. She trusted him, she would get married quickly, for him. It was a better gift than any present he'd ever received on August sixteenth. "That's my birthday."

"Oh. No." Her mouth pursed and he got distracted for a second, wanting to kiss her. "That won't work."

"Yes, it will. You and Paisley will be the best birthday present in the world."

It hit him like an unseen sucker punch that he would also get his inheritance and be able to give it to children throughout the world. He'd have to tell Eve all about that. He looked into her blue, glistening eyes. Tomorrow. They were both emotionally drained right now. Tonight they'd eat takeout, snuggle and watch a movie, and then kiss the night away after Paisley fell asleep. Tomorrow was soon enough to tell her he'd inherit billions on their wedding day. He knew she wouldn't

care about the money and would agree to use it for charitable purposes. She was so perfect for him.

“August sixteenth then,” she said.

She leaned closer and Beck wasted no time kissing those tempting lips until Paisley pushed in close. “That’ll do, son, that’ll do’,” she said in the imitation of some movie he couldn’t think of right now.

Beck and Eve pulled apart and both laughed. “All right little Princess,” he smiled down at Paisley, “What kind of takeout should we order?”

She wrinkled her nose. “McDonald’s!”

He and Eve shared a glance. “Try again,” Eve said.

“Ah, crap. How’s about pizza? And a salad for Mama?”

“Better.”

Beck carried Paisley to the couch and they all settled in together. Together. That was all he wanted. Together with his girls.

## Chapter Fourteen



The next morning at the gym Eve felt like she was floating. She and Beck were going to go shop for engagement rings after he practiced at the rink and she finished work this afternoon. Then they'd FaceTime each of her family members, starting with her dad for Beck to ask for her hand, and then his grandfather. She'd let Rachel plan the wedding. Her sister would love that.

Beck texted her this morning that he had some big news to share over dinner. Abbie had volunteered to watch Paisley since Beck had some extravagant date planned. Eve assumed he'd formally ask her to marry him tonight in some romantic setting once they had the ring.

She had a nine o'clock training with an older lady named Isabel. John stalked over to her the moment she finished at ten o'clock and hissed, "I need to talk to you in your office."

She blinked up at him. "Something wrong with the gym or your training?"

"You could say that."

She swallowed and walked with him to the stairs that led to her office. She didn't need him to attack her gym or her training in front of everyone. Beck watched her walk away and gave her a questioning glance but she smiled at him and gave him an ok symbol to let him know all was well.

Eve walked into her office, followed by John. He sat heavily in the chair in front of the desk. She didn't shut the door. Not that she didn't trust him but it was just safer that

way. Hopefully, he wasn't too upset and wouldn't start yelling. John didn't seem like that type though.

"What's going on, John?" she asked.

"You might want to sit down," he said quietly.

She arched her eyebrows and didn't comply. "I'm fine standing." Looking at him, she nodded her encouragement. Whatever it was he might as well get it out.

"You're marrying Beckett Tanner," he stated.

"Yes," she said. "How'd you hear?"

"Trudy."

She suddenly remembered John asking her if it was serious with Beck and she'd said no. He'd asked her to talk to him before she committed to Beck. She hadn't even thought of his request again until this moment. Yet what business was it of John's anyway?

He pushed out a heavy breath. "I was in the locker room not long ago and overheard Beckett talking to someone. He called him Papa."

Eve nodded. "His grandfather." Her gut churned and she had no clue why.

"There's no easy way to say this," John clenched his hands and then rushed out. "He's marrying you for money, Eve."

"Excuse me?" Beck had plenty of his own money. He didn't need to marry her for her inheritance. He wasn't like Mark. Fear pricked at her spine but she refused to believe it. No way. Beck was nothing like Mark.

"Not your money. His grandfather's. The guy seemed to be threatening him. If Beckett doesn't get married by a certain date, I gathered it was soon, his grandfather will gift his billions to someone else."

Eve's legs weakened. She stumbled over to her desk chair. John sprang to his feet and helped her sit down. "No," she whispered. Not Beck. He'd been so patient with her, so committed to her and Paisley, so perfect. Would he truly marry

her to get billions of dollars? That was an insane amount of money. Who wouldn't be swayed by that much money?

"I'm sorry," John said. "I wouldn't want you to be hurt, but I didn't want you to marry someone under false pretenses and for all the wrong reasons."

False pretenses. Lies. The wrong reasons. She'd wanted to marry Beck for all the right reasons. She thought. She loved him. She'd grown to trust him completely. He adored her daughter and had saved Paisley from Mark. Beck was good, kind, fun, spiritual, talented, amazing in every which way... and he'd lied to her. Maybe it wasn't as bad as she feared. John could have misunderstood the conversation. Sadly, it didn't matter. If there was any truth to Beck marrying her for money it would hurt her far worse than Mark ever did.

She sat there in a stupor trying to think it all through. Was Beck like Mark? He cared for her. He obviously loved Paisley. Did he love Eve? Did he love her enough? Was she simply the best option so he could get his money? No wonder he'd asked her to marry him so quickly and when she was emotionally a mess after the kidnapping attempt. That had been a smart move on his part. She'd trusted him so deeply and would've said yes to anything he'd asked yesterday.

Her head ached as if Mark had slammed another log into it. Was Beck planning to stay with them after he got his billions or ditch them? She wished she knew the stipulations of his grandfather's will. Would they have to stay married for a certain length of time? Maybe she could make him fall in love with her in whatever time she got with him. Somehow convince him she was worthy of him and he wouldn't leave her sitting alone in a hotel room, watching the door—desperate, alone, heartbroken.

Her spine straightened and horror rushed through her. No. She wasn't going to grovel for Beck's affections like she sadly would've for Mark's years ago. She'd never forget waiting in that hotel room for days, ordering takeout, and trying to distract herself with books, games on her phone, and movies, jumping each time she heard movement in the hallway. She hadn't dared leave in case Mark changed his mind and came

for her. She would *never* act so needy and desperate again. Not even for Beck who she loved desperately compared to the lame fake love she'd had for Mark.

Glancing around she realized John was gone. She tried to take some steadying breaths. She closed her eyes and said a prayer. She would've called Rachel for advice but there was a soft rap on the doorframe and there he stood. Beck. He was glorious. He was glistening with sweat from his workout and his muscles popped in his arms. His handsome face and bright blue eyes were more serious than usual. No dimples showed through his trimmed beard. Was he concerned for her, or for what she may have heard?

"You okay?" he asked.

Eve bit at her lip, willing herself not to cry. She shook her head.

Beck hurried into the room and knelt next to where she sat. The move made her want to cry even more. He appeared so genuine, so invested in her, so patient and exactly what she and Paisley needed. He took both her hands in his and said, "I'd hug you but I'm all sweaty."

Eve forced a smile. It was good he thought he stunk because if he held her right now she'd fall apart.

"What's going on?" he asked, his blue eyes earnest. "Something else with Mark?"

"No." A tear spilled over and she hurriedly brushed it away.

"What happened, love? What did John do?"

Eve had to get this out. She pulled her hands free and stood, walking around her chair and against the wall to create some distance between them. Beck stood and he looked even more incredible. Were his insides as perfect as his outsides like she'd come to believe or had she been duped again? Anger rose inside her. She was done being the trusting weakling. She was strong—raising her daughter on her own, putting herself through school, buying the gym, standing up to Mark. She could do this.



“I just have one question,” she said slowly and carefully.

“Ask me anything,” Beck said, but there was concern in his eyes now. Not just concern for her, but concern for what she would ask.

“If you are married by... your birthday.” It came to her even though she wasn’t certain that was true. “Will you inherit billions?”

The instant alarm and distress in Beck’s eyes was all the confirmation she needed. He held up his hands. “Listen, Eve. I was going to tell you.”

“Oh, you were? When? On our honeymoon?” The horror of that fear choked her. Mark had ditched her on their honeymoon. Would Beck have done the same? She put a hand to her throat.

“No. Tonight. You remember how I said I had something big to share with you?” He forced a smile. “Surprise.”

Eve’s eyes widened and a fury stronger than what she’d felt toward Mark surfaced. She stomped toward Beck and poked him in the chest. “At least Mark came clean eventually. You just planned on keeping on lying to me, didn’t you?”

Beck’s blue gaze filled with anger as well. “Never compare me to that scum-ball. I would never hurt you like that. I love you. I love Paisley.”

Eve didn’t want to hear about his love. “If you loved me, you would’ve told me the truth.”

“I am telling you the truth. It’s not about the money.”

Eve glared at him. “Keep telling yourself that, maybe someday you’ll believe it, but I never will.” Grabbing her purse off her desk, she stomped around him, half expecting and hoping for him to grab her arm and try to explain. His explanation might be more lies. She didn’t know how to wade through to the truth. She didn’t know anything right now.

She rushed from her office, down the stairs, and to the daycare hallway, glancing over her shoulder but he didn’t follow. Lucky. Or miserably unlucky. She couldn’t sort it all

out right now, she was too upset and felt too betrayed. Beck marrying her for money was a pain worse than she'd ever known, even with Mark. What she had with Mark had only ever been infatuation. With Beck, she'd fallen so hard she was sure every bone was now broken. She loved him. Desperately. And he'd just shattered her trust and her heart along with it.

She was able to fake it well enough to get Paisley from the kids' club, with only minimal questioning glances from Abbie, and quickly leave through the back entrance of the gym. Paisley kept asking where Beck was but Eve couldn't even answer her.

A few minutes later, she was surprised to find herself in her Cherokee with no sign of Beck chasing her. It just confirmed all of her fears. If he loved her, if he was innocent, he would've chased her down and explained it all.

Tears streaked down her face as she turned on Paisley's favorite kid rock station and handed her daughter her phone to play with. She couldn't go home. Too many memories there of Beck and too much risk of him going there.

She turned east toward Denver on Highway 58. She'd go to Caleb and Emily's. She didn't know if she could tell them the truth either, but maybe she'd stay with them or maybe she'd have her dad send his jet and she'd go to Jackson Hole. The house had just been renovated after the fire last year and her parents had been begging her to come visit.

She should go home and pack a bag but it would be easier to go to a store and buy what they needed than chance Beck coming after her. She'd have her gym manager take over for her. She should put more trust in him anyway. He'd be happy with the opportunity to prove himself.

Eve gripped the steering wheel. The music, the noises from Paisley's game, and Paisley's happy chatter all bounced around and off of her but none of them computed. She couldn't even tell what song was on.

She should be glad that she had a plan: get to Caleb's and then get to Jackson Hole. But nothing felt right. Nothing felt right without Beck. No. She couldn't think like that. He'd lied

to her for money just like Mark had. She was running from Beck.

As tears slid down her face, she started wondering if she was insane. She had an incredible man professing his love and because of a misunderstanding, she was running away. It was a pretty huge misunderstanding and with her past marriage, it hit far too close to home. Maybe she just needed some distance from the situation and from Beck, then she could see more clearly. If that logic was sound then heading to Jackson Hole and the safety of her parents was the perfect idea. She'd get away with Paisley on a little vacation. She'd have time to process and know how to proceed with Beck. Yet Beck wouldn't be there. Without him around she felt empty and lethargic.

She pushed it all away and drove. Ten more minutes and she'd be at Caleb's house. He and Emily could help her sort this out. If she got brave enough to even share. She'd always been the quiet one, the one who didn't make a stir, complain, or get too excited about anything. She knew her family would be more than happy to listen to any story she'd share. Then they'd get mad for her, support her, help her talk through this, and figure out what was right for her. Sadly, she hadn't even trusted her own family with Mark's deception as she insisted on doing everything on her own: raising Paisley, putting herself through college, and running her own gym. She always did it herself. Never wanting to burden anyone, even though she knew they didn't look at it like that. They all tried to be around and help her as much as she'd allow.

Since Mark, she'd never fully trusted anyone. Not even her own family... until Beck. She'd given him her trust, her love, and relied on him completely.

At that moment her phone rang. The phone display on her dash said it was Beck. She quickly pushed the end call button on the screen in front of her before Paisley could answer the phone in her hands. Immediately, she regretted pushing it. She wanted to hear his voice. She wanted to hear what he had to say. She really wanted to stop driving and bang her head against the steering wheel. She hated her weakness. If only she

could turn the car around and beg Beck to marry her, give her a chance, and learn to love her for her and not for the money. She'd work so hard to make him happy.

Gripping the steering wheel, she focused on getting to Caleb's. She wouldn't be weak for a man. Never again.

\* \* \*

Beck waited in Eve's office when she stormed past him and headed down the stairs. She was probably going back to work or maybe to get Paisley early. He needed to shower before they went to lunch, but he'd give her some time to calm down. They'd go get lunch and talk this out.

He walked slowly down the stairs from her office so he wouldn't miss Eve. Wherever she'd stormed off to she'd have to come past the staircase, right? He waited for maybe ten minutes. Then he started to get concerned. He headed back to the daycare center. Abbie confirmed that Eve had picked up Paisley ten minutes ago. Had she slipped by him somehow? He ran through the gym and outside, angling for the parking lot. Her black Cherokee was gone.

He pushed her name on his recent call list. It rang once and hung up. He tried a few more times with the same result. She was hanging up on him? He left a message, asking her to call him back so he could explain. He texted the same thing to her phone and then he drove to her house and banged on the door for a while. Nobody home.

Where could she have gone? Why was she ditching him? He thought he'd let her calm down and then he'd tell her the entire story of Papa's ultimatum, but how could he explain if she wouldn't answer his calls? If she was running from him?

He stood in front of her house and tried her phone one more time. It rang and then hung up. He listened to her sweet voice asking him to leave a message and then he spoke into the phone, "Eve..." He raked a hand through his hair and paced the porch. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the money earlier. Please call me back so I can explain. I love you so

much. Please give me a chance.” He didn’t know what else to say without breaking down and telling her how desperately he needed her, how he didn’t want to be without her. Did she even care?

## Chapter Fifteen



Three days passed. Beck was at Eve's gym every day, working out and praying she'd appear. He'd called, texted, FaceTimed, stalked her house, begged her employees to tell him where she was, tried to get phone numbers or addresses for her family members, which was proving to be more difficult than he'd foreseen. He'd even debated hiring a private investigator to track Eve down. Nothing. Eve had disappeared from his life and he hurt like he hadn't hurt since his parents had died.

He finished his workout, showered, and was walking through the parking lot and almost to his car when a large man approached from the side. Beck looked over and his jaw dropped. "Caleb?" Was this an answer to his prayers?

Caleb stormed his direction. Beck should've recognized the look of a man who was ready to clean his clock but he was too shocked, and excited, to see Caleb. Eve's brother would have some answers for him.

When Caleb's greeting was a fist to his face, Beck's head snapped back and his eyes widened in surprise.

Beck instinctively shoved Caleb away from him. Caleb knocked into Beck's Bugatti and lifted his eyebrows, giving him a smile that said he wanted to brawl. "You think you're so tough and smooth, famous hockey player with your million-dollar car and all the redheads flocking to you?"

Beck was confused. He'd liked Caleb when he met him. Yeah, the guy had attitude and had given him a hard time

about dating Eve but he'd seemed like a good guy and Beck thought Caleb had accepted him. Apparently not.

“What are you talking about? Where is Eve?”

“You think I'd tell you?” Caleb stepped up closer and Beck's muscles tightened, ready for whatever punches the guy decided to lob at him. “What did you do to her?”

“Me?” Beck shook his head. “We had a little misunderstanding and she took off, didn't even give me a chance to explain.”

Caleb's eyes narrowed. “You hurt my sister, and now you're going to pay.”

Beck thought he was ready, but Caleb plowed into him quick and hard. They knocked to the ground and were trading punches, rolling around, grappling for the upper hand, grunting and tossing out belittling remarks at each other, and in his mind really living. He hadn't had a good fight since last hockey season; pummeling Eve's loser ex didn't count as the man hadn't fought back. This evenly matched slugfest was exactly what Beck needed. All the worry over Eve and the frustration over not being able to find her, talk to her, love her, poured out as he executed hard, vicious hits at her brother's face and upper body, and received his own fair share of future bruises. Caleb was one of the toughest guys he'd ever fought. He loved the battle.

He was breathing heavy and relaxed onto his back for half a second when Caleb grabbed his head and slammed it so hard into the asphalt Beck saw black for a second.

Caleb sat back and scowled at him. “You had enough?”

Beck groaned and rolled up to a seated position. He noticed a small crowd had gathered. He waved and said, “No worries. We're having fun.”

“Fun?” Caleb looked like he wanted to brawl all over again. “Messing with my sister is fun for you?”

Beck jumped to his feet and offered Caleb a hand up. Caleb batted it away and stood, glowering at him. Beck

wondered if he looked as bad as Caleb—scratched, dirty, and ready to do it all over again.

“No, the fight was fun,” Beck said.

Caleb chuckled as he knuckled a cut at the corner of his lip. “I do like some things about you.”

Beck lifted his hands. “Hey, I don’t mind slugging it out again if you want, but I need Eve. Can you please tell me where she’s gone?”

Caleb appraised him. “What happened?”

Beck pushed out a breath, glancing around but luckily the people had dispersed. Where to start? “We fell in love and I thought everything was good, but then her ex showed up.”

Caleb straightened so fast his back popped. “Her ex? Did you kill him? Oh, why wasn’t I here?” he bemoaned. “I want to thump him so bad.”

“She hasn’t told you *anything*?”

Caleb shook his head tightly. “That girl is an expert at staying quiet and thinking she can do it all herself. Dang youngest child syndrome, right? Tougher than anyone in the family.”

Beck had no clue about that. “Only child.”

“Let’s walk over to the river,” Caleb suggested.

They walked the block and settled onto one of the park benches in the shade, watching Clear Creek dance by.

“Did you at least dismantle the ex for me?” Caleb asked.

“Mark,” Beck said. “Yeah, I beat him up pretty good.”

“Mark. She never even told us his name,” Caleb mused. “Do you have a last name so I can hunt him down and tear him apart?”

“What?” Beck angled toward him. “You really don’t know anything?” Now he was in a quandary. Eve had told him things she hadn’t even shared with her brother who she was obviously close to. It made him feel good that she had shared



with him, trusted him, but now he didn't want to betray her trust. Yet he needed Caleb's help to find her again, gain back the trust he'd lost over the mess with the inheritance.

Caleb shook his head tightly; his scraped knuckles whitening as he clenched his fists. "She was on a senior trip one minute and the next she was apparently in Vegas married. We didn't find out about any of it until months later when she started showing. I think the only reason she ever told any of us she'd even gotten married was because she was pregnant with Paisley." He shrugged helplessly.

"Man, that's messed up."

"You're telling me?" Caleb rolled his eyes. "And don't give me that look or get any ideas. Our family is golden, great people, if I do say so myself." He gave Beck his usual cocky smile. "I know Eve loves and trusts us all and you have no clue how hard we all work to be part of her and Paisley's lives, but she's just so private and that guy wounded her, bad. That's why I came here so fired up. Did you hurt her?" He looked like he'd start brawling again. Beck wouldn't mind, but he needed to find Eve not just enjoy fighting her brother.

"I didn't try to. I love her, man. I was upfront with her, treated her well, loved her, but... I messed up." He hung his head.

Caleb slapped him on the shoulder as if they were friends. At least he hadn't punched him again. "What'd you do?"

"I beat up that Mark guy after he tried to kidnap Paisley."

Caleb's eyes got big and he cursed. "That loser tried to kidnap my niece?" he roared. "Where is he now? It's my turn to use him for a punching bag."

Beck smiled despite the angst. "He's locked up, awaiting trial."

"Oh." Caleb slowly deflated, though his blue eyes were still full of fire. "I guess that's good. We could sneak into the jail, hurt him a little, couldn't we? I've hated that loser for so long. He changed my sister, damaged her bad." He glanced at Beck. "I thought you'd brought her back, but... You should've

seen her at my house, mopey, and trying to pretend that everything was happy times.”

“Is she still at your house? Aren’t you in Denver?” Could Eve truly be that close?

“Just south, Cherry Hills, but no, she’s gone. So what happened after you thumped the dirt bag?”

Beck’s hope of finding Eve and having her back in his arms wilted again. “Well, it was kind of before all that.” Beck walked a fine line between betraying Eve’s confidence and giving Caleb the story so her brother would take pity on him and reveal where she was. Beck started by telling him all about his grandpa’s crazy demands and then how he’d fallen in love with Eve, trying to take it slow because he knew she needed that. He promised he hadn’t asked Eve to marry him so he could get the money, it was more impulsive because of the kidnapping attempt and how desperately he loved her. He told Caleb all he wanted was Eve and Paisley in his life, even if the hyenas ate the billions that should’ve been his to help children in need.

He finished and stared hopefully at Caleb. “So?”

Caleb regarded him for a second then sprung to his feet and pulled his phone out. He pushed a number and paced as the call connected. “Rach? Eve’s man needs help.”

“Eve’s man?” Beck heard the yell from where he was sitting.

“Yeah, calm down, calm down. I’ll give you the story but you need to work your magic.” Caleb winked at Beck. “Yep, I’m counting on you, my brilliant sis.”

Beck’s heart was thudding fast and hard. Caleb was on his side. It wasn’t nearly as good as Eve in his arms but it was a start. He at least had hope now. He prayed that Eve being in his arms was the next step, and if his angels in heaven cared at all, could it please be a fast step?

## Chapter Sixteen



Over a week had passed since Eve had seen Beck. She was glad to be with her parents, but she missed Beck with a constant ache and she wanted to go home, back to Beck, to her house, to her gym, to the happy, ordinary life she and Beck had developed.

Her parents had no idea she'd fallen in love with Beck. They'd been focused on Paisley and only tried several dozen times to get the story of why she was there and why she was so morose. Her family was used to her being quiet and Paisley ate up their attention. Paisley said far too much about Beck and asked about him far too often, but Eve was able to play it off with her parents that Beck was just a good friend from the gym and she couldn't count how many times she lied to Paisley and promised her daughter that she'd see him soon. Anyone but a five-year-old would see clean through the lie.

One evening, Eve was on a quiet walk through the woods while her parents played with Paisley on the playset. She stewed about missing Beck, wishing she would stop being such a wimp and answer one of his calls or texts, or at the very least read or listen to one of the many messages he'd left. She'd seen glimpses of his texts when they popped up, always asking for her to give him a chance, or apologizing.

She had no answers, but she thought she was ready to go face him. It wasn't fair to not give him a chance. Though she was terrified that he'd dated her, and asked her to marry him, for all the wrong reasons, she still wanted to talk it out with him. Would she be able to see in his eyes if he was being

truthful? If he loved her like she loved him? She prayed hard that she would.

As she walked back to the house she resolved that it was time to go home. Her parents would understand. Maybe she'd even confide in them and get their advice. They were logical, smart, faith-filled people and they'd be thrilled for any chance to help her. They might have insight for her.

She heard voices on the back patio and as she approached she was pleasantly surprised to see Rachel and Abe with her parents and Paisley. There was also some older gentleman that she didn't recognize. Paisley was in Rachel's arms talking away. Rachel looked beautiful with her long, dark hair in curls and her beautiful face beaming at Paisley. Eve thought the scars made Rachel even more beautiful, showed how tough and resilient she was. If only Eve could be as tough as the sister that she idolized. They were different, Eve recognized that. But now that Mark was arrested, Eve didn't need to be so afraid of the media catching a picture of Paisley and maybe she could be brave and be the woman who could stand by Beckett Tanner's side.

They all turned as Eve approached and her dad smiled at her. "Sweetheart. This is Jacob Tanner... Beckett Tanner's grandfather. He'd like to speak with you."

Eve felt the ground shift. She looked into Beck's grandfather's blue eyes and felt a jolt of recognition. He wasn't as tall or broad as Beck but there were some definite similarities, including the dimples in his wrinkled cheeks that grew as he smiled. He walked slowly forward with the aid of a cane, extending his other hand. "Eve Jewel. I've been looking forward to this." He was old, maybe late eighties but he seemed spry and his eyes twinkled at her.

"Thank you, sir." She offered her hand and he held on to it.

"None of this 'sir'. I think you should call me Papa."

Eve blinked at him. "Um, I'm not sure about that."

"Well, I am." He turned to her family. "Can you give us a few minutes?"

They all nodded except for Paisley who put her little hands on her hips. “If you promise me I see my Beck soon.”

Jacob nodded. “I promise, little Princess.”

Paisley beamed. “Hey! Beck calls me Princess too.”

Jacob grinned. “I raised the boy right.”

Rachel looked to Eve. “You’re okay?”

Eve nodded. She watched her family walk into the large great room. The windows were two-story and encompassed the entire room to give the view of the forest beyond so they could all watch her and Beck’s grandpa if they wanted to.

Eve gestured to the patio chairs. Jacob sank into one and she sat perpendicular to him on a couch.

“You’re pretty good at keeping things from your family, aren’t you, pretty lady?” he asked.

Eve pursed her lips. “I deal with things on my own and don’t burden them.”

“That’s... dumb. You’ve got a great family. You should trust them.”

He paused as if to let that sink in. Eve knew she had a great family but she was private, what was wrong with that? How much did her family know? She liked her privacy but at the same time, she was sick of never sharing with anyone. She’d been able to share with Beck. What did this mean for her and Beck? His elderly grandfather. Traveling all this way. Had Beck sent him? Could it be possible he loved and ached for her like she loved and ached for him? Yet if that was true why hadn’t he come himself?

“You should also trust Beckett,” he said.

Eve froze. She should’ve known he’d get there quick. “I want to,” she said softly, “but I’m not sure why he initially started dating me, or why he proposed to me so quickly.” She waited with bated breath. Would his grandfather be blunt with her? That was what she wanted.

Jacob sighed heavily. “I demanded Beckett get married by August sixteenth, or all the billions of dollars he should inherit would go to the Save the Hyenas Foundation.”

“Save the...” This was a serious subject for her she couldn’t help but laugh. “Hyenas?”

He grinned. “I had to think of something really awful to spur him to find the right woman, stop messing around with empty-headed bimbos. I wanted him to find someone like you.”

“So he did only date me to save his fortune.”

It wasn’t a question but Jacob shook his head fiercely anyway. “No. The boy doesn’t care about money! He drives a two million dollar car like it’s a mini-van. You really think he’s caught up on money?”

Eve put a hand to her throat. She’d known his car was nice but... “Two million?” she said faintly.

Jacob chuckled. “That one-of-a-kind car should be in a climate-controlled showroom.” He shook his head. “My boy isn’t caught up on things or concerned with earthly value. He’s one in a million.”

Eve gave him a faint smile though she agreed. Beck had put a car seat that probably had Cheerios or fruit snacks stuck on it in a two-million-dollar car, multiple times. He’d handed the keys over to valets who could’ve taken that car on a joy ride. Obviously money didn’t mean much to him.

“He wouldn’t listen to me,” Papa continued. “I knew, just knew he had to get married and soon. My angels in heaven told me. So I gave him the ultimatum. He didn’t care. Said he had to put you first.” He raised an eyebrow and Eve’s heart thudded quicker and quicker. “I know he only wants my money so he can feed children throughout the world,” he rolled his eyes. “Boy’s got a bleeding heart like nothing I’ve ever seen.” His smile came again. “I’m proud of him, and I really don’t want to give my fortune to those ugly hyenas. But I will, I promise I will. My word is my bond.”

Eve's own heart had been racing but now it felt like it slammed to a stop. "He wanted to put me before billions of dollars? He only wants the money to help children?" she repeated.

He nodded. "But he told me to give it to the stupid hyenas because he loves you and he wasn't going to push you into marriage."

Eve felt frozen yet full of more excitement than she'd felt in a while. "He said that?" She searched his blue eyes for any deception but saw only sincerity and a grandfather whose grandson was his entire world.

"Yes, he did. You mean more to him than helping millions of starving orphans."

"That makes me feel awful," she said, but she was laughing. This man didn't beat around the bush, and somehow that reassured her that he was sincere.

"Not trying to guilt you into a quick wedding." He winked.

"I can see that."

They smiled at each other for a few seconds then he asked, "The question is, young lady. Do you love my grandson?"

"Yes." There was no reason to hesitate or lie about it.

Jacob gave her a grin that reminded her of Beck. "Well, all right then. Your sister had some ideas that I think we might all want to talk about."

"Rachel is full of ideas," she said.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "I think Beck and I are going to like being part of your family."

"Now you're being a little presumptuous. I said I loved him, I didn't say I'd marry him."

He arched an eyebrow. "So you'd rather billions of dollars be fed to the hyenas, the disgusting villains in the classic Lion King, than the needy children?"

"Of course not." She eyed him up and down. "You wouldn't really do that." She hoped to call his bluff. She loved

Beck but marriage still terrified her and was nothing to rush into, even marriage to a man as appealing and good as Beck.

“Oh, yes I would. It would pain me, but I’m a man of my word, just like Beckett is.”

Eve bit at her lip. “So I marry Beck on Saturday or the hyenas get the money?”

“Yep. So what’s it going to be, Eve Jewel: are you going to choose love and happiness, rescuing children in the process, or loneliness and making the hyenas howl with happiness instead of you?”

Eve didn’t answer right away.

“The clock is ticking,” Jacob reminded her.

“Don’t rush me.”

He smiled. “I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

Eve liked him but she still didn’t want to be forced into marriage. No matter how much she loved Beck or how worthy of a cause it might be. She’d rushed the first time and it hadn’t turned out so well. She’d rushed things with Beck after he’d saved Paisley from Mark and everything had exploded shortly after. Her natural cautiousness wasn’t a bad thing. She wanted to talk a lot of things through with Beck, kiss him, and know if it was right.

Billions of dollars to the hyenas? Yikes. She needed to pray hard, talk things over with her family, and she needed to see Beck. Hopefully, Jacob’s angels who had inspired this crazy idea would give her some inspiration because right now all she had was confusion.



## Chapter Seventeen



Beck thought he would go crazy with the waiting. Caleb and Rachel claimed they were on his side but they still wouldn't tell him where she was and he hadn't talked to either of them in about thirty-six hours. They both had reassured him the last time they talked that they had a plan and it was going to be brilliant. He didn't care about brilliance. He wanted a plan that had Eve and Paisley back with him.

Friday night his phone rang and he snatched it up.

"My boy!" Papa's booming voice came over the line.

"Hi, Papa." Beck went out back and paced his large patio. It was a beautiful summer's eve but he was missing Eve and Paisley, so much he couldn't appreciate much of anything.

"I've got a great solution to your marriage problem."

Beck groaned but asked, "What's that?"

"I met this gorgeous redhead at the grocery market of all places. She's a couple years younger than you, has half a brain, and a bleeding heart. Said she'd marry you tomorrow to save the children. What do you think?"

Beck sank into a patio chair and leaned his head back, sick to his stomach. "No. I love Eve, Papa. I can't marry anyone else, even if you do follow through with the stupid hyenas."

Grandpa laughed. "Okay, then, meet me at Boulder Country Club about two tomorrow. We'll golf, eat dinner, and try to forget about the misery of all your money going to the hyenas. Stupid lovesick sap that you are."

Beck sighed and agreed. He was a stupid lovesick sap. He agreed to meet Papa at two. He enjoyed golfing and wanted to spend time with his grandpa before the old man passed, even if he was giving his money to the hyenas instead of the children. What a jerk Papa was sometimes.

Beck spent a restless night and worked out hard at Eve's gym the next morning. Instead of practicing at the rink, he went for a long, hot run outside, ate a boring lunch by himself, then showered and headed to the golf course. When he pulled up, the valet predictably goggled over his car and promised him he'd treat it with tender care. Beck wanted to tell him it was just a car and only the woman he loved should be treated with such awe and tender care.

He walked inside and was greeted by a gentleman in a suit. "Beckett Tanner?"

"Yes." He shook the man's hand.

"Come with me, sir. It's a pleasure. Your grandfather wanted to meet you through here." Beck thought the guy was acting a little odd, but he went with him.

They walked into a nice room off the main area, next to the restaurant. His grandfather was waiting there with Rachel and her husband Abe. He recognized them from the online photos. They all stood to greet him, grinning like they'd stolen the Stanley Cup and gotten away with it.

"Hey." He walked over and shook Abe's hand, receiving hugs from Papa and Rachel. "You two joining us for golf?"

"No, sir." Rachel laughed. "I wouldn't want to put you all to shame." She winked. "We're here for your wedding."

Beck's heart thudded faster. Eve? He prayed desperately, *Please say they mean Eve*. "Please say you're not here to try to talk me into marrying some redhead."

"Redhead?" Rachel wrinkled her nose. "We're here to give you away to my sister."

Beck's heart threatened to explode out of his chest. "Eve's here? Where?" His gaze was darting around as if she were hiding behind the furniture.

“Calm down.” Papa slapped him on the back. “Desperately lovesick sap. She’s waiting outside with the rest of her family and the preacher.”

Beck turned and hurried for the door.

“Wait!” Rachel called. “You have to put on your suit.”

Beck whirled around. “Eve wants to marry me?”

“Yes.”

“Who cares about the suit?” He started toward the door again.

“Get the suit on, son,” Papa instructed. “Let her know how special she is to you. Women care about this wedding nonsense even if we don’t.”

Abe chuckled but Rachel silenced him with a look.

“Okay.” Beck conceded. “Where’s the suit and where do I change?”

Rachel produced a navy suit and brown leather shoes that looked like Beck’s. “It’s yours. I broke into your house while you were at the gym.”

“Oh? Great.” But he couldn’t stop smiling. He’d changed into a suit and then he was going to hold and kiss Eve. She’d really agreed to marry him? All he could think was he would see her soon. If she was ready to marry him today he’d happily recite vows, but if she needed more time he’d give it to her. All that mattered was Eve and Paisley in his life, no matter how much time it took to get there, no matter if the hyenas ate the money. Eve. He smiled just thinking about seeing her again. The burden of missing her lifted off his shoulders and he was ready to soar with her by his side.

\* \* \*

Eve waited very impatiently in a shady spot by a garden fountain, surrounded by all of her family and the preacher from Caleb and Emily’s church. There was a small area set up with chairs and a backdrop for the wedding. She hated that she

still felt fear and uncertainty. Would being in Beck's arms settle all her fears or would being in Beck's arms cloud her thinking? The pressure to marry him today so they could donate all that money to the children instead of the hyenas was wearing on her.

Was Beck even coming? What would he think of all of this? What if he didn't want to marry her anymore? She had acted pretty crazy running away from him like she had. Would he understand? Did he really love her and hadn't wanted to rush her as his grandfather had insisted?

Mar let out a low whistle and Eve whipped around. Beck strode confidently out the patio doors of the clubhouse and toward them. His eyes sought her out and he stuttered a step. She bit at her lip as he said, "Ah, Eve," and then he was running her direction.

Eve's heart threatened to burst out of her chest. He was here! She started toward him too, gathering up her lacy wedding dress in her hand.

"My Beck!" Paisley raced in front of Eve and held her arms up to Beck.

Beck swooped her off the ground. "Princess Paisley!" He gave her a tight hug but kept hurrying for Eve.

"I've missed you, my Beck," Paisley said.

"You look so pretty, Princess," he told her, but then he reached Eve. He wrapped his free arm around her, pulled her in tight, and kissed her soundly. It was just as she'd hoped, all the fears settled, everything was right now that she was in Beck's arms. She loved him. She wanted to shout it to anyone who would listen, but most of all say it to him loudly, quietly, before she kissed him, after she kissed him. She pushed all the worries aside and deepened the kiss.

Loud whistles and cheers interrupted them. Beck pulled back and searched her gaze. "Eve."

She smiled up at him, her lower lip trembling. Beck's smile slipped and his lovely dimples disappeared. He turned to

Seth who was close by. “Can you please hold the little Princess for a minute?”

“Sure.”

Seth took Paisley but she cried out. “I want my Beck.”

“Just a minute, pretty girl,” Beck said, “I need to talk to your mama.” He glanced around at the gathered family. “Thank you all for coming today, making the sacrifice to be here for us.” He nodded to Isaac in particular. “But...” Eve’s stomach dropped at that but. “There isn’t going to be a wedding today. I’m not ready.” There were gasps and hushed whispers and Eve wanted to crawl in a hole. Beck wasn’t ready. Beck didn’t want her.

“Excuse us, please.” Beck kept an arm firmly around Eve and escorted her around the fountain and toward some beautiful flower gardens. Her family would keep Paisley entertained but she could only focus on Beck’s words. No wedding today.

Eve had felt all lit up being close to him again, but now she was sick with worry. Why had he run to her and kissed her as if she were his world when he wasn’t ready? Why didn’t he want to marry her anymore? He’d told his grandfather the hyenas could keep the money. She loved that he didn’t care about the money but now she was so confused.

He stopped when they were far enough away they wouldn’t be overheard and turned to her. “Eve... I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you right up front about Papa trying to push me into marriage.”

She nodded. So they were starting there? “Thank you. I wish I would’ve known, but...” He’d said he wasn’t ready to get married today but he still seemed to want her. She was going to be truthful and convince him how much she loved him. Maybe there’d be a wedding soon. She could respect his need for more time just like he’d been willing to respect hers. “Maybe knowing about the money would’ve made me run earlier. I’m so sorry I ran away from you rather than working it out. I won’t do that again.”

He smiled softly and cupped her chin with his hand. “We’ll fight things out good and proper and you won’t run away?”

She laughed. “That sounds dreadful, I hate confrontation. But yes, I’m done running.” She swallowed and asked bravely, “You aren’t ready to be married today but do you still... want me?”

Beck’s jaw dropped. He blinked quickly at her and said fiercely, “Eve! Of course, I want you! You’re all I want.” He pointed back to where their family was waiting. “I said I wasn’t ready because I’m not going to pressure you. We can take years if you need, but never doubt that I want to be with you, only you.” He smiled softly. “And Paisley too.”

Eve was blinking quickly but still, the tears were coming. “I love you so much.”

He swept her into his arms and kissed her soundly. “I love you too.”

She looked at him, so filled with love for this man. He would’ve waited years... for her. Apparently Jacob’s angels did know a thing or two. “We’re getting married today,” she said firmly.

“The money doesn’t matter,” he insisted.

“It’s not about the money.” She kissed him softly. “It’s about you and me. I adore you. I don’t want to spend one more second apart from you. I want to marry you, this minute.”

He kissed her and kissed her and kissed her. When he finally pulled back her hair was a mess, her lips were swollen, and she wanted to never stop kissing him.

His eyes got serious, so blue, and deep and delectable. She was going to stare into those eyes every day of her life. She’d never thought she could be so happy. “Just to make sure—you want to marry me for me, not to give billions of dollars to famished, hungry, sad children who need it desperately instead of the disgusting hyenas who will just turn the savanna into a frat house?”

Eve smiled. “Since you put it so beautifully.” She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck. “I love you, Beck. I

want to marry you for you. Keeping your crazy grandfather from gifting his fortune to Save the Hyenas is just a side bonus.” She went on tiptoes and kissed him. “But I do have to say that I love you even more for wanting to help so many children.”

He ran his hands down her back and pulled her flush against him. “You might say there are a lot of reasons to love me.”

“You might, but you might also say you’re an overconfident hockey star who needs some humbling.” He grinned, making his appealing dimples deepen. She loved that she could turn to teasing with him so quickly. Her confidence was restored and she knew without a doubt she could trust Beck, he would love her completely, and she was right where she should be... in his arms.

“I can see that,” he said. “Do you know anyone who could humble me?”

“Paisley. She’ll put you right in your place. Or Rachel’s pretty good at it too.”

He laughed and kissed her. Softly at first but the need she felt for him and how much she’d missed him had her pressing even closer to him and deepening the kiss. Her mouth and head filled up with delicious tingles.

When Beck pulled back, he said, “I want to adopt Paisley. What do you think of that?”

She blinked quickly but again had no way to hide the emotion. Beck wouldn’t care. He’d love her weepy and tired or happy and radiant. Right now she was weepy, happy, and so in love. “I think she’ll be thrilled, and you’ll be the best dad in the world.”

“What about the best husband in the world?”

She shrugged. “We’ll see about that one.”

“Let me see if I can convince you.” He dipped her back and kissed her passionately.

“Okay you two, your time’s up.” Caleb’s voice interrupted their kissing. “Are we truly having a wedding today or calling it and getting some food? I missed lunch because Rachel demanded I come hungry and promised me the ‘most incredible food ever’. Or are you two just going to make out all afternoon?”

Beck lifted her upright and winked. “I guess if we get married we’ll get unlimited make-out time.”

“For sure.” Caleb agreed. “Em, Krew, and I won the bet and we get to keep Paisley for two weeks while you two go to Luke’s exclusive island retreat in the Caribbean.”

Eve blew out a breath. “Wow. Unlimited make-out time in the Caribbean. It’s a pretty good selling point.” She winked at Beck. “I guess I will marry you after all.”

Beck chuckled, swept her off her feet, and carried her toward her family and his grandfather. “Did I tell you yet how beautiful you look in this dress?”

“No, sir, you didn’t.” She clung to his neck, grinning like a fool.

Everyone started clapping, cheering, and whistling as they approached. Especially when Caleb announced with both fists in the air, “They’re going to get married!”

Beck set her on her feet in front of the preacher and the beautiful wedding backdrop, keeping one arm around her lower back. He leaned in close. “You look beautiful,” he said.

“You already said that,” she whispered back.

“I want to kiss you and never stop,” he murmured against her ear.

“I don’t think you said that,” she whispered back.

“Shh, I’m trying to listen to our wedding vows,” he said in her ear.

Eve laughed so loud the preacher stopped talking. He smiled at them benevolently and said, “Is this going to be one of those weddings?”



“The one where I keep interrupting the vows to kiss my bride?” Beck asked.

The preacher winked and gestured. “If you must.”

“Oh, I must.” Then Beck was kissing her and thankfully everyone seemed so thrilled for their happiness that they didn’t interrupt that kiss or the half a dozen other kisses that they stopped the vows for. Eve had never been so happy.

\* \* \*

Thank you for reading Eve and Beck’s story! If you enjoyed this fun romance, please keep reading for excerpts of more Jewel Family Romance.

Hugs,

Cami

### **Jewel Family Romance**

*Do Marry Your Billionaire Boss*

*Do Trust Your Special Ops Bodyguard*

*Do Date Your Handsome Rival*

*Do Rely on Your Protector*

*Do Kiss the Superstar*

*Do Tease the Charming Billionaire*

*Do Claim the Tempting Athlete*

*Do Depend on Your Keeper*

## Do Depend on Your Keeper

Allison darted a glance away from the ocean waves to the person approaching her. One glance became two and then three, and then she was blatantly staring. Now this was a guy she could gawk at all day. He was nice and fit, jogging in a t-shirt and shorts that couldn't possibly hide the broadness of his chest and shoulders and highlighted the nicely-defined lines of his arms and legs. He had dark skin, eyes, and hair, possibly a mix of Italian and Spanish heritage.

He glanced her way and she gave him a welcoming smile. He smiled back and she stopped walking completely. That smile had been the perfect mix of tough guy with a hint of a smirk. This was a guy who could be there for his lady, making her sigh with longing one minute and laugh the next. This man could sweep Allison off her feet, be her perfect fit.

His smile lingered, but he only gave her a manly tilt of the chin before running on past. What had just happened? Why hadn't he stopped?

She whirled around, planted her hands on her hips, and called out, "It's okay, macho man, keep on running. I didn't want to talk to you anyway."

His head darted back to stare at her and then he gifted her with a deep, throaty chuckle. Turning, he walked back to her, stopping a couple of feet away. "Were you speaking to me?"

"No." She gestured around at the couple making out up by the parking lot. "I was yelling at them."

He chuckled again and eased in closer. His dark eyes sparkled mischievously at her. “Apologies, I never would’ve guessed a woman of your beauty and class would be yelling at random men on the beach.”

She hid a smile. “I think you’re a few steps above ‘random’.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Whose fault is that?” She tossed her long, dark hair and gave him an inviting smile. She wasn’t much good at maintaining relationships, but she was pretty good at flirting with appealing men.

He laughed, loud. She liked that she could make him laugh like that. “I guess it’s mine, if I don’t do something about it.”

“What are you going to do about it?” she challenged. She wouldn’t usually be this forward with a man she didn’t know, but there was something about him that told her she could trust him. He had that innate protection built into his strong muscles and the handsome lines of his face.

He looked her over slowly. “Get your phone number and ask you on a date?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I don’t give my number to strange men and I don’t go on dates with someone I just met on the beach.”

He shook his head. “I guess it’ll be your fault you don’t get to know me then.”

She debated. She could hear Abe’s voice warning her to be smart and careful, but there was something about this guy. She wanted to see him again. “I’ll be walking this stretch of beach about the same time tomorrow evening.”

“I’ll be seeing you then.” He gave her a slow grin she felt clear through. This guy could be a lot of fun to flirt with.

Allison gave him one more inviting smile then turned and walked away. She put a little extra sway in her hips, just in case he decided to use that brain of his and watch her go. Glancing over her shoulder she was rewarded to find him not

just watching, but soaking her in. His dark eyes seemed to call to her. She forced herself to face north and walk away. It was one thing to flirt with a handsome man on a public beach. It was quite another to invite him into her life too quickly. She'd stay smart and safe, but she'd definitely be walking this stretch of beach tomorrow night, ready to flirt with him some more.

\* \* \*

Find *Do Depend on Your Keeper* [here](#).

## Do Tease the Charming Billionaire

Turning, he saw a vision in red and swayed on his feet.

Rachel stood right behind him wearing a long formal dress. Her dark eyes were outlined with smoky makeup and her lips were a deep red that matched the dress. She gave him a welcoming smile and he let himself appreciate the entire exotic effect of her appearance for a minute. The dress was floor length but had a slit on one leg that came well above her knee and showed off enough beautiful tanned leg to make his mouth go dry. Her right shoulder was bare and the dress tucked around her chest on that side. On the left side it covered her shoulder with a capped sleeve but most of the left side of the silky red bodice was covered with her long, dark hair that swooped from her forehead across her cheek and then was pulled forward to cover her neck and chin on the left side. He wished he could help her know she didn't need to cover up, but he could at least tell her how beautiful she was.

“Rachel,” he breathed out, automatically extending his hand. “You are exquisite.”

She put her hand in his, and just like this afternoon, he was struck by the power that seemed to surge through him at her very feminine touch. He could be her Tarzan or Superman or whoever she wanted him to be when she had her hand in his. He wanted to be more for her. A billionaire from upstate New York who had scrapped his future out of nothing but sheer will and his own two hands wasn't nearly good enough for a woman with such light, intelligence, and grit.

Acting like a sappy charmer, well, like Preston really, he bent low and brought her hand up to his lips. “Beautiful,” he said, then remembered that he’d already said she was exquisite. What was he doing? He wasn’t here to fall for a woman. In fact, falling for a woman hadn’t been on his radar since Angel backstabbed and betrayed him almost ten years ago.

“Thank you.” Rachel gifted him with a smile that made her even more appealing. “I didn’t figure you for a ‘compliments flowing like honey from his tongue’ kind of guy.”

He laughed and tilted closer to her. “Would you believe me if I told you that I’m usually not?”

“No.”

Oh, he liked her sass. Most women were enamored with his success and his looks and either flirted brazenly with him or acted like he was Zeus. Rachel did neither, but at least she did seem interested in him. He caught a glimpse of Preston coming their way and remembered Rachel was supposed to dine with his lifelong friend. He cursed and she lifted an eyebrow.

“Sorry,” he muttered. He’d picked up some habits in prison his mom didn’t like and swearing was one of them. He lowered his voice as Preston came closer. “Meet me on the beach after dinner?”

Rachel scrunched her nose and tilted her head to the left, her long hair trailing almost to the curve of her waist. “We’ll see.”

\* \* \*

Keep reading [here](#).

Only Her Undercover Spy



## Chapter One



Iris Chadwick blew out a breath and pushed her heavy, blond hair back over her shoulder as she rapped on the door and called out, “Housekeeping.” She’d been raised scrubbing toilets someone could eat off—Grams’s words—and making beds any general would be proud of, Grams was the general, but she hoped at some point she’d graduate from maid service. She had a master’s in hospitality management, and she and her cousin Catalina were officially taking over the Mystical Lake Resort this year. Still, her too-feisty Grams was quick to remind her that owning and running the hotel meant filling in for any and every job when there was a need. Today, housekeeping was short-staffed, so here she was.

There was no response from within the suite and no “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door, so she felt safe to enter. She passed her all-access key card over the door and pushed down on the handle, swinging the door wide and tugging the housekeeping cart in behind her. The huge windows showcased the deep-blue lake, the lush greenery surrounding the lake, the cabins hiding in that greenery, and the towering mountain peaks beyond. Iris paused to savor the view. She’d grown up here and would never leave, and she would also never take her favorite view for granted.

Mystical Lake Resort towered over the very edge of the lake. Its castle-like structure boasted eighty-two suites, an award-winning spa, four restaurants, indoor and outdoor swimming pools and hot tubs, ice-skating in the winter, and miles of hiking and biking trails in the summer, as well as an outdoor adventure course and zip lines, kayaking, paddle-



boarding, and fishing. The small town of Mystical Lake was only a mile around the lake to the east, and everything from ancient shacks to monstrous cabins stretched to the west and the south. It was a small valley, but there was enough open space to accommodate a large ranch to the east and south of the lake. This was heaven on earth, and Iris loved her self-imposed prison.

The bathroom door swung open, and Iris's gaze was ripped from the view of mountains and the lake to a view that had her jaw dropping and her eyes widening. A man strode from the bathroom, dressed only in navy-blue slacks; he was in the process of sliding into a white button-down shirt when he saw her and froze. One beautifully formed arm was partially in the shirt, but the rest of his upper body was revealed, and oh my, what an upper body it was. His chest, abdomen, shoulders, and arms were rippled with smooth muscle and skin that made her mouth go dry.

She forced her gaze to his face, hoping she hadn't been caught ogling him, and immediately wished she'd kept focusing on his bare chest. His face was equally perfect with a strong jaw, a straight nose, and nicely defined brows, but it was his piercing blue eyes that had her gasping for air. He was glaring at her as if she'd just kicked the flowers off his grandmother's grave.

Then he moved. He reacted so quickly and smoothly she couldn't so much as lift a hand to stop him. She only stared in awe, and in concern born of past experience, as his shirt flapped behind him and his athletic body shot across the space until he was towering over her. Her breath came in fast pants, and the delectable scent radiating from him did nothing to calm her nerves.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked in a husky voice that sounded cold and suspicious. "Who let you in? What is your purpose?"

Iris grabbed at the cart behind her for something to defend herself. She didn't sense any evil intent, and she prided herself on reading people, but he was ticked that she'd invaded his room. A customer was always right, but he was in her personal

space, and he was acting like she was attempting to steal secrets from the Pentagon. Her fingers wrapped around a handle, and she whipped the toilet scrubber up and held it in front of her. “Get back,” she demanded, as threatening and confident as she could muster while holding a white toilet brush. She could only pray he was a germaphobe. “I know how to use this.”

He blinked down at her, surprise and then amusement filling those blue eyes. He took a generous step back and held up both hands, reassuring her that her instincts were on target and he wouldn’t hurt her. Lifting his hands made his shoulder muscles ripple. She licked her lips and tried not to stare at the attractive picture he made.

“Put down the weapon and we can both walk away without injury,” he said, giving her a beautiful smirk and a wink that she felt clear to her toes.

This man would not hurt her, and she laughed as much from amusement as from relief. He chuckled along with her, and she didn’t know that she’d ever heard such an inviting laugh. Lowering the toilet brush, she felt she’d better use the hospitality she’d been taught throughout her life and perfected with her online schooling. “Forgive me for intruding. You didn’t answer when I knocked and called out. There was no ‘Do Not Disturb’ magnet on the door.”

He arched his eyebrows in a half-mocking, half-charming look that made her insides churn with an odd mixture of attraction and annoyance. “I left instructions with the front-desk manager that *no one* enter my room. And I mean no one.”

That was odd, and not just because of how private he was. The front-desk manager—Iris’s favorite cousin and future business partner, Catalina—hadn’t put a note in the file. “I apologize again,” she said. “I’m filling in today and didn’t see that.” She paused and had to ask, “You don’t want housekeeping services your entire stay?” Most guests stayed at least four days, some several weeks. Mystical Lake was a remote location, and once people got here, they wanted to stay awhile. She knew she never wanted to leave.

He shook his head firmly and folded his muscular arms across his chest, distracting her momentarily. It should've looked awkward with one arm in the sleeve and his crisp dress shirt trailing toward the ground, but he was too impeccably good-looking to understand what the word awkward meant.

“What are you going to do when your toilet reeks and you're walking on crumbs from all the room service food you've spilled?”

That mocking look was back. “I'm generally a pretty clean person. I think I can avoid the toilet 'reeking' and keep my food on the plate where it belongs.”

She should dredge up a little humility, but he was too confident and appealing. Maybe he needed a little humility of his own. Holding the toilet brush aloft, she gave him a challenging glare. “Well, when that toilet reeks and you have to humble yourself and beg me to use my 'weapon,' don't think I won't give you a hard time about it.”

He tilted his chin to her, his gaze slowly tracing over her face and his lips tilting up as if he liked what he saw. “I'll look forward to ...” His voice deepened to a gravelly tone. “Humbling myself and begging you.”

Iris's body went hot and cold. She knew she shouldn't be flirting with a guest. She should back away and escape now, but as he stared at her, he seemed to finally notice that his shirt was half on. He tugged the one sleeve up and slid into the other one. The room swayed as she stared with her mouth hanging open. His muscles were so smooth, so delectable, it was all she could do to keep from drooling.

His gaze on her become smoky and alluring. He knew exactly how he was affecting her. Tugging the shirt together, he slowly started doing up buttons from the bottom, letting her feast her eyes on that bare chest a few moments longer.

Iris finally dredged up some self-control, muttered, “Excuse me,” and backed toward the door.

Again, he moved much quicker than she'd expected, and before she knew it, that warm, spicy, yummy cologne of his

was infiltrating her senses and he was in her space, her eyes level with his half-done-up shirt and his chest. He swung the door open wide for her.

“Oh, um, thanks,” she managed, thinking a lifetime of training and six years of fitting in hospitality schoolwork every chance she had was a total waste. She couldn’t form a coherent sentence with a guest because he was too unbelievably handsome. She tugged the cart out into the hallway, wanting to hide underneath it like she had as a child when her and Catalina’s moms had regularly filled in for housekeeping. That had been before the resort had become immensely successful, her mom had gotten too sick with pancreatic cancer to work, and Cat’s mom had turned into an entitled, pampered woman. Iris and Cat had played hide-and-seek in the carts and half-heartedly helped their mothers.

He hung on to the door, looking like a poster she wanted to hang on her wall. She had all kinds of fantasies of what he would say to her. Maybe when he opened his mouth, he’d ask her to go on a hike or bike ride, go swim in the cool, clear mountain lake, go to dinner with him at one of the retreat’s exclusive restaurants, or walk down to town and get ice cream or a shaved ice.

“Will you please ask the hospitality manager to not send any more housekeepers to my suite?” His voice was still smoky, but the words were wrong.

“Oh, sure ...” He had no way of knowing she was the hospitality manager. “I’ll let her know.” She forced a smile and shoved her cart down the hallway to the next room. Taking a steadying breath, she rapped her knuckles on the next door and called, “Housekeeping.” No response. She waited and waited and then passed her key card over the door and swung it open.

A chuckle from her right brought her head around before she could push her cart in. When she turned, the man was leaning out of his door and watching her, his shirt now buttoned up. Thank heavens. “I wish you better success in that room than in mine.” He winked.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Iris flipped her long hair. “Your room was a lot of fun.”

He grinned and saluted her. “Too bad we can’t repeat the interaction tomorrow.”

She said sassily, “Too bad for you.”

The smolder in his blue eyes should’ve been illegal. “Yes,” he said, staring at her as if he were drinking her in. “Too bad for me.” Then he tilted his chin at her and disappeared back into his suite.

Iris forced herself to get back to work, but her brain was busy daydreaming about the man in the next suite over. My, oh my. She hoped she’d see him again this week.

## Chapter Two



Devon Berkshire, aka Chris Wilson while on this job, smiled to himself as he knotted his tie and checked his hair in the mirror. The fit blonde housekeeper had him more stirred up than he'd allowed himself to get on a job, maybe ever. She was beautiful, interesting, and funny. Too bad he couldn't request housekeeping every day with her as his maid. He glanced toward the closet, where his surveillance equipment was packed in a suitcase. No one could know why he was here at the Mystical Lake Resort, least of all a gorgeous housekeeper.

He usually tried to minimize any contact with locals while undercover, but the blond had been impossible to resist teasing with. The image of her holding a toilet brush aloft and telling him to get back was adorable. Luckily, she hadn't seen his Glock in the rear waistband of his pants that his shirt now hid. She'd been too busy checking out his chest.

Striding from the room, he started a slow perusal of the massive hotel, which was situated on the edge of a clear mountain lake. It was picturesque, something you'd expect in Switzerland. He'd received the request for this job yesterday morning, and having just wrapped up an easy case in Little Rock, Arkansas, he thought a little mountain air sounded nice, especially as it was July and the heat and humidity in Arkansas had about choked him. He'd flown into Missoula last night and driven along deserted mountain roads in the dark, checking in after one in the morning and sleeping until almost eight—much later than he usually would allow, but his target wasn't even here yet. Now, as he walked out onto the large

open patio hanging over the lake and took in the mountain view, he felt like he could breathe. It was all so fresh and beautiful and clean, it reminded him of the appealing blonde.

He'd traveled to many countries and most of the states, but the Rocky Mountains were hard to beat. When his bank account reached that elusive fifty million, he'd come buy one of the cabins nestled along the bank of a lake like this one, fish and hike and ... probably go stir-crazy. That day was more than a few years off, so he didn't need to worry about it too much.

He wandered to the edge of the patio. Bending down, he trailed his fingers through the water. Chilly, but it'd be fun to jump into on a warm summer's day. He doubted it ever got muggy hot at this high elevation. This morning, it was probably sixty, and it might break eighty by late afternoon. Perfect.

His assignment was due to arrive around noon, so he had some time to explore. He walked past some large swimming pools and then along a beach spot with nicely manicured grass and a spot of sand. There was everything from kayaks to floating islands in the water. A couple of zip lines ended in the water, and there were a variety of different platforms to jump off, a rope swing, and an adventure course that went through the trees and out over the water. Already there were teenagers and children enjoying the play area. A young mom caught his eye and gave him a brazen wink. Devon pretended he hadn't noticed and walked on. Better not to engage anyone, unless they were a certain beautiful blonde housekeeper.

There were trails darting away from the main lodge into the trees to the west and north, and a paved road headed west, probably encircling the entire lake. He could see all sizes of cabins across the lake: small older cabins, decent-sized cabins partially hidden in the trees, and structures graduating to huge mansions. The cabins stretched around to the west and south sides of the lake. He knew from his research there was a small town on the east side of the lake, and he could glimpse bits of shops, restaurants, and even a Ferris wheel. There was also a large ranch south and east of town owned by a Stetson

Stillwater. The airport was small and north of town toward the only road in and out of the valley. The lake was probably six or seven miles in circumference, so though the trees gave some privacy to the various cabins, it was fairly easy to see across the lake and into their backyards.

His intel said the target, Antonio Jasper, was planning to stay at the resort, meet up with his contacts, and set up transfer points somewhere in the small valley. It was far enough off the beaten path that nobody would expect drug runners to fly drugs into the small, private airport or make exchanges with trucks up in these tranquil mountains. Devon hated that even in this picturesque valley, there were drug runners and deals going down.

Rumor had it that Antonio, who was Italian by birth, had made significant contacts throughout South America and was suspected to be moving mountains of drugs into America. It was assumed he was also involved in human and sex trafficking. So far, the man hadn't been caught, and sadly, they couldn't arrest him on rumors.

Devon's gut tightened. There was nothing he loathed more than the scum who exploited and enslaved others for their gain. Devon was an independent contractor, but he had built up a solid reputation with a clientele he could feel proud to work for while making incredible money doing the jobs their people couldn't accomplish. He mostly gathered intel, then allowed the government agency or private business who'd hired him to proceed with that information, but sometimes he got into sticky situations. Which was why he was grateful for his Army background. He also carried his Glock and had a variety of weapons cleared to travel with him, stored in a suitcase and now in his rental car as well.

The danger surrounding his job was why he avoided getting to know the locals; he didn't want to involve anyone else with the scum he needed to survey. A few times, he'd had to protect such locals from trafficking or being used as shields when the scum got caught.

Speaking of locals ... As he strolled along a trail through the trees toward the west, he could see a gravel road winding



off the main road. It led down to a large cabin situated on the lakeside. Within, he caught a flash of blond hair and a red T-shirt like his housekeeper had been wearing.

Curious, he sidled through the trees until he had a decent view of the large main area of the cabin. Some open windows gave him a view into the kitchen, but most of the main area's large windows overlooked the lake. He caught another glimpse of the woman before she disappeared up a wide staircase with a wooden railing. An older lady was in the kitchen chopping onions at the counter. She had tomatoes and peppers spread over the counter, possibly making salsa. The sight brought back a memory of his mom cutting onions for her bottled salsa while tears streamed down her face. He'd been a teenager and teased her about crying over him. She'd teased right back that a good boy wouldn't make his mama cry.

Devon smiled. He should go see his parents, sisters, brothers-in-law, and nephews. He missed them. They all had a nice, safe life just north of San Francisco, California, in Mill Valley. His home was almost as pretty as this valley with the redwood trees towering everywhere. It had been a few months since he'd visited his home and family. He needed to keep the connections strong with the people who mattered to him. Maybe after this job.

He waited in the shadows of large birch tree, watching the older lady slice and dice and hoping for another sighting of the blonde. Was it his maid from this morning?

Finally, he caught movement on the stairs, and then the most breathtaking woman he'd ever seen floated down them. The sight had him taking a quick breath and leaning forward. It was his blonde, but she wasn't dressed in a T-shirt and slacks any longer. Instead, she'd swapped to a fitted pink-and-white polka-dotted dress that showed off her trim, tanned shoulders, arms, and legs from just above the knees down. The dress was flattering and classy and made his heart thump as if he'd been caught red-handed with surveillance equipment on the president.

Her long curls danced across her shoulders and upper back, and her beautiful face was enhanced by light makeup

and pink lipstick that matched her dress. Her lips were fuller than he remembered, with a pouty bottom lip that made him want to taste and savor its softness.

“Whoo-ee, you off to hook a man or do your job?” the older lady asked. Her voice carried easily through the open window.

“Grams,” his blonde reprimanded her. “I’m going to work. There is nothing wrong with looking good, especially with the client we have coming in today. Supposedly, he’s a fine-looking millionaire from Italy.” She whistled.

Grams laughed. “You be careful with those Italians, Miss Hottie Pants.” She smacked her on the rear, and Devon’s eyebrows went up. “Those boys are too charming for their own good.”

Devon’s gut churned. His beautiful housekeeper was obviously *not* a housekeeper, and she was excited to meet Antonio Jasper. His estimation of “Miss Hottie Pants” went down a few notches, though he knew that wasn’t fair to her; Antonio could convince the Pope that he was a saint. Nobody should be anticipating time spent with Antonio, least of all this incredible woman. The man was as likely to nab Devon’s blonde for sex trafficking as he was to add her to his own harem in Tuscany. Devon blew out a breath. He’d have to watch her close, very close. For some reason, that made his gut settle and warm up.

“We’ll see.” She looked at her phone. “I’d better go. I need to deal with some emails before Mr. VIP gets here.” She bent and kissed her grams.

Devon stepped deeper into the shadows of the thick woods as she strode out the rear door, across the gravel road, and toward the path to the lodge, staying on the wooded path rather than head to the main road. Her heels sank slightly in the path, but she plowed on, not seeming to notice or care.

He cautiously followed her. Dared he intercept? It would be out of character for him, but maybe he could simply say hi, find out her name, and make certain she didn’t fall prey to “Mr. VIP.” That grated at him. The scumbag drug dealer

shouldn't be treated as a VIP. Still, he had to admit that Antonio had been impressively successful at hiding his true business practices behind his winery business, which had been in his family for generations. That was why Devon had been hired by Interpol with contacts in the CIA working with him to get the info to rat the man out. Every country would benefit from Antonio being eradicated, especially America.

Maybe it was the wrong move, but watching those lean legs mince their way up the path made him long to know a little bit about her, to at least put a name to his fantasies of the housekeeper turned executive who lived in that beautiful cabin with her grams.

Increasing his pace, he also increased the sound of his footfalls. The blonde glanced over her shoulder with a curious glance and only a slight show of trepidation. Did she not feel fear of being in the woods with an unknown man pursuing her? Was she simply too trusting, or was it confidence in her surroundings and the people she usually came in contact with? She'd had concern in her aqua-blue eyes when he'd stormed up to her in his suite and she'd pulled the toilet scrubber on him, but he'd been impressed by her bravery. He smiled at the memory.

When she saw it was him, she stopped walking and spun around. Putting a hand on her hip, she tossed her long curls and asked, "So you finally put your shirt on all the way?"

Devon grinned and glanced down at his shirt and tie. "I usually get dressed for the day, except when I check into a hotel after midnight and a beautiful housekeeper walks in on me at eight a.m."

She smiled. "I'm truly sorry about that. We've got it in your file with an exclamation point now: 'Do not attempt to clean this room, unless you want to get flashed by a beautiful chest!'" Her cheeks turned a becoming pink.

Devon crossed the distance to her, unable to hide his pleasure. "You think my chest is beautiful?" He barely resisted flexing.

She glanced over his chest before meeting his gaze. Her eyes were a most intriguing greenish blue framed by long eyelashes. “I don’t think I’ll answer that one,” she murmured. Turning, she started walking toward the main area, and Devon fell into step beside her. “Exploring the area?” she asked, glancing sidelong at him. “In business casual?”

He arched his eyebrows at her, but it occurred to him that his apparel choices might not be appropriate for blending in here in the mountains of Montana. He’d have to dig out the T-shirts and joggers. “It’s a beautiful area,” he said.

“Thank you,” she responded, as if she’d designed the mountains and the lake and all the greenery. “I love it here.”

“Have you lived here all of your life?” Devon was careful not to get invested in people, but something about this woman was drawing him in like nothing he’d ever felt.

“Yes.”

“You never left for college?”

She shook her head, not meeting his gaze. “I got my undergrad and master’s online. Couldn’t leave my grams.” She smiled at him, but she was hiding something.

“And now you work as a housekeeper or some kind of executive?” He was confused by the different roles he’d seen her in, but sadly, it wasn’t his business to figure out what she was hiding.

She let out a hearty chuckle, and it made his stomach fill with a longing to hear that sound every day of his life. He quickly tamped those wild and silly feelings down.

“I’m the hospitality manager,” she said. “My cousin and I are buying out our dads and brothers and taking over the Mystical Lake Resort from my grams.”

His eyebrows rose. “Impressive. Has Mystical Lake always been in your family?”

“Yes. The lodge was built in the fifties by my great-grandparents. My grams and pops renovated it completely less than ten years ago; then my pops went to heaven.”

They were passing the recreational area next to the lodge, where more children and teenagers were playing, whooping, and laughing. “And your dad and brothers?” he asked. He shouldn’t have. He was not only becoming more invested in her; he could tell she didn’t like the question. She hadn’t referenced her mother, so he hadn’t either. Was she alive?

“They’re off living their lives.” She forced a smile. “Excuse me. I’d better get back to work.”

“Wait, please.” He held out a hand. “What’s your name?”

Her smile became more genuine. “Iris Chadwick.” She extended her hand, and Devon wrapped his larger hand around hers. He felt a warmth and a connection that he knew were unique to Iris Chadwick. She was impressive, and she was drawing him in more surely than any woman he’d ever met.

“Pleasure to meet you, Iris Chadwick. I’m D—” Surprise rushed through him, and he broke off. He’d almost told her his real name. He couldn’t remember the last person he’d told his real name to.

“I know who you are.” She gave him a sweet smile as he held on to her hand for longer than was probably appropriate. “Chris Wilson. The guy in room twenty-eight who doesn’t want his toilet to smell fresh and clean.”

He chuckled, relieved she hadn’t noticed or called him on his slip. “I guess you would know me. Difficult customer and all of that.”

She laughed. “Definitely. It’s in your file.” Tugging her hand free, she gave him an almost longing look, as if she didn’t want to walk away from him. “I really need to go.”

“I understand.” He tilted his chin up at her, grateful that she hadn’t asked more about him. For the first time in a long time, he wanted to tell a layperson exactly who he was. That wasn’t smart for her, or for the job he was on.

He watched her go up the stairs and into the massive lodge. A few seconds later, he followed her and started exploring the main part of the lodge more. The restaurants were all top notch, and he enjoyed a late breakfast slash early

lunch. The spa director was more than happy to give him a complete tour and list of all of their therapeutic treatments.

As he walked back into the main area shortly before noon, he caught a glimpse of long, blond hair and a pink polka-dotted dress. Fading back behind a large potted plant, he settled in to wait. Once he got Antonio's room number and a little information, he'd simply wait until the man vacated his room, and then he'd bug it with video and audio feeds. After that was done, Devon could monitor what Antonio said and did while in his room and track him when he left through his phone, iPad, or computer. Soon Devon would have the guy nailed to the wall and in prison. Then he'd move on.

He heard Iris's lilting voice. It would be a letdown to walk away from her. He pushed that away. It was unrealistic, uncharacteristic, and not something he had time for. Maybe once he had his fifty million, he'd come back here. By that time, Miss Chadwick would probably be married and have half a dozen children of her own. The churning of his gut worsened as Antonio Jasper strutted in like he was king and kissed Iris on both cheeks. Devon hated the disgusting drug dealer for the lives he ruined to make himself wealthy. Even more, he hated the thought of the man touching Iris.

Devon was forced to watch as the man pretended to be charming and Iris lapped up his attention. He followed them cautiously through their tour of the property, growing more and more disgusted with their flirtations. There were bodyguards trailing Antonio as well. Devon stayed out of the bodyguards' line of sight, while they avoided letting Iris see them. Interesting that Antonio wanted to appear as if he were alone.

Devon didn't know that he could warn Iris away without jeopardizing his mission. He couldn't reveal who he was or what his purpose was, but somehow, he had to keep her from falling for this loser's charms, or else she'd end up shared with Antonio's friends before being sold off. Such a fate was a strong possibility with any woman who got close to Antonio Jasper. Sadly, it appeared Iris was as innocent, fresh, and naïve

as he'd thought earlier. From the leering glint in Antonio's eyes, Devon feared he knew it too.

## Chapter Three



Grams had been right about one thing: the Italian millionaire was too charming. He had Iris laughing and blushing and agreeing to meet him for dinner before she knew what was happening. The entire time, though, the dapper, gorgeous Chris Wilson lingered in her mind's eye. Yes, Antonio was captivating, crazy rich, and handsome with his dark, sparkling eyes, smooth, dark skin, and strong build, but it was the blue-eyed guy she'd bantered with this morning who she couldn't stop thinking about.

She finally settled Antonio in his penthouse suite. She wondered why one man wanted a three-bedroom penthouse, but maybe when you were that wealthy, you just did it because you could. She also wondered what he would do for a week in the mountains. He hadn't expressed interest in any of the outdoor activities. As far as she knew, his only plans involved dinner with her. Flattering, but he would probably be very bored here.

She walked along the main floor corridor toward her office. A shadow darted out of a doorway. She stepped back in surprise, and her heartbeat picked up. When she recognized the exquisite face of the man she'd been daydreaming about all day, she relaxed and smiled. "Chris."

He wasn't smiling at her, though, quite the contrary. His brow furrowed, and his blue eyes glinted at her. "I need to speak to you," he said in an almost growl.

"Oh ... sure." She gestured down the hall to her office. "Will this work?"



He nodded and lifted his palm up for her to lead the way. Neither of them said anything as they walked to her office. As soon as they got inside, he shut the door behind them.

Iris walked around her desk to put some space between them. Chris was acting off. Even as she watched, he strode around the office, looking things over and cataloguing her world. Finally, he turned to her, marching right around the desk and invading her space. Iris's heart was racing again. She didn't know if it was the physical attraction that had her heart thudding—and dang if he didn't smell like her version of male candy—or if she was threatened and intimidated by how he loomed above her. He was a lot leaner than that Italian millionaire, but he seemed stronger and stood taller. It had been ten years since she'd been threatened by a man. She was strong now and brave, but sadly not brave enough to leave her valley. Doc and Pastor believed that had more to do with her mom's death and her dad's desertion than the guy who'd tried to take her into the woods. She thought they were right on, but how did she overcome being deserted by her dad when she'd needed him the most?

She licked her lips and tried for a professional angle. “What can I do for you, Mr. Wilson? Is everything okay with the room and your experience at the resort thus far?” She pasted on a smile.

Chris blinked down at her and nodded. “Yes, the resort is perfect. I have no issues there.”

“Okay ... what do you need, then? I'm assuming you have some kind of 'issue'?”

Chris's eyes moved carefully over her face and lingered at the racing pulse point in her neck for a few beats before meeting her gaze again. Those blue eyes were intense. Had any man intrigued her like this before? His allure was undeniable, but there was also an edge of danger. Not that Chris was a danger to her—she didn't think so, at least—but he'd seen danger and he would protect her. She licked her lips again, and when his eyes darted down to her lips, she just about had heart failure.

Then he gave a short grunt of frustration, stepped back from her, and started pacing the office. He tugged at his tie and brushed at his dark hair, casting concerned glances at her.

When Iris couldn't take the suspense and his obvious irritation any longer, she interrupted his pacing. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wilson. I can't help you if you don't tell me what is wrong."

"Chris, please," he murmured, but he kept pacing for a half a minute more.

She put her hands on her desk, leaned forward, and said, "You're making me dizzy, Chris. What is your 'issue'?"

"You," he flung at her. He swiveled around, also putting his hands on the desk, and leaned forward so only a foot separated them.

"Me?" She leaned back slightly, needing some distance from the intensity in his eyes and the delicious scent emanating from him. "What have I done?"

"You're too innocent, too beautiful, too easy of a target. Do you realize that?"

She wasn't sure if those were compliments or slams, but the memory of being an innocent and easy target at sixteen resurfaced. She pushed it away quickly. She'd worked with Pastor Mike to put it behind her, and she wouldn't allow the fears to surface again. She was strong, safe in her beautiful valley, and the Lord was with her. That was what mattered. "A target for what?"

"What do you know about human trafficking, Miss Chadwick?"

Oh, it was "Miss Chadwick" now? "Not enough, but I know it happens in our country." She straightened so he wasn't as much in her space, and he followed suit. They stood facing off over the desk. "I help fund a group in California that protects immigrants. The stories they tell are sickening. Entire busloads of immigrants stolen. Men, women, and innocent children snatched and distributed by traffickers because our organization didn't get to them soon enough. They were easy

targets, as they didn't understand the language and who to trust. Trafficking is horrifying and hard to prevent and ...” She sank into her seat, the memory of her own fears returning. She forced it away and focused on the conversation. “To think of children being sold, used, abused ...”

His eyes softened, recognizing and sympathizing with her pain. “Do you recognize you are a target?” he asked quietly, not sitting but leaning forward and staring down at her.

She gestured around. “I am definitely not a target in Happy Valley.” Not anymore, now that she was safe and smart.

“That’s where you’re *wrong*.” He slammed his palm on the desk for emphasis, and Iris jumped.

“What are you talking about? What do you know?” Out-of-town guests came into Mystical Lake almost year-round, but for the most part, except for the one man who’d tried to hurt her, they were good people. She refused to believe the ugliness of trafficking could penetrate her sanctuary.

Chris’s eyes became cold, unreadable. “I notice things, and I don’t believe you are taking your safety seriously enough. I would like to suggest that you never go out at night and you do not spend time alone with any man.”

He’d gone too far. Demanding she not go out at night? She’d wandered this valley after hours for years with her cousins and brothers. Not be alone with a man? As if she couldn’t handle herself. As if she were a naïve simpleton from the backwoods of Montana who would fall prey to human traffickers. There were no traffickers here. Still, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. What if there were? No. Her safe haven couldn’t be penetrated by that ugliness.

She stood and stormed around the desk, forgetting her role as hospitality manager in her need for answers from this infuriating, demanding man. “What are you? Who are you?”

His eyebrows rose, but he replied calmly. “My name is Chris Wilson. I’m a security specialist from San Francisco, California.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Security specialist? Are you working in my valley? Is there danger here? If so, we need to call Sheriff Greenwood.”

He shook his head slightly. “I’m here on a vacation, getting away from the stress of evaluating and installing security for huge corporations and very demanding clients. I believe your ‘Happy Valley’ is ... safe.” He didn’t look like he believed it. “I am simply telling you that you need to take precautions because of the innocent light I see shining from your beautiful eyes.”

“You say innocent and beautiful like they are something negative.”

“They are liabilities in my line of work.”

She didn’t want to pursue that negative line. “And you aren’t working now?”

He shook his head.

“Then why were your first questions to me this morning ‘What are you doing here?’ and ‘What is your purpose?’”

He shrugged. “Simply my norm. I’m used to being on a job. Dealing with so many security threats and issues has made me suspicious by nature. Hence not wanting anyone in to clean my room.”

That had been her next question, but he’d preempted her. “So if you are simply ‘suspicious by nature,’ it is highly likely that I am in no danger whatsoever and you’re flipping out just because you think I’m some innocent, immature woman.” She put her hands on her hips and dared him to contradict her.

He strode around the desk, getting in her space and taking her by the shoulders. Her bare skin tingled under the pressure of his palms. Lowering his voice, he said, “You are in danger exactly because you refuse to recognize it.”

Iris stared up at him. What a sad life he must lead, suspicious of everyone around him because of his work and his experiences. Yes, she’d almost been attacked once, but her brothers and cousin had taught her how to defend herself, and she refused to live in fear. As long as she stayed in Mystical

Lake, she was safe and happy. “What I refuse to do is live my life in fear and stay hidden in my cabin on the possibility of ‘what if.’” She backed away from his grasp and walked over to open to the office door. “Thank you for your visit, Mr. Wilson. Please let me know if there’s anything else we can do to make your stay more pleasant.”

Chris’s blue eyes glinted dangerously as he stepped toward her. He bent down to her level, and his lips grazed her earlobe. She startled and quivered at the sensation. “If you won’t take your safety seriously, I will be forced to miss out on my vacation and monitor your security for my own peace of mind.”

She turned to glare at him, but with his lips hovering near her ear, he was far too close for comfort. “You wouldn’t dare,” she hissed.

He straightened and smirked at her. “I am a very impressive security specialist, Miss Chadwick, and I think you’d be surprised what I dare do.” With that, he sauntered past her and down the short hallway. Before he turned and was lost from sight, he glanced back at her and winked—a gesture that should’ve been obnoxious and overconfident, but was actually sexy enough that her knees knocked together and she had to lean against the doorjamb.

So Chris Wilson, Mr. Security Specialist, was going to monitor her? Somehow, she wasn’t as annoyed and angry as she should be. Instead, she found her stomach heating up at the thought that he wanted to protect her. Not that she needed it now that she was smart and grown up, no longer a trusting teenager who’d almost lost her virtue to a despicable jerk.

Heading back into her office, she tried to focus on work until her dinner date with Antonio. Yet it was impossible to think about anything but Chris, the crazy conversation they’d had, the way he looked at her, and the way he made her feel.

## Chapter Four



Devon was partially fuming and partially chuckling at the conversation he'd just had with Iris. She was infuriating and so attractive she muddled his brain like nothing he'd ever experienced. He feared he'd overstepped bounds a spy should never even approach. He'd used the job of security specialist often and always told people he was from San Francisco to keep the story simple. Using names like Chris Wilson, Tom Jensen, or Jake Smith kept him safe from being discovered. There were dozens of such names in San Francisco.

Iris. What a lady she was. She didn't bow to his demands or act afraid, though there was something in her eyes that said she had felt fear before and dealt with it. If he'd read her correctly, that was remarkable, but that lack of fear terrified him when there were men such as Antonio Jasper around and most likely preying on her. It was still impressive that she wouldn't live her life in fear. Stupid, but impressive.

Before long, his phone screen displayed the view through her resort's security cameras that he'd easily tapped into. She was meeting up for dinner with Antonio in one of the resort's restaurants; Antonio's men were sitting at another table. Devon headed for his own room and his surveillance suitcase. He didn't like being away from watching over Iris, especially when she was basically in Antonio's grasp, but Devon had a job to do, and once he got everything set up, he could focus on watching Iris—and sadly, Antonio too.

Minutes later, he'd jammed the camera in the hallway outside the penthouse, used the all-access key card he'd lifted

from Iris's desktop when they'd had their talk, and slipped inside. He stayed just inside the door, listening and searching with his eyes and his probe for heat sensors or lasers. Interestingly enough, Antonio didn't have either, or maybe hadn't set them up yet. More likely, the man didn't think he needed them in this safe little valley, and it wasn't as if he was hiding anything in his hotel rooms.

If Devon's contacts were correct, this trip was to identify and find distribution spots for drug exchanges, and possibly trafficking as well. This beauty valley, with a quiet, unmonitored airstrip and plenty of spots to take cover in trees and mountains, would be a decent spot for them to fly in shipments and then distribute through the countryside. There were only a couple of drawbacks he could see: there was really only one way in and out of the valley, and the airstrip was pretty exposed to the small town. Maybe they'd find that out in their research, give up, and leave. It was interesting that an affluent criminal would take the time to do the research himself, but it would explain why he not only was successful but also hadn't been caught yet. He trusted only himself.

Devon located several cameras that Antonio's men must have installed. He scrambled them into a constant repeat of the seconds before he entered the room, and then he got to work. Ten minutes later, he'd hidden his own cameras throughout the room, along with tracking devices and some microphones in laptops, shoes, suitcases, and anything he could find that they might take with them when they went to meet with contacts. He downloaded a copy of everything on their computer hard drives and would send it on to Interpol for them to try to decode and find information that would help nail Antonio. He'd already bugged their Land Rover and with the easy access to the hotel's security feed, he felt he'd covered his bases.

Once that task was complete, Devon stepped back into the hall and headed downstairs, deciding it was time to go to dinner himself. It would be torture to watch Iris eat with Antonio, but it was his job to monitor the drug dealer, and Devon was making it his personal quest to watch over the beautiful hotel manager.

\* \* \*

Iris enjoyed her dinner conversation with the Italian millionaire, but her mind kept wandering to the fireworks she felt around Chris. A security specialist. That fit him. She wondered if he had a military background and found herself thinking of all kinds of questions she wanted to ask him.

Was he *really* on vacation, or was there some sinister reason he'd chosen her hotel and given her such an intense warning? A shiver trailed down her spine as she thought of danger coming to her beautiful valley. She shook it off like a wet dog. That could not happen. Not again. Besides the one incident when she was sixteen, she had always been safe and loved by all the people here.

"Everything all right, love?" Antonio asked, swirling the wine in his glass and taking a slow sip. His English was impeccable, but she did like his accent.

"Wonderful. Thank you for eating with me. Was the wine and food up to snuff for somebody from the vineyards of Tuscany?"

He smiled easily. "It was all perfect, but most perfect was the company." He reached across and squeezed her hand. "Would you permit me to walk you home?"

She shook her head. "I've still got a pile of work to deal with, and my cabin is close by. Thank you, though."

Disappointment flashed in his dark eyes. Iris had seen a lot of men pass through her hotel, and she'd dated her fair share, but she hadn't interacted with the likes of Antonio and Chris, especially not in the same day. Chris. She wouldn't mind seeing him again and bantering with him some more. He'd said he was going to monitor her safety. Hopefully, that meant he'd stay by her side rather than in the shadows. She bit at her lip, warmth filling her cheeks.

"You look very lovely when you nibble at that full lip," Antonio said in a low voice, obviously intending to be seductive.



“Um, thank you.”

“May I see you tomorrow?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Crazy busy day. Several of our housekeepers shared strep throat with each other, so I’m having to fill in throughout the morning, then deal with my own work in the afternoon and evening.”

His eyebrows drew together. “Pardon me. Fill in ... as a maid?” The disdain in his voice was unmistakable. She didn’t expect a wealthy and handsome man to understand.

“Sometimes you have to humble yourself and use a toilet scrubber as your weapon.” She smiled to herself, thinking of Chris again.

As if her thoughts had conjured him, she caught movement in a corner table and glanced that way. He was eating dinner by himself. He caught her eye, gave her a secretive, smoldering glance that was meant for only her, but then focused on his food as Antonio spun to look over his shoulder.

“What are you looking at?” Antonio asked.

“Just checking out my restaurant, making sure everything’s in order.”

“Ah.” His eyes flickered over the other occupied tables. “I’m afraid although I like to believe my English education was thorough, I miss some of your American jokes. A toilet scrubber as a weapon?”

Iris smiled. “It’s an inside joke with ... my cousin Catalina and I.”

“Is Catalina the Spanish beauty who runs the front desk? You are cousins by birth?”

“Yes, sir. She’s my favorite person in the world.” At the questioning look in his eyes, she explained. “Our fathers are brothers. Catalina’s mother is originally from Argentina.” She left out the part about Arianna ditching Catalina and her father and brother for a handsome rancher. The rancher was a man most of the valley had loved for his bright smile and easygoing attitude. Then he’d lost his wife to a car accident, and weeks

after he and Arianna skipped town together, with the aid of hundreds of thousands stolen from his son's ranch. They'd all learned a smile can be deceiving. Cat and her dad suffered as much as the rancher's son, Stetson, who Cat avoided like the plague.

"I see."

She stood. "Thank you again for having dinner with me."

Antonio stood and took her hand. "It was my pleasure. After your busy day tomorrow, could you spare time to show me the area and share dinner again?"

"Not tomorrow, but thank you for asking." Before he asked for the next day, she tugged her hand free, gave him a brilliant smile, and walked away. "Bye."

"Good night, beautiful Iris," he said to her back.

Iris gave him a wave and hurried out of the restaurant. She only let herself glance at Chris once. He watched her steadily, and the alluring look in his blue eyes sucked the oxygen from her lungs. She tripped over who knew what. Straightening herself, she rushed along the main floor to her office. Working late. That was smart and safe—much safer than spending more time with the intriguing Chris Wilson.

Iris settled in to work. She soon realized she couldn't focus on anything but that look in Chris's eyes. Night fell outside her windows, and her beautiful valley went to sleep, with only minimal lights twinkling across the lake. She stood and stretched, knowing Grams would want her home. She wished Catalina lived with them so Grams had someone else to fuss over, but Cat felt a duty to her father. Cat's brother, Cruz, had moved on to become a well-known snow-skiing and wakeboarding phenomenon and was rarely home. Iris adored her uncle Jay. He'd really stepped in as a father figure after her own dad had left. She worried right along with Cat that he was wasting away. He seemed thinner each time Iris saw him, like he'd given up on living when the beautiful yet spiteful Arianna had left him six years ago. At least he kept busy, spending his days fishing, hiking, and fixing up their cabin—which was a

half mile away from Grams's—as well as anybody else's that needed some help.

Once she'd put her computer to sleep and shut down her office, she said good night to a few employees as she made her way out one of the back entrances and onto the magnificent patio that overlooked the lake. She took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders back. Nothing was as wonderful as a summer night in the mountains. The birds had mostly settled, but some still chirped, an owl hooted, and insects buzzed. The water lapped against the shore and glistened under the light of a delicate slice of moon. She walked along the patio and then down the steps and along the lake's shore. All was quiet in the adventure area, and as she moved toward the trail to her house, she could stare up into a sky full of stars. Ah, she loved it here so much. Nothing and nobody could get her to leave again.

A branch cracked off the side of the trail, and Iris wondered what animal might be making its way through the woods. Probably a racoon looking for some dinner, but possibly a deer, an elk, or even a moose or a bear. She had no fear of the animals in the forest. She'd grown up roaming these trees and the mountains beyond and had never had trouble with any beast.

Men, though ... that was a different story. Her lips pulled down as she thought of Chris's warnings. In a way, she appreciated that he was concerned about her, but she had no fears in her beautiful mountain home. Not now that she was savvy, carried pepper spray, and knew defense moves. No one had threatened her in ten years, and she knew she was safe here. Chris had probably seen too much of the sadness and wickedness in the world with his profession. Spending time in the heaven that was Mystical Lake Resort would be good for him. She smiled, hoping by the end of his stay he'd believe her that everything in her idyllic spot was good and happy and—

A hand wrapped around her mouth and an arm slipped around her waist. Iris was lifted off the trail and into the woods. She tried to scream, thrash, and fight her way free, digging into the man's hands with her fingernails and kicking back at his shins as he held her off the ground. She couldn't

reach the pepper spray in her pocket, and the man was too strong for any of the moves she knew to be effective.

Her fear was closely followed by shock. How had Chris known? He'd warned her. Why hadn't she listened? *Please, please let Chris be watching over me and come help*, she prayed.

Her body trembled with fear and she felt weak in this strong man's grasp. She bit at the hand covering her lips, but it was holding her mouth too firm. She tried to stomp on the man's instep, but he easily avoided the movement.

Despite her panic, she recognized his scent. The man smelled amazing, like Chris's warm cologne. Could it be?

"Calm down, Iris, it's me." Chris's voice was soothing in her ear. He released her and stepped back.

Iris whirled to face him, raising her hand to smack him in the face.

He easily caught her hand. "I'm sorry if I scared you," he said, "but you didn't listen to my warning, did you?"

"You ... how dare you?" she sputtered. "I have nothing to be afraid of in these woods. Nothing except for you."

Even in the dark, she could see his smirk. "I assure you I would never harm you or any innocent person."

Something about his words struck her as interesting. Would he harm a non-innocent person? Maybe he'd had to with his career.

"Can I walk you home, please?"

Though his voice made her want to accept, she felt duty-bound to refuse. He had no right to terrify her, and what if tomorrow night she walked home like a scaredy-cat, looking over her shoulder and thinking every branch creaking was an ill-intentioned predator? She wouldn't do it. She wouldn't return to that scared sixteen-year-old. "No," she said sharply. "You have no right to scare me and ruin my beautiful night. Goodbye, Mr. Wilson." With that, she stomped back to the trail and toward home.

She could hear his footfalls behind her, but she ignored him, keeping her back straight and her head tilted proudly up. When she reached the cabin, she ran down the gravel road and up the steps to the wraparound porch. Glaring back over her shoulder, she saw him standing at the edge of the circle of light from the porch.

He stared steadily at her and tilted his chin up, all manly, tough, and appealing. “Good night, Iris. I’ll be watching over you.” He said the words with that smoldering look in his blue eyes that made her knees weak.

She clung to the railing, not sure how to respond. Then, like the professional woman she was, she stuck her tongue out at him. Chris smiled and then chuckled. Iris wanted to join in his mirth, but she was still upset with him. Though he hadn’t hurt her and he’d only held for a few seconds, she hated that he’d grabbed her and made her feel like a terrified teenager again. Giving him one last glare, she turned and hurried through the rear door, his laughter following her. If she wasn’t so ticked off at him, she might really like the guy.

## Chapter Five



The next five days passed slowly for Devon, mostly doing boring surveillance of Antonio and his goons. With the camera angles he'd installed and the security cameras for the resort all feeding into his phone and computer, he was free to roam the property. He didn't dare get too far away in case something happened. Not much did. Besides leaving a few times to check out the airport and different spots in the mountains and the valley, the bodyguards spent their time watching disgusting shows. Antonio focused on tapping away on his computer, they all ate a lot of room service, and the bodyguards looked as bored as Devon felt watching them.

A few times, Antonio took a phone call, and after he hung up, he would berate his men in Italian. Chris's translation tool was good, but Antonio didn't share any helpful information. Would it be too much to ask for names and meeting dates? It seemed they were all waiting for something that wasn't coming. Join the club.

Iris ate dinner in the resort's restaurant with Antonio two more times, and Devon hated every minute of it. Luckily, she didn't spend much more time with him than that, and from the camera angles Devon had access to, she appeared busy and happy.

Devon spent the most time away from his room in the early morning. He'd lift weights in the resort's gym and go on hikes or runs through the many forest trails. It was beautiful in the morning and there was little risk of his quarry doing anything. His phone would beep at him if Antonio or his men

left the room, but in the five days he'd monitored them, Antonio had started working on his computer around nine or ten and his bodyguards had slept until noon or later. Sadly if Interpol had gotten any fabulous insight from the computer files he'd sent to them they hadn't shared it with Devon.

His favorite part of the day was late in the evening, when he would follow Iris home. His assignments usually settled in for the night and watched movies or played poker, so he had little worry that they would leave the penthouse, and he always skimmed back through any footage he missed in case there was a significant conversation. Nothing yet.

He hadn't confronted Iris since that first night, but he didn't conceal himself, and she knew he was there. The first few nights, she'd given him irritated looks, but lately the looks seemed more inviting. Had she forgiven him for scaring her? He shouldn't have grabbed her like that and wished he could rewind and undo his rash move. He'd wanted to make a point that she needed to be smart and vigilant to protect herself, that anyone could easily grab her as she walked home alone at night, but it had been a stupid move on his part. He'd love to have a conversation with her without it turning into a battle. Yet if she didn't value her own safety, a battle might be his only choice to open her eyes.

He stopped below the porch like he had the other nights, waiting for her to turn to him so he could smile or laugh when she stuck her tongue out or simply glared at him. A movement around the side of the wraparound porch tore his gaze from Iris. A woman tottered along the wooden planks, and he relaxed when he recognized Grams.

"Grams." Iris's voice held a note of panic as she looked from him to her grandmother. "I'll be right in."

"And *who* is this?" Grams walked up to the railing, leaning over it and peering at him. "A handsome one, eh? You two playing Rapunzel and Flynn? She can let her hair down from the balcony, and you can climb on up."

Devon smiled. She was a quirky lady. He liked her immediately.

“Grams.” Iris rolled her eyes. “We’re not playing anything. Chris has been following me home the past five nights to keep me ... safe.”

“Safe?” Grams’s eyebrows rose, and her blue eyes filled with humor. “Safe. That’s a good one.” She lowered her voice. “You’re not really naïve enough to believe that’s why he’s following you, are you?”

Devon felt his neck heat up. True, he liked following Iris, but he was intent on keeping her safe, especially as she appeared to have no fears regarding her own safety. Her grandmother seemed to live in a fantasy world as well, thinking this valley was immune to crime and ugliness.

“Grams,” Iris said sharply.

Grams lifted her shoulders. “I’m just saying. There’s a lot of reasons a hot young man follows a beautiful girl home, and I don’t think safety is what he’s got in mind.” She clucked her tongue and looked him over as Iris gave him an apologetic grimace. “Well, you coming in or not?”

Devon put his hand to his chest. “I’d be honored to come in,” he said.

“Good. High time we got to know each other. Come on. I’ve got cookies.”

Devon chuckled and jogged up the stairs. Grams walked slowly to the back door. Devon eased in close to Iris as they followed, and he asked quietly, “Are you okay with me coming in?”

Iris stared up at him, those aqua-green eyes filled with uncertainty but also with interest. “You try telling Grams no.”

“I wouldn’t dare.” He winked, but he wished she’d said that she wanted him around.

“I heard that,” Grams called out.

Devon and Iris shared a smile, and he liked being in cahoots with her. He hurried ahead to catch the door Grams opened and held it while Grams and Iris walked in, the latter



giving him a look that made his stomach heat up. Maybe she was more interested in him than she was letting on.

They walked through a dimly lit mudroom and laundry room and into a huge, two-story living area. The kitchen, dining, and living rooms were all open with wooden beams to support the upper story and a balcony that must've led to bedrooms. The wall overlooking the lake was two stories of glass, and he could see lights twinkling in cabins across the lake and the moon glittering in the lake's surface.

"Can I come back during the day and see the view out these windows?" he asked without thinking.

Grams smiled. "You, my boy, are welcome back anytime."

"Grams," Iris said in an undertone. "You don't even know him."

"Well, I like what I see." Grams gave her an imperious look, then asked, "Chips and homemade salsa, or homemade cookies?"

"Both, please," Devon begged before he could stop himself.

Grams chuckled. "See why I like him?" she asked Iris. "Sit, sit." She gestured to both of them.

Devon walked with Iris around the large island and pulled out a padded barstool for her before sinking into one himself. He leaned forward and watched as Grams pulled out a jar of salsa and a bag of chips, pouring the salsa into the bowl and gesturing for him to dig in. Devon didn't need to be asked twice. He scooped up a generous amount of salsa on the chip and popped it in his mouth, savoring the salty crispness of the chip and the blend of tomatoes, onions, peppers, garlic, and lime in the salsa. You couldn't beat a home-canned salsa. This one was a little spicier than his mom's, but he liked it.

"Delicious," he proclaimed before reaching for another chip.

Grams grinned as she pulled out a Tupperware of homemade chocolate chip cookies. "Milk?" she asked.

“Oh yes, please.”

Chuckling, she went for a glass and rummaged through the fridge for the milk. “Are they not feeding you good enough up at that lodge?”

Iris stiffened beside him.

“Oh no, the food is delicious,” Devon reassured them both. “You just can’t beat homemade salsa and cookies.” He picked up his glass of milk and saluted them. “With milk.”

“You act like a little boy going to grandma’s house,” Iris said.

He felt like a little boy going to grandma’s house. Of his grandparents, only his Granny Sue was still living. He missed her. She and Grams would get along famously. He grinned at Iris and held up a cookie to her lips. “Take a bite. You know you want to.”

Iris bit the cookie in half. “I’ll never turn down Grams’s cookies.”

He ate the other half. “Amazing,” he agreed.

“You’d never know she can’t turn down a cookie by that shape,” Grams said, pumping her eyebrows.

“Iris’s shape’s more delicious than your cookies,” Devon agreed; then he froze with a cookie to his lips as he realized what he’d said. “I mean ...”

Grams laughed heartily, and Iris was blushing but smiling. “It’s okay. I started it.” Grams leaned into the counter but didn’t sit.

“Would you like to sit down?” Devon asked. “We could move this late-night eating party to the table.”

Grams shook her head. “I don’t sit well. Tell me all about you, young man.”

Devon ate another chip loaded with salsa and said, “Nothing too exciting. Grew up in the Bay Area. I’m a security specialist, so I travel quite a bit for work. No wife, no children.”

“No home base?” Grams asked, and Iris shifted beside him.

He glanced at Iris and shook his head. “Not really. I go see my parents and siblings when I can, and I enjoy living in different locations.”

“You’re here for work?” Grams asked.

“No. This is actually vacation. I found pictures of the lodge and lake online and wanted to spend some time decompressing here. Unless you need me to update your security system?” He didn’t need to inform them that he’d already infiltrated it and it was sadly lacking.

Grams laughed as Iris stiffened. “No, sir. No need for much security up here. We’ve got cameras in case somebody sues us for slipping on a newly waxed floor or flipping off the high dive and hitting their head on the platform, but this valley is as safe as your mama’s arms.” Grams shot a look at Iris that Devon couldn’t decipher. “Only once in a while do we get a tourist who needs their butt kicked.”

Devon hated that slime Antonio even more for bringing his filth to this picturesque and quaint spot. He was grateful that Antonio had been on Interpol’s radar and that they’d hired Devon. What if Antonio had hurt Iris or Grams and Devon hadn’t been here? He shuddered and lied to Grams, “I’m glad to hear that, ma’am.”

“What branch of the military did you serve in?”

Devon had a bite of cookie in his mouth and was savoring the mixture of brown sugar, butter, vanilla, and semisweet chocolate. He swallowed hard and fast, and the delicious cookie got stuck in his throat. Grabbing his milk glass, he washed it all down before admitting, “The Army.”

She nodded. “They put you through school?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“They open your eyes to the world?”

He shrugged. His job had done that more than the military had. “Them and my work, ma’am.”

“They make you a man?”

“Them and my father, ma’am.” Though his father had taught him how to be a man with love and by great example of treating others with respect and kindness, especially his mom and sisters.

“My Burt served in the Navy.” Grams gestured to a picture on the coffee table, one that depicted a craggy man. “He was right proud of his service every day, and I was proud to be married to him. Good man.” Her eyes glossed over for a second.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he murmured.

“Thank you, son. He was ready to go to heaven. Parkinson’s. It stank at the end.” She clapped her hands together. “Well, now, back to you—no wife, no children. You have a girlfriend, or do you leave one in every port?”

Devon smiled at the Navy reference and couldn’t resist saying as he glanced at the beauty seated quietly by his side, “Maybe not every port.”

Iris’s eyes widened and she asked, “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Yes, but I was only teasing.” He smiled and studied her, his body warming at the thought of dating such a woman. “If I could date you, I would dump all the women in other ports.”

Grams hooted happily. “I knew I liked you.”

Iris studied him as if trying to discern his intentions. Devon wasn’t certain about those intentions himself. He was interested in her, he liked her, but he was on a job here, and it wasn’t a safe, happy, easy job. If he put her in danger, he’d never forgive himself. At the same time, he could claim that he was protecting her from Antonio if he talked her into dating him.

She must not have liked what she saw in his eyes, or maybe it scared her, because she turned away and murmured, “I’ve got an early morning.” Standing, she gave Grams a kiss on the cheek and Devon a quick wave, then trudged up the stairs.

Grams waited until her door closed before leaning across the table and clasping Devon's hand between her soft, warm fingers. "You keep flirting with and teasing her. She'll fall prey to those blue eyes. I know I would."

"Thank you, ma'am, but how do you know you can trust me?" Trust was a tricky thing in his line of work. He usually focused on trusting no one.

"First of all, it's Grams, not ma'am. Second of all, I have the gift of discernment, and I know a good egg when I see one." She patted his hand and took the milk to the fridge.

Devon ate another cookie to hide his consternation. If she truly had a gift of discernment, she'd know he was hiding something. When she walked back to face him, he caught a glint in her eyes—greenish-blue eyes very similar to her granddaughter's—that said she knew more than he wanted her to know, but she still trusted him. All of it put more pressure on him than he was ready for. Sure, he wanted to be around Iris more, but he couldn't compromise her or his job. If Grams had any clue what his purpose was here, she'd be cussing him, not feeding him cookies.

## Chapter Six



Iris was still confused when she woke the next morning and slid into running shorts and a tank top. Chris had said he wanted to date her, but instead of furthering the flirtations, she'd run away. Was it the mixed signals he gave with his eyes, or was she afraid of finding the right man for her? Even if Chris was that man, he was only here for a short time, and it sounded like his work took him around the world, or at least around the country. A man like that would never be content to settle down in Mystical Lake, managing a resort and taking hikes for entertainment.

She mulled over these thoughts as she blindly ran through the forest trails, not even soaking in the view of green trees, mossy rocks, and bubbling springs around her. Dang Chris for stirring her up and making her miss out on the beauty of her home.

Footsteps came crashing through the trail behind her. Iris would normally either continue on her run or turn around and greet the fellow runner or hiker, see if they wanted to run together and chat for a stretch. Not this time. When Chris had grabbed her the other night, it'd brought back those unwanted feelings of being a scared sixteen-year-old, and his warnings rang in her head. She found her heart thumping faster as she increased her pace, wanting to outdistance the person following her and not risk dealing with someone with untoward intentions. It ticked her off that Chris could scare her and make her run away like a wuss, but run she did.

She left the main trail and angled east on an overgrown one-track, back toward the lake and hopefully the safety of a nearby cabin. She heard the steps still coming behind her, and fear traced along her spine like an icy stranger. The person was definitely following her. Why else would they leave the wide, well-maintained trail and go along this unkempt path?

Bursting out of the trees, she surveyed her surroundings quickly. Uncle Jay and Catalina's cabin would be a short distance north. Upping her pace again, she dodged off the single-track and toward the lake. She thought she heard the person behind her calling to her, but she could hardly hear over her own loud footfalls and the pounding of her heart in her ears.

She reached the glistening, peaceful lake and could see Uncle Jay's dock fifty yards away. The best news was that Uncle Jay was sitting in a camp chair, fishing from the dock in the peace of the early morning. She had no oxygen to yell; she just kept running until she pounded along the wooden dock and toward the safety her uncle represented.

He was in the process of reeling in his line, but he turned in surprise. "Iris? You okay?"

She stopped at the end of the dock next to him, put her hands on her knees, and gasped for air. "Someone ... chasing ... me," she managed to get out.

Uncle Jay stood and dropped the fishing pole, his brow furrowing and his lips pinching together until they disappeared. They all knew about what she'd gone through the day of her mom's funeral, the day her dad had left. Grams was proud of her for putting it behind her, but Uncle Jay had appointed himself as her protector since her brothers and Cruz had left the valley, and he didn't take kindly to anyone looking the wrong way at her or Cat. It was as if he had to make up for his only brother giving up on Iris and the rest of the family.

"Who?" He turned as the loud footfalls she'd been running from approached. "Hey!" Uncle Jay roared at the intruder.

Iris watched as the person who'd been following her came into view, and her jaw dropped. Chris. He looked incredible in

a fitted T-shirt and knee-length shorts. He was hardly out of breath as he approached the dock and held up his hands. "It's okay. I'm a friend of Iris's."

"She said you were chasing her; she looked terrified." Uncle Jay stepped in front of her and protectively pushed her back.

Iris's left foot slipped off the dock. She tottered and reached for Uncle Jay but only caught the sleeve of his shirt as her right foot slid as well. She flailed and splashed into the cold lake.

"Iris!" She heard the yell from Chris as the water closed over her head.

She popped back up out of the water, not quite able to touch the bottom, beating her arms and kicking her legs to stay afloat. She was an all right swimmer but she felt disoriented and chilled clear through. She was alone and without a safety net, just like she had been when her mom died and her dad left her.

Chris shed his shirt, dropped a cell phone and ... was that seriously a gun? ... on the pile before sprinting along the dock and diving into the water next to her. He surfaced from his shallow dive, wrapped his strong arms around her, and lifted her higher out of the water and pulled her against him. "Are you okay?"

Iris clung to him, loving the warmth of his chest and the strength emanating from his body. The way he'd dived in to help her touched something deep inside of her, something that had been damaged when her mom died, her dad deserted her, and her brothers all left to make their fortunes. Chris was her anchor. She realized she could trust Chris to watch out for her, exactly like he'd been saying he would.

She realized it was silly, irrational thinking. He'd leave her just like everyone else had. Yet she couldn't dismiss the warmth, safety, and happiness he represented to her at this moment.



“What is going on here?” Uncle Jay demanded from above them on the dock.

Embarrassment rushed in, and Iris tried to disentangle herself from his arms, but Chris held on tight. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Iris stopped resisting and looked up at Uncle Jay. “This is Chris Wilson. He’s staying at the resort. He’s my ... friend?” She looked to Chris for confirmation.

“Well, sir.” Chris stared up at Uncle Jay, his warm, strong arms holding her even closer. “I’m hoping for more than a friend but haven’t been blessed with that opportunity yet.”

Uncle Jay gave him a stern look, though his blue eyes sparkled. “You treat my girl with respect, and maybe you’ll be blessed more than you can imagine.”

“Yes, sir.”

Iris’s face filled with heat, even though her body was chilled from the water. Well, every part that Chris wasn’t touching was cold. Her torso, which was wrapped tight in his embrace, was plenty warm.

“You good, sweetheart?” Uncle Jay asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

He smiled, waved, and walked toward the house, leaving them alone.

Iris debated fighting her away out of Chris’s arms or burying her face in the crook of his neck, see how that smooth flesh felt against her lips. The one thing she didn’t know if she could handle was meeting his gaze. “Um, thank you for ... diving in for me. As you can see, I’m fine.”

“You are fine-looking,” he murmured, his gaze tracing over her face. “But I’m worried about you. Why did you run from me? I called your name.”

Fire flashed through her. She pushed away from him, grabbed the dock, and launched herself out of the water. Chris easily popped up beside her. The sun was just rising over the eastern mountains, and his broad chest sparkled with droplets

of water. This was her second gift of seeing his muscular perfection, but she wasn't going to allow herself to become distracted by it.

“The reason I ran is you,” she said shortly.

“Me?” He put a hand on his chest, and his blue eyes turned somber. “You have to believe I could never hurt you, Iris.”

She blinked up at him, softening a bit that he was so intent on protecting her. “I don't think you'd hurt me, but all your warnings scared me, and I don't want to be scared. I want to feel safe and happy exploring my beautiful spot of earth.” She'd worked hard to put the fears behind her, meeting with her pastor regularly and focusing on deeper prayers. Her sanctuary couldn't be compromised now. This place was not only her safe haven; it also held her family together. She loved Grams, Cat, and Uncle Jay. She missed her dad, her brothers, and Cruz. She ached for her mom. The great memories of growing up together in this valley were all she really had now.

He nodded. “I'm sorry to scare you, but you need to be aware and safe. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you.”

She folded her arms across her chest, trying to protect herself from his sweet words. “Nothing is going to happen to me,” she insisted. When his eyes filled with this almost mocking doubt, as if she were an innocent simpleton, she shifted gears. If only he knew—but she'd never tell him. “Why are you carrying a gun on a trail run?” She pointed at his discarded shirt, phone, and gun.

His eyes widened with fear—not a fear of her or anyone else, but a fear of discovery. He concealed it quickly, but she had that unnerving feeling that he was hiding a lot from her. “Just habit.” He gave her an easy smile. “In my line of work, you're always prepared.”

Iris stepped up closer to him. “Tell me the truth. You're here on a job, aren't you?”

He opened his mouth. Would he confide in her?

Something sliced through the water close by, and then she heard movement below her. She glanced down. Beautiful Catalina. She looked pretty even in swim goggles and cap.

“Hello, my sweet cousin and the handsome bare-chested man. What’s going on here?” Cat pushed her goggles onto her swim cap and blinked her gorgeous dark eyes at them. She winked at Iris and then tilted her chin to Chris. “I’m Catalina Chadwick. You can call me Cat. You two look like you’re having fun.”

Chris smiled down at her, that charming smile that Iris loved yet hated. It was gorgeous, but he wore it like a mask to keep the world out. “Chris Wilson. Pleasure to meet you, Cat.”

Cat grabbed the dock and jumped up, trim and fit in her one-piece racing suit. She’d been a competitive swimmer in high school, traveling to meets in other states, and she’d gone through college on a swim scholarship. Iris had missed her horribly while she’d been away to school. Unless the lake was near-freezing, Cat swam in it most mornings. “You too. Did I interrupt something?”

“No, nothing.” Iris couldn’t meet her best friend’s gaze.

Cat pulled off her swim cap, and her long, dark hair fell down her back. “Why don’t you both come in for breakfast? Dad makes a mean breakfast burrito and promised me that was on the menu this morning.”

“I’d love to,” Chris said.

“I can’t,” Iris said at the same time.

Cat arched an eyebrow at her, silently begging her to reconsider.

Iris backed away instead. Chris was confusing her, and he was hiding something from her. Nobody just wore a gun when they were running around a peaceful valley. There was trouble in her haven, and he was working to find it—and he was lying to her about it. If he wanted to protect her, why wouldn’t he tell her the truth so she could protect herself? *Please, Lord, let my home be safe. Protect the good people here.*

“Lots of work today,” Iris said. “I have three in housekeeping still sick.”

“And you know how to wield a toilet brush well,” Chris said, smiling softly at her.

Iris couldn't resist returning his smile, but then she remembered that he was hiding things from her. “I'll see you soon, Cat.” She tilted her chin to Chris before running off the dock and toward the trails. Her feet sloshed in her wet shoes and her hair dripped down her back, but she wasn't about to turn around.

## Chapter Seven



Devon enjoyed breakfast with Cat and Uncle Jay. Cat teased him about Iris, but he just smiled at her and gave her evasive answers. The feel of Iris in his arms in the water had taken a toll on him. She'd looked great in her wet running clothes, and she'd felt even better. Had a woman clinging to him ever felt like that? Not that he could recall. It scared him, yet it made him want to hold her close over and over again.

He helped them clean up, then excused himself. He wasn't able to run back to the lodge with all that food in his belly, so he took a walk and enjoyed nature. The time was still before eight a.m., and a simple check of his phone told him that his quarry was asleep. Were they ever going to do anything? Many of his assignments were boring as he watched for criminals to make their move, but watching Antonio was excruciating, as he wanted to spend time with Iris. If only he was on vacation like he'd lied to her about.

Lied to her. Iris was interested in him yet wary. Did she know he was lying? Did Grams? Was that gift of discernment passed down from generation to generation? Cat and Uncle Jay had seemed great, but he'd kept the focus on them, asking all about Iris's swimming and her schooling, Jay's fishing, Jay's son Cruz, the resort, and this beautiful area.

He didn't like lying to Iris. That should have scared him as much as anything. He admired people with integrity, but in his line of work, there was usually no possible way to tell the truth. He knew his job was honorable and he'd helped take down more criminals than most average-sized police forces,

but for the sake of the good, honest people out there, he lied to criminals and he lied to the innocent. He also was diligent about keeping his identity secret to protect his family. If only he could tell Iris everything.

He shook his head and hurried through the beautiful lodge and into his room. The day passed slowly as he watched, listened through his translator, and waited and waited. Nothing happened besides Antonio working, maybe making another million dollars, and his goons watching porn.

Devon was also able to watch Iris whenever he caught her on the hotel's security cameras. He kept an almost constant eye on the one outside her office that gave glimpses of her with her office door open. He got through hundreds of burpees and push-ups as he watched and waited, so at least the day wasn't completely wasted. He also talked to the contact he'd been assigned to work with in the CIA, and Devon frustratingly had to admit that he had no information for them besides a few possible locations Antonio had scouted and the fact that they'd visited the airport. Maybe Antonio was here to rest and relax, but if that was true, why did the man hardly leave his room? Devon had promised he'd call the instant he heard anything about a meeting or place.

The men were all settled in their separate rooms, watching shows Devon really didn't want to focus on, when the resort cameras showed Iris step out of her office and shut down her lights. Devon slid into some Sanuks, grabbed his phone, wallet, and gun out of habit, and rushed out into the hall and down the stairs. He was only on the second floor, and he'd found that the stairs were faster than the elevator.

He burst out onto the main floor and rushed out the closest door, stepping onto the wide patio that ran the length of the back of the resort and extended over the peaceful lake. He ran along the dock toward the west, the direction of Iris and Grams's cabin.

"Hey," a voice said from the shadows.

Devon spun, and Iris materialized before him. She looked so beautiful in a white button-down shirt and red skirt with

those heels he loved seeing on her. “Hey.” He lifted a hand and tried to calm his breathing. It wasn’t easy with her striding toward him so purposefully.

His eyes widened as she came right into his space. Devon felt his chest rising and falling quickly and wondered how, with all his training and years of experience, he couldn’t school his expression and hide his reactions. This woman in front of him was messing with him, and he loved every second of it.

“I’ve been thinking about you all day,” she said in a sultry voice that made his heart threaten to beat out of his chest and his throat feel dry and scratchy.

He cleared his throat and managed, “You have?” *Smooth, Devon, real smooth. Come on, think James Bond, man.*

“All day.” Her voice deepened, and she put both hands on his chest.

Devon couldn’t catch a breath. He might die from lack of oxygen, as his throat now felt like it was closing off, but dying would feel so good with her hands on him, her blue-green eyes staring into his, and the smell of her sweet perfume tantalizing his senses. “Wh-what have you been thinking?” he managed. James Bond would be severely disappointed, but come on. Devon was a top-notch spy and normally was good with the ladies, but that meant nothing when an incredible woman like Iris Chadwick was finally showing interest in him.

“Yes,” she purred, easing in closer. Then her voice rose a notch and her eyes flashed and she said, “Thinking about what a jerk liar you are.” She shoved him as hard as she could.

Devon would have been kicked out of all spy organizations everywhere if anyone had heard him yelp in surprise as he stumbled off the dock. His only reaction besides the unmanly yelp was instinctively grabbing Iris’s arm in an attempt to stay upright.

She yelled as he yanked her with him. The cold water hit him, covering his head and giving him a mouthful of lake water, as his mouth had been open yelping. He sprang off the

bottom—it was deeper here than it had been at Cat’s dock—and his head burst out of the water. Still holding on to Iris’s arm, he swam quickly to the dock, tugging her with him.

“Let me go,” she demanded.

Devon obeyed, but only so he could yank out his cell phone and pistol and set them on the dock. Her eyes widened as she looked at the pistol, and she gave him a disgusted glare. Instead of saying anything about the Glock, she spat, “You pulled me in.”

“I instinctively grabbed for something to stabilize myself when you pushed me.” He swept at his face. “I can’t believe I fell for you acting like you were into me.”

She was still glaring at him. “I might be into you if you’d tell me why you carry a pistol to walk me home each night, how you know exactly when to walk me home, and why you’re really here.”

Devon pushed out a breath. This was why he didn’t allow himself to get involved with locals. He planted his hands on the dock and leapt up, feeling like he weighed four hundred pounds with his clothes and shoes soaked.

Bending down, he offered his hand. Iris ignored his hand and tried to pull herself out, but her fitted skirt restricted her movements and she landed on her knees, not her feet. Devon wrapped his hands around her waist and easily lifted her to her feet. She stepped quickly away from him, looking glorious with her wet hair trailing down her back and her clothes clinging to her.

Devon scooped up his phone and his gun, shoving the latter into the back of his pants and shaking the former. “They claim they’re waterproof, right?”

Iris pulled out her own phone and shrugged. “I hope so. I heard the rice trick was actually a bad idea.”

He nodded, then gestured with his hand. “May I walk you home?”

Iris folded her arms across her chest. “You implied to Uncle Jay this morning that you were interested in dating me.”



Devon's eyes widened. He would absolutely love to date her, after he finished this job and could get back here. It would be well worth a break from work to see where things went with Iris, and then he could return to his pursuit of fifty million and retirement. He was at thirty-two million, and it had taken him eight years of very hard work. Another eighteen million wasn't going to be quick or easy. "I would," he admitted, trying his level best to be honest with her whenever he could.

Her eyes softened, and she said, "I would love to have you walk me home, if you'll answer some questions honestly for me."

Devon's spine stiffened again. He would try to be honest, but he couldn't compromise this mission. If he promised that he would keep her safe, even if he couldn't give her details, what would she say? She'd probably push him back in the lake.

She was watching him and waiting. Devon passed a hand over his face, glanced around at the deserted patio, and admitted in a quiet voice, "I'll try my best, Iris, but my career doesn't lend itself to honesty."

She gave him a concerned glance, turned, and started walking forward. Devon fell into step beside her. "This is the second time today that I've had to walk in wet shoes because of you," she said.

Her comment wasn't what he'd been waiting for, and he chuckled. "I blame the first one on Uncle Jay."

She smiled. "How was breakfast?"

"Delicious. I really like your uncle and Cat."

"Thanks." They stepped off the patio and continued past the pools. "Cat is my best friend and business partner."

"Partners in crime. You two could take on the world with a toilet brush."

"For sure ..." She smiled contentedly. "But we're happy to make our little corner of it a wonderful experience for all who come to visit our beautiful valley."

Devon thought that was admirable and interesting and it hit him that Iris would never leave this valley for more than short vacations. He knew that shouldn't matter to him, but it did.

They continued along the dirt path past the adventure course and beach spot. As soon as they were in the woods, she looked at him. "You're here on a job," she stated.

Devon swallowed. Despite all his training and all his instincts, he found himself admitting in a croaky voice, "Yes."

"Aha!" She triumphantly jabbed a finger at him, hitting him in the shoulder. "I knew it. Why did you lie to me?"

He splayed his hands, hoping he could toe this crazy line he was trying to walk. He should never give an innocent local information, but he wanted Iris to trust him. He wanted it so badly. "I did it to protect you."

She narrowed her eyes at him as they slowly walked along the darkened trail. "The way you talked, you design or install security systems or something, but that's a lie too, isn't it?" She didn't wait long enough to let him figure out how to explain. "I think you're more like James Bond."

He smiled now. "I try."

"You try to be like James Bond? So you're like a super spy?" Her voice was getting louder as she got excited, or upset—he couldn't tell which.

Devon had no choice. He wrapped his arm around her waist and covered her mouth with his other hand. They stopped in the middle of the trail. She went still in his arms, but he could feel her breathing quicken under his palm. He whispered in her ear, "Please keep your voice down. I want to share with you, but if someone was around and overheard, it could be tragic for my mission and dangerous for you."

He stared into her aqua-colored eyes, and she looked so beguiling and beautiful it was all he could do to remove his hand when she slowly nodded, not kiss her like he was aching to do. "Thank you," he murmured.

"Can you please tell me, everything?" Her eyes were lit with interest and excitement, as if this were some movie set

she'd walked onto.

Devon didn't know what to do, and he hated not knowing what to do. He was always the epitome of cool under pressure but right now he realized he was irrational. He wanted to kiss Iris and forget he was on a job and pretend he knew nothing about espionage. He backed away. "I apologize, Iris, but maybe this wasn't a good idea."

"What?" She straightened and looked offended.

She was tugging him in much too fast. Watching how kind, fun, and smart she was on those monitors had made him want to be with her. He needed to step back, evaluate, plan, and most of all, pray. Maybe then he could share ... some things. "I need some time," he said.

"So you don't want to date me?" She put a hand on her hip and tossed her hair sassily, but her eyes revealed that he'd hurt her.

"I don't want to hurt you, Iris, and I'm very interested in you, but you have to understand you're asking a lot of me."

His words seemed to help a little bit. "How much time do you need?" she asked, biting at her fuller bottom lip.

"Hopefully, I can share more with you tomorrow, and then maybe we can make a plan to date?" The words were more optimistic than he felt about the situation, but he wanted to be with her, more than he'd ever wanted to be with someone before.

"Okay," she said simply. Giving him a sweet smile, she turned and walked away.

Devon watched her go, wishing he could chase her down, share all of his secrets, and then kiss her until the sun shone tomorrow. He passed a hand over his face, and after he heard her door close, he walked slowly back to the lodge. *Please, Lord, a little help here.*

## Chapter Eight



The next day passed more slowly than any of the previous week. Devon woke early to exercise, but sadly, he didn't see Iris on the trails or at the gym. When he wasn't watching the men on the monitors, he watched her. Did she know he was watching her? She was cuter than ever. Could he share everything with her tonight? Would she be satisfied with a partial explanation? He'd prayed hard last night, but so far, no inspiration had come.

As nighttime fell, Antonio and his guards were predictably settled in their rooms, and Devon felt he could go walk Iris home. Was tonight the night he would be able to share with her, kiss her, and tell her how irresistible she was to him? His heart thumped quicker.

Falling to his knees, he said a heartfelt prayer. Peace and warmth washed over him. There were no words of inspiration or direction on what to say to her, but he had a sense that it would all work out and that he could trust the Lord, and maybe he could trust Iris too. She was genuine and sweet, and she loved the Lord. If ever he could trust someone besides his family, it was Iris.

He stood and noticed that she was closing down her computer. Pocketing his phone and key card and shoving his gun in out of habit, he hurried out of his room, down the hall, and down the stairs.

He reached the huge patio off the back of the resort and found her standing there, looking beautiful in a fitted shirt and

skirt. "Hello, beautiful," he said, hoping it sounded suave and not out of breath and lost over her like he felt.

"Hiya, handsome," she said, smiling sweetly at him. Tilting her head, she asked, "You up for a walk?"

"Sounds better than being pushed in a lake."

She laughed, and he hurried to her side. She reached out her hand. Devon took it, and her touch filled him with that same warmth and peace he'd felt after his prayer. The timing was right.

They walked away from the resort and toward her and Grams's cabin. Iris told him about her day, and he wished he had something exciting to share about his. As they stopped on the gravel road by her cabin, she asked, "Did you decide you can share more with me so we can maybe date?"

Devon smiled and gently brushed her hair over her shoulder. "I've been praying about it, and I feel I can share some things with you." He couldn't share all. He didn't want to hurt or endanger her or risk messing up this job.

"Thank you. I have an idea," she said in a quiet but excited voice.

"Okay?"

"Grams has a rowboat tied onto our dock. We could row out into the lake and talk where no one could hear us."

Devon's heart was racing now. Alone, with this woman, on a boat on the lake at night? Yes, please. Yet before he got in a position where he couldn't react quickly, he needed to check. "Can you give me a moment?" he asked.

She nodded. "Of course."

Devon walked a few paces away and opened his phone. It had seemed fine today, for the dunking it had taken in the lake yesterday. He pulled up several camera angles of the penthouse. All three men were still in their separate rooms, watching their televisions. He should be safe to go on a rowboat ride. It wasn't like his client owned him or his time. They asked him to deliver information and sometimes get

involved to bring down a criminal. He could still accomplish that tomorrow. Tonight, he was going on a rowboat ride and somehow telling his secrets without telling his secrets, and—if anybody in heaven loved him—kissing this beautiful woman.

## Chapter Nine



Iris felt her heart thumping faster and her skin prickle with awareness as Chris brushed past her on the dock, then waited, steadying the rowboat while she climbed in before climbing in himself. She felt like they'd taken a step back in time and she was in some nineteen-twenties movie as he grabbed the oars and rowed them surely and swiftly toward the middle of the lake. All she needed was a dress and parasol, and the sun would have to be up. She was pretty sure that in those old movies where the strong man rowed the admiring woman out in the lake, it wasn't after ten p.m.

The moon was a little thicker than a sliver tonight and reflected prettily in the water. The stars were on fine display, and lights from the cabins danced next to the shore and in the water. It was hard for Iris to pull her gaze from Chris. With his T-shirt fitting him very nicely and him rowing with both oars, he cut a mighty nice picture. Most people struggled to row at first, but Chris was a natural. His strong jaw and well-formed lips were tempting her. She wanted to brush her hand across his jaw and brush her lips across his—okay, maybe more than a brush of the lips.

She tried to mentally slap herself. This man was a spy. He'd all but admitted he was James Bond. He was handsomer and more well-built than James Bond. She wondered if he was as good of a spy. Or was James Bond considered a secret agent? Hmm.

Neither of them said anything as the oars sliced through the water and the boat slid easily away from shore. When they

were quite a distance away, he stopped rowing.

“You don’t think we can be heard out here?” she asked.

He shook his head. “We’re at least five hundred yards from shore, and the normal intelligible outdoor range of the male human voice in still air is one hundred and eighty meters, or approximately two hundred yards. We should be fine, *if* we don’t get in a yelling match.” He smiled.

She grinned as well and held up her hands. “No promises.”

“Well, just don’t push me in the water again. Two dunkings yesterday was more than enough.”

“Wimp,” she teased, though there was nothing wimpy about this man.

He chuckled and leaned back against the rear of the boat. That was the advantage of his seat, whereas hers had no back rest.

She wrapped her hands around her legs and said, “So I can start drilling you with questions?”

“You can start.” He blew out a long breath. “I don’t want to lie to you, Iris. Truly, I want to share all with you. But if I cannot answer, I will tell you that, and no amount of prying is going to change my answer.”

“I guess that’s fair.” Though she didn’t really like it. She liked him, and she wanted to know him, not some fake persona. Her eyes widened, and her first question came out in a rush: “Chris Wilson isn’t even your name, is it?”

He stared at her. “No, ma’am,” he whispered.

She wanted to beg for his real name, but first she had something else to ask. “You say ma’am and sir a lot. Did you grow up in the South?” He didn’t have a Southern accent, but as a spy, he’d probably been trained to talk in a way that blended in.

He shook his head. “I grew up close to San Francisco, just like I told you. I went to college in Georgia, and then most of my military time was spent on bases in the South as well.”



“Did the military lead you to the dark path of a spy?”

He smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“So, like ... army intelligence?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t seem willing to share much more, so she went a different route. “Can you tell me about your family?”

His blue eyes lit up. “Now that’s an easy one. I have two older sisters, two brothers-in-law, four nephews, and two parents who should write a book on being involved and loving.”

She forced a smile. Her dad could write a book on deserting those who cared for him. She tried to remind herself that he’d been devastated by her mom’s death, but it still hurt too much to dwell on the knowledge that she and her brothers weren’t enough for him. “Four nephews sounds fun.”

“It’s a party. Wrestling and football nonstop with my little men.” He smiled fondly.

“Do you see them much?”

His smile faltered. “Not as much as I’d like. Every few months, I escape for a visit.”

“I bet they miss you.” And maybe they all felt as deserted by Chris, or whatever his name was, as she felt by her dad and brothers. Not that she really blamed her brothers. There wasn’t a lot of opportunity in the valley to create a million-dollar construction business, be a Hollywood stuntman, play professional hockey, or be a smokejumper, unless a dreaded forest fire got too close. All four of them came to visit regularly.

She did blame her dad. She could understand how hard it was to recover from her mom’s death. She also could relate to wanting to fly somewhere warm in the wintertime, but this valley was paradise. She was sure the Caribbean was as beautiful as the pictures he occasionally texted to her, but was it out of line to hope he’d come home and visit? Ten years was a long time to not have a hug from or a talk with her dad.

Especially considering how close they used to be. Of course, whenever Grams, Iris, or Uncle Jay asked him to come, his only response was that the plane flew both ways. Her brothers understood about her panic attacks and never asked her to leave her safety net, visiting her as often as they could.

“Of course they do.” Chris spread his hands wide, and the muscles in his shoulders flexed. “Who wouldn’t miss all of this?” His blue eyes twinkled mischievously.

Iris laughed, even though staring at his muscular body made her throat feel dry. “Who indeed?”

“What other questions do you have?” He seemed relaxed and unfazed as he reclined against the back of the boat. “They’ve been easy to answer so far.”

Iris lifted her eyebrows and asked a non-easy question she felt she had the right to know. “What job are you here for? Are my people in danger?”

He straightened, and his eyes shuttered. “Your people?” he questioned.

She gestured around the lake at the town and the cabins and her resort. “My people. This is my town. These are my friends. It’s always been peaceful and happy here. They cannot be in danger.” Her voice was too intense, almost shaky, but she had to make sure the people in her town were safe. Only once, ten years ago, had danger come to their valley. She had been the recipient of that, and she’d survived the attack better than she had her mother’s death and her father’s abandonment. Clinging to that tree, she’d found herself grateful she’d escaped that man, but mostly she’d prayed that her dad would turn around and come save her. He never had. Instead, her brothers and the people in this town had come for her, rescued her. She’d take the brunt of the pain and fear again if it could protect the innocent people she loved.

“I can’t tell you about my job, Iris, but with the people involved, there would definitely be danger to your town ... if I wasn’t here.”

“You think pretty highly of yourself.” She liked his confidence and the fact that he was willing to protect others.

“No.” His gaze intensified on her, and she felt like they were the only two people in the world. “But I swear to you I will keep you safe.”

Iris caught a breath and put a hand to her chest. She wanted to gush her gratitude, but instead she whispered, “And everyone at the resort and in my town, you’ll keep them safe too?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Thank you,” she managed.

The water lapped against the boat and the stars twinkled down at them, but neither Iris nor Chris moved. Finally, she felt she had to say, “I don’t want to compromise whatever job you’re on, but maybe if you could give me some hints—who you were after—I could keep myself and others safer.”

He studied her, then finally broke from her gaze. Focusing on a large cabin with all the windows lit up, he said quietly, “If I can give you any details that will protect you, I will do it. Though I’m an independent contractor and my own man, I cannot risk compromising the target.”

“Can you tell me why they’re in my valley?”

“The people I’m watching are assumed to be drug runners and possibly traffickers. I believe they’re here to scout out and set up distribution points.”

Her blood ran cold. Drugs? Human trafficking? In her valley? No! “Are they staying at my resort?”

He simply stared at her, and she knew the answer. Her mind raced through her current guest list. Eighty-five suites, but almost all had two to four occupants. It was a large list to think through: families, honeymooners, and couples on a getaway. There were a few groups of young men using the lodge as a base for backpacking adventures. Could they be scouting out rendezvous points for drugs or trafficking? What about the Italian millionaire, Antonio? She’d researched him the night he’d arrived. He looked like an upstanding

businessman, but who knew? She supposed even a couple who appeared to be happily married could be a front for horrific business activities.

“Who do you work for?” she asked Chris.

“Lots of different organizations.”

“If you get the information you need, the good guys will come and take out the bad guys, right? Not that I don’t think you could do that single-handedly.”

He nodded and smiled slightly.

“I can help you.” She leaned forward.

His mouth turned down as if he was worried that she’d combust. “No. I will not allow you to be in danger.”

She shifted on the hard seat. She didn’t want to be in danger either. She’d tried danger, against her will, and she hadn’t liked it. “No, not like that. I mean I could give you access to the hotel’s security cameras and footage.”

He grunted out a surprised chuckle that turned into a full-blown laugh.

She leaned back, annoyed at his reaction, and said sniffily, “I apologize. I thought that might be helpful to you.”

He stopped laughing but couldn’t hide his smile. “I tapped into your security cameras within hours of my arrival here.”

Iris blinked in surprise. He was a spy. She didn’t know what she’d expected. “Oh,” was all she could think to say. But then comprehension of what he was saying rushed over her. “You’ve been watching me?” That made sense. That was how he knew exactly what time to walk her home each night.

He looked her over, and it was a look full of heat and appreciation that made her want to fling herself into his arms. That would flip the rowboat, but the risk of getting a dunking was nothing compared to the risk of losing her heart to this enigmatic man, who would leave her valley soon and probably never be back. “Yes,” he said in a husky whisper that made her flush with awareness. “I’ve been watching you, Iris.”

She swallowed hard, wondering if he'd liked what he'd seen. "And?" she managed to ask.

"And I like everything I've seen about you," he murmured, all smoky and sexy with his gaze and his voice. "How hard you work. The way you treat people. That beautiful half smile you always have on your face. The way you move." He paused as if to let that sink in, and then his blue eyes turned mischievous and he said, "And I've only caught you picking your nose twice."

"Ah!" She gave a gargled scream and moved to smack him, but the boat rocked dangerously. She stopped in mid-scramble and gingerly sank back down into her seat. "When we get back to shore, I'm going to give you a good punch for that one. Grams taught me very well to always use a tissue."

He chuckled. "I'll be waiting for that punch." He looked out over the water and appeared melancholy. "We'd better get back. We both still have jobs to do in the morning."

"Okay." She also didn't want this time to come to an end.

"Did you get enough of your questions answered?"

"To satisfy my curiosity?" she asked.

"To decide you'll give me a chance to date you," he returned.

She tilted her head and appraised him, thrilled that this mysterious, tough, and handsome man wanted to date her. "Maybe."

"What other questions do you have?" he asked apprehensively.

"What's your real name?"

Chris swallowed hard. Several moments ticked by before he said, "I never tell anyone my real name. It could endanger my family."

"Oh." She couldn't hide her disappointment, but she understood that reasoning. "I understand."

“Thank you.” He grabbed the oars and rowed steadily back to shore. He didn’t say anything, and she kept sneaking glances at him and wondering what he was thinking. He wanted to date her. That thought made her flush with excitement, but how did she date a super spy who would leave her without a backwards glance once the job was done? Her dad had left right after her mom’s graveside service, and he hadn’t come back for so much as a Christmas party. It had rocked her safe, happy world to lose her mom to death and her dad because he’d checked out of his family’s lives after losing the love of his life.

Clinging to that tree, she’d prayed desperately, and the people she loved had come for her. She had only attempted to leave the valley a few times since. It hadn’t gone well. This was her spot; she was happy, safe, and well-loved here. Not even this incredibly appealing man could make her leave. She blushed at her wayward thoughts. He was asking to date her, not take her away to Venice.

The time passed too quickly as her mind raced, and before she knew it, he was catching the dock and then tying them off. Chris stepped out of the boat and reached out to her. She put her hand in his, and he tugged her onto the dock and straight against his chest. Iris’s hands went inadvertently to the muscular shoulders encased in his shirt. She reveled in the firm flesh under her fingertips and especially in the warmth of Chris’s intense blue gaze.

He gently wrapped both arms around her lower back and enveloped her in his embrace. His head lowered and breathing became difficult, but he didn’t claim her mouth like she was hoping for. “Iris,” he whispered huskily against her lips.

Iris was certain nobody had ever said her name more beautifully.

“I wish I could tell you everything,” he continued. “In my business, trust is elusive, slippery, and often dangerous.”

She drew in a breath and nodded that she understood, though she hated it.

“But I want to trust you.” His words carried across her lips and vibrated through her. She appreciated those words. He wanted to trust her, but could he?

He ran his hands up her back and across her neck, framing her face with his palms. Iris managed a tremulous smile, but her knees were knocking together from the intense, passionate look in his eyes and the incredible sensation of being touched by him. He lowered his head, and their lips gently brushed. Iris’s entire body trembled from the sheer joy of that simple kiss.

He paused and whispered, “My name is Devon.”

Iris’s heart threatened to pound out of her chest.

“Can you say it, please?” he asked softly.

“Devon,” she murmured, and time stood still as the significance of this moment passed between them. He’d trusted her enough to tell her his name, and he’d been waiting to hear it from her lips.

“Thank you.” He traced his thumbs along her cheeks. “I love my name on your lips.”

She wanted a whole lot more on her lips. “Devon,” she said again. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He grinned, and then he captured her mouth with his own. He drank her in, and she felt like he poured his hopes, dreams, and true self into their connection. The kiss was as pure as any she’d experienced, and it was more meaningful to her than any man’s touch had ever been. Devon didn’t just want her for today; he wanted her for always. She knew that as surely as she knew his lips lit up her mouth and expanded and enriched the small bubble of her world. She’d never need to travel to exotic locations. She had everything she needed right here in her valley, including Devon.

Devon. She loved that name, and she loved even more that he’d confided in her. It should’ve been unsettling that he was some clandestine agent and could be lying to her, but she knew he wasn’t. He trusted her, and she trusted him.

Devon slowed down the kisses and stared at her. She was unable to slow down her breathing. "I never tell anyone my name," he said again, almost in wonder.

"Well, I'm a lot more special than 'anyone,'" she sassed.

He chuckled and wrapped her up tight. "That you are, Iris." Then he was kissing her again. It was only a short kiss, though, before he pulled back and said, "I've been fantasizing about something."

"Have you now?" She hoped she was part of that fantasy.

He pulled out his phone and wallet and then the gun from the back of his pants. It gave her a shiver of delight to know this man was tough and threatening to some, but not to her. He tugged her cell phone out of the pocket of her skirt, and she stared at him as he set everything on the dock.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm hoping you would help me recreate my fantasy."

"Well ... maybe."

He grinned, wrapped his arms around her waist, lifted her off her feet, and jumped off the dock with her in his arms.

The chilly water wrapped around her as surely as his arms. When they came up out of the water, she was spluttering. "What are you *doing*?"

He chuckled. "I've gone in the water twice for you, and each time I wanted to hold you close while I kissed you. Can you help me with that fantasy?"

She laughed and shook her head, snaking her arms around his neck. "If I must."

Tenderly, he wiped water from her face with the pad of his thumb, trailing it along her lips. She quivered from the sensation. "Can you make it even better by saying my name again?" His smile was almost shy, so different from the confident smirk he usually displayed.

"Devon," she said in a husky voice she hardly recognized. She pulled him in tighter and whispered it again. "Devon."



She could feel his warm body tremble against hers, and then he bent and replaced his thumb with his lips, holding her close to him as he gave her a beautiful, longing kiss. As far as fantasies went, Iris agreed that this one was definitely worth creating.

## Chapter Ten



Devon woke early the next morning, feeling like he could take on the world, despite the fact that he'd only slept a few hours. His targets were of course sleeping off their drugs-and-porn fest from the night before, so he hit the resort's gym and then the running trails, his mind on constant repeat of being with Iris last night. Had he told her too much? He should be concerned about his lapse in judgment, but he was amazed to find he didn't care. Iris was worth bending his self-made rules a bit. It wasn't like spies had some code of ethics. It was all about getting the information and getting the job done. He could ad-lib a little bit for Iris, as long as he brought down Antonio.

He heard a runner coming the other direction. Glancing up, he spotted Iris, and his chest swelled with a happiness he'd only felt previously around his own family. This happiness was combined with an attraction and connection he knew could never be equaled.

"D—" Her voice stuttered, and her face flashed an attractive pink. "Chris! How are you?"

Devon ran up to her and swept her off her feet, spinning her around. She giggled and held on to his neck. As he set her down, he took her lips in a soft, fulfilling kiss. He trailed kisses to her ear, liking the salty taste of her soft skin, and whispered, "I can't tell you anything, can I? You almost yelled my name."

She squeezed him tight around the neck and muttered, "I am so, so sorry. I'm not very good at this super spy stuff."

He chuckled. "It's okay. I can teach you."

She stared into his eyes, her aquamarine gaze mesmerizing him. "What can you teach me?" she asked breathlessly.

"This." Then he was kissing her again, and they didn't stop for a good, long time. Finally, he released her and took her hand. "You want to run or walk together for a bit?"

She nodded. "Walk."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "You don't want to be out of breath so we can talk?"

"You make me out of breath enough," she laughed. "If I added running to that, I'd be panting for air."

He smirked. "I don't mind." Squeezing her hand, he headed deeper into the forest.

"Can I ask you more questions today?"

"I think it's my turn, actually." He smiled down at her. She was so beautiful with her blond curls swept into a ponytail, her face fresh and clean, and those bluish-green eyes sparkling at him. Yet it was her personality and depth that sucked him in—the way he'd watched her over the past six days as she interacted with children, elderly people, her employees, and her own cousin. She was kind, thoughtful, and witty. He wanted to know so much about her.

"I'm pretty boring. I don't know that you'd have many questions for me." She ducked her head.

"Boring?" Devon released her hand and wrapped his hand around her trim waist. "Sweetheart, I've traveled the world and been around many interesting people. You, beautiful Iris, are the most fascinating and intriguing person I've ever met."

She gave him a tremulous smile and cuddled into his side. "That was pretty sweet. I'll let you ask some questions now."

He laughed. "Okay." Taking her hand again, he walked happily by her side as his mind raced with questions for her. Couldn't she just tell him every detail from childhood on up? He was more excited to learn about her than when he'd been a

newbie straight out of the Army and could hardly anticipate his first solo cases. “Tell me about your family.”

Her body stiffened, and she said nothing.

Despite a dart of apprehension at her response, or lack of response, he pressed on. “I know Grams, Uncle Jay, and Cat. Do you have any siblings? Where are your parents?”

As she kept silently walking, horror crept over him. He started imaging all kinds of scenarios. He could’ve sworn she’d mentioned her parents earlier, at least her dad, but now he wondered if he was remembering right. Maybe her parents were dead, or they were in prison, or they’d been kidnapped by the mafia. The last one might be a little far-fetched to someone who hadn’t seen it all. He should’ve been smart enough to leave it alone and ask about something different, but he was a spy, not an interrogator.

“Yeah, Grams, Uncle Jay, and Cat are great,” she finally said. “Did Cat tell you she has a brother?”

“Yes.” At least she was talking now, but he grew even more concerned about her parents. “Cruz, right? Pro wakeboarder and snow-skier?”

“That’s right. You should Google him sometime. Insanely cool videos.”

“I’ll bet.” He paused, and when she still didn’t offer anything, he asked hesitantly, “Do you have any siblings?”

“Oh ... yes!” She laughed. “I have four brothers. All older.”

“I could’ve guessed you were the baby.”

“Ha ha. You’re the baby too.” She jabbed at his side and smiled up at him as they wound up a gradual incline.

He started to relax. Maybe she just wasn’t used to talking about herself. She spent her days seeing to the needs of others, and she was probably an expert at drawing everyone else out while keeping her true self hidden. He wanted to be the one privy to that true self. “Where are your brothers now? None of them wanted to be part of Mystical Lake Resort?”

Iris shook her head jerkily, like it pained her that her brothers weren't around. She spoke quickly. "Aster is the oldest. He owns a large construction company in Jackson, Wyoming. Super successful. Cedar is the second. He's a stuntman, and he's been in some big films. Right now, he's making crazy good money in the new *Crusaders* series."

"Wow, that's great. I saw the first one and loved it."

"Allison Bradford was amazing, wasn't she?"

"For sure. Tough chick."

Iris smiled. "Then Quill is the third. He plays hockey for the Colorado Avalanche."

"Oh? That's sweet. I know Beckett Tanner—well, I met him through a friend once, and Beckett gave us front-row tickets to a game. He's a great guy."

"Quill thinks Beck is amazing. Then Ren is fourth. He's my closest in age and I see him the most. He's a smokejumper so whenever they're stationed close or if they have a rare break, he comes to stay." She paused and said, "So that's it. Four awesome brothers. I don't see them as much as I'd like, but they come visit as often as they can." She smiled, but it was definitely forced and she wouldn't meet his gaze. "We're all too busy conquering our own corners of the world."

He wanted to ask her if she'd ever leave this corner, even for a short time, but it didn't seem likely. "And your parents?" he asked gently.

"My parents." Her brow furrowed.

"Did they pass?" Devon asked.

She stared up at him, her mouth drooping. "My mom did. Cancer when I was sixteen."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you." She looked away. "My dad's still alive. He just kind of broke after my mom died. So he left and ... never came back home."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

“When I was sixteen,” she said quietly.

Devon stopped walking, feeling his own jaw drop. “Sixteen? Where is he?”

She looked down at the needle-strewn path. Swallowing, she managed, “Last I heard, he was in St. Thomas.”

“But he comes to visit?”

She shook her head shortly.

“You go visit him?” he asked hopefully.

There was another quick shake of her head.

“Why?” He couldn’t resist asking.

She looked up at him, and those aqua-colored eyes were really bright in the predawn morning light. Was she going to cry? Ah, crap. His experience with women crying was almost as lacking as his interrogation experience. His sisters were both older than he was, and he hadn’t seen them or his mom cry often. On those occasions, he’d been putty in their hands.

“My dad says he’s done with the cold ... that’s why he doesn’t come home. Sometimes he texts me.” She shrugged. “I think my mom’s death broke him and there are too many memories of her in this valley.”

He looked over her beautiful face, saddened by the anguish written there. He missed his family and wished he could go home more often, but he knew without a doubt that if his parents knew where he was and that they wouldn’t jeopardize a mission, they would travel anywhere in the world to see him, talk to him, and give him a hug. His parents and sisters, especially his mom, adored him. How could Iris’s dad not feel the same? She was extraordinary, sweet, fun, smart, and hard-working. He should be proud of her and want to see the woman she’d become.

Devon asked in a controlled voice, “And you’ve never been offered the opportunity to visit him?”

She let out a heavy sigh. “I have some ... issues.”

Should he leave this alone or delve deeper? He'd shared a lot with her last night, more than he'd ever thought he'd share with anyone outside his family, and felt he'd exhibited a lot of trust. Could she trust him too? "With?" he asked, searching her eyes.

"Doc Penrose diagnosed it as abandonment issues and panic attacks."

Devon nodded his understanding and then waited, hoping she'd share more.

She gathered herself, took a long breath, and then started speaking in a small voice, making him lean closer to hear. "The day my dad left, I was ticked at him for leaving. I'd always been his girl, and I couldn't believe he'd desert me the day of my mom's funeral. And he wasn't just leaving me. He was leaving Grams, his sons, his brother, his niece and nephew, this beautiful valley—everything and everyone who loved him and could help him through my mom's loss."

She studied her hands. "I could understand he was broken—my brothers and I felt the same—but how could leaving help?" She paused but didn't seem to be expecting an answer so he simply waited. "I hid in an empty suite of the lodge so he couldn't find me to say goodbye. Then I watched from the windows as he hugged everyone goodbye and left. I couldn't believe he'd really left without telling me goodbye." She shook her head and angrily brushed at some tears that trailed past her lashes. "I ran out of the lodge the back way along the patio to try to catch him but avoid seeing the rest of the family. As I made it around to the east edge of the parking lot, a guy was gunning through on his motorcycle."

She looked down now, and Devon's gut clenched as he feared the worst.

"He stopped as soon as he saw me," she continued in a quiet voice. "Asked me if I needed a ride." Her body shuddered, and Devon hoped he wouldn't be sick. "I jumped on, asked him to help me find my dad who was leaving the valley. He said sure and took off. We were ripping through the valley, and then we headed up the mountain pass. I was scared,

but something in me just had to get to my dad, tell him I loved him before he left me.” She paused, and he nodded his understanding, concerned by where this story was going.

“We were almost to the summit of the canyon road,” she continued, “when the guy grabbed my leg, leaned back, and said, ‘Good choice, pretty girl. We’ll find somewhere private, and I’ll make a woman out of you.’”

Devon’s stomach tried to claw its way out of his throat. He was going to be sick. He’d seen a lot of horrible things in his profession and thought he had a thick skin, but he couldn’t stand the thought of Iris being hurt. He didn’t know if he should interject something or keep silent.

She made his decision for him when she kept talking. “I may have only been sixteen and rarely left this valley, but I understood exactly what he was planning to do to me.” She took a breath and said in a shaky voice, “He spun off onto a side road that wound up the mountain. We were climbing; the road hugged the mountainside, and the opposite side was a crazy steep decline and then a drop-off. I was terrified, but I knew I had to get away. He spun out on the shale. The bike stalled, and I jumped off and went off the edge of the road.”

Devon’s eyes widened. “You got away?”

She nodded slowly, and his stomach settled a little bit. “I slid so fast down that mountainside. Then I saw the drop-off coming. It was a couple hundred feet I was going to free-fall. I could hear the guy yelling at me from above and knew I’d rather fall off that cliff than let him touch me.” Her eyes were terrified, even though her words were brave. “I smacked into a tree maybe ten feet before the edge. I wrapped my arms around that trunk and held on tight.”

“For how long?” His own voice felt tight.

“I don’t know. It must’ve been hours. The guy yelled at me for a while, but he must not have dared come after me. Finally, I heard his motorcycle leave. I prayed for my dad to come, but of course he didn’t even know I was in danger. The sun disappeared before I started hearing helicopters, truck engines, and finally people calling my name.” She smiled faintly.



“Sheriff Greenwood and search and rescue saved me; then my brothers, Grams, Cat, Cruz, Uncle Jay, and half the town were there.”

Devon didn't want to ask the obvious question, but he had to know. “Did your dad come back?”

She shook her head. “He was already in the airport—couldn't miss his flight.” She gave him a sad, defeated smile.

His eyes widened in horror. Sixteen? She'd barely escaped rape and survived a plunge off a cliff to her death. He understood that her dad had just lost his wife, yet how could he not put his child before his own pain? He couldn't miss his flight and had never come back since? Devon wanted to tear that guy apart who'd tried to hurt her and then ... okay, maybe he couldn't tear her dad apart, but he definitely had some words for him.

“I was all right,” she said bravely. “I mean, after a while. They caught the guy, so that helped. I've worked with my pastor to learn to turn to prayer. My brothers, Grams, Cat, and Uncle Jay have always been here for me, along with the whole town. My brothers and Cruz taught me self-defense and awareness so I can keep myself safe.” She gave him a significant look.

He felt horrible. “I'm so sorry I said you were too innocent and grabbed you that night.”

“You didn't know,” she said quietly.

“I still feel like a jerk. I'm sorry, Iris.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a half smile. “I truly have gotten past the attack and don't feel afraid, as long as I'm here. But I don't like to leave the valley. I feel like I can't breathe and like everything's closing in when I get to the top of the pass. Then I get tunnel vision, and sometimes I vomit.” She shuddered, then pulled from his hand and jogged away.

Devon caught up to her easily. He wanted to drag her to a stop and hug her, but he simply jogged by her side, praying for the right words. The birds twittered around them, and small animals scurried through the woods. He thought of nothing, no

comfort, no inspiration. The only thing running through his mind was a selfish thought: Iris would never leave this valley with him. He'd have to earn his fifty million and come back for her. Would she wait? Would she think he was betraying and deserting her like her dad had done?

He saw her cabin approaching as they finished their run, and he finally steeled himself and put a hand on her arm. "Iris."

She stopped running and turned to him, but she didn't meet his eyes. "Sorry," she said. "You at least have cool secrets. Mine are awful and depressing and—" She broke off as a sob strangled the words.

Devon didn't care that they were sweaty from the run, and he hoped she didn't care either. He opened his arms and prayed she'd take his offer. After her story, he wouldn't dream of forcing her into his arms, and he still felt awful for grabbing her the other night, no matter that she'd forgiven him.

She gave another little cry and flung herself against his chest, and he cradled her close. She let out heavy sobs and clung to him as she cried. Devon hoped this was helping her. He was happy to hold her all day, but he also wanted to help her heal.

She pulled back after several minutes of intense crying. Her face was splotchy and her eyes were bright, and he thought she'd never looked more beautiful. She self-consciously rubbed at her cheeks and then pushed her long, blond hair over her shoulder. "Sorry," she murmured.

"Sorry? You shouldn't be sorry. That jerk who tried to hurt you should be sorry for existing. Your dad should be sorry for deserting you. I should be sorry for grabbing you the other night in the dark. You are the last person in the world that should be sorry."

She stared up at him. "Oh, Devon." And then she kissed him.

Her kiss was salty and desperate, and he loved it. He loved how she needed him. He worked hard to excel at his career. He

knew he was one of the best in his field, but he was also an expert at not getting close to anyone. Being close to Iris felt more natural than breathing. She was meant to be in his arms.

She pulled back and said, “Thank you, Devon. I’ve never shared all those details with anyone except Pastor, and especially not broken down and cried so hard about it.”

“Even with Cat or Grams or your brothers?”

She shook her head. “They all know I have issues, but they’re embarrassingly kind about it, and when they bring it up, I change the subject and they don’t push me.” She smiled, but it was an embarrassed smile, not her usual radiant one. “Most people in the valley only know I almost went off a cliff the day my mom died and Dad left. They probably think I was simply trying to get his attention, and they’re all proud that I’m so well-adjusted and successful. How little they know.”

He smiled down at her. “You’re incredible and successful. Well-adjusted? Hmm.” He raised both palms.

She chuckled and swatted at him. He caught her hand, and she pressed in tight against him, and then they were kissing and the only thing in the world that could interrupt them was ...

“Breakfast, you two monkeys! Stop the mack-daddyding!” Grams yelled from the front porch.

They both laughed, not even embarrassed to be caught “mack-daddyding,” and pulled apart. “Breakfast?” Iris asked.

“I thought you’d never ask.” Devon took her hand and led her toward the porch. He did lean down close and say, “We need to stick to Chris around everyone else, though.”

“Oh! Of course.” She squeezed his hand back.

They walked toward the porch, and Devon wished for a moment that he could forget who he really was. He’d never, ever failed a job, and no matter his lofty thoughts of putting Iris first, he knew he couldn’t walk away from this one, especially knowing the drugs Antonio would try to bring in, the damage he could inflict on this country Devon loved, and

this little valley Devon wanted to spend time in as much as his home in Mill Valley.

He'd finish this job, and then he'd reevaluate. Yet he wasn't sure he'd stay in the valley forever because of Iris's issues. He didn't want to try to fix her or anything, but he couldn't imagine being tied to one spot for life. She smiled sweetly at him, and he thought he could imagine being bound to one woman. He'd take it one step at a time.

## Chapter Eleven



Devon got back to his room before nine a.m., showered quickly, and sat with his laptop, looking over multiple computer screens and skimming back over the footage he'd missed monitoring this morning. Nothing exciting, unless you liked watching Italian men sleep off their drug-and-alcohol-induced semi-coma. Even Antonio must have indulged too much last night, as he snored for the cameras and scratched himself. Disgusting.

Finally, at noon, they stirred. Devon paid attention to their video feeds and the surveillance of the resort cameras. Iris now knew he was watching her, and throughout the day, she made him laugh several times as she stuck out her tongue, made heart shapes with her hands, and even wrote him a couple of notes and held them up to the camera in the hallway outside her office when it was deserted. One said, "I like kissing you." Another said, "Hello, my handsome secret spy guy."

She was far too cute, and he wished he could watch her all day, or even better, be with her all day. What would that be like, spending an entire day with Iris? He let his mind wander through delicious possibilities as he watched the stupid Italians. He ate lunch in his room and thought he should probably stay and watch the cameras through dinner too, though he wished he could be with Iris. The men seemed agitated and excitable tonight, arguing with each other, and the two bodyguards almost got into a fistfight. Devon felt his own nerves ramp up. Maybe something was finally going to happen. He could finish this job and focus on Iris. He could still get to his fifty million, but he could pick and choose what

jobs and spend most of his time dating Iris in this beautiful valley. What good was self-employment and being his own man if he couldn't choose his jobs and his hours, right?

There was a rap on the door and a call of, "Room service." That voice sounded beautifully familiar. He usually waited until the resort staff left before he retrieved his tray of food, not wanting to risk someone glimpsing the screens he had set up for monitoring, but this time he rushed to the door, hoping that if it was her, she wasn't going to leave the food and walk away. He looked through the peephole and smiled as he saw Iris standing there. He tugged the door partially open and gazed out at absolute perfection: Iris in a flirty floral summer dress with her long curls trailing across her shoulders and her face lit up in a big grin.

She held up a large tray. "Fancy some company for dinner, Mr. Wilson?"

He grinned and took the tray, brushing her fingers with his and setting off butterflies in his stomach. Butterflies. It really was happening to him. He'd always thought all that romance stuff was for fanciful teenagers, women like his overly imaginative sisters, or created by hippies smoking too much weed, but Iris honestly made him giddy. "I would love some, but ..." He realized she'd see exactly who he was monitoring. Not only did he not want to make her nervous; there were some rules he wasn't going to bend. He couldn't risk the knowledge endangering her or compromising his job. "Can you wait one moment, please?"

She nodded and gave him an exaggerated wink. "Wouldn't want to *spy* on anything."

He chuckled, glad that she could joke, but he wasn't sure she understood how serious his job was and how filthy these men were. He gently shut the door. Hurrying to the table, he set the tray down, then glanced at the monitors. The men were sitting around eating, the bodyguards playing on their phones while Antonio worked on his computer. Devon doubted he'd miss anything and felt only a slight sting of guilt as he shut off all the monitors and closed his computer. He'd get a notification on his phone if they left the penthouse, and he was

still recording. He could go back over the footage later. It was well worth staying up late to eat dinner with Iris.

Rushing back to the door, he opened it wide now and stepped aside for her to come in. She walked in, glanced around, and set the food on the table. The door swung shut behind her. “Hmm,” she said. “Amazingly, you are pretty clean. Maybe you don’t need my toilet brush weapon?”

Devon laughed and stepped up close to her. So much had happened in the last six days since he’d first met this amazing woman. “No, but I do need my beautiful housekeeper to help me with something.”

“What’s that?” Her pulse was thrumming quickly in her neck as she looked so beguilingly up at him.

“Let me show you.” Devon raised his hand and trailed his fingertips over her smooth neck. She pulled in a sharp breath, and her pulse went faster. He bent low and tenderly kissed the pulse point and then worked his way up, loving the way her breathing quickened and her body melted into his. He reached her mouth but didn’t claim it yet, hovering there for a brief moment.

“What was it you wanted to show me?” she asked. She was teasing him, but he could see how he was affecting her.

“My toilets don’t reek,” he said. “But I’m humbling myself and begging you ...”

“To clean your toilets?” She wrinkled her nose, but her aqua-blue eyes were full of him. She cared for him, maybe as much as he cared for her.

He shook his head. “Begging you to have mercy on my heart,” he said. It was cheesy, and he couldn’t have cared less.

She slid her hands around his upper back and said, “If you’ll do the same for me.”

“Deal,” he said, and he meant it. His lips came down on hers, working together in a beautiful pattern that he’d never tire of. The kiss sealed the deal. He had no clue what their future might look like, as he had no clue where he’d be next

week, but he was gone over her. If she didn't have mercy on his heart, he didn't know how he'd survive.

As they pulled apart and caught their breath, he took her hand and walked her to the table. He pulled out her chair and uncovered the food—steak and veggies for him, and a large chicken salad for her. She bowed her head, and he followed suit, savoring her short but sweet prayer over the food and for protection for him, his family, her family, and everyone in the valley.

“Thank you for coming,” he said as they started into their meals. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

“Did you like my signs?”

He grinned. “I loved them. ‘I like kissing you’ and ‘Hello, my handsome secret spy guy.’”

“Ah, you missed the best one. I thought you’d seen it when you referenced the toilet brush weapon.”

He chewed the tender steak, drank some water, and asked, “What was it?”

“It said, ‘Don’t make me use my weapon; just kiss me all night long.’” She turned a pretty shade of pink and shoved a large bite of lettuce and tomato in.

Devon couldn't think about food right now. He stared at her with his mouth slightly open. “All night long?”

She swallowed and shook her head. “I didn't mean it like that. It seemed a lot cuter when I wrote it earlier rather than saying it now, with you looking at me like ...”

He stood quickly, wrapped his hands around her waist, and lifted her into his arms. “It sounds plenty cute,” he said, struggling to breathe normally as he envisioned kissing her all night long.

“But you need to understand that I didn't mean it like all night long, right? Just lots of kissing was what I meant.”

He gave her what his sisters liked to call his “smoldering look” and rubbed his hands along her lower back. “I



understand what you intended, and it's great with me. I like lots of kissing."

"Me too." She bit at her lip and then said, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Devon chuckled. "What indeed?" Then he obliged her and kissed her again. After several wonderful minutes, he knew he should finish his dinner and get back to work, but somehow his motivation was lacking. All he wanted was Iris in his arms and someday soon "kissing all night long." Tonight he'd content himself with kissing as long as she wanted. Who cared if his steak was cold or Antonio finally made a move? Iris was all that mattered.

## Chapter Twelve



Iris paced the huge resort patio that overlooked the lake. Was Devon coming? He'd been so amazing at dinner. Her lips still tingled from his kisses. He wouldn't be ditching her, right? Maybe something had happened with his work and he'd been shot and injured or killed by the people he was spying on. That was crazy, yet what did she know about what he did and how much danger he was in? He'd told her he'd protect her and everyone in the valley. That was a lot of protecting, and her fear for him ratcheted up.

She naturally went to her deep-seated trust issues, and she started fearing the worst in a different way. Devon was a super spy who traveled the world and had probably kissed women in every port like he'd teased with Grams about. He was probably bored of Iris. Why would he even consider dating someone who would trap him in this little valley? She couldn't do that to him, cut off his jet pack and not let him save the world. Round and round her mind spun as her heels clacked on the patio.

One of the rear glass doors slid open, and she forgot all her worries and turned to greet Devon with an expectant smile. She loved that he walked her home every night, even back when she'd been suspicious and ticked at him.

A large man strode out, but it wasn't Devon. She backed away, careful not to go too far and fall off the dock—unexpected trips into the lake were her and Devon's thing—and she didn't want to be alone in the dark with anyone but Devon.

Antonio Jasper grinned when he saw her. “Ah, bello Iris. How are you tonight?”

“I’m great.” She forced a smile, greeting him as she would any guest, though she felt apprehensive about being alone with him. No, she wasn’t alone. The patio was dimly lit, but there were still employees and even guests about in the main area of the lodge. He wouldn’t try anything. Devon hadn’t revealed who his quarry was, but Iris had gone over the guest list a few times. Antonio and the creepy guy who was staying alone in suite fifty-four were her top picks for somebody a spy should be watching. Not that Antonio had ever been anything but gracious to her, but what Italian millionaire goes on vacation to the Montana mountains without a woman? It seemed a little off. Maybe he wasn’t wealthy, though, just trying to flaunt it and find a woman? Who knew?

“It’s been a good day,” she said quickly. “How about for you? Is there anything you need? Has your stay been good?” Her voice was a little shaky, probably revealing that she was uncomfortable around him.

He got a little too far into her space, and she backed up again, feeling her heel slip off the edge. Antonio’s arm shot out and pulled her back before she teetered off the dock.

“Thank you,” she managed, scurrying around him, breaking his hold on her, and backing toward the wall of glass and the brightly lit main area of the lodge. “The fall isn’t far, but that water is chilly.”

He smiled. “I can imagine. To answer your question, everything is fine. This is a beautiful resort, beautiful area.”

“I hope you’ve enjoyed the area. If you need mountain bikes, fishing equipment, a boat, climbing gear, whatever it is, our staff can accommodate.”

Again, he stepped too close. Iris held her ground. She wouldn’t let him push her around, and she wanted to convince him, and herself, that she was the confident hotel owner/manager she portrayed.

“Could you accommodate a moonlit walk with me?” he asked, his accent becoming more pronounced. What would’ve been charming to her a week ago now felt like nails on a chalkboard. She wasn’t walking alone with any man but Devon.

She gestured toward the moon. “The moon’s not really full enough to give much light.”

He smiled silkily. “Maybe you and I don’t need much light to ... walk.”

Iris’s stomach filled with ice. She refused to be alone with him. Where was Devon? Devon. There was her excuse. “I apologize that I can’t go on a walk with you. I have a boyfriend, and he wouldn’t like it.”

Antonio’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? Yet you shared dinner with me three times.”

She stiffened but refused to let him bully her. “That was as the hotel’s hospitality manager, not as a date.”

The door behind her whooshed open. She looked over her shoulder and almost fell to the ground in relief. Devon strode out, looking tall, strong, and handsome in a white button-down shirt and gray slacks. The muscles revealed under his shirt and the determined look on his face told her he would protect her. If Antonio really was the threat.

“There you are, love. Sorry I’m late.” Devon ignored Antonio as he wrapped an arm around her waist and gave her a lingering kiss on the lips.

Iris happily melted into him, wrapping both of her arms securely around his firm waist and holding on like he was her lifeline. “No worries. I was just talking to my friend Antonio.”

“Oh?” Devon glanced over at Antonio as if seeing him for the first time. He kept one arm around Iris but extended the other hand. “Nice to meet you. Chris Wilson. Iris’s boyfriend.”

Iris loved that he’d added that. Did he sense that she was uncomfortable with Antonio, or were her suspicions correct and Antonio was the bad guy? She watched Devon closely for

any clues, but he seemed relaxed and his face and eyes gave nothing away.

Antonio shook his hand, smiling as if he hadn't just hit on Iris and was thrilled to meet her boyfriend. "Antonio Jasper. The pleasure is mine, mio amico."

They released hands. "Which part of Italy are you from?" Devon asked.

"Tuscany."

"Beautiful country. I'd love to take Iris there sometime." He squeezed her waist.

The comment struck Iris like a toilet brush flicked in her face. She was certain that Devon was trying to make conversation with Antonio, but she'd told him her story last night. He had to understand that she could never leave this valley, right? She could dream of spots like Tuscany and watch videos online. That was enough for her. Safe, easy, no risk of a panic attack. Yet as she held on to Devon, she felt safe and treasured. Maybe she could explore if her safe anchor was holding her close.

"You would both be welcome any time, but for tonight, I'll leave you two lovers alone." Antonio lifted a hand, gave her one more lingering look, and then strode toward the building. One of the sliding glass doors opened, and he disappeared inside.

Devon watched him go with a slight frown on his face, but he quickly smoothed his brow and glanced down at her. "Sorry I was late. I got caught with work stuff, and when I saw you out here talking to that guy ... I kind of flipped out. It made me crazy possessive of you."

She smiled up at him. "Maybe I like you crazy possessive."

"Really?" He pumped his eyebrows, then bent and kissed her. The kiss was possessive, and she did like it. He pulled back much too quickly and said, "I'd better walk you home. I have to deal with more ... work."

“Oh, okay,” she said. He took her hand, and they walked together off the low patio and across the lit-up pool area. There were some teenagers laughing and talking in one of the hot tubs, but the area was deserted otherwise. “Is everything okay with work?” She wanted to ask him if Antonio was the guy he was after, but he sure wasn’t acting like it.

“I think so. I’m hoping to finally have some movement and close out this case.”

“That’s good.” She thought differently, though. If he closed this case, would he leave her? Would he come back? He’d called her “love” around Antonio and said he was her boyfriend. Was that just because he’d been “crazy possessive,” or did he feel as deeply for her as she did for him? If she couldn’t go to Tuscany, or even Missoula, Montana, would this classy, well-traveled man leave her in the dust?

Only their footfalls and some insects and chattering creatures accompanied them past the adventure course area and onto the trail that led to her house. Devon seemed lost in thought. Iris hated to interrupt him, as he was probably stressed about work, but she had to know. She worked up her courage, and they’d turned onto the gravel road and were almost within the circle of light of Grams’s patio when she got brave enough to ask, “When you’re done with this job ...” She swallowed and spit it out: “Will I see you again?”

Devon turned quickly to her and wrapped his arms securely around her. The look he gave her made her stomach fill with warmth. “Did you think you could get rid of me that easily?”

“I sure hope not.” Iris bit her lip and grinned at him. “I really, really like you, Devon.”

He kissed her tenderly and said, “I more than like you.”

More than like? Now what did that mean? “You’ve traveled the world and probably dated women from all over. Are you sure you want to be with someone who ... doesn’t want to leave Happy Valley?” She tried to joke, but she was feeling insecure about how impressive and accomplished he was and how little experience she had.

Devon nodded seriously. “I’ve traveled the world and dated plenty of impressive women.” She winced, and he must have noticed, as he gave her an understanding smile. His voice lowered. “And I have never, ever felt the way I feel with you. I’ve been searching the world for you, Iris Chadwick, and now that I’ve found you, I promise I’m not going to let you go.”

Iris tingled all over. His words were exactly what she’d needed to hear.

He kissed her, and she savored every second of the interaction. He drew back and let out a heavy breath. “I hate it, but I do have to go.”

“Okay.” She nodded as if she were the understanding, supportive girlfriend.

He gave her a peck on the lips, then backed up. “I’ll wait until you get inside. Tell Grams hello from me.”

“I will.” She turned and walked across the gravel and up the steps to the patio. Glancing down, she lifted a hand to him. He smiled at her, tilted his chin up, and then made a heart symbol with his hands just like she’d done to the security cameras today, hoping he was watching.

Biting at her lip, she knew she was falling in love with him. He said he wasn’t going to let her go, and she wouldn’t get rid of him easily. At the same time, she knew he had a job to do. She’d have to trust him. It was exciting, and scary.

## Chapter Thirteen



Devon ran back to his room. When Antonio had left earlier, he'd followed him for a while, frustrated because he knew that Iris would probably be waiting for him to walk her home. When the man had confronted her, Devon had waited as long as he could stand before interrupting. He didn't think Antonio was on to him, but the man was either one of the most impressive criminals Devon had ever been assigned to, or they were all waiting in this remote valley for something that wasn't coming. His contact at the CIA had admitted that all of Antonio's businesses seemed squeaky clean, the files on his computers had revealed nothing, and even with all of Devon's surveillance, he hadn't heard one word drop about drugs or trafficking. Had Interpol and the CIA been wrong about this guy? It was a possibility, but Devon felt like the guy was dirty and an expert at hiding it.

Devon would never regret the time spent with Iris, but he had been so caught up in her that he hadn't felt the buzz of a notification that Antonio had entered his room again until the last kiss with Iris. His beautiful girlfriend—he'd loved claiming her as such with Antonio—had so distracted him that he hadn't even thought about Antonio not being in the room. He hadn't tapped their cell phones, as none of them was away from their devices, ever. Even when they showered, they kept their phones in the bathrooms, playing music or shows. It was pathetic.

He got to his room and started looking back through footage. Earlier, they'd all been excited, and he thought something was going to happen. There were some



conversations he overheard, but the only thing solid he got was some unidentified man saying that this wasn't right, the one way in and out of the valley was too risky, the airport was too small and exposed, and they needed to move on. Then they kept repeating "get what you can" and "five-forty-five."

By the time Devon had watched through all the back footage, keeping one eye on the men in the present, they'd all settled in and were watching shows in their own bedrooms. He mulled over the scant information as he waited for something more. They were leaving; he was pretty certain of that. He texted his contact the information, and the man predictably said that Devon should follow.

Usually, that wouldn't bother him at all. What was a new location to him? Right now, he wanted to stay at this resort until he died. No, he wanted to buy a little cabin around the lake, marry Iris, and move in promptly. He passed a hand over his face. Even if he did give up his career and his dreams of fifty million for Iris, he had to finish this job. He would never be able to live with himself if he didn't put scum like Antonio away. The man was filthy. Despite the fact that Devon had nothing on him, he trusted Interpol and the CIA, and he knew Antonio was a dealer and trafficker. He just knew it.

What did it mean for them to "get what they could" and five-forty-five? He hoped they were just planning on stealing the silverware from room service, but he highly doubted that was what they were after. Was there a stash of drugs somewhere in the valley or the mountains, or was it trafficking? Had they marked women or children in this innocent, unsuspecting valley or at the resort? His blood ran cold. He'd have to watch Iris, Catalina, and anyone else Antonio might have come in contact with the past week.

Five-forty-five. He cast a disgusted look at the men. At least he knew it wouldn't be five-forty-five in the morning. If that number was even referring to a meeting time. It could be referring to a location or a plane number or who knew?

Certain that the men were going nowhere, Devon brushed his teeth, washed his face, and said his prayers, asking for help

to protect everyone and get the information he needed and finish this case soon. All he wanted was to be with Iris.

\* \* \*

Devon's alarm went off at four-twenty a.m. He got up and checked his cameras. The men were all down for the count. Just as he'd thought, there was no world where they'd be getting up early in the morning, if that five-forty-five had even meant a time. Maybe five-forty-five tonight, though. If that was the case, Devon could catch them red-handed and get them arrested easily. He would love to put this all behind him and focus on Iris.

He dressed quickly and decided to just go on a run, then come back to the gym to lift, in case something crazy happened and the men did actually know there were two five-forty-fives in a day. It was dark outside as he headed out on the trails, and his mind ran with concerns about Antonio and his plans that bumped up against much happier thoughts of Iris in his arms.

His breath came in faster pants, and his legs burned. With no light from the sun yet and the moon gone, the only indicator that he was heading straight up a narrow path was the pull of gravity. He paused and looked at his watch. Five-ten. He'd better get back.

He turned to head back down the trail, but it was still dark in the predawn and the trees were so dense and thick around him that it appeared even darker. The trail split, and he took the one that went downhill, but then it split again and he wasn't certain which way to go. He stopped and glanced around. Was he lost? He rarely got lost, but he didn't remember the trail going off in different directions, hadn't seen it in the dark. The slight tinge of light on the mountains in front of him had to mean that east was that way. He'd initially run north and west of the resort, so he just needed to head toward the little bit of light. He'd get back if he headed east and south. He'd be fine.

The fork he was at broke to the south or north. He chose the south one. He'd get back eventually, but he felt uneasy that he wasn't back when he wanted to be. Not that Antonio and his men would stir before noon, but if there was something significant about five-forty-five, he wanted to be around at that time.

He pushed the concern away, but as he upped his pace, the trail angled back west. Shoot. Should he double back or hope it would turn again? The trees and foliage were so thick that creating his own trail would slow him down possibly worse than running the wrong direction for a bit. If only the sun would come up or he'd find another trail heading the direction he wanted.

A buzz on his hip sent a wave of cold fear washing over him. He pulled out his phone, praying it wasn't what he feared, but the message confirmed that the door to Antonio's room had opened. It was five-fourteen. Someone really was awake this early in the morning.

He stopped and clicked on his cameras. His hands were clammy and his gut churned as he watched all three men calmly exiting the room, suitcases in hand. He quickly texted his contact: *Suspect is on the move.*

Shoving his phone back into his pocket, he sprinted along the trail, fruitlessly looking for an option to head back south and east. He had trackers on their suitcases and their vehicle, so he wouldn't lose them, but it was only five-fifteen. Did five-forty-five mean a meeting time, then? And what were they supposed to "get" and take with them?

Frustration and concern coursed through him. How had he allowed himself to get lost on this morning, of all mornings? Yet how could he have seen this coming? The men had never gotten up before noon. He pushed on faster, finally finding a thin trail that headed east. As he ran, he prayed, *Please don't let me lose them.* More importantly, *Please don't let them touch Iris, or anyone else.*

## Chapter Fourteen



Iris woke early, smiling at the thought of Devon and excited for the possibility of another day with him. He'd said that he'd searched the world for her and he wasn't going to let her go. She grinned as she remembered those words and his sweet and passionate kisses. She slid into a tank top, shorts, socks, and running shoes. Tiptoeing through the house so she wouldn't wake Grams, she drained a glass of water, then slipped out the back door. It was still murky dark at five-twenty in the morning, but she had a busy day and wanted an early start. She wanted to head up the trails, but she decided to do the six-mile loop around the lake. It was relatively flat terrain and easier to navigate in the dark.

She approached Uncle Jay and Cat's cabin and suddenly came upon a large camping van right in the middle of the road. She pulled up short and eased around it. The stupid van was taking up the entire road, as it was turned on an angle to block both lanes.

She heard a shriek of surprise and then the sounds of water splashing and scuffling. What in the world? Was that Cat? Hurrying down the gravel path that led to their cabin, she wondered if she could even help if someone was hurting Cat. Inspiration struck, and she yanked out her phone, clicking on her text app and her latest text stream with Devon.

A door slammed on the van and she whirled around, not wanting someone to come at her from behind. A man approached, and she backed up. Should she make a break for

the front porch of the cabin, or continue to the back and hope Uncle Jay was up fishing already, or try to get to Cat?

Movement came behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder. Peering through the murky predawn light, she could see a burly man with a body slung over his shoulder. A trim, female body in only a swimsuit. A body that wasn't moving or resisting.

"Cat!" she screamed, pushing the concern of the man coming from the van away as she rushed toward her cousin.

Footsteps from behind pounded through her like a death knoll, and she knew the guy was coming after her again. She felt surrounded and outnumbered and horrified. Who were these men, and why did they have Cat? Was she dead? Could Iris help her, or would she get knocked out or killed herself? She fumbled with the phone, trying to push on the icon with Devon's name so she could get to a call button.

A large body slammed into her from behind, and she sprawled face-first into the dirt. The man's weight knocked into her from above, and her phone flew from her grasp. All the oxygen was robbed from her body.

"No!" she managed to gasp, but it wasn't loud enough for Uncle Jay to hear her. The man's fingers dug into her neck and she flailed and fought for air, but darkness crept in faster than she could've imagined.

\* \* \*

Devon hated this feeling of panic. His quarry was gone, he thought. The vehicle they'd driven into the valley hadn't moved, but the trackers he'd hidden on suitcases and in shoe linings showed that they were headed out of the valley. And where was he? Still sprinting down trails, but thankfully, he was *almost* back to the lodge. One of his dad's sayings drifted through his mind: *Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.*

He'd called his contact, and they were sending a couple of operatives from Missoula, but even if they found the men, they

couldn't stop them for no reason. They couldn't afford to miss the opportunity to catch them doing something illegal. For all Devon knew, they could be simply going on a drive—at close to five-forty-five in the morning, the elusive number from last night. He knew they were up to something, but he had absolutely no clue what. If only he had time to look back through his surveillance video. He raced into the lodge and up the stairs to his room. He looked at his monitors, which showed an empty room, and cursed just for the sake of the frustration. He wished he had time to call Iris and check on her, but she was either still in bed or maybe out on a run.

He rinsed off in record time, dressed, and grabbed his keys, wallet, and gun from the dresser. The pressure of the gun at his back waistband proved comforting reassurance. He gripped a small carry-on that was full of weapons. Hurrying back out of his room, he took the stairs two at a time and was in his vehicle with his phone in hand, tracking the men as he pulled out of the still-quiet and semi-dark resort. It wasn't yet six a.m., and the peaceful look of the resort and the valley reassured him.

As he drove, he kept one eye on the tracker, thankful that the roads were quiet this early in the morning and required little effort to stay on track. The men were halfway through the mountain pass that led out of the valley when the dot appeared to turn off the main road and head east. Devon put the sport utility on cruise and hit the button so the vehicle would stay in its lane. He studied that dot as the vehicle basically drove itself. He was certain that they were headed east, deeper into the mountain. They either assumed that no one was following them and they were probably headed for a rendezvous spot, or they could be changing their base location to a cabin in the mountains instead of the lodge. Either way, they weren't fleeing the valley with women or children they'd kidnapped, which had been his worst and first fear when he'd seen them on the move this morning.

Devon called his contact and explained the change, adding that he'd send them the location as soon as he got there. They confirmed that they were about forty minutes from his location and had local police and state backup if he felt it necessary. He

didn't, but he'd reach Antonio and his men first and reevaluate if necessary.

He slowed his speed and felt much calmer. Now his frustration stemmed from the fact that he hadn't grabbed his surveillance equipment before rushing after them. If they were settling into a new location, he'd have the CIA ops wait and watch while he went back for his gear. It wouldn't be nearly so easy or convenient to watch them from his vehicle without the nice resort room, a shower, room service, and most importantly Iris, but he'd experienced worse.

There was only one knot in his gut now: his idyllic time with Iris would have to halt for a while. It would be awful not to see her for a little bit, but he'd take down Antonio, and then he'd come for her. It would all work out. It had to. He needed to be with Iris more than he needed his pistol and knife with him at all times.

## Chapter Fifteen



Iris woke to the world bouncing underneath her. She was facedown on a thin, hard carpet. Everything was foggy and her head hurt, but she was lucid enough to figure that she was in a vehicle. They hit a bump, and her body lifted and then slammed down again. She tried to move her hands to brace herself from knocking against the floor again before realizing they were tied behind her. She cried out in surprise and heard a feminine voice, maybe Cat's voice, say, "Shh, I'm here, shh."

Prying her gritty eyelids open, Iris rotated her head toward the voice. It was Cat, bound and lying on her stomach too. No! "Cat!" she tried to keep her voice down, but the panic was too strong. "Where are we? Are you okay?"

Cat gestured her head toward the front of the large van. Two men sat up front—she could only see the backs of their heads—while a burly guy with a large gun sat in the back with them. The guy with the gun simply watched them, not caring that they were awake or talking. That didn't bode well for them, right?

"Antonio," Cat whispered.

"No," she squeaked out. Iris couldn't believe this. She could remember running in the dark, seeing that van, and hearing Cat screaming. Antonio was behind this? She blinked, and her vision cleared enough to let her see Antonio's profile as he sat up front in the passenger seat.

As if he sensed her gaze, he glanced back. When he saw her eyes were open, he gave her a silky-smooth smile and a



wink. “Ah, bellissima. Buongiorno.”

“‘Good morning’?” Iris’s voice came out as an almost shriek. “It is not a good morning. Why did you kidnap us? What are you *doing*?”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, carina. I will treat you special.”

“You won’t touch my cousin!” Cat yelled at him.

Antonio laughed, and his men laughed with him. “Ah, amore mio, I’ll do much more than ‘touch’ her.”

“You’re disgusting!” Cat screamed. “Weak, lame, vile, filthy men! You try to touch either of us and I’ll cut your fingers off!”

Only laughter met her insults and threats.

Iris’s stomach churned and she swallowed down vomit, hoping she could keep it inside until the right moment to puke all over the disgusting Antonio. She’d been nice to this scum, and he was kidnapping her and Cat. To traffic them? Devon had said that the person he was after was a drug dealer and a trafficker.

Devon! He would be watching Antonio. She hoped he would come for them. Would he get to them before Antonio did ... revolting things she couldn’t let herself think about? The panic started pressing in, and she felt even more nauseated as her palms got slick and her vision narrowed.

A movement from her other side snapped her out of her panic attack for a second. She turned her head to see who was lying there. Her nausea worsened, but the darkness abated and she was seeing clearly. Worry for the other women in the van helped her stave off the attack.

Meredith Francis lay there with horror in her large, dark eyes; her smooth, dark skin looked almost sallow. She was still one of the most beautiful people Iris had ever seen. Meredith was a few years older than Cat and Iris, a sweetheart who owned the ice cream shop in town. Her granny was best friends with Grams, and Cat and Iris had always believed she

was the love of Cruz's life, though Cruz always said they were "only best friends."

Nervously, Iris asked, "Are you okay?"

"As okay as I can be," Meredith murmured.

Iris guessed that was about as good of an answer as she could expect. What a lame question. Of course she wasn't okay. None of them were.

They bounced around for a few more minutes, and then the van came to an abrupt stop. Iris felt relief for a second that they weren't bouncing anymore, but the relief vanished as she realized that if they were stopped, these awful men could do all manner of horrible things to them.

The driver and Antonio climbed out as the man with the large gun stood and shoved both of the side doors open. The man shifted his gun to his left hand and grabbed Meredith's bound hands with his right, yanking her onto her feet. She cried out in surprise and pain.

"Careful," Antonio cautioned from outside the doors. "We don't want them damaged."

The guy bowed his head in submission, set his gun down, and lifted Meredith off her feet and down into the other guard's waiting arms. Meredith screamed for help, but from what Iris could see, they were in the middle of the forest. No help was coming. Where was Devon? Did he know Antonio had them? She couldn't imagine how. There was no service this high in the mountains, making it impossible to follow a tracking device, she thought.

She prayed hard for some kind of miracle as the man lifted her into the air and down into Antonio's arms. She squirmed to get away and kicked at his legs, but with her arms bound and him being much larger and stronger, she didn't have much hope.

The man in the van came down the stairs, holding a writhing, screaming Cat slung over his shoulder. Antonio led the way into a small cabin. Iris tried to fight him, horrified of what might happen once they got inside. Antonio shoved

through the door and strode through an open kitchen and living area with her in his arms. When he walked through the open door to a bedroom, she kicked and flailed and was about to sink her teeth into his shoulder when he tossed her on the large bed and said with a sneering smile, "Calm down. Our time isn't yet."

Iris stared in surprise. He wasn't going to hurt her ... for now.

The other two men followed with Cat and Meredith in their arms, each tossing them on the bed, and then the men stormed out and shut the bedroom door behind them. Iris was tempted to dissolve into a puddle of tears, but just like when that man had taken her on that motorbike at sixteen, she knew she'd jump off a two-hundred-foot cliff before she let some jerk take advantage of her. She'd overcome the horror of almost dying at sixteen, and she was stronger and braver now. She would go down fighting; that was for certain.

Pushing to her feet, she turned her bound hands to Cat. "You want to pick mine off first, then we'll get out of here?"

"Yes, ma'am." Cat stood awkwardly and turned her back as well, blindly reaching for Iris's ropes and trying to unknot them.

Meredith scooted over on the bed and started guiding Cat through which way to push or tug on the rope. Iris was terrified, sick to her stomach, and praying someone would come rescue them, but with her cousin and friend working with her, maybe they could rescue themselves.

As time wore on, the knots didn't budge and Devon didn't appear. The looks on Cat's and Meredith's faces matched the desperation Iris felt. Her despondent hope that they wouldn't be violated and trafficked flickered and died. Escaping this situation by leaping off a cliff required being close enough to jump. What could they do?

They heard the front door open and close, and Antonio growled at somebody, "You're late." Multiple male voices started discussing something vehemently and she only caught snatches of the conversation, but it was pretty obvious from

those snatches that whoever the newcomer was, he wasn't happy, and they were fighting over who got the "merchandise."

The fear increased until she could hardly catch a breath. When the door to the bedroom was flung open and Antonio stood there with a leering grin, she felt her vision darkening. She prayed hard and fought to stay present.

"It is time to decide your fates, le mie belle signore," he told all of the women, but then he focused on Iris. "I hope for both of our sakes you leave here with me."

\* \* \*

Devon followed the tracker off the main road through the overpass, but then he lost the signal. He wasn't too concerned, as this seemed like a dead-end road. He called his contact with the CIA before he lost cell coverage as well.

"Jones here."

"Wilson," Devon said, using his pseudo last name. "They turned off the main road, but I lost their signal. Cell service must be sketchy. I'll send you my location, and you can follow me from the turnoff. Hopefully, it's a dead-end road."

"Wait for us at the turnoff."

Devon shook his head. "No. I'll go scout the area. I don't want to risk them getting away somehow."

The guy answered with disapproving silence, but he wasn't Devon's superior. What could he say?

"I'll see you soon." Devon hung up and slowed his speed as he followed the dirt road. He didn't want to round a corner and just stumble upon them, ruining the entire op. He hated being blind like this, but this was how it was done back in the day. He'd just pretend he was Sean Connery as James Bond, not Daniel Craig.

He smiled to himself, remembering how Iris had compared him to James Bond. He wished he could call her, just hear her

voice and know her day was starting off well. He looked at the dash. It was almost six-thirty. Would she be done with her run and heading into work soon? Maybe she was getting ready or having breakfast with Grams. Would she make cute symbols and signs for the security cameras, not knowing he wasn't there to see them? He wished he could be with her.

Tightening his grip on the steering wheel, he focused on the present. Whatever Antonio was up to, taking this detour could bode well for Devon. Maybe he was finally meeting with his contact. It was well after five-forty-five, but Devon still felt optimistic. His CIA buddies weren't too far behind him. He'd find the place Antonio was meeting, they'd catch them doing something illegal, and then the CIA could work their magic and bring down this operation. It would all be over soon, and he'd be back with Iris.

The road was rough, pitted-out gravel, and his Atlas bounced all over the place. He rounded a corner and immediately slowed to a crawl. Up ahead, there was a large Chester van and a Lexus sport utility both parked in front of a modest cabin. He slowly reversed and found a spot in the trees to hide his vehicle, then grabbed a few extra weapons, strapping a Remington 9mm on his thigh, shoving a Ruger EC9 in his front pocket with his knife, slipping his usual Glock in his rear waist band, and grasping a semiautomatic Troy Defense tactical rifle. Thankfully, he had a few surveillance toys stashed in the suitcase as well. He tried to send his location to the CIA again, but there was zero coverage here. They should easily find this place. As long as they didn't come in guns a-blazing, everything would work out fine.

He eased his way through the trees and to the side of the cabin. As he approached, he heard raised voices. He eased in under a window and pulled a video snake out. Sliding it up to the window, he flipped open the small video screen so he could survey the room. Five men and three women, he counted quickly. But no ... a flash of blond curls caught his eye, and he dropped the camera in horrified shock.

“Iris,” he whispered, feeling the blood drain from his face. “No, no, no, please Lord, no,” he begged.

He scrambled in the grass for the camera with sweat-slicked fingers, grappling for the camera and then pushing it back in place. He’d never felt so out of sorts or fumbling on a job, but this was Iris—his Iris—in that criminal’s grasp. He should’ve known Antonio wouldn’t just leave. Iris and the other women were what he was supposed to grab before he left.

Devon got the camera back into position and scanned the room again, trying to catalogue the innocents and his biggest threats and how to isolate the situation for the best outcome. The problem was that he knew he’d do everything in his power to keep Iris safe. He shook his head. He couldn’t risk the other women either. There had to be a way to free all of them. He glanced over his shoulder quickly. Where were the CIA? If ever he’d needed backup, this was that day.

Besides Iris, there was her cousin Cat and a beautiful dark-skinned lady he’d never seen before. All three women stood pressed against the backside of a sofa in front of the men as the men discussed something closer to the dining room table. They were gesturing to the women, and it looked like Cat was feistily throwing insults back at them. At least they weren’t touching them. If one of those slime made a move toward Iris, Devon would give the term guns a-blazing new meaning.

Horribly, the thing he feared happened. Antonio flounced over to Iris and wrapped his arm around her waist, his large, disgusting paw dangerously close to her bra line. The possessive look on Antonio’s face made Devon’s stomach churn, but his grip on his rifle was strong. His mind cleared, and he knew exactly what he had to do.

## Chapter Sixteen



Iris felt herself sway as the fear and the horror of their situation almost overwhelmed her. She, Cat, and Meredith stood with their hands tied, their legs pressed against the back of a sofa as they instinctively tried to get as far away from the men as possible. They faced five men, two of whom were vehemently discussing which of the women they got to take with them. The other three seemed to be guards or henchmen.

The two newcomers were obviously American. The tall, blond man looked them each over coolly, then said to Antonio, “You owe me, and you know it. This valley was a failure for an exchange spot. You know I loathe anyone wasting my time. To make it up to me, you give me all three of the women.”

“You can’t have any of us,” Cat spat at him.

The man arched a pale eyebrow, a sickening look in his blue eyes as his gaze raked over Cat. He turned back to Antonio. “I especially want that feisty Spanish beauty.”

“I only want the blonde,” Antonio said. “I’ll make it up to you when I find an even better spot for our future exchanges.”

Iris’s stomach dropped, and her palms were so sweaty she thought they’d start dripping on the wood floor soon.

“You listen to me, and you listen good,” Cat hurled at them. “We are not property, and if you dare kidnap us, you’re going to have some ticked-off brothers after you. Famous, wealthy ticked-off brothers at that.”

The men ignored her. “Okay,” the blond guy acquiesced, “take the blonde, but I get the other two.” He smiled at them.

“Beautiful. Perfect for using and then selling.”

“No!” Cat hollered at him. If her hands were free, she probably would’ve tried to scratch his eyes out.

Antonio sidled close to Iris, displacing Meredith from her side. He wrapped his arm around her waist, his fingers wandering higher than they had any right to. He had no right to touch her at all. The men’s voices and Cat’s protests seemed to be coming from far away. Iris said a prayer for help and forced herself to stay in the present.

Antonio looked her way with a leering grin. “You’re all mine now, *il mio amante*.”

Iris glared back at him and then slammed her forehead into his temple as hard as she could. He howled with pain and released her to grab his head. One of his men whipped his weapon up to point at her just as the front door sprang open.

Iris’s head was a little dizzy from hitting Antonio’s so hard, but it appeared he’d taken the worst of it as he staggered away from her, clutching the side of his face. She turned to see who had come now, praying this couldn’t get any worse.

Her jaw dropped and her heart raced as hope filled her. “Devon?” she squeaked out.

He stood in the doorway with a large machine gun thing in his hand, another gun strapped to his thigh, and a dangerous look on his face. His eyes flickered to hers briefly, and she nodded to reassure him that she was okay. Of course she was okay; he was here. Yet five awful men against one? What if Devon was shot and killed trying to protect her?

Devon’s eyes continued to the blond man, and he held up his free hand. “My friend. You started negotiating without me?”

“Who are you?” the blond man demanded.

“Chris Wilson,” Devon said. “Pleasure to meet you. I’ve come to offer for the women.”

“How much?”

“A million each.”



The blond man's eyebrows went up. "I'll deal."

"He's here for the blonde!" Antonio screeched, pulling his hand from the red mark on his face. "Iris is mine!"

"What do we care who we sell them to?" the blond man asked. "A million each? Much better than the lame amount of money you've secured me over the past week."

"He's lying. He's not here to buy. He thinks he's her boyfriend!"

"Down!" Devon roared, gesturing toward the couch behind them.

Iris leapt into Cat and Meredith, sending them both sprawling over the back of the couch. She thudded on top of Cat as guns started firing. Rolling onto the floor, Iris heard screams and yelps, but luckily, Cat and Meredith got the idea and rolled off the couch and onto the floor with her. Iris closed her eyes, buried her head into the hardwood floor, and prayed desperately for Devon to somehow survive this. Five men against one.

She felt like she couldn't stand to look, but when a body thumped onto the floor next to them, she risked a glance, then screamed when she saw one of Antonio's men with his eyes closed and blood seeping from his shoulder and head. Was he dead?

Wood splinters sprayed her as bullets went wild. Then another body came scrambling behind the couch, but it wasn't dead. It was Antonio. He had a wild gleam in his eyes as he grabbed her arm and yanked her to her feet, screaming, "Stop shooting, or she dies!"

The bullets miraculously ceased. Devon appeared to have taken shelter behind the doorframe, but he came out with his machine gun held loosely in his hands.

Antonio shoved his pistol into Iris's abdomen. "I'll kill her."

Devon set the weapon on the ground and straightened with his hands held up. "Don't hurt her. I'll let you walk away. Just please let her go."

“You think I am an idiot?” Antonio sneered. “You’re not going to let me go.”

Iris felt as if the room pitched, though nothing moved. She could hardly see through the darkness encroaching. Antonio held her tighter, and she prayed harder. Everything miraculously came back into focus.

The cold fury in Devon’s eyes said that the man was correct in his assumption, but as Devon gazed at Iris, he softened. “For Iris ... I’ll do anything.” His jaw tightened. “I’ll let you go. Let’s walk together to your vehicle. You give me the girl, and I’ll let you go.”

Antonio assessed the situation. Iris was shaking uncontrollably as she glanced around as well. The tall blond man was holding his bleeding right arm, cowering behind the dining room table. Antonio’s two bodyguards were obviously dead, and the blond man’s bodyguard had dodged behind the safety of an overstuffed chair and didn’t look to be coming out anytime soon. It was basically Antonio against Devon, and even though Antonio pushed his gun into her stomach, he was obviously scared of Devon.

“Okay,” Antonio said.

“Okay?” Iris squeaked.

Devon nodded as if he knew it would all work out. He looked to the blond man and his bodyguard. “Neither of you move or touch those women while I’m gone, or the last thing you’ll see is my gun pointed at your forehead.”

The blond guy nodded. His bodyguard whimpered, “Okay.”

“Throw me your weapons,” Devon demanded.

Three guns and a knife skittered across the hardwood floor, landing close to Devon’s feet.

“Cat?” Devon called.

She scrambled out from behind the couch, followed closely by Meredith. Devon shifted his rifle to his left hand and pulled out a knife from his pockets. Cat and Meredith

reached him, and both quickly turned around. He sliced their ropes, then lowered his voice and asked, "Can you keep a gun on those two until I get back?"

"Happily," Cat said, scooping up all three guns and handing one to Meredith.

"Good job," Devon said.

Iris felt Antonio shaking against her. Was he scared of Devon, or was it adrenaline? He was probably used to hiding behind his goons, who were both dead. She found it interesting that Devon was in charge, even with Antonio holding a pistol to her side. She wished she could get her hands cut free too, but she understood they were in a precarious balance with Antonio so unstable and his dark eyes looking wild.

"Let's go." Devon gestured with his head toward the open doorway.

Antonio strode his direction, dragging Iris along with him. Devon backed out onto the porch and then down the stairs and toward the camper van. Iris's heart thumped uncontrollably. Did Devon really think this criminal would simply hand her over, or did he have another plan? It was obvious that Antonio was scared of him, but the criminal was wild and out of control. Iris flinched and cold sweat rolled down her back as she expected him to pull the trigger at any second.

Devon opened the door to the van and stepped back. Still holding his hands out in a placating manner, he said, "You're free to go, Antonio. Just give me Iris ... and never come back to my country."

Antonio sneered at him, but he was shaking so hard it wasn't very convincing. "We'll see." Then he shoved Iris at Devon.

She stumbled with her bound hands and knocked against Devon's chest. He caught her easily as Antonio's van roared to life and he backed up and spun away, spitting gravel at them. Devon gently set her to the side, pulled out a pistol, and aimed at the tires. He shot off several rounds and cursed. "Bulletproof."

A black sport utility came around the corner. The van slammed into it, rocking it onto its side; then Antonio spun around it. Devon shot at the back windows of the van, but had no more success than he'd had with the tires. Within seconds, the van disappeared behind the trees.

"You okay?" Devon asked her.

She nodded. "Go!" She was worried about those people in the sport utility.

Devon ran to them as the door facing the sky popped open and a man started crawling out. Devon helped him, and they both reached back in for another man. The second man's nose was bleeding, but he looked okay.

"Go secure the cabin, but be careful and announce who you are before you storm in there. I armed two innocent women who may shoot you," Devon instructed. "I'm going after Antonio."

Horror rushed through Iris. Devon shouldn't go after that criminal.

They both nodded and took off at a run.

Devon hurried back to her side, lifted her against his chest, and gave her a quick kiss. "You're really all right?" he asked, his eyes sweeping over her.

She leaned into him, choking back a sob and wishing her hands were free so she could hold him. "I am now. You came for me."

"Of course I did." He gave her a lingering kiss but pulled back. "I've got to go after Antonio."

"No! Please, Devon, don't. Let the authorities chase him."

He shook his head. "I have the tracking devices on him. I can find him, and I have to finish the job. I'll call in for help as soon as I get coverage." He looked her steadily in the eyes. "I'll be back for you, Iris." He paused, then asked, "You believe me? I'm not deserting you."

Iris didn't know what to say, because it felt an awful lot like he was leaving her, deserting her, just like her dad had.

She was disoriented and wanted her lifeline—Devon. Wasn't there another solution? He could hand his trackers off to those guys who'd just come. He could secure the cabin while those men chased Antonio, and Devon could stay with her, Cat, and Meredith. They were in the mountains above her valley. They could return to Mystical Lake together and both be safe.

She knew down deep that she had to let him go. It was awful and it hurt and she might never heal from him leaving her, but she'd known when he'd told her about his career that he'd leave her. She'd also known she would have to let him go because she couldn't tie him down. If he came back to her, it had to be his choice.

"I believe you'll come back for me," she said bravely.

He smiled. "That's my girl." He kissed her, softly and then more firmly, increasing to almost desperation before breaking away. "I've got to go before he ditches the van and the trackers." He ran down the road where he must have left his vehicle. Before he vanished from sight, he pointed at her and called, "I'll be back for you, Iris Chadwick."

Iris forced a smile, wishing she could wave, but her hands still weren't free. She watched him disappear, and then she sank to her knees in the dirt. *I'll be back for you, Iris Chadwick.* If only she could believe those words were true.

## Chapter Seventeen



Devon launched over the ruts in the road in his sport utility and reached the main road twice as fast as he had coming. He spun onto the main road and dodged in front of a semi, earning himself a loud honk and a quickened pulse. The semi would definitely have won if they'd collided, but he couldn't risk getting behind a slower truck.

He put some distance between himself and the semi and checked his trackers. Luckily, there was one bar of service, and he could see that Antonio was only half a mile in front of him. He dialed his contact with the CIA, and within twenty seconds, they had a plan. Antonio would run into a roadblock of state troopers and local police as he left the canyon.

Devon smiled, thinking of Antonio being captured, as he flew around corners in the canyon. His mind easily slid back to Iris. It had been excruciating to leave her. Something in her eyes dug at him. She had to trust that he'd come back. She had to. He'd revealed more to her than he'd ever told anyone besides his family.

He gripped the steering wheel and tried to focus on the road. Iris was amazing and accomplished and confident. She would be all right, and she knew he'd return for her. It was all working out. He lost coverage as he descended the canyon and was stuck in some narrow spots with towering canyon walls above him. Saying some prayers in his mind, he drove faster, dodging around a couple of slower vehicles. He wanted this to be over. Antonio would be arrested, and Devon could head back for Iris. One of the perks of helping the government but

not being officially employed by them was that there was no paperwork on his end after he finished these jobs.

He could see the mountain peaks opening up in front of him and knew the canyon would end soon. There was a small river down a twenty-foot drop-off on the side of him. The canyon was lush and green and narrow. He'd driven through this canyon to get to Iris's valley a week ago in the dark. If Devon hadn't been so preoccupied now, he would've enjoyed the beautiful scenery.

All he could think about was finishing Antonio and getting back to Iris. If all went according to plan, Antonio would be caught and arrested as Devon exited the canyon. He wished he had service and wasn't going into this blind, but it should be no stress. He took some calming breaths as he approached the last corner.

He heard the scream of sirens, and his eyes widened as the camper van barreled toward him. Antonio must've seen the barricade and flipped around. He could see Antonio clearly in the driver's seat, clutching the steering wheel, his eyes wide and terrified.

Devon cranked the wheel to the left. Antonio would slam into his passenger side and have no choice but to stop or go off the drop-off into the river. He jammed the gearshift into park and pushed the parking brake button while slamming on the brakes. The tires locked and his SUV skidded sideways, taking up both lanes. There was no way for Antonio to get around him now. Devon gritted his teeth as he awaited impact, wishing he had time to jump out and climb up the incline to safety.

Glancing over, he saw the van bearing down on him and a desperate, maniacal gleam in Antonio's eyes. Instead of hitting the brakes like Devon assumed the man would do to avoid killing himself in the collision, he seemed to be increasing his speed.

Devon prayed that his seat belt and airbags would do their job as he instinctively braced himself against the dash and the door.

The van crashed into him with a horrific screech of metal and shattering of glass. Devon's head slammed against the side window, and multiple airbags hit into him so hard he must've lost consciousness momentarily. The next thing he remembered was feeling airborne and the vertigo of the Atlas flipping several times before crashing upside down into the river.

All the blood rushed to his brain, and the pounding of his head worsened. Freezing water flooded in through the broken windows as Devon struggled with his seat belt. He finally popped it open, but the car was full of the rushing water, and he was stuck upside down, as he couldn't fight free of the airbags and smashed metal surrounding him.

He ripped his knife out and started slashing wildly at the airbags, holding his breath and praying desperately even as he felt himself start to lose consciousness. No, no, no! Iris! He had to get back to her.

The airbag on the door deflated and he was able to fumble for the handle and jerk on it, but it didn't budge. The door was pinned shut, either from the water pressing against it or from the way the car had landed. The window was broken, but there wasn't enough space for him to fit through. He slammed his shoulder into the window, and then he smashed it with the butt of the knife, but the darkness was coming fast. He couldn't let himself pass out, couldn't take a breath and inhale and never see Iris again.

His movements slowed, and he felt his fingers release their grip on the knife, his body sagged against the seat, and everything went black.



## Chapter Eighteen



Iris stood watching the spot where Devon had disappeared as she listened to voices floating from inside the cabin. The guys who Antonio had smashed into in the black vehicle took charge of the situation, and soon Cat and Meredith came out, followed by Devon's associates bringing out the blond guy and his bodyguard, leaving the two dead bodies for somebody else to deal with.

One of the men came over and cut Iris's hands free, then quietly asked if she was okay.

She nodded, forcing out, "Yes, thank you."

The men congregated off to one side, the blond and his bodyguard sinking to the ground, looking exhausted and defeated as the other two guys watched over them. It hit Iris that they were all stranded here until Devon or some other authority came.

Cat wrapped her arm around Iris, and Meredith came to her other side. "You okay?" Cat asked.

"Yeah."

"You're crying," Cat pointed out quietly.

Iris wiped at the wetness on her face and blinked to clear her eyes. She was crying. Odd that she hadn't even noticed. "Are you two all right?" She tried to focus outward, not scream out her anguish and worry about Devon. He shouldn't have chased that awful Antonio by himself. Would he be all right? Would he come back for her? He'd promised. He wouldn't desert her.

“Yeah,” Cat said.

“Crazy, huh?” Meredith said, but then she shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself, sniffing as she said, “You hear about trafficking but assume it happens somewhere else. I’ve always felt so safe and sheltered in our little valley.”

Cat pulled Meredith in with her other arm and the three of them tightened into a three-way hug. None of them said anything for a while as they just hugged and let the tears run, shaking over the horror of what could have been.

Iris’s mind slid through those panicked moments of being abducted, but overshadowing everything that had happened was her worry over Devon being safe. The other women were probably focused on what they’d been through and how to deal with it. Iris had dealt with worse before. She knew she could get through this emotionally, but she couldn’t handle losing Devon.

“So ... Chris?” Cat asked, pulling back slightly. “Our hottie rescuer? You called him Devon.”

Iris released her cousin and friend and wrapped her arms around her middle. She didn’t know how to answer Cat. Would telling Devon’s real name expose his family like he’d said? She didn’t even know his real last name.

“He’s gone,” she muttered, rather than answering the question. “I don’t know when I’ll see him again.” She bit at her lip and turned slightly away.

Cat wasn’t about to let her wallow. She put an arm around her and murmured, “He’ll come back for you, sweetie.” She got a curious gleam in her dark eyes. “Or maybe you’ll have to chase him down.”

Iris gave an uneasy chortle. “Yeah. Like that’s happening.”

Cat didn’t answer, staring at her as if challenging her to step up, conquer her fears, and chase after her man.

“Why not?” Meredith asked innocently. She gave her an encouraging smile. “He risked his life for you, and he seemed worth chasing after, at least to me.”

“Oh yeah?” Cat spun on Meredith. “More worth chasing after than my brother?”

Meredith took a small step back and put her hand to her chest, her large, dark eyes full of regret and angst. “Cruz?” She shook her head and gave Cat a sad look. “Cruz doesn’t want me chasing after him. We’re just friends, and he’s got *plenty* of women chasing after him.”

Cat pushed out a heavy breath. “But you’re the right one for him, and you could settle him down and bring him home.”

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “No one could settle that man down.”

Cat didn’t say anything, which made Iris feel awful for her. She knew Cat felt just as abandoned by her mom as Iris did by her dad, and they both longed to see their brothers more. Cat at least had her dad, but she also had an irrational fury against the son of the man who her mom had run off with. Cat hated Stetson Stillwater, the handsome rancher, almost as much as she hated his thieving, adulterous father. Iris tried to never bring up either of their names.

The women waited in silence after that. Finally, some sheriffs from Birch County on the opposite side of their valley arrived and arrested the men. The men who’d worked with Devon conferred with them, then asked the women to separate for questioning. When it was Iris’s turn, they revealed that they were CIA agents and asked her to recount any interaction with Antonio and the abduction. They didn’t say anything about Chris Wilson or Devon, and she didn’t ask. She didn’t know if she was afraid to hurt Devon in any way, or if she was scared of the answers that might come.

Sheriff Greenwood appeared toward the end of her questioning and reassured the men that he’d get them all home safely. He gave them each a side-armed hug and ushered them into his Durango, telling them there had been an accident in the other end of the canyon and he couldn’t share details, but Antonio had been captured.

An accident? Iris’s heart raced. *Please, not Devon*, she prayed over and over again. She stewed with worries over

Devon as they motored down the canyon and her beautiful valley appeared. She loved this view of her valley, always had. It was home. Yet Devon was all she could think about. She wanted him. She wanted a home with him. What if that wasn't here? Could she leave her valley for him? She prayed that he was all right and he'd come back to her. If they could be together, maybe she could overcome her fears to be with him. She'd been able to pray during those horrifying moments at the cabin and stay present and not have a full-blown panic attack. Maybe she could pray hard enough to leave the valley, for Devon. But maybe he wouldn't ask that of her. Maybe he only cared if they were together. She'd pray for that as well.

\* \* \*

Iris made it home and into Grams's hug. She had to recount the entire story before Grams let her go take a bath and figure out how to face the day. Grams surprised her by bringing her cottage cheese with sliced peaches and raspberries, her favorite breakfast, and telling her she was going to man the resort and Cat and Iris were to rest or do whatever they wanted with the day.

She tried to rest but couldn't fall back asleep. As the hours slowly passed with no word whatsoever from Devon, Iris wished she was at work so she could at least be busy. She called and texted Devon numerous times with no results. The calls went straight to voicemail, and the texts didn't pop up as received or read. Was his phone dead? Was he? She felt disoriented and alone. Could he leave her and never come back?

She got up, went on a long walk, and then made dinner for her and Grams. Dinner was spent talking about the crazy kidnapping again and of course Devon. Grams was sure he would be back for her soon. Iris wasn't so certain. Was he okay? Where had he been all day?

She went to bed early and slept fitfully. The next morning, she went on a run, searching around every corner for Devon.

When she got back home, Grams was all dressed to go man the resort again.

“No, Grams,” Iris insisted. “I need work, need to stay busy.”

Grams eyed her up and down and shook her head. “Nope. It was fun for me to work yesterday, and I think you need to spend some time praying and finding yourself. Then when your handsome man comes, you’ll be ready for him.”

Iris argued, but of course Grams won in the end. She took a long bath, and then she focused on reading her scriptures and praying for help.

A rap on her bedroom door pulled her head up. “Devon?” she asked quietly, hoping, praying. Please let this be the answer to her nonstop prayers. “Come in,” she called louder, standing by her bed and straightening her comfortable cotton dress.

“Hey.” The door swung open, revealing Cat.

“Oh, hey.” Iris let out a pent-up breath and squeezed her eyes shut so she wouldn’t cry. Devon. Where was he? She told herself to stop stressing for the hundredth time. He’d been part of a criminal takedown. He probably had paperwork or something like that to deal with before he could come back. She could see him pointing at her and calling, “I’ll be back for you, Iris Chadwick.” The tears squeezed out as she remembered that she didn’t even know his last name. How could she find him if he didn’t come back for her? Was she brave enough to go find him? She was sick of fighting these fears of leaving her safety net. Her dad had never really acted as if he wanted Iris to go to him. Did Devon? It’d been over twenty-four hours now, and she hadn’t heard one word. Couldn’t he at least have texted or called?

Cat hurried across the room and held her close. “You love him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Iris admitted miserably. “So much. He was incredible.”

“‘Was’? Stop that. It’s been, like, twenty-eight hours. I saw the way he looked at you. How he plunged into battle to rescue you.” Cat pumped her eyebrows and grinned. “So stinking sexy.”

“He said he’d come back for me.”

“Of course he will.” Cat tugged on Iris’s hand. “I tried to go to work this morning, but Grams found me and kicked me out to come check on you. Let’s walk through the trails to town and get lunch and an ice cream, check on Meredith.”

“Okay.” Iris didn’t want food or ice cream—she wanted Devon—but sitting around here wasn’t helping any. She pocketed her phone, resisting the impulse to call one more time or check if any of her texts had been read, and slid into some Texas.

“Do you really think Cruz and Meredith are just ‘friends’?” Cat asked as they walked out of Iris’s room and down the wide staircase.

“She got pretty heated quickly.” Iris appreciated something to distract her brain.

“Exactly! If they’re only ‘friends,’ she wouldn’t have been so upset. Plus you remember how those two were together, sparks flying and teasing all the time. He brought out such a fun side of Meredith, and she settled him down a little bit.” She sighed. “They’re perfect for each other.”

They walked out of the closest French doors and onto the wide porch. It was after noon now, and the day was warming but still a beautiful seventy degrees. Iris tried to focus on the beauty surrounding her and the conversation with her cousin, but she could hardly pull her brain from Devon, even for a few moments. *Please let him be okay, Lord. Please bring him back.*

## Chapter Nineteen



Devon fought with a fog and lost time and time again. He heard voices and felt people poking and prodding him, someone holding his hand, someone crying, someone else praying. He couldn't get out of the fog.

Finally, finally, he pried his eyes open and croaked out, "Iris?"

"Devon!" His mom's voice. She clung tighter to his hand but also smoothed his brow with her other hand. "Oh, sweet boy. My Devon."

He focused on her face. Dad was just over her shoulder, smiling anxiously at him. "Hey, bud. You okay?"

Devon felt like a little boy. He remembered breaking his arm from jumping off a bridge with his bike and his parents hovering over him, so concerned and patient, always there for him. Iris's parents couldn't and wouldn't be there for her. He needed to be there for her. He struggled to sit up, but he felt hands push him back down.

His parents' faces went from happy and anxious to concerned. "Calm down, son," his dad cautioned.

"No, I need to go!"

"Boys," his dad called.

He felt enormous pressure on his legs and torso and saw his brothers-in-law holding him down and his sisters watching over their shoulders, exclaiming all sweet and annoying, "Devon!"

“Please,” he begged. “I’ve got to get to Iris. Please!”

“Who is Iris?” asked his sister, Shelly.

“Iris?” Jaynee repeated. “Ooh, yeah, little brother finally fell in love! Who’s Iris? Where is she? How’d you meet?”

He was going to suffocate from the combined weight of his brothers-in-law, but he was nowhere close to done fighting.

“Jaynee,” his mom reprimanded, still clinging to his hand and hovering over him protectively. “He’s just coming out of a coma. Leave him alone for one second.”

“A medically induced coma.” Jaynee rolled her eyes. “I need some dirt on this Iris.”

Devon struggled to sit up again.

“Dude!” said his enormous brother-in-law, Jake. “I’m almost three hundred pounds, and I can’t hold you. Calm down.” Jake was a bodybuilder, but nobody had the right to hold Devon back from Iris. Sadly, his head was aching and still cloudy, and he felt weaker than a baby in his mom’s arms and he needed to catch a full breath.

“Jake, Gary. Get off of me, please. I promise I won’t try to leave ... yet.”

His brothers-in-law complied and went to stand next to their wives.

Looking to his mom, Devon had to make sure she knew something. “Mom, I’m so sorry I got hurt, and I’m sorry for the stress you go through for me. Thank you all for always being there for me. It means more than I can ever express. I love you.”

His mom’s blue eyes filled with tears, and she tenderly kissed his cheek. “I love you so much.”

He knew his career stressed his mom, but she always supported him. Iris didn’t have anybody loving her like this. She had Grams, Cat, and Uncle Jay, but Devon wanted to show her more love.



“Tell us about Iris,” Jaynee demanded. She was the oldest and such a boss, but he loved how invested she was in him. For the first time, he was grateful for her bossy attitude. Even with all he’d seen, all he’d been through, he’d never fully appreciated these wonderful people enough.

“I fell in love on my last job,” he admitted.

Jaynee squealed, and Shelly clapped her hands together and looked up at Jake with a huge smile. His mom got tears in her eyes again. His brothers-in-law both pumped fists in the air. “Finally,” Gary muttered. “I’ve been hearing about how you need to settle down for years.”

Jaynee elbowed him.

“She has some trust issues because her mom died and her dad deserted her,” he said. Then he realized that maybe he shouldn’t have shared that, as everyone’s eyes widened with concern and his mom looked like she was going to cry again. “Where’s my phone?” he asked.

“Probably at the bottom of that river you almost died in,” Jake offered.

“Oh, yeah.” It rushed back, and he had to ask, “Who pulled me out?”

“Highway patrol and some pretty impressive EMTs saved your life. Luckily, the cold water slowed down your vitals, so you’re not brain-dead,” Jaynee said. “Well, not any more brain-dead than you were before.”

He nodded, too focused on Iris to rise to her teasing. “How long have I been out? How did you all get here so fast?”

“It wasn’t that fast,” Shelly said.

“The CIA had our contact info and called us about eight yesterday morning. Your dad chartered a jet, and we got here yesterday afternoon,” his mom explained. “We left the boys with Granny Sue.”

His grandmother was as with it as Iris’s grams. His four wild nephews were in good hands. But ... yesterday? He’d lost

an entire day. Would Iris think he'd deserted her? Was she okay? "What time is it now?" he asked.

"Twelve-thirty."

Devon wondered where Iris was, both physically and emotionally. She should've been fine with CIA ops on the scene when he left and the other women holding the weapons, but what if something crazy had happened and one of those men had a hidden gun and had shot Iris and ... He forced himself to stop thinking worst-case scenarios and looked to his closest sister in age and relationship. "Shelly, I need you to get ahold of Iris Chadwick. She owns and manages the Mystical Lake Resort in Mystical Lake, Montana. Where am I now?"

"Missoula," his dad supplied.

"Why Shelly?" Jaynee planted her hands on her hips.

Devon really wanted some medicine to calm his head and a nap, but he also needed this time with his family, and he had to let Iris know he was coming for her as soon as they released him. "Because you'd scare her away," he explained to his oldest sister.

Jaynee cried out in protest. Everyone else laughed, and Shelly leaned forward. "Of course, bro. I'll get her here soon."

"No." Devon held up a hand. Shelly had to understand this—it was important—but he was so cloudy. "Tell her I'll come to her. Don't pressure her to come here. Please, Shelly."

"Why?"

Devon tried to think of how to explain it without giving away too much, but his head was only running at about twenty percent capacity. "Please don't, Shell. I can't explain."

Shelly's brow wrinkled, and everyone stared at him.

"Devon," his dad said patiently. "You had a bad head injury and almost drowned. You've been in a medically induced coma for over twenty-four hours. They're not going to let you out of here today, maybe not tomorrow. Why couldn't she drive an hour to you?"

He shook his head, even the slight movement hurt. “I can’t tell you the story, but she went through something traumatic. I have to go to her.”

“But if you love her, of course she loves you.” Jaynee jutted out her chin. “She’ll want to be with you. I would run to Gary. I’d run miles if he was injured.” That was a big deal, since Jaynee hated to run.

Gary bent and gave her a swift kiss. “Thank you, love. I’d swim through shark-infested waters to get to you.” Gary hated the ocean and had an irrational fear of sharks. Too many *Jaws* movies as a kid.

Devon rolled his eyes. “It’s not about how much she loves me.” Though they hadn’t even said those words, he thought he knew how much Iris cared for him. “It’s that I won’t ask that of her. I can wait.”

His family looked at him like he was missing the point, but they didn’t understand. He loved Iris enough to wait until he could get to her. All that mattered was that she knew he was coming and didn’t think that he’d deserted her. It didn’t matter that he wanted her here, surrounded by his loving family and in his arms. He could be patient, because he knew it wasn’t fair to ask her to leave her valley.

\* \* \*

Iris had choked down some fish and chips from Chips and Whips, the best restaurant in their small town, but she knew she couldn’t stomach ice cream. She waited in line with Cat for their turn. Meredith looked exhausted, but she still had a smile on her beautiful face as she served everyone. They finally got to the counter, and she let out a sigh and her shoulders relaxed. “Girls! How are you both?”

“As tired as you look,” Cat said, grinning. “I mean, you’re gorgeous, but you look dead on your feet. Can you take a break?”

Meredith looked to her teenage helper, who pushed at her arm and said, “Go. I’m fine.”

Meredith grabbed them each a Diet Coke from the fridge, and they walked out into the sunshine. They wandered down to the lakeside and sat on a bench facing the water. Iris sipped her Coke and listened to them chat. Meredith and Cat had always liked each other, but something about this morning's experience had strengthened their bond. Cat wisely didn't bring up Cruz again.

"Any word from our handsome rescuer?" Meredith asked, turning to Iris.

Iris held up her phone and shook her head. "Nope."

Meredith and Cat both looked sympathetic and maybe empathetic. Was Meredith hiding her love for Cruz? Did Cat have somebody she was longing for as much as Iris longed for Devon? He'd promised to come for her. It was only yesterday morning that he'd run after Antonio. Why was her faith in Devon so low? He'd proven that he was tough and could take on five men by himself. He'd proven that he cared, and he'd promised he would be there for her ... right?

The phone rang, and she startled. Glancing quickly at the caller ID, she scowled. "Telemarketer."

She was going to hang it up, but Cat held out her hand. "I love talking to them," she said.

Iris shook her head and laughed, handing the phone over. "You would."

"Hello?" Cat said in a falsely sweet tone. "No, this isn't Iris; this is her personal assistant. Can I please have your personal number so I can return the favor of this call? I can call you late at night, early in the morning, when you're having dinner with your family, when you're at church trying to feel the Spirit ... Excuse me?" Her eyes went wide. "This is *who*?" Cat shoved the phone into Iris's hands. "Devon's sister."

"What?" Iris's hand trembled as she put the phone to her ear. "H-hello?"

"Iris." The voice was warm and sweet. "I'm Shelly Keller, Devon's sister."

“Hi,” Iris managed, standing and walking to the lakeside as her cousin and friend stared at her. Was Keller his last name, then? He’d said his sisters were married. Was that her married name? It didn’t matter. “Where’s Devon? Is he okay?”

“He’s okay,” Shelly reassured her. “He was in a wreck and almost drowned and is just coming out of a coma, but he’s okay.”

Iris could hardly catch a breath to reply. He had been hurt. Almost drowned? A coma? “No,” she squeaked out. “Oh, Devon.”

“He’s okay, I promise. He lost his phone, so he was insistent that I track you down. Your grams answered at your resort and gave me your cell number.”

“Where is he?” Iris demanded. Maybe that was too strong, but she had to know, had to see him.

“St. Pat— Shoot, I’m not supposed to. He made me promise not to tell you where he is. Listen, he wanted me to tell you that he was fine and to tell you he’s coming for you. He was insistent you not come to him, that he’ll get to you as soon as possible.”

Iris pulled in a loud breath. He was worried about her leaving the valley. He was so understanding and sweet.

“He loves you, Iris. He told all of us.”

“He—he did?” Neither of them had said the word *love* yet, except when Devon had claimed to be her boyfriend in front of Antonio. Had that been just a day and a half ago? She was safe now from Antonio, but she wanted the safety of Devon. Iris had definitely thought of the word *love* and Devon in the same sentence, in the same phrase, simultaneously. She put a hand to her heart and looked at Cat. “He loves me,” she said aloud.

Cat shrieked, and Meredith clapped her hands together.

“But he doesn’t want me to come?” Iris asked Shelly.

“He said it would be too much to ask of you.”

Iris let out a sigh. It was so thoughtful of him not to ask her to leave her home, but she wondered what kind of a mental

case or wimp he and his family must think she was. “That’s very sweet of him. I ...” She wished she could say baloney, she needed to know exactly where he was and she would be there in a little over an hour—well, if they hadn’t flown him somewhere far away. Sadly, she couldn’t form the words. “Tell him ... thank you.” She didn’t really want to tell him she loved him via his sister; she wanted to tell him in person. Was there any way she could make the journey to him? Would Doc Penrose give her some valium? Would prayer work and calm her like it had at that cabin when they’d been in so much danger?

“Okay.” Shelly sounded uncertain and as if she’d expected more. “Hopefully, we’ll meet you someday soon.”

“Thank you. I hope so too.” There was an awkward pause; then she said simply, “Thanks. Bye.”

“Goodbye.” Shelly ended the call, and Iris felt even more awkward.

Devon was okay. That was all that mattered. Tears pricked at her eyelids, and she wondered if she’d cried this much since the day her mom had died or her dad had left her.

Cat and Meredith were right there, both hugging her. “He loves you and he’s okay?” Cat asked.

“Yes,” she managed, “but he doesn’t want me to come. He said he’d come for me, but he’s injured, and his sister didn’t know how long until they’d release him.” She needed to know where he was. St. Pat ... something? St. Patrick’s? Was there a St. Patrick’s in Missoula?

“He’s injured?” Meredith asked. “You have to go to him. Come on. I’ll drive you.” She tugged at her arm.

Cat stayed planted and stared at her. “You told him about your issues?”

Iris nodded. Something held her to the spot where she stood, as if she were physically bolted down.

“You really do love this guy.”

Iris nodded again.

Cat hugged her tight, then turned to Meredith. “Iris hasn’t left the valley in years.” She lowered her voice and looked apologetically at Iris before saying, “Because of her parents.”

“Oh.” Meredith stopped tugging on her arm. “I’m sorry.” She bit at her lip. “But he’ll come to you soon. It’ll be okay.”

“That’s right,” Cat said. “He told his family he loves you, and he’s okay. He’ll come soon.”

Iris smiled, acting like it was all okay, but her heart ached for Devon. He loved her. He was in a hospital. She wished she could be with him. If only she could teleport ... wherever he was. If only she were strong enough to go to him. She loved him and wanted to be with him. Did she love him enough to overcome her fears?

## Chapter Twenty



Devon hated waiting. He hated inactivity. He hated being without Iris. His family hovered over him, and he focused on enjoying this time with them, but underneath he was chafing at his inability to get to Iris, hold her, kiss her, and most importantly reassure her that he would always come for her and he wasn't going anywhere once he had her in his arms. Thirty-two million was plenty to retire on. He could start a new business from Mystical Lake. He'd never imagined he wouldn't want to be in the espionage business. He'd miss it, badly, but Iris was more important. Maybe he could work on security systems like he'd originally told Iris. That wouldn't be bad, simply different, right?

Since Shelly had returned from talking to Iris, she hadn't seemed like herself. She'd told them all that she'd gotten ahold of Iris, and Iris had been very concerned about him, saying that it was sweet of him to come to her and asking Shelly to thank him. Devon wasn't thrilled with how Shelly relayed the conversation, but Iris was probably still shaken up from being abducted yesterday morning. Was it only yesterday? He hated being so out of it. It was nearing dinnertime, and he still had no promises that the doctor would release him soon. Last he'd heard, they wanted to keep him overnight for "monitoring." What the heck did that mean? He was about ready to rip these IVs out and have Jake drive him to Mystical Lake. His brother-in-law would do it too, and nobody would dare step in Jake's way.

Most of the family had gone to get some food from Five Guys and had promised to sneak some back in for him, Shelly,



and his mom, who had opted to stay behind. His mom took a phone call from Granny and walked out of the room. As soon as she left, Devon motioned to Shelly.

She approached the bed but looked like she wished she'd left for dinner. "What's up, bro? Do you need anything?"

"Do you think I should call her myself? I wanted to see her in person, but I didn't think it'd be tomorrow before I could be there. I don't want her to worry."

Shelly shrugged and glanced at the monitors. "I think she'll be okay."

"What?" Devon swallowed and had to know what she was thinking. She was the one who'd talked to Iris, who had a bead on what Iris was thinking. "What's wrong, Shell?"

Shelly met his gaze and licked her lips and finally admitted, "The way she won't come to you and the way she just said 'thank you' and 'bye' like she didn't really care ... Sorry, bro, but it bugged me. Are you sure she's the right one?"

Devon's heart sank. Shelly would never hurt him, and she wanted him in love and happy just like she was. Iris must've been really cold and distant for Shelly to express any kind of concern. He was thinking more clearly now and hoped his words would make sense as he explained to his favorite sister. Of course he could trust Shelly. "She went through something horrific at sixteen, and I don't think she's left her valley since. She was abducted yesterday morning, and the criminal tried to claim her for his sick harem and then shoved a gun into her abdomen and almost killed her. I think you should cut her a little slack." He was far too defensive for Iris's sake, and he knew it. Still not all the way right in the brain, probably.

Shelly looked stricken. She sank into the chair and muttered, "I'm sorry. I can't imagine."

She didn't say anything else, and Devon was getting really ticked off—not at Shelly, but at the situation. Maybe Iris didn't care for him as deeply as he cared for her. It was irrational, but he wanted her to come, longed for her to overcome her fears

for him. He would never ask that of her. He was grateful that she didn't know his location so she didn't have that pressure on her.

He swung his feet off the bed, and Shelly's eyes widened. "I'm done, Shell. I'm not staying another night for monitoring. She'll be wondering if I'm coming for her. She needs to know I will never desert her. I have got to get to her. You come with me, and then you'll see, you'll see that she's the right one for me."

He didn't dare say that Iris loved him like he loved her, because she'd never expressed that, but he knew she cared for him. It hit him how selfish he was, lying here in an uncomfortable bed and listening to the doctors and nurses saying they needed to monitor him. After what she'd gone through yesterday morning, he knew Iris needed him. He had to get to her.

His monitors started beeping as he stood. His head pounded, he felt sick to his stomach, and he broke out in a cold sweat. He swayed on his feet but luckily didn't go down.

Shelly was quick to steady him with her hand. "Are you sure about this, bro?"

A nurse came running in. "Hey ..." She put her hands out, all placating. "Hey, it's okay. You need to lie down for me. You'll be okay, big guy."

"I am *fine*. Olive?" The nurse's name was written on his board along with the date as if he had amnesia.

She nodded.

Devon used the voice he'd use on a criminal, feeling only a slight twinge of guilt. "Here's what's going to happen now, Olive. I am officially refusing treatment. You can either take out the IVs and catheter, or I will rip them out." He cringed slightly at his own words. He looked to Shelly, not giving Olive any time for a rebuttal. "Please say Jake brought a change of clothes." His dad's and Gary's clothes would be too small. Jake's would be too big, but they would work until he

got back to the resort and his own suitcase. When Shelly nodded, he asked, "Can you please go get me some clothes?"

"Okay." She still looked uncertain, and he thought that uncertainty went back to Iris. It didn't matter. As long as she came with him to meet Iris, she'd see. Iris loved him and needed him. He hoped.

He looked back to the nurse. "Can you also please scrounge me up a toothbrush and toothpaste? Something crawled in my mouth and died while I was unconscious."

She managed a small smile. "You're refusing treatment and you're going to rip that catheter out by yourself, tough guy?"

Devon nodded, giving her a look that had made many men stop in their tracks and turn tail and run.

She kept smiling. She was a tough one. "Okay. I'll help you, unless you don't react well to getting up and moving. What's her name?"

"Iris."

"I thought so. You muttered that name while you slept. I'll get the toothbrush and paste too, if you'll sit down and relax for two minutes before you go sweep your girl off her feet with a head injury," she said in an undertone. "If I determine you aren't ready to leave, you'll listen to my advice?"

"Thank you," Devon said sincerely, though he wasn't certain he'd listen to anyone who wanted to keep him from Iris one minute longer. He didn't care if he was still out of his head.

"Sure. Let's see how it goes." She winked and left.

Devon relaxed into his bed as Shelly gave him a glance and walked out after the nurse. The nurse returned first and quickly took care of all the tubes poking out of him. She soon had him monitor and tube free and helped him into the bathroom so he could brush his teeth. He was even able to take a quick shower before sliding into Jake's too-big T-shirt and joggers, which Shelly handed through the door. He exited the

bathroom, feeling almost human again, though some Tylenol wouldn't be rejected.

His mom was waiting with Shelly. "What are you thinking, love?" she asked, obviously as concerned as Shelly was.

"Well, I'm thinking you all want to come on a drive to Mystical Lake. It's gorgeous there. If you're able to stay for a bit, I know the lady who runs the resort." He winked. His head pounded, and he was exhausted from the effort of showering and getting ready. If he hadn't had Iris on the brain, he would've sunk into that stiff bed and fallen back asleep.

"Is it really wise to check yourself out of the hospital and go chasing after some girl?"

"She's not some girl, Mom. She's the one."

His mom's lips pursed, and she and Shelly exchanged a look. Apparently, she shared Shelley's concerns about Iris's level of commitment.

"I know you're worried about me and I love how much you care, but this is right. Iris is right for me."

"I am?" The sweetest voice came from the hallway, and then Iris walked into the room.

Devon swayed, and he had to grip the bed frame. "Iris?"

She smiled tentatively, glancing at his mom and sister and nodding at them.

"How did you—? Why did you—?" Everything was going fuzzy, but Iris was here. He wanted to hold her, but his head was thumping, hard. He put a hand to his head and admitted, "I think I might ..." Then everything went black again.

\* \* \*

Iris cried out in horror as Devon flopped to the floor, barely avoiding hitting his head on the chair or the bed frame. She rushed forward and beat his mom and sister to him. She put her hand to his face.

Those beautiful blue eyes gazed up at her. “Iris ... I love you.” Then he closed his eyes, and she was afraid he’d passed out again.

Nurses ran into the room, and Iris and his sister and mom were shuffled out as the medical professionals assessed him and helped him back into bed. When she, Cat, and Meredith had arrived at the hospital, the nurses had only let her through because of Cat telling them far too much—how the love of Iris’s life had been injured by Italian mafia and how Iris hadn’t left her valley for ten years because of her parents, but had braved the trip because of her desperate love for Devon and on and on. The nurses had been impressed with the story and finally let only Iris through.

The drive through the canyon hadn’t been as bad as she’d feared. With a lot of deep breathing, prayer, focusing on Devon and how much she loved him, and Cat and Meredith talking calmly with her, she’d made it. It was more than worth it to come for Devon, but what if she’d hurt him worse? Had he passed out because of the shock or her coming, or because he’d been out of bed and shouldn’t have been? She didn’t want to hurt him, ever.

“I’m sorry.” She turned to his mom and sister, who were anxiously waiting with her outside the open door. “I didn’t mean for him to get hurt again. I just had to be with him.” Her voice lowered. “I have to ... tell him I love him in person.” She looked to the sister. “Shelly? I couldn’t just say it on the phone. I felt like I had to be with him, and you did give away part of the name of the hospital.”

Shelly smiled tentatively at her, but she looked uncertain. “Why didn’t you just come earlier, then? He passed out again because he insisted on removing all the tubes and stuff and showering so he could come to you, bullying a nurse into helping him.”

Iris put a hand to her heart. She wanted to rush back in there, but she didn’t want to injure Devon. “He’s amazing. He was worried about me coming to him because ...” She swallowed and admitted, “I was deserted by my dad the day of my mom’s funeral at age sixteen, almost raped the same day,

and almost fell off a two-hundred-foot cliff trying to escape the man who was trying to take advantage of me.”

The women’s eyes went wide.

She hung her head. “I have a lot of issues, and I know I’m not worthy of Devon, but I do love him.”

She felt warm, soft arms around her. Motherly arms. Devon’s mom cuddled her close, and Iris felt the stupid tears coming back for who knew how many times the past two days. She sighed in relief and wrapped her arms around his mom. “Shh, it’s okay,” his mom said. “Devon loves you too, and it’ll all work out.”

Shelly’s arms also came around them, and she said, “We all have issues, Iris. We aren’t going to judge you for your issues. If you love Devon, we’ll love you too.”

Iris let herself cry and cling to these women, murmuring, “Thank you,” over and over again.

The nurses filed out of the room, and the three of them pulled apart. Iris should’ve felt embarrassed, but Devon’s mom and Shelley were smiling at her with such kindness.

“He’s okay,” a dark-haired nurse said. “He wants Iris.” She rolled her eyes. “Can you convince him to calm down and stay in that bed?” she asked, staring pointedly at Iris.

“Of course.” Iris looked to his mom and sister.

“Go,” Shelly urged. “We’ll come in when the family gets back, and then we’ll completely overwhelm you.”

“Sounds good.” She smiled at them and slowly walked into his hospital room.

Devon was sitting up in bed. His blue eyes looked clear and his clothes were too big on him, the shirt hanging down to reveal his beautiful chest. He wasn’t his usual polished self, and she loved him even more.

His smile was all for her. “Nurse Olive isn’t thrilled with me. She tried to help me, and it went south. Now she said I can’t leave this bed again or she’ll put restraints on me, but

you can climb up here and kiss me.” He gave her that smoldering look that made her feel a little unsteady.

Iris didn’t even have it in her to tease him as she gave a little cry and ran to him, sitting on the bed and cuddling into his chest. He wrapped her up tight and tilted her chin up, kissing her desperately and firmly and making the trip out of her valley even more worth it.

When they pulled apart for air, she asked, “Are you okay?”

He smiled cheekily. “They made me put the IVs back in, and they’re going to make me do another MRI when the machine becomes available, but at least they left the catheter out.”

“Thanks for sharing that.” She touched his cheek softly and asked, “Please, Devon. Are you really okay?”

“I’m fine. Just pushed it a little too fast after a head injury and almost drowning, but I had to try to get to you.”

Her heart melted.

He looked at her with wonder. “But you came for me. That was so brave of you.”

“Brave?” She almost choked. “You burst into a cabin with five armed men and rescued me, Cat, and Meredith.” She kissed him tenderly. “You, Devon, are the bravest person I know.”

He shrugged. “All I care about is that you’re safe and that you know something.”

“What’s that?”

“That I love you.”

Iris’s heart thumped harder against her chest. His sister had said that he loved her and he’d said it as he passed out, but hearing it from his beautiful lips while he was lucid was incredible. “I love you too,” she admitted.

He framed her face and pulled her against him, taking advantage of her lips for several wonderful minutes. Leaning

back, he admitted, “I am exhausted, and the nurses tell me I need to rest, not kiss you all night.”

“Jerks,” she murmured.

He chuckled.

“Seriously, Devon, I want you to heal. I’ll leave so you can rest.”

“Can’t I just ... hold you until I fall asleep?”

“Okay.” She swung her legs up on the bed and cuddled against his side, resting her hand on his chest as his arm secured her to him. *He* was her anchor, not her valley. She could be grounded and safe and happy because of this incredible man.

“Iris?” he whispered against her forehead.

She looked up at him. “Yes?”

“I want to date you, be with you. I think I’ll retire from espionage and maybe start a security company or build rowboats or be your maintenance man. Maybe you could teach me how to use that toilet brush.” He winked, all irresistible and cute.

Iris sat up swiftly and stared down at him. “Devon! I could never ask that of you. You need to do what you love, what you’re incredible at. Go be the super spy guy. Just promise to always come back to me.”

He gazed up at her, a look full of love and devotion. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes. I love you, and I want you to be happy.”

“I want you to be happy too, love. We’ll figure it out together.”

Iris liked the sound of that. She settled in next to him again. “Let’s wait on any major decisions until you’re not suffering from a traumatic brain injury.”

He chuckled. “Deal.”



She cuddled in close, but she heard shuffling at the door and smelled the rich scent of fried hamburgers. Several people crowded in the doorway. A big, buff guy shook a sack of takeout from Five Guys. “Bacon double cheese?” he called.

“No,” Devon said. “Shut off the light, close the door, and get a hotel. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

“Testy,” the guy returned. “Hi, Iris.” He waved.

She waved back. “Hi, brother-in-law of the man I love.”

The big guy chuckled. “Jake.”

An older gentleman smiled at her. “Would you like some food, Iris?”

“No, thank you,” she said. “I’ve got what I want right here.”

They all laughed, and the woman who had to be his other sister said, “Well, we know when we’re not wanted. We’ll meet you officially tomorrow, Iris, and we’ll let your friends know to get a hotel as well.”

Iris raised a hand. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

Someone shut off the light and closed the door.

“You do realize you’re going to have an awful night’s sleep in the hospital, and they’re going to interrupt our cuddling session for an MRI, and I’ll probably snore and push you off the bed at some point?” Devon asked.

“I don’t care. All I care about is being with you.”

He pulled her in closer, and she gazed up at him. His blue eyes were suspiciously bright as he said, “You’re miraculous, Iris. I love you.”

Then he kissed her softly. He lay back and within seconds was asleep. Iris cuddled in close and listened to the rhythmic beating of his heart and the monitors in the darkened room. She loved him. He loved her. She’d left her valley for him. She’d do anything for him. Devon was the miracle in her life.

## Epilogue



Iris stood at the top of a twenty-foot cliff overlooking a small, clear pool. They were in Rincon, Costa Rica, for the day, exploring waterfalls and adventure parks before they went back to their seaside villa. It was the perfect honeymoon, just her and Devon, two weeks of traveling through this incredible country. At home they had two feet of snow, but here it was a warm, tropical paradise.

Maybe she could understand her dad wanting to stay in the warm beauty of the Caribbean, but she could never understand him checking out on life and never coming back to those who loved him. Devon's parents and family had taught her the meaning of devotion and family over the last five months. She adored all of them as much as her own brothers, Cat, Grams, Uncle Jay, and Cruz. Everybody but her dad had been at her and Devon's gorgeous Christmas wedding at the resort.

Devon treaded water below her, the sun sparkling off his broad shoulders and his hair darker and slicked back with water. "Come on, love, you've jumped much higher than that."

"Is that water sanitary?" she asked.

He chuckled at the *Tarzan* reference. She'd taken to calling him Tarzan as they'd zip-lined through jungles, climbed through adventure courses, swum through waterfalls, and jumped off more cliffs than she'd ever imagined. Her little lake back home was gorgeous, but she really loved the ocean and bodysurfing as well as all the adventures they'd had in Costa Rica. Most of all, she loved her handsome husband. He hadn't quit espionage completely, but he had only taken a few

jobs over the past five months. Usually, he was focused on fixing up the cabin he'd bought half a mile south of Uncle Jay's, learning how to fish, and—most of all—being there for Iris.

“Really, is it deep enough to dive?” she asked.

“Yeah. I didn't hit bottom.”

“Sweet.” She launched herself off and dove into the pool. The water was warm as she slid through it. She loved swimming in all this warm water. Not that she'd ever love anywhere as much as Mystical Lake, but overcoming her fears and being able to travel with Devon had truly been a gift from above.

She surfaced and pushed the water from her eyes and her hair back out of her face. Devon was right there, wrapping an arm around her and tugging her to a spot where he could touch. She wrapped her arms and legs around his muscular back and held on.

“Nice dive,” he said.

“Thanks.” She cuddled in close and sighed. “This is really paradise, isn't it?”

He shook his head. “Not this place.”

“You don't think so?”

His blue gaze traveled over her face. “You're paradise, Iris. We could live in a shanty in Africa, and it would be paradise with you.”

She smiled and kissed him softly. “I love you.”

He kissed her more passionately. “I love you, Mrs. Berkshire.”

She grinned every time she heard that name. She pressed against him and kissed him again. Footsteps approached, but Iris had no desire to pull away from her husband—paradise—wherever Devon Berkshire was. That was the truth.

\* \* \*

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## Only Her Cowboy - Excerpt

Meredith looked across the park toward Main Street. Cat didn't know if she was avoiding her gaze and her questions but something had caught her gaze. She whistled low and murmured, "Hot cowboy at your six o'clock."

Hot cowboy? Cat's blood ran hotter, even as cold chills pricked her skin. There was only one hot cowboy in this town and she didn't want to look at or talk to him, ever. She slowly spun, and there he was. Stetson Stillwater. She'd make fun of his too-typical cowboy name. If it wasn't so sexy and didn't fit him so well.

She wanted to look away, claim he was definitely *not* a hot cowboy, but there was only so much lying and depriving oneself of staring at such perfection that a girl could do. She stared, clutching her ice cream cone, and licking her lips. Stetson tipped his hat to Mary Penrose, Doc's wife, and her two young daughters. The girls gazed up worshipfully at him and his cheek and eyes crinkled as he gifted him with his slow grin. That smile. Those eyes. Those crystal blue eyes that seemed to see straight through her animosity and right into her girlish dreams about him. She loved and hated those eyes so much.

He said goodbye to yet another group of female worshippers and walked on. His strides were purposeful and his body was well-built, showcased far too well in that t-shirt and nicely-fitted jeans, and dang it if he wasn't the most beautiful creation the good Lord had ever put on this earth.

Why did he have to look so good, when he ticked Cat off so completely?

It appeared he was angling for Meredith's ice cream shop, but he suddenly glanced around as if he could feel Cat's gaze on him. He met her gaze and the world disappeared around her. Cat tried to swallow but her throat was too dry. Stetson stopped walking completely, in the middle of Main Street, staring into Cat's eyes.

She licked her lips and against all that was right or smart, she smiled at the son of a gun before she could stop herself. His answering grin yanked the oxygen from her lungs and the resistance from her body. He was going to march over here and ask her out and she was going to forget her anger and protecting her own heart and join the throngs of women who knew exactly how it felt to be kissed by the "hot cowboy".

Her heart started racing as he did exactly as she'd hoped and strode her direction. She put a hand to her heart and prayed for help and strength. She'd hated Stetson Stillwater for six years now. He'd been a little slow to join her angry parade but he was a smart guy and he caught on when she avoided him, regularly hid sacks of fish guts in his truck and tractor, and was more poisonous than snake venom when she saw him. Over the past few years they'd settled into a comfortably toxic relationship. She regularly took digs at him at church, potlucks, any time he came into the resort or she saw him in town, but dang him being so appealing, and always responding to her digs with kindness. Her biggest fear was she'd fall susceptible to his charms and go the way of her mother.

He was almost to her and she had no clue how she was going to keep resisting him if he kept looking at her like that. Then his gaze shifted and he said warmly, "Meredith. How are you?"

Meredith? Cat shook her head, coming out of her Stetson-induced fog and remembered her friend was sitting right next to her. Meredith stood and took the hand Stetson offered. "Great. How are you?"

“Good. I had to run some errands and I wanted to thank you for the bread and jam. It was delicious, reminded me of Mama’s.”

Cat felt a small lurch of sympathy for Stetson. Despite herself, Cat still loved Stetson’s mama. Brenda had been an angel and almost as close to Cat as her own Aunt Lucy. Of course the two angelic women in her life died. Grams couldn’t be called angelic, too feisty, but Cat adored her.

“I’m glad you liked it,” Meredith said, looking at him with those large, dark eyes that Cat was certain could pull any man in. Well, sadly any man but her brother. Stupid Cruz. Why wasn’t he with Meredith? Why was Stetson looking at Meredith as if he were interested in her?

Meredith and Stetson. It couldn’t be. A horror and sickness rushed through Cat. No! Meredith was meant for Cruz and Stetson was meant for ... well not Meredith that was for dang sure.

She stood, feeling awkward and out of place but wanting to break up this flirting, or whatever this was. “You brought *him* bread?” she accused Meredith with.

Meredith raised her hands innocently. “He fixed the leak in my roof and wouldn’t take payment for it.”

Cat’s eyes narrowed at Stetson as he stood there smiling at her like he knew exactly where her traitorous thoughts had gone thirty seconds ago. She looked back at her friend, well maybe her friend, and lowered her voice, “The Stillwaters are the sworn enemies of the Chadwicks.”

Meredith looked confused and embarrassed while Stetson let out a hearty laugh. Cat turned to glare at him.

“Only of *you*, beautiful Catalina,” Stetson said, still laughing.

Had he really just called her beautiful? She rolled her eyes at herself. He probably called every woman beautiful. Like father like son.

“I get along perfectly well with Cruz and all of your cousins,” Stetson said. “You’re the only one who thinks of me

as the ‘sworn enemy’.” His voice lowered and she crazily thought a flash of pain went through his blue eyes, “For something I had absolutely no part in.”

Cat’s eyes widened. Had he really dared go there?

“You’re dripping ice cream all down your arm,” Stetson pointed out.

Cat looked down, shocked that she still held a melted ice cream cone and pink stickiness was all over her hand and arm. She glared at Stetson as if it were his fault and stomped to the nearby garbage can. A wasted ice cream, all because she couldn’t stop staring at, and fighting with, that infuriating man.

Find *Only Her Cowboy* [here](#).



Royal Mistake



# Chapter One



Princess Belle Magnum walked down the picturesque street of her town, still in her comfortable scrubs as she'd just finished working at the clinic with her future sister-in-law Dr. Grace. She grinned as the tropical sun darted through the trees to warm her face, plumeria and jasmine flowers scented the air, the creek babbled to her right, and children and adults waved and called greetings to her. She loved the people of Magna and everyone loved her right back.

“Princess Belle?” A darling little girl with pigtails and big brown eyes gazed up at her, holding her mom’s hand.

Belle bent to the little angel’s level. “Yes, my sweet Paisley?”

“Where’s your crown and your pretty dress?” The little girl’s nose scrunched. “You’re my favorite beautiful princess, but you need a pretty dress.”

Belle laughed. “I’m sorry, love. I’m just getting off work and I would get all my pretty dresses dirty there.” She winked. “But I promise I’ll put one on tonight for dinner.”

Paisley seemed to consider this as her mom looked on with a smile. She finally nodded. “I guess that’s okay. Will your handsome prince be at dinner with you?”

Belle’s smile stayed in place. She could hardly tell this girl she didn’t have a handsome prince yet. Treck Wilder, her older brother Bodi’s best friend and the royal pilot, was destined to love her. Someday. He gave her looks that made her think he

was interested, but neither of them had bridged the gap yet. Soon.

“Yes, he will be,” she said. It wasn’t a lie; Treck usually made it to dinner with the royal family and their myriad of guests since tourism had come to their island in June.

Paisley put a dramatic hand to her heart and then whispered, “Are you gonna kiss him?”

Belle laughed again. “I hope so, love. I truly do.”

Paisley nodded, all wise and cute. “He’d be dumb if he didn’t want to kiss you. You’re practically perfect.”

“Oh, you sweetie. You’re the perfect one.” Belle gave her a hug and straightened, waving goodbye and continuing on. Delicious scents wafted from the bakery and she couldn’t stop herself from darting inside. Isabella was at the counter. “Hello, my beautiful friend,” Belle called.

“Belle. You angel. How was the clinic today?”

“So fun!” She eased up to the counter, looking through the glass at muffins, brownies, and sweet breads.

Isabella shook her head. “Only you would think dealing with blood and urine is fun. You need to quit being so angelic. Sometimes I worry I won’t see you tomorrow because you’ve been exalted.”

“Stop. You’ll blow my head up. Are you closing soon?”

“Yes.” Isabella smiled shyly, her dark eyes glinting with excitement. “I’m hoping Stuart will stop by.”

Stuart Falslev. The handsome American military hero. He was too sure of himself and far too appealing, but he rarely looked Belle’s direction. Not that it mattered. She had Treck, and Stuart had made a play for her sister Addie not long ago. It would just be awkward if Belle was interested in him. Which she wasn’t.

“Oh. I’ll hurry then so I’m not in your way.”

Isabella laughed. “It’ll be fine. What can I get you?”

Isabella never rushed her. She must be excited to see Stuart. Not that Belle blamed her. He was a handsome puzzle that she couldn't figure out, and he didn't seem to know she was alive.

“I'll have a mint brownie, please.”

“Sure.” Isabella got her the treat, took her coins, and then waved goodbye. “See you soon.”

She was definitely rushing Belle out the door. “Good luck with Stuart.”

“I'll need it. I've never seen the likes of him.” She fanned herself dramatically. “Whew he's hot.”

Belle knew exactly what she meant. Stuart was different, intriguing, and definitely “hot”. She held the brownie in her right hand so she wouldn't squish it and pushed the door open, turning for one last wave to her friend as she rushed through. She collided with a wall of solid muscle.

The man wrapped his hands around her arms to steady her and an incredible sensation of warmth rushed through her. She startled and clung to her brownie, staring up into the dark eyes of none other than Stuart Falslev. “Oh! Excuse me.”

He looked her over with a slightly open mouth, as if seeing her for the first time. His grip softened and he gently ran his palms down each of her arms. Belle's entire body quivered in response and the world seemed to tilt. What was happening?

Stuart suddenly went stiff, stepped back, and gave her a detached, slightly-mocking look. “Excuse me, Princess.”

He brushed around her and into the shop. Belle felt the effect of him brushing so close, and if the sharp intake of breath she heard from him was any indication, he felt it too. She expected him to stop, turn to her, talk to her, but no. He went right up to the counter and started flirting with Isabella.

Her friend responded with a broad grin and flirted right back.

Belle had never had someone disregard her like that. Everyone on Magna loved her and were exceptionally kind to

her. It was even more shocking to be dismissed so rudely because of the warmth and connection she'd felt with him.

Belle backed out of the shop, waiting for him to look around. He suddenly did. His dark eyes pierced right into her, and her heart pounded as if she'd sprinted a mile. His eyes trailed over her and then he simply inclined his chin and turned away.

Dismissing her, again, just like that.

Belle walked out onto the street, hardly hearing the greetings coming her way. What had just happened? Why had it affected her so deeply while it hadn't affected Stuart at all?

She blew out a breath. He was a toughened military man who'd traveled the world. She was an innocent princess who'd never left her island. He had probably felt nothing. Her shoulders rounded slightly, but she immediately pushed them back and focused on Mr. Schriver who was making his way slowly toward her.

"What you got in your hand, darling girl?" Mr. Schriver asked.

She looked down at her squished brownie. It was ruined, just like any hopes of something happening with Stuart. She needed to forget the American. He didn't matter to her. At all. He was rude and not her type.

Treck. She needed to focus on his easy-going nature and happy smile. Treck was her focus.

Why then did she have to stop herself from gawking through the bakery window at Stuart?

## Chapter Two



Stuart Falslev lay on his back in the dust, gritting his teeth against the sharp stab of pain in his left shoulder. The scents of dirt, sweat, and horses washed over him, making him want to gag. Which made no sense. He wasn't a gagger.

It was probably the hundredth time he'd been knocked off his borrowed horse, Annalisa, trying to joust Alaric, Kingston, Malik, or any of the other Magnite men. Maybe it was because the islanders had been trained from birth on up to ride a horse and somehow joust from the back of the beast. Maybe it was the horse's fault. Who named their horse Annalisa anyway? It was a wussy name, far too pretty of a name for a horse. Stuart needed a horse as strong and determined as him. He needed a horse with a name that would help him be taken seriously.

He should move, roll over, and stand up. Fight again. It was one of the few times in his life that his competitiveness didn't overcome everything. Everything hurt. He'd joined the military the day he turned eighteen, worked his way into being trained as an Army Ranger, and been involved in dangerous ops throughout the world. He'd been shot and stabbed by the enemy. He'd been worked near to death, beaten, and demeaned by his commanding officers and his own father. He could easily recall hurt like this many times in his life. Pain he was used to, but not humiliation. He would never accept humiliation, but he'd been forced to swallow his share of the uncomfortable emotion on the idyllic island of Magna.

What was wrong with his shoulder, and how could he hide that he was hurting?

Prince Commander Alaric appeared above him, grinning widely. Stuart liked Alaric. Usually. He loved this remote kingdom that belonged in a past century. Except for when he got bested at jousting. At least by now, after a month living here, he could beat everyone but Kingston at the sword. And he was rarely beaten in hand to hand combat and never at target shooting or tracking.

Had he dislocated or separated his shoulder? Usually he would shake the pain off and keep going, but right now he didn't dare move.

"You dead?" Alaric asked.

"I wish I was," he gritted out. Above all else, he had to retain his pride—quite often, pride was all he had—but dang, this hurt. He closed his eyes again and willed himself to move, but his body didn't obey. The ground was hard and the agony was sharp and all he wanted was to knock Alaric off his horse for once. Stuart's dad had told him hourly as a child and teenager that he'd never amount to anything. At times like these, it was the only voice in his head. Stuart had spent his adult life determined to be successful, to win, and to someday shut that voice up.

"I need a new horse," he said, hoping it didn't sound like whining. "Who names their horse Annalisa anyway? I'm going to import a horse from Ireland. Don't they have the best-bred horses in the world?"

He said all of this casually when inside he wanted to cry. Should he tell Alaric how much his shoulder hurt? Alaric usually hit him straight in the chest with what they claimed was a blunted lance but often felt like a sharp spear. This time the blow had been off-center and had smacked him in the left shoulder. Was it out of socket? That would make sense. He'd seen that happen before and the guy had been screaming in pain. At least he wasn't screaming. He could cling to that for his battered pride's sake.

Alaric laughed. "It's the Indian, not the arrow, my friend."

Stuart hated when Alaric said that. Basically, it was operator error and not the equipment—or in this case, the

horse. He opened his eyes to stare up at Alaric and hoped the agony didn't show in his face. He needed to stand up and be a man. Wes had left a few minutes ago to shower and get ready for dinner. Stuart rarely ate dinner with the royal family and guests like Wes did. If Wes was here, Stuart could let down his guard a bit, at least admit to his friend of twelve years that something was wrong.

“Seriously, friend ... I'm getting worried.” Alaric's brow furrowed. “Your face doesn't look right, all pale and waxy. Let me go get Grace.”

“I'm fine. Help me get this stupid armor off.” Stuart tried to sit up. He let out a groan and instinctively grabbed his left shoulder with his right arm, swallowing down bile. This was bad. “Give me a minute,” he grunted. Luckily it was getting late in the day and only a few other men were still in the stadium. He'd had many witnesses to his humiliation as he failed to win the joust time and again, but it was nice to not have a crowd witness every failure.

He'd get there. He'd win the joust. He just needed time. And a nap. And maybe Dr. Grace to look at his shoulder. And maybe some Tylenol.

He'd had morphine when he'd taken a bullet to his thigh and a knife to the side of his abdomen. That sounded nice right now. Magna was behind in many technological and medical advances. Usually he didn't care, but right now he was seriously concerned that they didn't have morphine and the necessary equipment to fix his shoulder. He didn't want to leave his new home like Alaric had been forced to do a few weeks ago to have a brain tumor removed.

Alaric quickly loosened Stuart's armor and slid it off.

Stuart laid back. “Thanks,” he managed. Was he panting? Was he pale and waxy looking?

“I'm going to get Grace. Just lie there and I'll be right back.”

Stuart didn't answer. He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and started counting. Anything to distract himself from the



pain. Despite the numbers in his head, he heard his father's voice telling him what a pathetic wimp he was, telling him to stand up and fight like a man. Excruciating seconds ticked by as he tried to tell himself he was tougher than this.

A fresh, clean scent washed over him. The scent of a woman. It was intoxicating and also strangely familiar, as if he'd smelled it recently. Was the pain making him delusional? He opened his eyes to see the face of an angel looming above him. She was exquisitely beautiful with smooth, brown skin, deep brown eyes, long lashes, full lips, and a sweetness that radiated from her. Princess Adelaide?

No. It wasn't the woman he'd been so impressed and intrigued by when he first arrived at the island. Princess Adelaide had shot him down hard. That was no surprise. He didn't deserve an incredible woman anyway. It was mostly his competitiveness that made him pursue any woman he met who was too good for him. If an impressive woman returned his interest, he'd walk away quick. No reason to grow close to anyone and let them know how pathetic he was inside. Much better to be seen as the non-committal jerk.

He focused on the woman's flawless face. This dark-haired, exotic beauty was Addie's sister, the youngest princess. He couldn't recall her name at the moment. The woman who'd run into him yesterday coming out of the bakery and had upended his world by how incredible it felt to touch her. He'd ignored those feelings yesterday, turned away from her no matter how hard it had been, and he'd ignore the connection right now.

He'd avoided the younger sister and her twin cousins since coming to the island, knowing they were too young for him. Even though he riled their older brothers at every turn, he would never intentionally cause a breach by pursuing an innocent, inexperienced princess. Nobody would believe that he cared, but he felt at home here and didn't want to get run off the island into the ocean. It was a long swim to Spain and he'd never admit it, but maybe his SEAL buddies *could* best him at swimming.

The appealing woman knelt beside him and lightly touched his arm. The warm press of her fingers somehow eased the pain and made him feel tingly and warm and all kinds of new feelings he'd only experienced when he touched her yesterday. It was such a strong contrast to the intensity of his pain that he couldn't believe she was real and not some ministering angel.

Maybe he was dreaming. Soft touches and tender feelings weren't in his wheelhouse. His mom had tried to be soft with him when she doctored his wounds after his father beat him, but she'd had to be careful not to be too tender. If his father saw him getting soft treatment, he'd thrash his mom, sister, and then Stuart again for fun.

"Your shoulder is out of socket," she said. "The quicker we get it back in, the less damage and recovery time you'll have."

That made sense, but how was this wisp of a girl going to help him? He tried to struggle back up. He'd better get to Grace and see if she and Alaric could pop it back in with Alaric's strength and Grace's knowledge and skill set.

"Stay lying down," she murmured. "I can fix it."

He forgot about her warm touch and laughed incredulously. "You? Forgive me, princess, but I've seen what it takes to put a Ranger's shoulder back in. You don't look strong enough to pop my finger back into place, let alone my shoulder."

She stared at him. Fire lit in those dark eyes, replacing the sweetness that radiated from her. "Lie on your back," she commanded him.

Stuart's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "I only take commands from military leaders," he shot at her.

She gave him the cutest, most impertinent look he'd ever seen. "Gerald, Mary, Johnathon," she called. "Come hold him down so I can pop his shoulder back in."

They all three came running. He hadn't even known Gerald and Mary were still here, but they appeared at her sweet command.

"You want to fight all four of us?" she asked.

“Hooah,” he snarled, the Army equivalent of *Bring it on*.

Those incredible, long-lashed dark eyes got even more determined. She climbed over him, straddling his abdomen and gently pushing him onto his back. For some insane reason, Stuart didn't resist. Her touch was the most healing balm he'd ever known. It also filled him with a heat he had to ignore unless he wanted a troop of angry brothers and cousins hunting him down. He didn't mind fighting anyone, and had, but he'd enjoyed his past four weeks on this idyllic island and respected the men of the Magna family. He'd worked against his own nature and tried not to tick them off too badly. Often he failed, but they hadn't tied him to the mast of a slow boat and shipped him off the island. Yet.

She placed her right hand on his left shoulder and grasped his left hand with hers. Her touching him had an incredible effect. It was better than a shot of morphine. Crazy thoughts. Maybe the pain was so intense that he was translating it into pleasure. Yet that wouldn't explain how it had felt when he touched her yesterday in the doorway of the bakery.

“Hold tight to my hand,” she instructed. “This is going to hurt.”

“Hooah,” he ground out. “Bring it on, pretty princess.” Hurt was second nature to him and he'd never shied away from it.

She gave him a brief smile and then she yanked on his hand while simultaneously pushing hard on his shoulder. A sharp stab, a pop, and then blessed relief. Instinct said to close his eyes and relax, but he couldn't take his gaze off her gorgeous face.

“Thank you,” he breathed out. His right hand lifted, without conscious thought on his part, and he gently cupped her cheek with his hand. He'd never felt anything so smooth, so appealing. Every part of this perfect, sweet princess, who also had a determined side, seemed to call to him.

She smiled down at him, and was it a hallucination or was she leaning closer?

“What is going on here?” a loud, angry, male voice demanded.

The princess whipped her head around to look and scrambled off him and onto her knees beside him. Stuart popped to his feet, wrapping his right hand around her arm and easily lifting her up and then drawing her behind him to protect her. When he realized it was Alaric, he relaxed his stance, thankful he wouldn't have to fight without knowing what his shoulder could take at this point. It felt immensely better, but he suspected there was some damage and he'd have to deal with a brief recovery period. That was the worst part of getting hurt—recovering. He hated downtime. His dad's voice grew louder if he wasn't insanely busy and challenging himself.

The princess pressed against his back and he felt a swirl of protectiveness and desire that he'd never felt before. The protectiveness was nothing new. He'd spent his childhood and teenage years trying and failing to protect his mom and sister and his adult years trying and quite often succeeding to protect underprivileged souls the world over. He'd felt desire before, most recently with this princess's sister, Adelaide, one of the most exquisitely beautiful women he'd ever seen, but to have the two emotions combined so seamlessly rattled him.

Alaric stormed toward them, Dr. Grace at his side. His friend's face was a thundercloud. “What is going on here?” he repeated.

The princess came around to Stuart's side and said more defiantly than he would've imagined she could speak, “I was putting Stuart's shoulder back into place.”

Alaric's brows rose. Apparently the sweetheart of a princess didn't usually speak defiantly to him. Stuart had also been surprised by the steel he'd seen in her when she forced him to let her put his shoulder in. The combination of gentle and tough was more appealing than anything he'd seen, and he'd seen a lot of the world in his time in the military and recently working for his good friend Axel Dexter.

Stuart nodded. “Yes, the Princess ...” Dang. He still couldn’t remember her name. There’d been a lot of names to learn since he came to the island and the younger princesses had never registered.

“Belle,” she supplied, giving him a partially angry, partially hurt look.

“Sorry.” He grimaced. Great, he’d offended her and after she’d so kindly helped him and shook his moorings with her tender touch.

It was just as well. From the way Alaric had stormed their way, Princess Belle was another on the list of women Stuart wasn’t supposed to look twice at—Adelaide, Grace, and now Belle. Check, check, and check. He’d stay away. This one would be harder than the other two had been. “Belle put my shoulder back into place.” He rolled it and forced a smile as Alaric and Grace stopped in front of him. “It feels much better. She’s very ... adept.”

Alaric’s brows shot up. Wrong word? The “Commander Prince” as social media called his friend turned an angry glare on Belle. “You were straddling him.”

“Alaric, really.” Grace put a hand on his arm and he instantly seemed to calm. “She was using the techniques I’ve taught her for popping a shoulder back into place. The other option would’ve been for her to take her shirt off and use it as leverage. Would you have preferred that?”

Stuart went hot all over, pinpricks breaking out on his arms and neck. What was going on with him? He’d seen many women in bikinis at the beach or sports bras while they were working out and he’d been fine, but the mere thought of this woman with her shirt off made his legs feel strangely weak. He found his gaze magnetically drawn to the beautiful woman standing next to him. If he shouldn’t even be looking at her according to Alaric’s current reaction, he definitely shouldn’t imagine her with her shirt off. She wasn’t very tall, so he’d written her off as a young girl, but now that he noticed, she was probably mid-twenties and she had ... womanly curves.

“Absolutely not,” Alaric growled.

Belle gave her brother an angelic smile and then hugged him. Alaric shot Stuart a warning look over his sister's head. He'd guessed right. Off limits. Was any woman on this island not off limits to him? He shouldn't care; he'd never commit himself to a woman anyway. Nobody deserved to be shackled with him and his demons.

He'd gone on a few dates with one of the beautiful bakers, Isabella, and Alaric hadn't said a word. Apparently it was just the royal family and Dr. Grace he had to stay away from. But no woman's touch had ever felt like Belle's, not even close. Was it worth a battle with all the Magnite men and getting drowned or tossed in the volcano? Possibly. Stuart had always loved a good fight. When he was seventeen, he'd held his own in one of many battles with his father, been kicked out of the house, and bided his time on the streets of Boise until he turned eighteen and could join the military. Since then, the taste of victory had been worth any pain.

Belle turned to Stuart. How had he not noticed how irresistible her smile was until yesterday at the bakery? It was innocent and sensual at the same time. How did she accomplish that?

"I hope your shoulder heals quickly," she said, biting at her lower lip and making him want to kiss her long and hard. Despite the fact he'd have to fight Alaric after. He didn't want to tick off his friend today, especially with his shoulder still feeling this dull ache.

Maybe it was wrong, but he put out his hand in the guise of shaking hers. Alaric couldn't find exception to that, right? He wanted to touch her one more time. It might be his last if Alaric had anything to say about it. She put her hand in his and he wrapped his larger palm around her delicate fingers. Ah. A slice of heaven, that's what touching her felt like. "Thank you for rescuing me," he managed, his voice gruff and far too deep.

She grinned. "I'm sure the tough military man has never been rescued before."

“Never,” he admitted. He had military brothers who had his back and they’d worked together to keep each other safe, but he’d always tried to be the one doing the rescuing. Penance for not rescuing his mom and sister.

“I could rescue you anytime,” she said, giving him a sassy yet sweet smile.

He felt the effects of that smile all the way through his body as his jaw went slack and he wasn’t sure how to respond. He wanted her to rescue him—from the belittling voice in his head, from the darkness that often surrounded him, from his loneliness. He wanted to keep touching her all day, but any kind of relationship with the perfect princess wasn’t to be. Not for him.

He pulled his hand back and tilted up his chin. “I’ll never need to be rescued again,” he pushed out, rather than begging her to stay close so he could bask in her warmth and light. He’d douse her light with darkness and her warmth with the chill of his anger and vicious past. No. He couldn’t do that to her.

Her full lips seemed to droop, as if he’d rejected her. He ached to reach out to her again, reassure her that no man in his right mind would reject her beautiful sweetness, but he held himself military straight. Self-control was one of his many strengths.

“Grace and I are headed to the castle.” Alaric’s voice burst through the connection Stuart felt simply staring into Belle’s eyes. Princess Belle. How could he forget such a perfect name for this beauty? “We’ll escort you back, Belle.” It was a command if Stuart had ever heard one, and he’d heard a lot in his decade in the military. He’d never thought he’d leave the military life, it had been a fulfillment and acceptance he’d never thought he’d find, but Axel had tempted him and Wes to retire early with the lure of lots of opportunities to protect the innocent and a paycheck the government could never match. He had so much money in savings now that he could live his life on this island and never need anything.

*Anything besides Belle.*

Oh boy, he needed to reign in those stupid thoughts.

Belle gave him one more appealing look and then turned and walked off. Stuart watched her go. It was a gorgeous picture. Her long, dark hair trailing down her back. Her appealing frame encased in white nurse's scrubs with little pink flowers on them. He'd never known scrubs were that ... form-fitting.

There wasn't an artistic bone in Stuart's body, but he wished he could paint a picture of Belle or write poetry about her.

He realized someone was glaring daggers at him. He turned back to her brother and Dr. Grace.

Alaric gave Stuart a warning look to which Stuart raised his hands innocently, feeling a twinge in his left shoulder as he did. The joint was back in socket, but it might be tender for a day or two. He'd been injured a lot. He always got over it.

Alaric rolled his eyes, put his hand on Grace's back, and tried to direct her away. Grace turned to Stuart. "How is your shoulder feeling?" She moved in close and probed the joint with her fingers. It didn't hurt, which he was grateful for. It didn't arouse any of the warmth or tingles Belle's touch had, which he was also grateful for. Yet Belle's touch confused him. That tingly warmth was just crap in girl movies, right? He would turn thirty next month and he'd never felt anything like that in his life.

"It's fine."

"Rotate it for me." She kept her palms on his joint as he did. "Is it tender?"

It was definitely tender, but he would never admit that. "It feels good."

She shot him an exasperated look. "You military men. I'd like you to rest and ice it tonight, ibuprofen, sleep in a recliner to keep it elevated and so you don't roll onto it in the night. Come see me in the morning and I'll see if I feel like clearing you for activity."



Stuart looked to Alaric. “Is she serious?” Nobody told him when he could resume activity, at least not since he’d retired from the military, and even then he’d been pretty good at faking that he was fine to get cleared for duty.

“I wouldn’t mess with her.” Alaric gave his girlfriend a loving look that made Stuart want to gag. Love. Sissy stuff. But Belle ... oh crap, he wasn’t falling in love with the princess. He was far too strong and driven to go all soft over a few tingly touches and a pretty pair of lips and dark eyes and that sweet smile and that underlying toughness and ...

*Stop it*, he commanded himself. These thoughts were completely out of control.

And just because Alaric was a wimp for his woman didn’t mean Stuart had to obey her. Grace finally removed her hands but gave him a warning look. “I’ll see you first thing in the morning?”

“Six a.m.? I guess I can push my morning workout that late.”

He thought she’d balk, but she simply said, “I’ll meet you at the clinic at five-forty-five, before my morning walk.”

Stuart liked Grace, always had. He was happy for her and Alaric. It didn’t mean he was jealous. Marriage and love weren’t on his agenda. Dating a pretty girl, sharing a few kisses, that was fine. The thought of ever tying himself into a family situation gave him the cold sweats. Maybe if he could’ve saved his own mom and sister, he’d feel different. He pushed that agony away but even the thought of their lifeless bodies made his stomach roll.

“Are you coming to dinner?” Alaric asked.

Stuart had taken to mostly making his own meals in his suite at the castle. There was a lot of fresh food on Magna and he liked to eat healthier than most of the meals the castle chefs prepared. “Maybe.”

Alaric blew out a breath. “I’m sorry I got so upset when I saw Belle ... straddling you.”

Stuart didn't want to hear she was off limits, though he suspected as much. It would be too final to hear it. He wasn't analyzing why he cared. He raised his right hand, waving them off. "No worries. See you later."

"Back to your room to rest, ice, and ibuprofen," Grace instructed.

"You got it."

Finally, they walked off. Stuart watched them go. The stadium was quiet; even the horses had disappeared. When had that happened? Gerald had probably taken Annalisa for him. He and Mary would take good care of his horse. He did like his horse. It was simply easier to blame innocent Annalisa when he got knocked off.

Stuart stood there, feeling despondent and alone. Usually he'd go work out or find somebody to box or sword fight if those feelings surfaced, but he probably should listen to Grace and rest tonight. He hated listening to anybody. What was he supposed to do while he rested and relaxed? Read a book. That was exactly what he should do. The castle library was open to him. They didn't have Netflix here and he wasn't a movie guy anyway. He'd find a good book and shut out his dad's voice and his mom and sister's horrific ending. Maybe.

What he really wanted was Belle to come back and touch him again, look at him in that alluring yet innocent way. He wanted to smell her and hear her voice.

He shook his head to clear it. How was he going to get Belle out of his mind now that she'd invaded every part of his thoughts? He'd better figure out a way, unless he wanted to fight the entire Magnite army.

He smiled to himself. Hooah.

## Chapter Three



Belle couldn't stop her hands from shaking as she walked away from the arena. She didn't risk a glance back, afraid Alaric would see in her face how taken she was with the American military hero. Stuart Falslev. Even his name made her want to sigh. The ultra-handsome, ultra-tough, dark-haired, olive-skinned man had never appeared to notice her. Even yesterday when she'd run into him at the bakery, he'd disregarded her, and he'd done the same thing today. She'd offered to rescue him anytime and he'd rejected her.

She'd peeked into the stadium earlier to see if Treck was there. She'd had a crush on her older brother's friend for as long as she could remember, and at times she thought he might feel the same. Yet ... Stuart. She'd been drawn to him the second she saw him a month ago, but he'd never given her so much as a second glance until she ran into him yesterday at the bakery. Touching him today had shaken her to the core. And she wasn't even important enough for him to remember her name. That stung.

Her brother obviously didn't want her going after Stuart. The man himself had given her some significant looks and made her tremble and ache for more of the tingly touch she'd never felt before, but he wasn't a good fit for her. Treck? He was the right fit for her. He always had been. Now to convince the royal pilot of that.

She forced her mind away from unrealistic Stuart fantasies and back to the exciting news she'd been given before she'd left the clinic to head home to the castle. She was going to stay

in the mountains for four days. With Treck. Before she'd touched Stuart and looked into his incredible dark eyes, she'd been certain she'd won the jackpot with this opportunity. She would administer vaccines and health exams for the zealots and the dissenters, camping out near the zealots' village for two days and then next to the waterfall the dissenters lived close to, letting the people who wanted the shots, exams, and advice come to her.

Belle walked across a bridge and toward the castle gates. She should've protested when Grace told her Treck had been assigned to come with her and watch over her. Grace had only been joined by a bodyguard a few times when she stayed in the mountains.

Belle hadn't protested. Not even close. She'd been ecstatic about the opportunity to prove she was a natural and instinctive nurse and to be semi-alone with Treck. She hadn't shown any decorum, throwing her arms around Grace's neck and thanking her over and over again. Afterward, she'd gone into one of the shops she loved and purchased the beautiful beaded necklace her cousin Constance had made as a celebration. Constance would give her, or design specifically for her, any jewelry Belle wanted, but Belle wanted to support her cousin and the shopkeeper so she bought the jewelry.

She'd been happy with her retail therapy and especially with the opportunity to prove her skills and be with Treck. Then she'd seen Stuart in the stadium and touching him had upended her world.

No. It was simply a reaction to helping him, not the angels above declaring they were meant to be. She'd never experienced anything like it, but she couldn't let it mean anything. Stuart wasn't for her. He was too intense, out of reach, confusing, and kind of a jerk. Easy-going, smiling Treck was for her, and soon she'd be with him for almost a week. If they didn't fall in love and declare their devotion in a remote mountain setting, spending day after day together and sleeping in the same tent, they never would.

But what about Stuart?

*Stop it, Belle*, she cautioned herself. No reason to get into those confusing feelings again.

She hurried through the castle courtyard and up the stairs. She had an hour before dinner and needed a new book to read. Hurrying through the halls, she said hello to several friends who worked in the castle and Bodi and Julia who were always together. Why those two weren't engaged yet was beyond her. It was like Alaric and Grace. If two people loved each other, why wouldn't they get engaged and married pronto? Addie and Malik were doing it right; they'd gotten engaged quickly and would be married next weekend. Right after Belle got back from her adventure. How incredible would it be if Treck asked her to marry him at her sister's wedding? Ooh, she liked that idea. Her new dress was already ready, and she'd never felt so beautiful as when she tried it on. She started conjuring different daydreams of Treck declaring his love and proposing, but the dreams morphed to a different pair of dark eyes—more intense, more tingly, more mind-blowing ...

Stuart.

Oh, shoot. She needed to keep her focus on Treck.

The library doors were wide open, as most doors were in the castle. Belle loved that everyone was welcome here. The library was probably the most frequented location by friends throughout the village and island. It was quiet as she walked through the spacious aisle, but she sensed she wasn't alone. That was fine. She loved people.

A tale of fantasy was the way to go, she decided, but they were too high for her to reach. Sliding the ladder down the aisle, she climbed up and started thumbing through *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. She'd read all of them a few times. She pulled out *Assassin's Apprentice* by Robin Hobb. She'd never tried this one, so she raced through a few pages as she balanced on the ladder.

"Hello, Princess Belle," a deep voice said below her.

Belle's right foot slipped. She tried to reach out with her free hand but missed the rung. She cried out in surprise, arms

flailing as she tumbled off the ladder. It was a long way down, and the castle's stone floors were anything but soft.

Sooner than expected, she hit something firm, but not as unforgiving the floor—a man's arms. He caught her with a barely audible grunt.

“Forgive me,” she gasped, looking into the handsome face of none other than Stuart Falslev. Oh, my. His strong arms around her and that slight smirk on his firm lips made her feel weak and hot all over. It felt incredible to be pressed against him. She found herself dropping the book, snaking her arms around his lower back, and leaning her head into the crook of his neck. Heaven. That's what being in his arms was.

He held her for several wonderful moments, and then his lips brushed her forehead as he said huskily, “Are you all right?”

Though the tender touch of his lips and the sweet concern in his voice made her tremble, it also brought her back to reality. He was the one who wasn't all right. She leaned back and looked into his dark eyes. She should've released him and stepped away, but she couldn't make herself do it just yet. “I should be asking you that question. Did I hurt your shoulder?”

“No.” He chuckled easily. “A small girl like you couldn't hurt me. You weigh hardly anything.”

“A small ... girl. I'm not a child, Mr. Falslev.” She stepped back, already missing his incredible touch.

His eyes roved over her and just that simple movement had her heart racing again. How could he see her as a child?

His eyes shuttered and his chuckle this time felt ... off. Condescending and wrong and hurtful. “To me you are,” he said. “What are you, eighteen?”

“Twenty-three, thank you very much,” she shot back at him. If you asked her family, or anyone on Magna, Belle was always kind and happy. She didn't feel like either at the moment. Bending, she swept up the book and then faced him. The smirk on his face was both appealing and infuriating.

“Forgive me, Princess Belle.” He gestured around. “Do you sing on the ladders as you read books like Belle in Beauty and the Beast?”

“*You’ve* seen Beauty and the Beast?” That seemed to be the last movie a tough military man would watch.

He edged closer, and her pulse picked up. “Why do you act so surprised by that?”

“It seems a little out of character for you.” She looked him over. His well-defined muscles bulged under his shirt, thick ropey biceps and triceps poking out. Ooh, she loved muscles, appreciated them because of her medical training. “So are you more the Beast or more Gaston?”

He chuckled at that, causing his dark eyes to sparkle. She liked that she’d made him laugh, for real this time. “Probably both. Wes would tell you I’m a beast and a buffoon.” He started singing, which shocked her completely, “*When I was a lad I ate four dozen eggs every morning to help me get large. And now that I’m grown I eat five dozen eggs so I’m roughly the size of a barge!*” He postured and flexed his arms.

Belle’s mouth dropped open and then she started laughing. He joined her. “You really have seen the show.” And he had a great voice, deep and sexy. Oh, my, had she just thought the word sexy? Her family would flip out.

“It was my sister’s favorite,” he said.

Something in his dark eyes dimmed. Horror streaked through her. Was? What did he mean? That now his sister was grown and it was no longer her favorite? Or...

She had so many questions.

He stepped back. “I’d better go.”

“Wait ...” She held out a hand. “What happened to your sister?”

His eyes went almost black, cold and hard. He took another step backward, staring into her eyes as if discerning her sincerity and found her lacking. Everybody claimed she was compassionate and could pray or charm a snake out of its

skin. Apparently not this snake, or man, or beast. Who knew? Why did she get all tingly and warm over a man who definitely wasn't the right one for her?

"Excuse me," he murmured and turned away from her.

"So you're more of the Beast than Gaston," she said to his back.

Why had she said that? Belle wasn't one to rile somebody, but he riled her and she wanted him to talk. Heaven knew why.

He looked back over his shoulder. "Why do you say that?"

"Gaston wanted to talk about himself and pursue Belle. The Beast didn't."

He smiled slightly; he didn't seem mad at her, which was a relief, but obviously he didn't want to share about his sister. "I may be more of a Beast ..." His gaze swept over her and made her stomach hop. "But I'll *never* turn into a handsome prince." He tilted his chin up at her, all tough and manly. "Goodbye, beautiful princess."

With that, he turned and strode confidently out of the library.

What had just happened? She'd never been so drawn to and confused by anyone. He'd insulted her, claimed she was a child, and said he'd never be a prince. He'd made her warm and cold all over. She'd never met someone like Stuart. Why didn't he want to be a handsome prince? What did it matter when she'd promised herself for years that she'd somehow convince the kind-hearted Treck to fall in love with her?

She clung to her book, wishing she were more like Belle. Gaston and the Beast had both wanted Belle in the movie. Neither Treck nor Stuart seemed to want the real Belle at all.

\* \* \*

Belle sat down to dinner early next to her cousin Constance. They were the closest of friends and immediately they chattered about Belle's nursing job, Constance's handmade



jewelry, which was selling like mad to the tourists, Belle not telling her she'd bought some today, and then Constance let slip, "Have you seen the handsome American military men lately?"

Belle looked at her suspiciously. Did she know something? "I helped Stuart put his shoulder back into socket after work today."

Constance smiled. "Interesting. What do you think of him?"

"Well, he almost bit my head off." Belle blew out a breath. "I swear, lion tamers have an easier—"

"Is this seat taken?" a deep, appealing voice asked.

Belle looked up and instantly broke into a grin. Treck stood there, tall and handsome with his familiar friendly smile. There was no hidden darkness or coldness in his eyes. Treck. He was the one she should be thrilled to see. Then why did she find her gaze dart around looking for Stuart?

"I saved this particular seat for you," she said.

He eased into the seat. "I heard I've got a rough assignment next week."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Oh? What could it be?"

"Watching over a headstrong, spoiled princess who thinks she needs to go romping all over the mountains doctoring up the zealots and dissenters."

"Spoiled?" She looked to her cousin Constance, who was giggling. Nobody had ever called Belle headstrong or spoiled. "I resent that label."

Without meaning to, she let her eyes sweep over the rest of the table as everyone was taking their seats. Stuart settled in straight across from her. His dark gaze met hers and time froze. There was only the two of them in the world. Blood rushed to her face and her heart thumped so fast she couldn't catch a breath. The table was massive; she wouldn't be able to carry on a conversation with him. Dang it. His firm lips tilted up in an appealing smile. Belle wanted to rush around the

table, take his hand, sit by him, and talk for hours. Who needed food when a man like that was smiling at you?

“Belle?” Treck’s voice pulled her from staring across the table with a slightly open mouth and a heated face and neck. “Everything all right?”

Belle turned back to her friend and her cousin. “Fine. Why do you ask?” She grabbed her water goblet and took a long drink. It didn’t help the fire in her face, especially when she risked one more glance at Stuart and he was still staring openly at her.

“Constance was asking about our assignment this week and you didn’t answer her.” Treck’s voice sounded stiff. His gaze was flickering from her to Stuart and he didn’t appear to like what he saw.

“Oh, yes.” She spread her napkin in her lap. “We’ll have a fabulous time.”

They both frowned at her. She wasn’t thinking clearly. “I mean, it’s not a party or anything. It’ll be a lot of work, but being with Treck is always fun.” She said this to Constance then looked at Treck. He was smiling now.

Was Stuart still looking at her? She didn’t care. Not at all. She should be furious at him for stirring her up like this when he didn’t seem intent on pursuing her, but somehow she only wanted to see him smile again.

Her father welcomed everyone, said a prayer over the food, and she was relieved to busy herself with passing dishes and taking bites of chicken pot pie, garden salad, homemade rolls, and berries and cream for dessert. She talked easily with Treck and Constance and only occasionally looked to where Stuart was sitting with his close friend the American Wes and her cousin Kingston, the general of the Magnite military. They seemed in deep discussion, but not deep enough to keep him from looking at Belle every time her eyes strayed.

Treck. *Look at Treck*, she begged herself. Her longtime friend was a great guy, and she was comfortable around him. Stuart had no right making her eyes and mind wander, making

her crave another opportunity to touch him. It was good she was leaving with Treck tomorrow morning and wouldn't see Stuart until the end of the week. She'd fall desperately in love with Treck in the beautiful mountain setting and if the good Lord willed it, Treck would return those feelings. By the time she returned, Stuart Falslev wouldn't be a passing thought.

She snuck one more glance at him. His dark gaze pierced into her soul and his lips tilted up in an appealing smirk. She blew out a shaky breath and finished all the water in her goblet, her hand shaking as she put it down. She was in trouble.

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

## Chapter Four



Stuart walked into the military offices after his early morning appointment with Grace. She'd cautioned him to take it easy for a couple days. He'd done as much weightlifting as he could with the old equipment housed near the arena and indoor sparring ring without pushing his left shoulder.

He was irritated this morning and he doubted that his lackluster workout was to blame. He'd decided to go to dinner last night with the royal family and friends. There was a standing invite every night for those who stayed in the castle, including the tourists who visited the island each week. He didn't go often. He'd hoped to sit by Belle despite knowing he wouldn't pursue her, but she'd been sandwiched between one of the other young princesses and Treck. He didn't mind Treck—seemed like a good guy—but watching him flirt with and fawn over Belle last night had ticked him off to no end.

Alaric and Kingston were discussing something intently this morning, but as soon as they saw him, they both stopped talking.

“Hey,” he greeted them.

“Good morning.” Kingston looked him over, then turned to Alaric. “I think we have our solution,” he said decisively. Alaric's mouth tightened, but he nodded. Not even Alaric argued with Kingston.

“To what?” Stuart sank into a chair and studied his friends.

Alaric lifted his hands and shook his head slightly, looking to Kingston. “I'm not sure it's the best idea, but as always, I

respect your decision.”

Stuart’s brows bunched. He wanted to demand answers, but he waited. His friends were on edge about something and he didn’t want to make it worse.

“Are you up for a little camping trip the next four days?” Kingston asked.

“Sure.” Stuart shrugged. He’d never gone camping as a child, but in the military he’d lived in jungles and forests and that could be considered camping. “Who’s going?”

Kingston gestured to Alaric. “Belle is going to administer vaccines and health exams to the zealots and dissenters.”

Stuart went hot from head to toe. Four days in the mountains alone with the intriguing, beautiful princess who made him tingle with one touch or look? The only drawback was the way her brother was studying him as if trying to discern if he had untoward intentions. Stuart had always been respectful of women. It was the one thing he could do to show his mom and sister that he missed and revered them. Of course he’d be respectful of Belle. But could he cuddle and steal a few kisses? Alaric’s expression said no. He didn’t want to lead the pretty princess on, either. She was far too benevolent and good for someone like him. He couldn’t imagine royalty falling for someone who’d been fathered by a scum-ball murderer. Never happening.

Stuart kept his face impassive and nodded slightly. “I could watch out for the princess. Keep her safe from the dissenters and zealots. Are you worried about that idiot Kelvin who went after Princess Adelaide?”

His answer seemed to help Alaric calm down. He nodded. “I’ve got a list of dissenters I’m worried about. Kelvin, Samson, Jeffrey... There are quite a few we keep our eyes on, and I don’t want them alone with my sister for a second.”

“Okay.” Stuart’s heart raced out of control and he hoped they couldn’t see it in the pulse at his neck. Four days by her side and four nights basically alone with Belle? It sounded like heaven. He’d have to keep his distance, but it would be an

exquisite torture. What did more pain matter? He'd love rising to the challenge of winning the princess's heart, but he couldn't let himself compete on this one. It wouldn't be fair to her and would result in a one-way ticket off the island, and he felt comfortable here. It was a home and a safe space he'd never known before. He'd been accepted and almost revered in the military but it hadn't been a haven like Magna.

"Treck will be with you as well," Kingston informed him.

Stuart's competitive side immediately reared up and all he could see was Belle laughing with Treck last night while the man leaned in close. His fists clenched. "Why?"

"Treck is the one who was originally assigned to protect her," Alaric explained, "but neither of us felt right about sending them alone into the mountains."

"You don't trust Treck?" That surprised him. Treck was Prince Bodi's best friend and a close friend of the royal family.

"We do," Kingston insisted. "But we want extra protection for Belle. Plus it's not a great idea for any of us to be alone with a beautiful, single woman. Especially if that woman has been in love with us since she was a child."

"Excuse me?" Stuart's neck prickled. Belle had appeared to be ... nice to Treck last night at dinner, but Stuart wouldn't say she looked as if she was in love with the man. His stomach curdled. What did he know about love?

Alaric grimaced. "Don't say anything. Belle would be humiliated if she knew we were aware of her lifelong crush. Constance told us after we'd rescued her from a horrific situation. She was not herself and started revealing all kinds of secrets." A line appeared between his brow and Stuart sensed there was a lot more to that story, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Belle loved Treck. Always had. Had he just agreed to go on a four-day camping trip with the two of them as a chaperone? Watch them fawn all over each other? How could he bow out now when minutes ago he'd been gung-ho and trying to hide how excited he was?

“I won’t say anything,” he reassured Alaric. The last thing he was going to bring up with Belle was her lifelong love or crush or whatever it was. His empty stomach rolled, reminding him that he hadn’t had breakfast after his workout this morning.

“We’re all overprotective of Belle, but my father would kill me if something happened to her,” Alaric said.

His father. The King. Belle’s father. Stuart was reminded once again that he had no right even having untoward feelings toward the gorgeous princess. She had royal blood running through her veins, and Stuart had the devil’s. He could just imagine King Kendrick seeing Stuart hugging Belle and commanding Kingston, “Off with his head.” Like the old Robin Hood cartoon. But Stuart was no hero and Belle wasn’t his Maid Marian.

“Thanks for being willing to go with them,” Kingston said, standing and offering his hand. “It will ease my mind in many ways. The dissenters are at an uneasy peace with us right now, but I honestly never trust them.” He shared a look with Alaric.

Stuart shook his hand, wishing he could back out, but it was too late. “I’m happy to help.”

“You always are.” Kingston slapped him on the shoulder.

From Kingston, that was high praise. He was less gushing than Stuart’s first drill sergeant who Stuart had been certain would kill him when he’d joined the Army as a desperate teenager.

Stuart stood. “I’ll go ... pack. What time are we leaving?”

“Eight.”

He lifted a hand and headed for the door. It was quarter to eight now. Alaric followed him. When they were outside, he stopped Stuart with a hand on his arm. “Thanks for going to help watch over my sister.”

“Of course.”

“Treck’s a great guy.”

Stuart grimaced. Of course he was. Belle loved him. Why did Stuart care?

“I didn’t want you to think we don’t trust him.”

“You don’t have to explain to me. I had a little sister.”  
Stuart swallowed hard. Why had he admitted to that?

Alaric’s gaze softened. “Had?”

Stuart nodded and looked away. Not even Axel knew about his mom and sister. Only Wes. Speaking of his best friend... “I’d better go. I need to tell Wes goodbye and throw some stuff in a bag.”

“Okay. We’ll wait for you. No rush.”

“Thanks.”

Stuart took off at a jog toward the castle. He’d pack first, then find Wes at the stadium. At least he’d dodged more questions from Alaric about his sister or a lecture on why Stuart couldn’t go after Belle. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t going after Belle. She loved Treck. The lame infatuation he’d had from her fixing his shoulder and the incredible feeling of her warm touch was done. Good. It was for the best.

His stomach churned. The next four days might be a nightmare.



## Chapter Five



Belle walked out the castle's front doors a few minutes before eight. It was idiotic, but she wanted to see Stuart before she left for four days. She'd spent most of the night trying to convince herself there was nothing between them and she was ecstatic to spend four days with Treck, but she couldn't make herself believe it.

A man jogged across the drawbridge and into the courtyard. A handsome, well-built man who made her heart race. Belle's stomach flip-flopped as he offered her a broad, cheeky grin and jogged right up to her. He stopped below her on the steps and bowed, revealing a backpack strapped on his back.

"Princess Belle," he said gallantly.

"Gaston," she returned, fighting a grin.

He chuckled. "I thought we decided I was the Beast who could never turn into Prince Charming."

"You're too handsome to be a beast." He could be her Prince Charming.

He was a couple steps below her which made them about eye level. For some reason, her compliment sobered him. "It's what's inside that counts, though," he said softly.

Belle regarded him. What was wrong with his insides? He was a military hero, a hard-working, determined man, maybe a bit too cocky but he wore it well. Did he have some fatal flaw she needed to know about before she handed over her heart to him?

A vehicle pulled into the courtyard and doors opened and closed. Belle wrenched her gaze away from Stuart's dark eyes. Alaric and Treck. Oh yeah. Treck. The before-she-touched-Stuart love of her life that she was spending the next four days with. Stuart would probably think she was unhinged if she told him she was going to miss teasing with him. Goodness, she *was* unhinged. She'd helped him and they'd had a few superficial conversations.

Those conversations hadn't felt superficial. The way she felt when they touched, the deep look in his piercing brown eyes... those were anything but superficial.

"Stuart," Alaric called. "You ready to go?"

"Go?" Belle looked from Stuart to her brother and back. Then she caught a glimpse of Treck, whose jaw was set, his dark eyes cool. Treck never looked like that. He always had an easy smile and a warm look in his eyes, especially for her.

"Kingston asked me to go with you to the mountains," Stuart explained. "Treck and I will be protecting the pretty princess." He bowed slightly as if he were a loyal knight.

"You?" Her heart took off like she was sprinting away from danger—or toward it. With this handsome guy setting off all sorts of alarms and heat and confusion in her body, it was probably the latter. She didn't like the way he called her "pretty princess," as if she was a ten-year-old. Why was she so stirred up around this man?

"Yes, me," he said in a gravelly voice. Then his voice dropped even lower, so only she could hear it. "Are you happy to have me along, beautiful Belle?"

She didn't have any idea what to say. Beautiful Belle was redundant and overdone and ... why did it sound so appealing coming from him? She picked up her bag, determined to walk around him and greet Treck. She needed to focus on the man she was meant to be with.

Stuart took the bag from her, but their fingers got entangled. Who knew how that happened? The pressure of his warm fingers against hers made heat pulse through her. Belle

yanked her hand away. Stuart's jaw tightened and his dark gaze turned unreadable. He hefted her bag easily and gestured for her to walk in front of him. She did. With her head held high.

Treck's expression was still troubled, but he greeted her with his usual grin. "Hi, Belle. Four days with two military brutes shadowing you. Will you be okay?"

Stuart loaded his bag and hers in the back of the Humvee next to boxes of medical supplies, tables, chairs, some food, a tent, sleeping bags, and pillows. Everything had been packed last night. He then joined her and Treck and Alaric.

"Of course," she said. "I was raised by three older brothers. There are no tricks you two can pull that I won't be able to one-up you on."

All three men laughed. Belle relaxed a fraction. Maybe this time wouldn't be full of tension and her trying to fight untoward feelings for Stuart every second.

As if to contradict that thought, Stuart winked and said, "Brave words, Princess Belle. We have tricks you've never imagined."

Surely he didn't mean anything by his words, but her imagination went crazy. Stuart finding her alone by the waterfall and tricking her into swimming, and then kissing her in the water. Stuart waking her up at night and tricking her into snuggling through the dark hours. Stuart bringing her a bouquet of wildflowers and tricking her into thinking he cared. She shook her head to clear it.

"He's right," Treck agreed.

"All right, you two." Alaric tried to look stern. "You're supposed to protect my little sister, not tease her to insanity."

"But she's so fun to tease." Treck gave her his easy smile and she returned it. Did that mean he was finally interested in her? Why wasn't she ecstatic about it, ecstatic to be with Treck for four days? Her gaze slid to Stuart and her stomach hopped happily. He was coming! She wanted to clap her hands together and jump in the air and cheer.

“That she is,” Alaric agreed. He gave her a warm hug and then said far too seriously, “Be careful up there. Stay with Treck or Stuart at all times. Love you.”

“Love you.” She went on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “I’ll be fine. Stop worrying, big bro. Give Grace a squeeze for me.” She’d hugged the rest of her family goodbye earlier but hadn’t gone to the clinic to see Grace.

“That’s not a problem for me.” Alaric grinned.

They all said their goodbyes and Treck walked to the driver’s side. Stuart and Belle walked around to the passenger side. Stuart opened the front door and gestured for her. “You can sit up front.”

She regarded him, wondering if she should protest, but Treck was waiting and watching them, and his eyes looked troubled. She couldn’t be upsetting Treck when she’d planned on making him declare his love this week.

She started to climb in. Stuart’s hands came around her waist and he easily lifted her into the seat. Belle’s breath rushed out. Her skin tingled where he’d touched her waist. That was so silly. She could hardly feel his touch through her clothing.

“Thank you,” she managed, far too breathlessly.

Stuart only gave her a sharp head bob, but something in his eyes was deep, warm, and reminded her of delicious chocolate cake, tempting and irresistible. Would she feel guilty if she consumed the entire cake? Maybe. Maybe not.

Treck faced forward, clinging to the steering wheel. Stuart shut her door and climbed in back. Treck jammed the military vehicle into gear and all but spun the wheels out of the palace courtyard. Belle slammed back into the hard seat. “Wow. These things have some power.”

Treck looked at her guiltily and slowed down, navigating the narrow streets of their small village. “Alaric souped this one up.”

Belle nodded.

“Alaric’s talented,” Stuart said.

“Yeah,” Treck agreed.

“You’re the pilot, right?” Stuart asked, though it was obvious he knew that.

“Yep.”

“What’s your dream plane to fly?”

Treck warmed right up to that subject and the men started discussing F-14 Tomcats, F-22 Raptors, Mirage 2000s and all manner of airplanes she’d never heard of. Belle was surprised and impressed that Stuart wasn’t behaving like the selfish Gaston he claimed to be, instead drawing Treck out and making a friend. She studied outside the vehicle as the ocean and fields passed and then they turned up toward the mountains. She didn’t let herself glance back at Stuart like she wanted to, but she enjoyed the sound of his voice as he and Treck chatted. She couldn’t wrap her mind around the two men she was interested in being on this trip with her. It was confusing and stirred her up.

Medical care. She’d focus on that. She couldn’t have Stuart, and maybe Treck wasn’t interested in her anyway. Neither of them was making any effort to flirt with her at the moment.

That was for the best. Absolutely. It wasn’t as if she needed two handsome men fighting over her, being jealous of each other, wanting her for themselves.

Stuart had fought Malik over Addie. He’d repeatedly challenged Malik and tried to work his way into Addie’s heart. Was that even a month ago? Her shoulders slumped as she thought of that. Of course he’d pursued Addie. Addie was the most beautiful woman on Magna. Belle had heard that Stuart had said Addie was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, and he’d been all over the world so that really was saying something.

Yet he’d told Belle it was the inside that counted. Was he giving her a hidden message? Did he like her insides? He’d also called her beautiful, so he didn’t find her atrocious at

least. She and Addie looked a lot alike. Was Stuart interested in her because he still wanted Addie? She hated that thought. She loved her sister, but she didn't want to live in her shadow. Especially with the man she was so attracted to.

She couldn't stand it any longer. Even though Stuart and Treck were chatting like old friends, she yanked her gaze from the scenery of the mountain road they were climbing and glanced back at Stuart.

His gaze was instantly riveted on her. "Are you doing all right, Princess Belle?"

So formal. Was he being careful because Treck was here? Or had she read too much into their brief interactions and the crazy way her body responded to touching him?

"Yes, of course. I'm fine. We're going to work with the zealots first, correct? Put off seeing the crazy dissenters for a couple of days." She looked to Treck. She was semi-joking, but the dissenters were intimidating. Especially Samson. Constance had an odd interaction with the man years ago and seemed drawn to him, but Belle thought he was kind of scary.

Treck nodded and reached across the wide console, squeezing her hand. Instead of feeling all lit up by his touch or excited that Treck was paying her some attention, she felt awkward knowing that Stuart was in the back and could probably see Treck touching her. What was wrong with her?

"I don't want you to worry about the dissenters hurting you," Treck said. "From what I've seen of Stuart's fighting, he could take on the entire rebel group by himself. I'll back him up."

"Hooah!" Stuart cheered.

Treck released her hand and she found her gaze drawn back to Stuart.

"Yes," he agreed. "No worries, little princess. You're safe with us."

She mumbled a thanks and turned forward. Little princess? The road was getting rougher, the trees and undergrowth so thick it scratched at the Humvee. Little princess. She wasn't

worried about being safe with these two around. She was annoyed that the man she was drawn to didn't seem to feel the same about her.

She really needed to focus on Treck. That had been her plan all along. If she prayed hard, could the good Lord make her be attracted to the right man for her? Of course. Her Heavenly Father could do anything. It shouldn't be hard. She'd always been attracted to and invested in Treck.

What had changed?

She didn't let herself look back. She knew what had changed. The tough guy taking residence in the back seat and in her every thought. Dang him.

## Chapter Six



The first day with the zealots went well. Belle was so busy that she put Stuart and Treck to work organizing the lines of people and their children, checking medical questionnaires, and even putting on Band-Aids after she administered vaccines.

The zealots were a very respectful people, despite their name. They were good people who focused on strict religious observance and wanted to live a simple life without any influence from the king or the military. Some of them were obviously uneasy around Stuart, an outsider. His build and bearing marked him as military before he said a word.

Belle had been impressed with her guardians. They'd been respectful, patient, and helpful. Stuart had held a little girl who couldn't stop sniffing and coughing for almost fifteen minutes while Belle took her mom into the tent and did a prenatal exam. It was surprising to all of them that the girl was instantly drawn to Stuart and reached for him first. Even more surprising, the ultra-tough man had sat and spoken quietly to her, keeping her distracted from her mother leaving her and her own misery. Truthfully it melted Belle's heart, but she didn't need any more heart anything where Stuart was concerned.

The mother was twenty-seven weeks along by Belle's calculations and doing well. The little girl was miserable. Belle checked her out and pronounced it was only a head cold, but she cautioned the mother to keep the girl hydrated, comfortable, and as isolated as she could so it didn't spread.



When they finished for the day, a lovely older lady named Nessa brought them steaming plates of venison, potatoes, and homemade bread with warm goat milk to drink. Belle preferred fresh water from the stream and was pondering how to accidentally knock her cup over. She didn't enjoy goat milk.

Grace had instructed Belle to only pack a little food as the zealots and even the dissenters would insist on feeding her. Thankfully, they were feeding Stuart and Treck also. Grace had come by herself, maybe with one nurse or a military helper. Belle hoped her two helpers—or bodyguards or whatever—weren't a burden on these good people to feed.

“Thank you for your work today,” Nessa told them as they started eating.

“We're happy to do it. Thank you for dinner,” Belle replied.

Nessa nodded. “You are only here for tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“You'll have twice the crowd tomorrow. Some of our outliers will be informed you are here. Plus...” She cut a glance to Stuart. “The outsider treated our people well. Those who were afraid of the tough guy will come to see you now.”

Stuart raised his cup in a salute. “See? I'm not such a bad guy.” He winked at Belle.

Not such a bad guy at all. She'd been insanely busy today, but she wouldn't soon forget seeing that sick little girl reaching for him and him easily picking her up and comforting her. The child had looked teeny in his strong arms and it made Belle want to be in those arms. Every time he so much as smiled at her or brushed by her today, she'd been instantly on alert like a motor had revved up her heart. All she wanted was more of his attention. She cast a guilty glance at Treck. Why couldn't she feel like that with him as she'd always assumed she would?

“Here, here,” Nessa said.

Stuart grinned and took a deep swallow of the drink. He choked and spit the milk out. Treck hooted out a laugh. Nessa

joined in, luckily not offended. Belle found herself laughing along with them.

Stuart wiped off his mouth with the cloth napkin Nessa had brought with his plate, sputtered, took a long drink from the water carafe, and said, “I apologize. I did not plan on warm, earthy nut milk.”

Nessa was still laughing. “Goat milk. Have you never had it before?”

Stuart nodded. “I actually have, but it was chilled and sweetened.”

“Ah, you Americans. I heard somewhere you like ice in your drinks.” Nessa shivered.

“We’re crazy like that.” Stuart gifted Belle with his irresistible grin and resumed eating.

Belle could hardly swallow her food, suffering from the aftereffects of that grin beaming right at her. It was like the sun—blinding her, warming her up, filling her with good vitamins she needed to survive.

They finished their meals, stacked their plates, thanked Nessa, and went to set up the small tent and sleeping gear Grace had included for them. Stuart must’ve had experience with tents because he whipped this one into shape within seconds. He stood back, looked at the tent, looked at her and Treck and then whistled. “That tent is ... really small.”

Belle wrung her hands. She stared at the tent and then let her eyes run over each of the large men by her side. “Um ... well ... Shall we take turns sleeping in the tent then?”

Stuart and Treck both rounded on her at the same instant.

“Absolutely not,” Treck said.

“You’re sleeping in the tent, princess,” Stuart asserted.

Sometimes when he said princess, it was alluring. Right now, it was annoying. “I’m not some spoiled princess,” she shot back. “I can take a turn out in the open. It’s not as if something is going to happen to me out here.” She gestured

around at the beautiful mountain scenery, barely visible as dusk had deepened its gloom.

Stuart stepped closer to her, his dark eyes intense, and she suddenly found it hard to catch a full breath. “Treck and I are here to protect you. You’re the important one with not only the medical expertise but royal blood running in those veins. You will sleep in the tent.”

She stared into his deep-brown gaze and knew she’d do anything he asked, even though she didn’t like being reminded she was royalty. Her family didn’t try to act above anyone else. Her breath was coming far too fast and with Stuart this close, she could smell him—a crisp, clean, manly scent.

“Agreed,” Treck said from her side. He took her elbow. “I’ll take Belle to brush her teeth and ... relieve herself before bed.”

Well, that was awkward.

“I’ll set up the sleeping gear,” Stuart said, not sounding frustrated at all that their moment had been interrupted. Had it been a moment? What did she know about moments with tough, incredible military heroes from America?

Belle retrieved her personal bag and walked with Treck down to the stream. She brushed her teeth, splashed water on her face, and then hid behind a tree to use the bathroom. After scrubbing her hands in the stream, she was ready to lie down. It had been a long, stressful day, and not just because of the nonstop patients. Stuart was seriously messing with her head.

It was full-on dark now. There were pinpricks of light from inside the zealots’ small homes.

“Are you ready to rest?” Treck asked. He was so close she felt his breath on her forehead. This could be the moment she’d been waiting for years to experience. Why, then, as she squinted up into his handsome face and her eyes adjusted to the dark, did it feel so ... awkward and forced?

“For sure. Long day. Thanks for your help.”

“Of course. I’m happy to be here.” Treck wrapped his arm firmly around her waist and turned her toward him.

Belle gasped in surprise and instinctively her hands went to his chest.

“Belle.” Treck’s voice was soft. “I hope this isn’t too forward, but we’ve been friends for years, and ...”

Now *this* was a moment. Right? What was she supposed to do? How should she react? Were her hands in the right place or should she wrap them around his neck? His chest was nicely-formed, but her hands felt out of place there. Maybe it was too forward to be touching his pectoralis major muscles. She wished she could ask Leia about levels of intimacy when dating. What was appropriate for a first kiss and so on?

Really? She was thinking of muscle names and her cousin when she was about to kiss her dream man? Oh boy. She’d always assumed she wanted Treck. Now was their time. She was simply waiting for him to say how he’d noticed she was a woman and he secretly loved her, then he’d kiss her and this dream could progress. If she could just figure out where to put her hands and somehow dredge up some excitement. Shouldn’t her nerves be tingling?

Instead of being thrilled, all she could think about was where Stuart was. What if he saw her in Treck’s arms? Did he want her in *his* arms? If she was in Stuart’s arms, this would feel vastly different. A tingle rushed through her at the thought.

“Now that you’re all grown up,” Treck continued, pulling her in tighter.

“Don’t let me interrupt anything,” Stuart’s voice came from far too close.

Belle jumped and screamed, pulling herself away from Treck. “What are you doing?” she demanded of Stuart.

“Going to brush my teeth,” he said, a challenge evident in his dark gaze, sparking at her in the dark night.

“Well, don’t let us interrupt that important activity,” she said to him, as sassy as Leia or Addie would be, totally unlike herself.

“I won’t,” he all but snarled back at her.

Treck was looking back and forth between the two of them. Even in the dark she could see his face had gotten tight. He seemed as confused by her intense response as she was.

She held up her hands. "I'm exhausted and going to lie down now. Thank you both for helping today."

She didn't wait for their responses but whirled and headed for the tent, outlined in the night sky not far away.

"Goodnight, Belle," Treck said to her back, his voice full of disappointment.

"Goodnight, little princess," Stuart hurled at her.

"Goodnight," she managed, hurt by Stuart's tone. Why was it so cold and derisive? She rolled her eyes at herself and unzipped the tent, slipping inside. Stuart wasn't right for her. Treck was. Why was she almost relieved that Stuart had interrupted their moment? Why did it hurt so much that Stuart had been snippy with her? He was a cocky jerk that she was in no way interested in. Right?

She stretched out on the blankets and small pillow. She could smell Stuart's scent. He'd set up her bedding; had he rubbed his delicious scent all over it? There was no way a tough military man like him would do such a thing. There was no way a man who'd traveled the world and been interested in her perfect older sister would be interested in her. Her stomach curdled as if she'd drunk a cup of goat milk.

Treck. She had to think of Treck. At the moment, she couldn't even dredge up an image of his easy smile, but she could picture the tempting smirk on Stuart's lips all too easily.

She rolled over and pushed out a heavy breath.

Oh, boy. She was a mess.

## Chapter Seven



Stuart couldn't sleep. He could hear Belle's soft exhalations through the thin tent walls and the much louder exhalations of Treck sleeping next to him. He'd been so thoroughly ticked off when he saw them in each other's arms that he'd almost ripped Belle from Treck and thrashed the man.

He'd restrained himself. He liked Treck, and he couldn't really fault Belle for being interested in him. The man was probably extremely attractive to women. He had that easy-going vibe and smile that women liked, and he was a pilot. Everybody knew the Air Force guys were women magnets.

He growled and rolled onto his other side. He was uncomfortable, but that was nothing new. He'd slept in far worse conditions. The babbling of the creek should've helped him fall asleep, but all he could think was he'd acted like a jerk to Belle. Of course she'd like Treck better. And since when had he cared that he acted like a jerk? He'd been a jerk and acted like a jerk many, many times and it had never bothered him. But Belle ... ah crap, he'd never felt like this for a woman. He had to get over it. He wasn't worthy of her, and she wanted Treck. Even if she hadn't been a princess, she was too sweet, pure, and perfect for him.

He rolled over again, wanting to punch something or someone. If only Malik was here. He and Malik loved to goad each other and regularly sparred just for the fun of it. Malik had won Princess Adelaide. Stuart had gotten over it. Addie was beautiful, fun, sassy, and intriguing, but going after her had been more of a competition to him than anything. But

Belle ... She was an ethereal light that he couldn't push from his mind.

He forced out a heavy breath. He was thinking like a wussy womanizer. That wasn't him. Ever.

He must've drifted off. A pained groan woke him, and he blinked up at the sky, it was lightening to a pale blue and pink. Where was that groaning coming from? He rolled over just in time to see Treck thrash out of his bedding and spew into the grass.

Stuart scrambled up. He should check on the man. Treck was still huddled on his side and clutching his stomach. That didn't look good. He hoped it wasn't contagious.

"You all right, man?" he called softly.

"No," Treck groaned.

"Ah ... shoot. I'll get you ... water." He grabbed one of the glass water jugs and rushed to the creek, rinsing it quickly, filling it up, and hurrying back.

Treck had rolled back onto his bedding and was lying flat on his back, panting slightly. His face was sweaty and shiny and he looked awful.

"Here, man." Stuart had never been called a wimp by anyone but his father. At the risk of calling himself a wimp, he did not want to get too close. He'd seen malaria in a village in Haiti. It had been horrible to watch the small children miserable and dying. He'd held that cute, little girl yesterday as she coughed and sniffled, but puking was vastly different than a few coughing fits.

He extended the water. Treck took it and downed a long swallow. Then he turned to the side and puked again.

Stuart cursed. What could he do? Belle! She was a nurse and as sympathetic and talented as anyone he'd ever seen. He'd watched her closely yesterday. Too closely. She was impressive and she obviously cared for Treck. She'd help him.

"I'll get Belle," he said.

Treck nodded but didn't answer.

Stuart hurried to the tent and sort of rapped on the vinyl.  
“Belle? Belle?”

She didn't respond. Shoot.

Treck wretched again. He needed Belle. As a nurse.

Hoping it wasn't an invasion of her privacy, Stuart bent low and unzipped the tent. Poking his head inside, he drew in a sharp breath. Belle's beautiful face was even softer and more appealing in sleep. Her lips were pursed, and her long lashes fanned across her bronzed upper cheek. The covers were down to her waist; her toned arm and a sliver of her firm abdomen were revealed in a nicely-fitting T-shirt. Stuart drew in a shaky breath. Behind him, Treck groaned again. He shouldn't be checking out Treck's girl; he should be getting the man help. This sucked.

“Belle?” Stuart called. He shouldn't have done it, but he bent and touched her smooth upper arm with his fingertips. Her skin was soft and firm and fire shot through him at the simple touch. “Belle?”

She sat straight up, her dark hair wild around her face. “Stuart?” She blinked at him and then her dark eyes got a warm, longing look in them, completely different from the anger she'd seemed to have at him last night for interrupting her make-out time with Treck. Maybe she'd thank him for his timely interruption in the light of day. If he would've let her kiss Treck and he was contagious, she'd be puking right now too.

“Treck's sick,” he managed to say when he really wanted to just hold her in his arms. Yep. He was acting like a total wimp.

She scrambled to her feet and tried to push through the door, but he was blocking it so all she did was throw herself straight at his chest.

“Whoa.” Fire took over his entire body. Stuart straightened and tugged her closer, his arms securely locked around her lower back. He thought she'd yank away to go help Treck, but the moment seemed to freeze as she stared up at him. The way



her dark lashes shadowed her eyes was so incredibly alluring he couldn't have dragged his gaze away if insurgents were surrounding them. She licked her lips and he felt like somebody had slugged him in the solar plexus.

A groan came from not nearly far enough away.

“Treck,” they both said at the same time.

Stuart released her and she hurried out of the tent and to Treck's side, kneeling in the spot opposite of where he'd been vomiting. Stuart watched her, wanting to keep his distance from the sickness but wanting to be by her side. He scrubbed at the day's growth on his jaw. She tenderly touched Treck's forehead and spoke soothingly to him. Stuart was an idiot. A woman like Belle would never want him. He shouldn't make himself vulnerable and needy for any woman, no matter how incredible she seemed.

\* \* \*

Stuart stayed close by, following any instructions she uttered as Belle checked Treck. He had no fever, the onset had been quick, and the only truly sick person they'd seen yesterday had been the little girl with a head cold. She suspected Treck had food poisoning, which would bode better for her mission here. If he had the stomach flu, she'd probably have to cut her mission short to avoid infecting all of these people.

Stuart had just returned with a cold, wet cloth from the stream. She pressed it to Treck's forehead. “Treck,” she asked, “did you drink the goat milk?” Raw milk that hadn't been pasteurized or chilled could easily have caused this.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “It tasted off, but I didn't want to offend Nessa. You didn't?”

“I hate it.” She shook her head and looked to Stuart.

He put up his hands. “You both know I didn't. That stuff was nasty. Sorry if I offended Nessa.”

She smiled despite how bad she was feeling for Treck. Footsteps approached. Nessa looked over Treck and Belle and

asked, "Is he sick?"

"Yes." Belle tried to decide if she should blame the goat milk. She didn't want to offend this kind woman either.

"My children didn't think the milk tasted right last night. I made them drink it and told them not to complain." She gave an embarrassed smile. "They were both throwing up early this morning. I think my husband and I have stomachs of steel, but I still feel ... like I'm rolling. Are you feeling all right, Princess Belle?"

Belle nodded. "I don't like goat milk, so I didn't drink it."

"We all know you didn't drink it." Nessa smiled at Stuart.

"Told you I was smart," he said, putting up his hands defensively.

"You never claimed you were smart," Belle hurled back at him.

"Oh. I just thought it when I didn't drink the milk." He winked at her.

Belle's stomach flushed and maybe she didn't feel quite right either.

"Do you think it's the milk and not a flu?" Nessa asked.

"I do. The only person we saw yesterday with any kind of sickness was a little girl with a head cold. Treck, has anybody at home been sick?"

He shook his head.

Nessa looked over Treck. He looked horrible, wan and exhausted. Belle felt so bad for him.

"I feel we should put Mr. Treck in my home. I can watch over him while you doctor the village and then no one will see him being sick and worry that we're exposing them to sickness."

Belle nodded. "It's a good plan. Treck ... can you make it to Nessa's house?"

Treck gave her an injured look, as if she were trying to get rid of him. He didn't say anything though, simply struggled to his feet. He bent forward and dry heaved, probably having nothing left to vomit.

Stuart hurried forward as Treck straightened and wrapped his arm around his waist, supporting the other man. Belle's heart gave a lurch. Stuart was such a humble hero at times, and an over-confident jerk at others. If only she could get through to the real man.

"Thanks," Treck murmured, obviously embarrassed to be miserably sick in front of all of them, and to need assistance.

Belle started after them, but Nessa waved her off. "We'll get Treck settled. You get your medical supplies ready. People will come soon."

Stuart looked back at her as they shuffled away. "Leave the tent and the mess. I'll clean it up when I get back."

Her eyes widened. He didn't seem the type to be cleaning up disgusting messes. "I guess you really are a good guy," she said to him.

He winked and her body flushed predictably. "I did tell you that already."

She laughed and instantly felt bad as she heard Treck groan, leaning forward to dry heave again. Stuart focused back on the man by his side and they started lumbering forward again. Stuart gave her one more appealing look over his shoulder. Belle put a hand to her heart. He was definitely a good guy. Stuart had love and compassion inside of him that he didn't seem to want anyone to see. The conflicted, humble hero drew her in faster and harder than anything she'd ever imagined.

It was telling that she felt compassion for Treck as a friend and a patient but not much more. Dang. Stuart was messing everything up. Why wasn't she more upset at him about it?

## Chapter Eight



Belle got through Wednesday and that was saying a lot. It was insanely busy with lots of zealot families coming in for checkups. She hadn't even realized there were hundreds of zealots that lived up here. She knew the dissenters had a larger, and more spread out, population. What would tomorrow be like? The dissenters weren't as friendly as the zealots and some of them intimidated her.

Stuart had been incredibly helpful. The children had warmed up to him and it made her want to sigh like a lovesick girl when she saw him teasing a little girl or spinning a little boy in circles. The man made her heart race out of control far too often. One simple glance or a brush of his hand was all it took to make her forget everything and everyone else in the world. Not a great thing when she was the one in charge of these people's health, but it sure was ... invigorating.

She'd had a couple breaks where she checked on Treck, but he was asleep both times she went by. Nessa brought them dinner after the last patients had finally left and it was near dark outside—vegetable beef stew and homemade bread.

“No goat milk,” Nessa teased Stuart.

He saluted her and took the large bowl she offered him. “Thank you. How are your children and Treck feeling?”

“Not great, but thank you for asking. They've been sleeping or throwing up most of the day. None of them have been able to hold down even sips of water.” She looked exhausted. “Praying they sleep tonight.”

“It’s wonderful of you to take Treck in, but we can have him come rest in the tent tonight if it eases your burden,” Belle said. “We can both look after him.”

Stuart looked at her as if she’d begged to have Treck come sleep by her or something. She focused on Nessa; she didn’t need Stuart to analyze why she was doing something. But Stuart surprised her yet again. “I can come get him,” he said to Nessa. “Thank you for taking care of him today.”

“No, it’ll be fine,” Nessa insisted. “I don’t want to make him move. We really appreciate you all coming up here and I feel responsible for getting him sick.”

“Wasn’t your fault he downed goat milk.” Stuart winked at her and ate a bite of the bread. “That is incredible.”

“Thank you.” Nessa looked him over. “Do you live in Magna now or are you just visiting?”

“I live here.” Stuart rested his bowl on his legs and drank a long drink of water.

“For how long?”

Belle leaned forward, very interested in this answer. He glanced at her and said, “I don’t plan on ever leaving.”

Belle’s heart raced out of control. Did that mean anything? For her? For them? Last night she’d tried to convince herself that it would never work between them and Treck was the one for her, but the only time she’d thought about Treck today was to feel badly that he was here for her and he was miserably sick.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t stop thinking of Stuart: his irresistible smile, the mischievous sparkle in his dark eyes, his ultra-fit body and the way his muscles flexed in his arms as he picked up one small child after another and hefted them into the air, making them giggle and entertaining them while their parents had their exams, or celebrating with the little ones after they survived shots from her, often gently teasing that Belle was the “mean one” and he was the “nice one” which made everyone laugh.

“How does your momma feel about that?” Nessa challenged him, obviously thinking how she’d feel if one of her children left their country and planned on never coming home.

Stuart’s jaw tightened and he pushed his stew around with his spoon, focusing completely on the bowl. “She’s gone,” he muttered and plunged a bite of stew in his mouth.

Belle felt like she’d been punched in the gut. His mother was gone, and he looked absolutely miserable about it and completely shut off from other questions. She glanced at Nessa, but the woman was focused on Stuart. Belle prayed she would read his resistance to any more questions, but she must not have. “No other family back home?”

Stuart didn’t even look up. “No.” His answer was quieter than she’d ever heard him speak.

Silence fell. Belle tried to eat a bite of bread, but it stuck in her throat. She was filled to the brim with emotion, feeling awful for Stuart. Belle had been surrounded by, and spoiled by, her immediate and extended family all her life. She was the probably the most well-loved person on the island of Magna and she tried to love everyone in return. Stuart had nobody, no one to love and nurture him, no one to spoil him and tell him how incredible he was. She wanted to do all of that for him, and more. Was that her place?

Stuart ate quietly and quickly as Nessa studied him and Belle tried to get some food down, mostly drinking from her water carafe to soothe her dry throat. As soon as Stuart had finished his last bite, Nessa went to him, took the bowl and his mumbled thanks, set the bowl aside, knelt next to him, and wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

Stuart startled and Belle’s breath caught in her throat. She half-expected Stuart to push their new friend away. He didn’t. He didn’t return the hug, but he didn’t turn away from Nessa either.

Eventually Nessa pulled back, wiped her eyes, and said, “I’m sorry about your family.” She picked up the bowl, came over and took Belle’s bowl, and then she walked away. She

looked back over her shoulder. “Don’t worry about Treck. If he’s not better in the morning, we’ll keep him here while you go help the dissenters.”

“Thank you,” Belle managed.

Nessa headed to the settlement and her home. Belle had no clue what to say to Stuart. He didn’t appear to be the type of person who wanted sympathy. Like her brother Alaric, too tough. She felt she had to say something though. “I’m sorry that you lost your mom.” His sister too, if she understood right from their Beauty and the Beast discussion.

He looked up at her. For one brief second, she felt like she had a window into his soul. She could see the agony that his mother’s death had caused and how lonely and lost he truly felt. The moment was there and gone quick. He broke eye contact and it felt like he’d wrenched himself from her. Belle sucked in a quiet breath, shocked that a shared look could be so deep and then cause emotional pain when it was taken away.

“Would you like to use the bathroom and brush your teeth before you rest?” Stuart asked. His voice was stiff, and he didn’t look at her.

“Yes, thank you,” she managed. She stood, retrieved her small toiletry bag from her supplies, and walked with him to the nearby creek. She hid behind a bush and used the bathroom and then washed her hands and face and brushed her teeth.

Stuart brushed his teeth and splashed water on his face and arms. He still wouldn’t look at her, but he did say, “I’m ready for a shower.”

Even in the near-dark, she could easily see his strong form, his biceps and triceps poking out of his T-shirt. Clearing her throat, she managed, “Grace said that the place we camp by the dissenters is close to a beautiful waterfall pool. We could ... bathe tomorrow night.”

She could feel his steady gaze on her now and she met his eyes, not wanting him to think she was too immature and silly

to talk about a shower or bath without blushing like a teenage girl. Their gazes connected and a world of warmth and heat pulsed through her. He was the first one to break the connection, glancing away and muttering, "Let's get some rest. Tomorrow will be another big day."

She fell into step with him back to the small tent. She wished she was an accomplished flirt and knew what to say to draw a man in. It was only the two of them out here. Most women could probably capitalize on that. Not her. She claimed she was mature, but the sad truth was most of the time she felt like an inexperienced, sheltered girl. Especially around a mature, accomplished, worldly, tough, handsome, and impressive man like Stuart.

They stopped outside her tent, and she glanced up at him. He was gazing down at her with an intensity that took her breath away. Was this their moment? Oh, how she longed for a moment or more with Stuart. It seemed all her good intentions of going after Treck had disappeared. Would her brothers disapprove of her falling for Stuart? True, he was an outsider, but her brothers, especially Alaric, seemed to be close to him. Yet Alaric had been upset when he'd found Belle kneeling over Stuart to fix his shoulder.

"How's your shoulder?" she blurted out.

Stuart's eyebrows lifted. "It's fine." He gave a half of a smile. "No lasting damage ... thanks to you."

She waited. This was the perfect chance for him to say something even sweeter, brush her hair over her shoulder, cup her cheek with his large palm, or kiss her passionately like the military stud he was. She waited and waited and ... nothing. He started to turn away from her.

"I don't think you stink," she heard herself blurt out. She didn't want to let this private, almost perfect moment go.

"Excuse me?" He glanced back at her.

She shifted uncomfortably and clutched her hands together. The night was deepening around them and the noises from the small community close by had settled. "You said you



wanted a shower and I understand that. After two days of working hard in the heat, I want a shower too, but I just wanted to reassure you that you still smell ... very nice. What kind of cologne do you wear?" Goodness, what was she doing? She sounded like an inexperienced fourteen-year-old trying to talk to a college boy. Heat filled her face, and not the good kind.

Stuart stared at her as if her monologue was confusing and annoying. "I don't wear cologne."

She should've stopped, but she didn't. "You have to wear some kind of cologne. I could smell it in my tent after you set up my bedding last night."

His eyes widened but he shook his head. "Must've been Treck's smell."

"No," she insisted. "I know Treck's smell. This was something different."

"You know Treck's smell?" Now he was glowering down at her.

"Yes, I do. I've known Treck my whole life. You have a very distinctive, manly, musky, spicy type of smell."

He stared at her as if not sure how to respond, then he finally shook his head and said, "Must've been my antiperspirant."

"Your what?"

"The stuff I put in my armpits so I don't stink." His dark eyes gave her a challenging look. "It works to take the sting out of bug bites too."

"Gross," she huffed. "That's not very romantic."

His gaze was intense, but not in a good way. "I'm not trying to be romantic. That's not me. I wouldn't even know where to start."

That hurt. He didn't want to even try to be romantic with her. She turned away and unzipped the tent. Glancing back, she waited for him to stop her, to at least *try* to be romantic with her. Did he even want to? Did he even care about her? Or

did he look at her as a young, inexperienced, and spoiled princess? He didn't even give her the courtesy of looking at her, focused on the trees around them. He definitely wasn't behaving like the handsome prince, but then he'd told her he'd never be Prince Charming.

Belle pushed out a breath, hurried into the tent, and zipped it shut. Sinking to her knees on the thin mattress, she prayed for help. Through the haze of frustration and what felt like rejection, she could've sworn she heard Stuart say, "Why doesn't she ask Treck to be romantic?" Then he grunted out, "She knows his smell."

Belle shut her eyes tightly and focused on her prayer. Stuart was the most confusing, frustrating, and appealing man she'd ever been around. How could he be so cute with the children, so willing to jump in and help, give her looks that made her tingle and yet have no desire to be romantic with her? Maybe he was just a cardboard cutout of a hero and she was having girlish fantasies about the military stud.

But no, that wasn't it. There was a depth to Stuart that reached out to her. He'd obviously suffered deeply yet pushed through it and come out stronger and more impressive on the other side. He also obviously wasn't going to pursue her. Dang him.

Why did Treck have to be sick? Why couldn't she simply love him and not have her head and heart turned by Stuart?

## Chapter Nine



Stuart hardly slept, once again. He woke to the sky lightening but at least no one puking beside him. Princess Belle stepped out of the tent. He stared up at her, wondering if she was truly an angel or a woman or a princess. It seemed she was all three combined. So perfect and appealing and out of his league. He was falling for her, and he had to stop it quick.

Hopefully Treck was feeling better. If Stuart had to spend another night walking Belle to her tent alone, he'd kiss her and nobody could blame him. He passed his hand over his face as her gorgeous dark eyes stared down at him. Her brothers would blame him. And he'd blame himself.

Belle was not the type of girl a man kissed and then walked away from. Stuart needed to just stay away. Treck was a much better fit for her, and she knew exactly how Treck smelled. Why did that make his gut roll with jealousy? Treck was a nice guy and Belle was a sweetheart. They were perfect for each other. Ugh.

He pushed off the blanket and stood, facing her. Belle's gorgeous dark eyes widened and she backed up a step.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She shielded her eyes. "I'll go check on Treck while you put some clothes on."

Stuart looked down at his bare chest. He had shorts on. "Does my chest appeal to you, pretty princess?" He shouldn't have flirted with her, but it was hard to resist.

She backed up again, stepping on the tent and half-collapsing the side wall, slipping on the nylon material. Scrambling, she came back his direction and ran into him. She put her hands out to steady herself and they ended up on his chest. Stuart found the breath completely knocked out of him. It was instinctive to wrap his hands around her trim waist and draw her in closer.

Belle gave the cutest little gasp and stared at him as if he had just rescued her from hundreds of angry dissenters. His entire body seemed to respond, and that unsettling mixture of desire and protectiveness filled him. She was like magic elixir to him. No one was taking this woman from his arms.

Her hands slid slowly up his chest and along his neck. His skin hummed in response. He lowered his head as she arched up on tiptoes. The anticipation he felt inside wound him up tighter than an archery bow. Amazingly, the same anticipation and desire were reflected in her gorgeous, thick-lashed deep brown eyes.

Stuart knew nothing of romance and love, absolutely nothing, but he did know there had never been a more perfect fit than this incredible sweetheart of a woman in his arms.

Footsteps approached and then an embarrassed, “Oh, my!”

“Nessa!” Belle gasped, pulling out of his arms and turning to face their friend.

An intense letdown hit Stuart and then something even worse ... shame. His father’s voice pinged around in his head telling him how unworthy he was of such a woman and how stupid he was to think he could rise above his station in life. Stuart clasped his arms behind his back so he didn’t reach out for her again. He was a soldier. He fought, protected, and served. It was what he was made for. He wasn’t a lover and for once he agreed with his dad. He was in no way worthy of an angelic, refined princess like Belle.

She glanced back at him, and her gaze smoldered with heat as she looked over his chest and arms. Stuart knew then that volunteering for this job was the stupidest thing he could’ve done. He’d done it because he was drawn to Belle, but he

hadn't thought how hard it would be to be alone with her like this. Dang Treck for getting sick. Treck was a good man. He deserved a sweetheart like Belle. His gut twisted. Stuart didn't deserve her, but he wanted her.

"Sorry to interrupt," Nessa said, sounding all chipper and happy as if Stuart and Belle were some couple that kissed all the time and she'd only interrupted their ritual good morning connection. Nope. She'd interrupted what would've been the best kiss of Stuart's life. He should be thanking Nessa. He didn't want to confuse Belle or lead her on. He didn't want to confuse himself either. It wouldn't be good if he fell any deeper for the princess. Still, he wanted to cuss Nessa and send her and her breakfast away.

She brought the tray over to them and waited while they took bowls of oatmeal that looked to be full of berries and nuts, plates of scrambled eggs, and cups of juice.

"Thank you," Stuart managed. *Thank you for ruining one of the best moments of my life.*

"Of course." Nessa smiled at them as they both sat and started eating. "I wanted to feed you before you headed out. I have some bad news though."

Stuart glanced up at her, chewing on a forkful of buttery eggs. What could be worse news than her interrupting that kiss?

"Treck is keeping down some water, but he's still weak this morning. I don't think you should move him until he can keep some food down."

Belle nodded. "You're right," she said, scooping up a bite of the oatmeal. "The dissenters wouldn't like us bringing a sick man around. Are you all right to watch him until tomorrow night? We'll come by for him after we finish with the dissenters."

Stuart stared at Belle. He thought she wanted Treck. Why was she so easily leaving him here?

"It's settled then."

"Are your children feeling better?" Belle asked.

“A little. It seems they’ve recovering more quickly than Treck. Ally asked for bread this morning and Joey hasn’t thrown up since yesterday afternoon.”

Belle and Nessa chatted about her children, the school that they attended here in the zealot village, and Nessa’s husband’s role in the shared gardening and hunting that was so essential for their small community. Stuart listened and ate, shocked that Belle didn’t even seem disturbed that Treck was sick and they were ditching him. It didn’t fit with her nursing, her sweetheart persona, or the crush he’d thought she had on Treck.

They finished their food, carried everything back to Nessa’s, and checked in on Treck. He was miserable-looking, pale, and exhausted. Belle gave him an electrolyte solution and told him they’d come back for him tomorrow night.

He only nodded and said, “Hopefully I can handle the drive home by then.”

Sheesh. Another reminder not to drink goat milk. As if Stuart needed one.

He and Belle thanked Nessa again, said goodbye to Treck and her children, and packed up their supplies so they could head to the dissenters’ camp. He slid into a shirt before he packed up his bag. Belle gave him a lingering look and he knew that he needed to say something. What though? He’d rather cut off his left arm than tell her he wasn’t interested in her. He couldn’t lie like that. Women hated hearing that he wasn’t worthy of them, but nothing could be truer in this case.

They loaded into the Humvee and drove along a mountain road. “How far is the other village?” he asked.

“It’s about twenty minutes away, but it’s not really a village. The dissenters live all over the mountains. Grace instructed me to set up by the upper falls and the dissenters would come to us. They know this is their two days of the month to receive medical care without having to come down to Magna.”

“Okay.” His hands were slick on the wheel and the road was rough. They bounced around as Stuart drove as if he’d never driven a Humvee before. “Are you worried about Treck?” he managed.

Belle shrugged. “I feel bad he’s so miserable, but it’s just a foodborne illness. It’ll pass.”

He swallowed hard and said against all his instincts, “I got the impression you and Treck were ... interested in each other.”

Her gaze darted to him. He tried to focus on the rock-strewn, uneven trail of a road. A few seconds of awkward silence passed, then she said quietly, “I always thought Treck was the one I would fall for.”

Stuart nodded quickly. Here was his opening, no matter how he hated it. She had been meant for Treck. He knew it. Alaric and Kingston had said as much and now she was confirming it. He pushed out the painful words. “That’s what I thought. You two make a great couple. I’m really ...” he licked his lips and cleared his throat and managed to squeak out, “happy for you.”

The silence inside the vehicle hurt his eardrums. The Humvee bounced up and over rocks and even some logs. He focused on driving and wished she’d tell him off, tell him she wanted him, tell him there was nothing between her and Treck. It was selfish and he should’ve felt guilty, but he was a selfish creature and that simply confirmed once again how unworthy he was of Belle.

Belle quietly told him a few different times to make a turn, but that was all. Then finally she said, “You think Treck and I are a good couple?”

“Yeah.” It hurt to grind out that word and the next sentence. “You’d be great together.” *No!* He wanted to yell it and curse in frustration, but he refused to be the selfish loser his dad always told him he’d be. He would support two good people being together and not tick off Alaric and his other friends. He refused to pursue Belle and put himself so far

above his station that the entire kingdom of Magna, and his dad in purgatory, would get a good laugh out of it.

Belle faced forward, her arms clenched tightly over her bosom and her normally soft, smooth skin looked tight. “Thank you for sharing your opinion on the matter,” she snipped at him.

Stuart held in a groan. Did she have any clue how much he hated this? How he wanted to be a selfish jerk, pull over the Humvee, lift her over the console, and kiss her until she knew she was the most incredible human he’d ever encountered? He passed a hand over his face and then gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Yep,” he managed to say.

The river appeared on his right and Stuart recognized this trail from when he’d hiked up here over a month ago, back when he was pursuing Princess Adelaide. He felt a sting of guilt about that now. He’d been enamored with her, but he’d known even then it couldn’t go anywhere. It had only been his natural competitiveness that kept him fighting Malik for Addie. He ached to fight for Belle, but he couldn’t let himself do it. Belle would do herself a huge favor to focus on Treck and not get enamored with Stuart. He was nothing special and he knew it better than anyone. It had been drilled into him from toddlerhood on up.

A few minutes of awkward silence passed and then he saw the waterfall and the pool. “Just park anywhere?” he asked.

“I think so.”

Stuart parked and hopped out. The scenery was gorgeous. Prettier than the trip he and Wes had taken to New Zealand. If only he could focus on the lush greenery, the waterfall dancing over mossy rocks, or the wildflowers. His brain was consumed with all things Belle.

He hurried around to get her door, careful not to look at her or especially touch her. If he did, he might pull her close and kiss her until someone yanked them apart.

They silently set up tables, chairs, tent walls for exams, and the medical supplies. It was quiet except for the sound of



the waterfall. Stuart wanted to plunge into that green pool and swim around. No matter how sticky, awkward, and hot he was, he couldn't leave Belle alone while they were close to the dissenters.

When they were done, he set up the tent a little ways away. He could've waited until nighttime, but he didn't know what else to do. Belle brought the bedding and laid it inside and he zipped it up. They both stood and stretched, glancing around and avoiding each other's gaze.

"If you build it, they will come?" he asked.

"What?" She finally looked at him.

"Sorry. It's an old movie quote. Kevin Costner builds this baseball field and then the ghosts of baseball superstars from the past come to play ball ..." He trailed off as she stared at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"Sounds like an odd movie."

He shrugged. "I liked it." He glanced around again, wanting to jump in that waterfall pool worse than ever. He sensed movement from behind the trees. "There's someone there," he said quietly, easing closer to Belle.

She stepped in at the same time and their arms brushed. Stuart felt a warm flush and cursed himself. It was a simple brush of the arms. He had to get under control, and now.

A lady with dark hair hanging past her waist eased around a tree. She was holding a small child on her hip and had a slightly larger child by the hand. As Stuart looked closer, he could see her abdomen was rounded. Busy mom.

"Welcome," Belle called, sounding immensely relieved they weren't alone together anymore. That stung. Though it shouldn't matter.

The mom still looked reluctant but responded as Belle ushered her over with both hands. Belle started by sitting the children down and examining them. Stuart noticed more shadows and then people started filtering out of the trees and things got busy.

Throughout the day, he listened to Belle's summons and helped with children when she took their mothers behind the curtain for exams. He carried a snake away from the tent and got a gushing thanks from Belle that made him feel ten feet tall.

He tried to help any way he could. Belle kept giving him appreciative glances, especially when one of the women reluctantly let him hold her crying baby and surprisingly the little one fell asleep in his arms. It must've been all the quick pacing he did to calm her down. Stuart hadn't had much human interaction throughout his life and holding that baby girl felt ... as if he were closer to heaven, to his mom and sister.

The day went quickly as he put on Band-Aids after shots and teased with the little ones, pretending to get a fake shot so a little man would do the same. Yet there was a vastly different feel here and nobody but the children seemed inclined to look at or talk to him. He was comfortable in the villain role, but he heard the muttered, "outsider" so often it started annoying him. He was trying to help them, and they treated him with suspicion and almost distaste. He'd seen something similar at times in countries where the U.S. military presence was unwelcome, so he wasn't surprised. He'd gotten comfortable around Nessa and her people the past couple days. These people were not like the zealots who seemed peaceful and just wanted to be left alone. The dissenters obviously didn't want him here and it was like an underlying current. At any moment, he expected a riot. It didn't offend him, but he mentally planned how he'd defend Belle and fight them all. No problem.

Someone brought them nuts, jerky, and too-ripe mangoes at lunchtime. As dark came, the people tapered off and a man arrived with a venison and root stew of some sort.

Stuart thanked him but the man blatantly ignored him, turning slightly away. Belle sat with her bowl, thanked the man, and started eating. Stuart took that as his cue to dig in, though he didn't like this man standing over them, glowering

at Belle as if she shouldn't associate with scum like Stuart. The man was right, but it still hurt for some stupid reason.

They both shoveled in bites, in silent agreement that the quicker they ate hopefully the quicker this man would leave them alone. Stuart would love to swim in that waterfall pool. With Belle. No. He couldn't go there. She could swim while he watched the trees for dissenter gawkers and then he could swim after she was settled in the tent.

Stuart's bowl was almost gone. It hadn't been his favorite meal—he wasn't a huge fan of the gamier venison or the flavor of resentment he'd had sprinkled on him all day.

The man shocked them both by speaking. “You are one of the Magnite princesses. The youngest one.” It wasn't a question, and his tone wasn't friendly.

She nodded, swallowing her bite. “Yes. I'm Princess Belle.”

Stuart had no clue how the man wouldn't soften to the sweetness radiating from her. Everyone else had treated her with respect and instantly warmed to her kindness and beauty.

“And a doctor?” he asked, his voice even tighter.

“No. I'm a nurse, but I'm trained and qualified to give vaccines and examinations.”

He studied her. Belle ate another bite, obviously uncomfortable, but Stuart understood she planned to finish the food they offered and not risk offending them more than they obviously were by Stuart's presence.

“The other woman doctor ...”

“Dr. Grace,” Belle supplied. Stuart finished his bowl and she looked to him. “Would you like the rest of mine?”

“Oh ...” It wasn't the oddest request. It had been a large bowl and she was so small she was probably full. He could easily eat more, and they could send the bowl back empty so no one got upset that they wasted their food. He'd eaten much worse meals. “Sure.”

He took the bowl from her. Their fingers brushed and he loved the tingling sensation. He ate a bite, waiting for the man to keep talking. He still hadn't looked Stuart's way, as if Stuart was below him. Whatever. Although Stuart was fiercely competitive and always wanted to win, he'd been in too many situations where people knocked him down verbally, or tried to. He'd learned not to flare up. Too quickly.

He kept eating when he wanted to fist fight the guy. He'd been itching to fight somebody for days as he fought his feelings for Belle. Today had only increased his ire as the dissenters had been hostile to him no matter how he tried to help. Maybe this guy would give him the opportunity to blow off some steam.

"Dr. Grace almost always came alone. Why did you come with a guard, and an outsider at that? Does the king not trust his daughter with us? Is he hiring American military to protect you? We've agreed not to hurt the outsiders, but this ..." He gestured to Stuart. "Is offensive."

Stuart could hardly swallow the bite in his mouth. It was obvious the man didn't want him here, but now he was making a political ploy out of it? Should he step in and tell the guy to chill out and back off?

"It's nothing like that," Belle reassured him, clasping her hands together and looking uncomfortable. "Treck Wilder was supposed to accompany me because he and I are ..." She looked to Stuart and then said quietly, "dating."

Stuart took that word like a jab to the gut, which was stupid. He knew she and Treck liked each other. He'd caught them almost kissing by the creek two nights ago and she'd told him in the Humvee driving here this morning that it had always been Treck for her. To admit it to this stone-faced dissenter made it all too real. He wanted to compete for Belle, but he tried once again to fight that instinct. He wasn't worthy of her, and he didn't want to win for the sake of winning like he usually did, break her heart, and then get a one-way ticket off Magna. He could best almost any man, but Kingston and Alaric together might prove too much for him. It was

interesting though how breaking Belle's tender heart was the larger deterrent. He cared for her. Far too much.

"My brothers asked Stuart to come along as a friend," she continued as the man watched her steadily. "So Treck and I wouldn't be alone at night. Treck got food poisoning at the zealots' settlement and is still there recovering. So Stuart accompanied me here alone."

The man finally glanced at Stuart. "Your brothers don't trust Treck, a Magnite, but they trust an outsider alone with you, the famed 'sweetheart of the kingdom?'" His voice dripped with derision.

Stuart's spine prickled. This guy was asking for a fist to the face. Yet he agreed in some ways. Belle was a sweetheart and a princess. Stuart knew how far he was beneath her station.

"Yes, they do," Belle said evenly. "Thank you for dinner."

Stuart stacked the bowls and spoons, stood, and handed them to the man. The man took them but glowered at him. "We've agreed not to attack any outsiders, but you've got a bad vibe about you. We might make an exception for you."

Stuart laughed and threw his shoulders back, pumping his eyebrows tauntingly for added measure. "Bring it ... anytime, anywhere."

The man's hands trembled on the bowls he held. He looked like he was tempted to throw down right here, but his eyes roved over Stuart's frame and he probably didn't like his chances one on one. "Watch your back, outsider," he growled, spinning and striding away quickly.

"I'll watch you run away," Stuart called to his backside.

The man gave him one more glare then disappeared into the trees.

Stuart rolled his eyes. "Wuss," he muttered.

"Stuart," Belle's voice was breathless, afraid. "You shouldn't anger him. They kidnapped Julia and almost started

a war over tourists coming to the island. It's a tenuous peace right now."

Stuart blew out his breath and met her gaze. "Sorry," he said, though he wasn't. "It's not in me to back down." Beating Treck in the race for her heart was the only time he could remember that he'd backed down in years. He should've been proud of his self-control, but he just felt awful that he'd never have a chance with her.

"I've noticed." Her voice was stiff.

It appeared he'd made her mad, but he wasn't sure why. Because he'd upset the dissenter? She was the one who was "dating" Treck. Stuart had come up here to help these people and the thanks he got was some jerk saying he got a "bad vibe" about him. The man could join the club. A lot of people got bad vibes about Stuart, starting with his own father and most authority figures since then. He had a bad attitude, didn't know how to lose, and was unpredictable. Hooah. If only he knew how not to lose Belle. He looked her over. She'd never been his in the first place, and he'd do well to stay far away from her.

"Do you care if I swim and clean up first?" he asked, forgetting his resolve to let her swim and then put her carefully in her tent, safe from him, before he swam. He was being selfish again, but he really needed to cool off, to not feel so sticky and annoyed and ... wanting her.

"No, that's fine."

"Thanks." He meant it. "Then I'll keep watch for you so you can swim and wash up."

"Okay." She nodded.

Stuart was done—done fighting how much he wanted her, done trying to be a nice person and having it backfire like today with these people, done staring at her and knowing he could never have her. If only that dissenter would come back and fight him. That would be more refreshing than a cool waterfall pool.

He spun from her, ripped his shirt off then his socks and shoes and within a few steps he was pushing over the uneven rocks of the cool water and diving underneath. It felt good. He swam quickly across the pool and under the waterfall. The pounding water helped loosen the tension in his neck and somewhat cooled his anger at the stupid dissenters. It did not help him forget his desire for Belle. He ducked under, refusing to glance at where she was still standing not far from the edge of the waterfall pond. He suspected nothing would cure him of wanting her.

Exercising self-control and not winning sucked. He couldn't forget his place. Her father was the king for crying out loud. He had to somehow keep his distance and get through tomorrow. Then he had to forget these stupid fantasies. Stuart Falslev and the sweetheart princess? Never happening.

## Chapter Ten



Belle watched with an open mouth as Stuart shed his shirt, shoes, and socks and plunged into the waterfall pool. She was so confused and frustrated with him. He had seemed like he was pushing her to Treck, but then he seemed upset when she'd said she and Treck were dating. Was Stuart interested in her or not? She was leaning toward not.

She should be worrying about if the dissenters were going to come back and try to thrash Stuart and run him off, but he didn't seem concerned. He just seemed angry. She watched him swim under the waterfall. He was so tough he didn't seem afraid of anything.

She kept hoping for the possibility that he was interested in her. He would've kissed her if Nessa hadn't interrupted this morning. But how much could a kiss mean to him? He'd probably kissed hundreds of women; what was one more? He was easily handing her over to Treck, and Treck wasn't even here fighting for her. Stuart had fought for her sister Addie's attention, trying to win her from Malik. The man seemed like he lived to compete and win. If he didn't even care to compete for Belle's attention, she must mean nothing to him.

He swam out from the waterfall as the sun set behind the myriad of trees, but it was light enough she could see his dark gaze fixed on her. Heat pulsated from that gaze and her stomach pitched like someone had just thrown her off the waterfall. How could he look at her like that and not be interested? Did she stand any chance with such an accomplished and attractive man? She didn't want to be just



another kiss to him. She wanted to be the one woman he couldn't live without.

He ducked under the water and the moment was broken. Belle's jaw tightened. She spun and hurried to the small tent and her bag. Zipping herself in, she stripped out of her sweaty, dusty clothes and squirmed into her one-piece pale blue swimsuit. She'd packed it hoping to swim in this waterfall pool. She'd thought she'd be swimming with Treck. She truly hoped Treck was all right, but he didn't hold her interest any longer. It was all Stuart for her. He was incredibly tough, yet she'd seen him be tender with her and with the children the past few days. Even though the dissenters hadn't treated him well, he'd showed impressive self-control and kindness.

Did she dare tell him she was falling for him? Would he even care? How could she nudge him to step up and compete for her?

She hurried out of the tent, slowing when the uneven rocks dug into her feet. She made it to the edge of the pool and stopped. Stuart was treading water in front of the waterfall's spray. It was a gorgeous picture with the water cascading down mossy rocks framed by pine trees and the focal point for her—the most handsome man she'd ever glimpsed treading water.

His eyes were focused on her and she flushed with warmth. He was interested. She knew it. His gaze said everything. Boldly she walked into the water, holding his gaze no matter how many pesky, uneven rocks she stepped on. He didn't move, simply treaded water and watched her come. When the water was waist deep, she dove under. She surfaced and swam the short distance to the waterfall, and Stuart. The waterfall pounded behind him, splashing the back of his head and shoulders. He simply stared at her.

She splashed more water at him and tried for a flirtatious smile. "You okay? Have you never seen a girl in a swimsuit before?"

Stuart simply wiped the water from his face, gave her a longing look, and swam around her.

Belle's stomach dropped with disappointment and her heart ached. He wasn't interested in her. She was more hurt than embarrassed, though the embarrassment would come soon.

He swam the short distance to where he could touch, ducked his head under the water and scrubbed at his hair and then surfaced, pushing the hair back from his face. He seemed to sparkle in the evening air as his chest and shoulders came out of the water. He started toward the edge, ignoring her.

"What are you doing?" she yelled at his back, suddenly fed up with him. He couldn't even be civil with her now? "Why'd you come on this trip if you can't stand to even be around me?"

Stuart whirled, waist deep in the water. He pinned her with a look that filled her with excitement and apprehension. "What am I doing?" he asked, his voice tinged with disbelief and anger. "I'm trying to be the bigger person here, stay away from the princess that I have no right even looking at, and not intrude on Treck's ... property."

"Property?" That ticked her off. She swam quickly toward him and stopped when the water reached her chest and she could touch. "I'm nobody's 'property,' you jerk." Why didn't he have the right to even look at her?

Stuart rolled his eyes, scooped up a handful of water, and splashed it on his face. "I apologize, princess. His territory, his girlfriend. Look ..." He raised his hand, and she was temporarily distracted by the muscles flexing in his arm and shoulder. "You and Treck have a history. I get it. It's fine. He's a great guy and a better fit for your station in life. I don't want to mess anything up for you and him."

Belle studied him. The cold water had been refreshing, but now it was chilling her. "What if Treck isn't the one I want?"

Stuart's gaze flickered with a fire that made her forget the cold water, but just as quickly it cooled as if he'd commanded himself not to be interested in her. "That'd be stupid of you. Treck is a stand-up guy."

She slowly moved closer to him. He didn't look away.

He thought she wanted Treck. After she set him straight, would they kiss the night away? Her body felt like it was sizzling and popping just envisioning that.

“What if you're the one I want?” she said just loud enough for him to hear.

He pulled in a quick breath. From the searing look in his eyes, she was certain she had him. He'd wrap her up tight and he'd give her a better and more thorough kiss than she'd dreamt of.

Instead of fulfilling her dreams, he edged away from her, shaking his head. “Look,” he ground out. “You have no idea how appealing you are to me, but I am trying *not* to compete with Treck. For once in my life, I'm trying to be level-headed and not just win the prize at all costs.”

Belle studied him, even more confused. So he was attracted to her, but he was trying not to “win” her? She wasn't sure if she should be offended or flattered.

“You fought for Addie,” she said quietly.

“Exactly. That's what I do. I fight. I compete. I have to win.”

“But you don't want to fight for me?” It wasn't like her to sound like a jealous teenager, but she had to get the truth straight from him.

He studied her and his voice and shoulders dropped. “Of course I do, Belle. But you're far too pure and perfect and beautiful. I've never been drawn to any woman like I am to you ...”

Belle's heart fluttered in her chest. She was having a hard time catching a full breath. He was interested in her. This incredible, appealing, strong, perfect man was interested in her.

She pushed through the water separating them and wrapped her arms around his neck. Stuart's breath shortened

and his strong chest heaved with emotion, but he didn't wrap her up tight.

"Belle, you don't understand," he rushed out. "I'm trying to be the bigger person because I'm not the right fit for you. Stick with a good, kind man like Treck. I could never be worthy of you and—"

She pressed her lips to his, cutting off his crazy train of thought. For a brief moment it was all her, kissing him fervently, pulling herself close to his chest, and praying that he'd return the kiss.

Then Stuart wrapped his palms around her shoulders and gently tugged her away from him. Belle felt the rejection clear through. "Belle," he said in a low, husky tone. "Ah, Belle."

She feared he'd push her away completely, but he looked over her face and then ground out, "Hooah," and his expression grew fierce. He ran his hands around to her upper back, pulled her in tight, and kissed her.

The kiss was insane. She felt like she was floating. She was flushed with heat and happiness, and she had no idea the pleasure receptors in her mouth could function at that high of a level.

He pulled back slightly, trailed his wet fingertips over her shoulders and up to her face, making her tingle all over. He framed her jawline gently with his large palms. He gave her a devil-may-care grin and murmured, "Ah, Belle. I'm afraid this is a horrifically bad idea."

She tossed her long hair back over her shoulder and ran her fingers through his wet hair, making him groan. "Try not kissing me again and I'll show you what a horrifically bad idea means."

He chuckled. "At your humble service, princess."

She laughed and pressed her lips to his. He responded, lifting her off her feet and against him, her body weightless in his arms. He gently deepened the kiss and she was flying. She'd kissed her share of boys, but nothing was like kissing this man, the right man for her. She had visions of kissing for

hours and then talking through the night. She could hardly wait to hear all about him; his past, his family, his future plans, what made him tick. Then she forgot all of that and simply enjoyed the incredible kiss and being surrounded by his muscular body.

Suddenly Stuart yanked her away from him and tugged her behind him in the water, turning to look out at the trees.

“What are you doing?” she cried out, bereft of his lips and ready to smack him, and then kiss him again.

“Show yourselves,” he demanded loudly.

Shadows moved from behind the trees. Belle cried out in horror as she counted eight men strutting toward the water’s edge. The night had darkened around them as she and Stuart had kissed, but she could easily see the hard set to these men’s jawlines and their clenched fists as she clung to Stuart’s back and peeked over his shoulder.

“What do you want?” Stuart asked. He sounded strong, brave, and in charge of the situation. He couldn’t fight eight men. Could he? Yet she knew how indomitable his spirit was. He’d protect her, no matter the cost, and she loved him for it.

She tried to reassure herself that maybe these men simply wanted medical care. As they grew closer, and she could see the anger in their dark eyes, she knew they wanted more than that. Some of them might need medical care before Stuart was done with them, but what if they hurt him?

She recognized the man who’d brought them dinner on the edge of the group and gave him a glare. He wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“You have no right to be seducing one of *our* princesses,” one of the men said. “What do we want? We want to rip you apart and send you back to America in a body bag. Encourage the tourists to find another vacation spot.” He gave a leering smile.

Horror raced through Belle. She wanted to defend Stuart, but before she could open her mouth, she was surprised by a deep, throaty chuckle. The laugh came from Stuart. “Sounds

fun,” he said evenly. “Do you want to fight me alone or eight on one?”

Sounds fun? He was insane, but so brave and impressive she couldn't help but fall harder for him.

“We'll see how the fight goes,” the man said, cracking a sadistic smile and his knuckles.

“Fine by me. As long as you swear not to touch or hurt the princess.”

Belle wasn't worried about herself, but she was terrified for Stuart. She'd seen him in the sword fights at the tournament and he was as tough as anyone, but eight on one filled her with trepidation.

The men exchanged glances and then nodded. “None of us will hurt the princess.”

“Or touch her,” Stuart reiterated.

Another lengthy pause came. Belle clung to Stuart's strength, wishing these jerks would leave them alone. What would these men do to him and why was he so concerned that they not touch her? She didn't want any of them to touch her, but they knew she was a princess and they wouldn't do anything inappropriate. Right?

“We won't touch her,” the guy who'd brought them dinner said. “Unless she touches us first.”

Belle's stomach rolled. She wouldn't be touching any of them.

“I assume you're honorable enough to stand by your word,” Stuart said evenly.

“Of course we are,” one of the men growled.

“All right.” Stuart turned his head and said quietly to her, “As soon as I start fighting, slip away and lock yourself in the Humvee. I'll come for you.” He gave her a brief squeeze, and then released her and started pushing through the water toward the men.

Belle couldn't move. He was impressive, fearless, a humble hero. He was taking care of her as if he was going to work; his only thought seemed to be keeping her safe.

She couldn't catch a breath as she watched his muscular body rise out of the water until he stood in front of the men closest to him. "Hooah," he growled, and then he slammed his fist into the man's temple. The man flew back, hit the ground, and didn't so much as twitch.

There was a stunned silence before the rest of the men howled, screamed, and snarled like a pack of angry wolves. As one, they all dove at Stuart.

"No!" Belle screamed. She had no idea what to do, how to help, but one thing was certain. She wasn't sitting by like a helpless princess or slithering away to hide in the Humvee while they ripped apart the man she was falling for.

## Chapter Eleven



Belle pushed through the water toward the battle. Terror filled her. They were going to hurt, possibly kill him. Help was too far away to even think of calling for it. What could she do?

“Stop!” she yelled. “Please stop! He’s done nothing but try to help your people and protect me.”

They all ignored her as if she hadn’t spoken.

She’d learned from her parents not to put herself above the people of Magna but the only idea she had was to command, “In the name of the crown of Magna, I command you to stop!”

A few of the men paused and looked round at her but then just as quickly they commenced trying to get a piece of Stuart.

She could hardly see Stuart’s muscular frame, but what she could see of him was unfathomable. He wasn’t being thrashed by these bullies. He was fighting. Fighting with no chance of winning and every chance of being defeated. The fact that he was doing it for her made her love him more, but also filled her with horror. She couldn’t let him sacrifice himself for her.

Seven men on one and she could still see Stuart’s arms and legs landing punches and kicks. With two men on top of him, he swept one man’s legs out from under him. The guy hit the ground hard. That freed up an arm and without hesitating, he used it to grab one of the men on top of him around the neck and slammed him into a nearby tree.

That gave her an idea how she might be able to help. Alaric had taught her that with the right pressure on their neck she could take down a person who might be bigger and



stronger than her. For a split second she hesitated, remembering the first rule of medicine she had learned from Grace—do no harm. But that was why Alaric had taught her this move. Her victim would wake up after a minute, confused and with a raging headache, but with no permanent damage.

The man nearest her kicked Stuart in the back, a total cheap shot. If it hadn't been an easy decision before, it was now. She launched herself onto that same man's back, wrapped her elbow tightly around his neck and secured it with her other arm, holding on for dear life as if she'd just mounted the wildest stallion in all of Magna's stables.

The man squeaked out a protest and started tugging, clawing, and hitting at her arms. It hurt—it hurt worse than anything she'd felt before—but she didn't care. She was hanging on until he passed out and then she'd move on to the next one. Stuart was battling and evening up this fight. She'd help however she could to keep them from killing, or at best maiming, Stuart.

The man next to the one she was choking turned to see what had happened to his comrade and then he hollered, "The princess!"

Several of the men stopped trying to beat up Stuart and turned to look at her. The man whose back she was on flailed and hit at her, but his movements were slowing as he choked and feebly gasped for air.

With fewer opponents, Stuart threw one man into the water and thumped another's head into the ground. He glanced up as if uncertain why he was only fighting three instead of seven and then he saw her.

"Belle!" Her name came out as an unearthly roar of protectiveness and desire, and she had never been so in love in her life. Heaven help the person who came between them. Stuart would dismember them.

Stuart threw two men out of his way and stormed toward her, dragging two dissenters with him as if they were stubborn children who wouldn't let go. Before he could reach her, the

man she was holding onto sank to his knees, gasping in vain for air. Belle felt renewed strength and squeezed tighter.

Stuart paused, staring at her as if seeing her in a completely different light. “Belle?”

“Alaric taught me,” she said, putting extra sweetness into her tone, as if Alaric had taught her how to make a berry tart.

Stuart grunted out a surprised laugh. “You are incredible,” he said, his dark gaze almost worshipful.

Belle flushed with happiness, despite the awful situation they were still in and despite the fact that she’d never done anything violent in her life and she was now trying to make a man pass out. She prayed that what Alaric had said about no permanent damage was accurate.

“You’re more incredible,” she told him.

The men around them were all staring as if not sure how to proceed. The guy she was choking went limp and face planted into the grass. Belle released her chokehold, scrambled to her feet, and put one hand on her hip, tossing her hair. “Who wants to go next?” She was out of breath, but full of fire.

Two of the men immediately put their hands up and backed away. “I’m not touching the princess.”

One large man stepped forward with a leering look in her eyes. “I’ll have a go, princess.”

“Oh no you won’t,” Stuart snarled. He turned to the man and kicked him hard in the side. The man doubled over, and it appeared Stuart was expecting it because he was already following it up with an uppercut to the man’s dipping head.

The dissenter was knocked back a couple steps, but he shook his vision clear and came at Stuart. As they battled, the rest of the men stepped back, watching her warily as if afraid she was going to choke them if they joined the fray. She counted three men down on the ground and one crawling out of the water. Would these men give Stuart a fair fight now? She felt certain he could best any man one on one, as evidenced by how he was pummeling the large man he was currently fighting. She was overwhelmed with her love for

him, the humble hero who didn't want any credit but would protect her at all costs. It didn't hurt that he looked like a superhero warrior who made her heart race.

The large man Stuart was fighting stepped back several steps and Belle's heart leapt with hope. Was he giving up? Would they leave them alone and she could doctor up Stuart's cuts and kiss him better then hold him and talk to him all night long?

The man whipped a gun out of the back of his pants and pointed it right at Stuart's chest.

Belle's stomach plunged. "No!"

Stuart didn't advance on him, but he didn't look afraid. He was poised to fight as if a deadly weapon wasn't feet away and ready to end his life.

"You're an impressive fighter," the man acknowledged. "I hate to kill you, but we'll get you and the rest of the filthy tourists to leave our island one way or another."

A muscle worked in Stuart's jaw as he studied the man. Would he rush him? Did he think he could survive a bullet from two feet away? What could Belle do to protect him when he was in mortal danger?

"No," she begged. "Please!"

The man glanced at her. "I'll deal with you later, princess," he said with a sneer.

Stuart flew across the space separating them, knocking the man off his feet. Belle screamed in horror, waiting for the gun to go off and end Stuart's life.

Stuart flipped the man over and ripped the gun from his hand, tossing it into the trees.

Belle's heart leapt. Was he going to survive? Yet what other weapons were these men hiding? They were intent on killing Stuart at any cost.

"What is going on here?" a loud voice hollered. A man ran into the clearing. A tall man with long, dark hair and no shirt

on. He was as well built as Stuart, Alaric, or Kingston. Belle felt a dart of fear.

Even more unnerving than this man's commanding and overwhelming presence was how quickly she recognized him. Samson. He used to be good friends with her brother Bodi and he had kidnapped Julia, Bodi's fiancée. But at that time, he'd also revealed his father had been killed by a tourist years ago, talked things through with her brothers and her father, the king, and made a promise that the dissenters would allow the outsiders to come visit, and not attack them.

The men backed away, looking out at the trees or holding up their hands as if they were innocent. Stuart brought his elbow down on the man he was fighting, and he went limp. Then Stuart leapt to his feet to face the newcomer, holding his clenched fists up. His biceps and shoulders bulged. He looked like a war machine.

"Who are you?" Samson demanded.

"I'm Stuart Falslev, former Army Ranger with the U.S. military. I'm here with Princess Belle to administer medical care to your people, and this is the thanks we get." He wiped some blood from his chin with his knuckle as if to prove his point.

Belle hadn't realized he was bleeding. What other injuries was he currently ignoring? A man of Samson's size and demeanor would be a challenge even at full strength, and Stuart had already taken more than any one man should be able to.

"Princess Belle." Samson shocked her when he turned to her and bowed slightly. "I apologize. I had no idea. I gave your brothers and father my word."

"Yes, you did." She raised her chin haughtily, though relief rushed through her. Stuart was suddenly not at death's door. For the moment. She prayed Samson's humility would last and he'd get these awful men away from them so she could nurse and hold Stuart tight. "Is this how your people treat those trying to help them?"

Samson was tough and almost as competitive and headstrong as Stuart, but he looked chagrined. “No. This will never happen again. My apologies. Please don’t stop offering the medical care. Many of our people need it and refuse to make the trek into town.” He looked his men over, grunted in disgust, and then growled. “Move!”

They moved. The ones that were still healthy paired up and lifted or dragged the others, three of them having to get together to move the gun-toter Stuart had just downed. It took a few slaps to the face to wake up Belle’s victim, but he came to and hurried away with the rest of them and disappeared into the dark forest.

Samson stayed. He held up his hands. “I had no idea. Please tell Prince Bodi and the rest of your family this was not me.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I will, and we won’t stop medical care.” She didn’t know if that was a promise she could make. After what had happened tonight, Alaric and Kingston may come hunt these men down and would probably never allow her to come back here. Even if she had to sneak up here on her own, she wouldn’t let people in need suffer because of the bigotry of a few men.

“Thank you.” Samson’s gaze swung to Stuart. “You’re the outsider who tracked Kelvin so easily and then knocked him down for scaring Princess Adelaide.”

“I am.”

“He might be behind this.” Samson rubbed at his square jawline. “But he wasn’t here tonight, was he?”

“I didn’t see him.”

“I’ll get to the bottom of it. Those involved will be severely reprimanded. Do either of you need anything?”

Stuart looked to Belle. She only needed his arms around her. “No,” she said to Samson.

Samson gave them a jerky chin lift and strode away.

Stuart turned to Belle as Samson disappeared. She whimpered in relief and ran at him. Stuart caught her, holding her against him and melting all her fears away. He bent his head and kissed her. It was the kiss of a warrior claiming his princess, but there was also respect and a deep love pouring from him that had her lit up despite the previous fear and the dark night and forest around them that now felt spooky and unsettling. Anything outside of Stuart's arms wasn't safe.

Stuart pulled back from the kiss, swept her legs off the ground, and cradled her against his chest. "Come on," he whispered. "Let's get you somewhere safe."

"I have to take care of you first," she said, looking at the blood trickling down from his eyebrow.

He shook his head. "I'm fine."

He wasn't fine. "Is your shoulder okay?"

"It held up."

He carried her to the tent and let her legs slide to the ground. "Change quickly. I'll watch for them."

She let his injuries go, for the moment. "You think they'd come back after Samson telling them to go?"

He lifted his broad shoulders. "They seem like a lawless people. If they respect Samson enough to stay away, why did they show up tonight? There was already an agreement in place."

He was right. The dissenters had their own laws and didn't want anyone telling them what to do. They might come back just to spite Samson's authority and show that they ruled themselves. A tremor of fear raced through her, chilling her in her wet swimsuit. She hurried into the tent and changed out of her suit and into a T-shirt and sweatpants with trembling fingers. She hung her suit from a hook and unzipped the tent.

Stuart nodded to her. She wanted him to hold her close, give her a reassuring smile, but he simply said, "Can you grab your bedding?"

“Okay.” She bent down and scooped up the blankets and pillow, leaving the pad. He had his bedding and his bag in one hand. He reached his other hand around her back and ushered her toward the Humvee.

“Do I need my bag?”

“Do you have weapons in there?”

“No.” Weapons? Yikes.

“I don’t think they’ll mess with it, then.”

“Let me grab some supplies for your injuries.”

He scoffed but she gave him a steely look and he responded with a slight smile. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t you give me that.” She darted to the medical supplies and grabbed a small kit that would have steri-strips, alcohol wipes, medical tape, gauze pads, and bandages. Hopefully he hadn’t broken a rib or had other internal injuries she wouldn’t be able to treat. They couldn’t drive down the mountain tonight. It was treacherous in the daylight and even more deadly at night.

He directed her toward the backseat of the Humvee. There was a flat, carpeted spot between the two back seats that extended into the cargo space. Stuart helped her spread the blankets and pillows out and then instructed her, “Lay down there.”

“Not until I doctor you up.”

He arched a brow and lifted his shoulders slightly, splaying his hands. He was still only in the shorts he’d been swimming in, and he cut a fine and tough image. “As you can see, nobody can hurt me.”

She was impressed by him, but something about his bravado didn’t sit right with her. Was he too tough to feel? Too tough to let her in? They’d shared those incredible kisses, and when she’d choked that man out he’d told her she was incredible. Was he simply focused on keeping her safe now or was he going to distance himself from her?

She set the medical kit on the seat, opened it, and pulled out an alcohol wipe, ripping it open. “Hold still and let me look you over.”

“Belle, we don’t have time—”

“Don’t challenge me right now,” she said in the fiercest tone she’d ever used in her life.

He gave a surprised chuckle and then nodded slightly. “Make it quick, please.”

She wiped the blood off his forehead and his chin. His chin would be okay, but his forehead needed a steri-strip if not stitches. She pulled it tight and put the steri-strip on. He didn’t so much as flinch. As soon as she finished, she looked him over and ran her hands over his ribs, feeling for protrusions. He caught her hands in his and said gruffly, “Belle, I’m fine. I promise nothing is broken. Please get in and get some rest. I’ll sit up front and keep watch through the night.”

“No.” She grabbed his arm and held on like it was that guy’s neck she choked out earlier. “Please stay back here with me and hold me.” She’d gone from the in-charge medical person to the needy girlfriend quick, and she didn’t even care. They’d been through something horrific, and she wasn’t letting him out of her sight.

Stuart’s eyes widened and a depth and warmth filled them that poured into her. He looked her over and then swallowed hard. “I’m in a lot of danger with you, Belle.”

“Danger?” She released his arm and looked over her shoulder into the trees. “What does that mean?”

“Danger of falling in love with you.”

She tilted her chin imperiously even as happiness filled her. “And why would that be bad?”

He chuckled and kissed her softly. “Loads of reasons that I don’t want to talk about right now.”

She studied him, hating that answer. Stuart looked like this tough, kick-butt, appealing man, and he was, but in a romantic



relationship it seemed he was more a child terrified of getting his shots. Had she just compared herself to getting shots?

“Just hold me,” she murmured, giving him what she hoped was an irresistible look. “We’ll talk some other time.”

His jaw slackened. He rubbed at it and then nodded. “Okay.”

He ushered her into the back of the Humvee and climbed in after her, scrambling up front to lock the doors before returning, opening his bag on the seat next to him and pulling out a gun and a knife, checking the chamber to make sure there were bullets. That gun made this all too real, but she wasn’t afraid with Stuart here.

Belle rested on her side, peering through the near darkness as he finished. He finally eased down next to her, his muscular frame filling the space and his manly scent prickling her senses.

He laid down close to her but didn’t reach for her. His arm brushed hers and he said quietly, “I’m not sure how to ... hold you.”

“What?” She leaned up on her elbow and peered down at him. “Don’t act like some inexperienced teenager. I’m sure you’ve dated and kissed hundreds of women.”

His voice was husky as he said, “I’ve kissed my share of women, but I’ve never held a perfect, impressive, and beautiful princess through the night. I want to make you feel safe and protected while maintaining your virtue and innocence. I need some help with that.”

Belle’s throat was dry, and her pulse raced. She loved his sweet words and his humility to ask for help and to want to keep her safe every which way.

She gave him a tremulous smile. The smile he gave her back was nothing like the smirk she associated with him. It was humble and full of concern for her. Belle eased down against his side and instructed, “Wrap your arm around me.”

“Gladly.”

His deep voice shot tremors through her, but it had nothing on how she felt as he tucked her against him, his muscled arm surrounding her back and his palm and fingers framing her waist. She rested her head on his chest and her hand on his abdomen. He pulled in a quick breath.

“You are hurt.” She put her palm flat to feel for internal injuries.

“No,” he said in a gruff, almost unrecognizable voice. “Just ... give me a minute.”

Belle wanted to tease him. The big tough military man who couldn't handle cuddling a princess close seemed to be an oxymoron, but this wasn't a time to tease.

He finally relaxed against her, and she melted into him. The silence was warm and peaceful between them. She thought maybe he'd drifted off, but then he said, “You were incredible out there, Belle. I never imagined I'd see my sweet princess choke a guy out.”

Belle smiled, loving that he'd called her *his* sweet princess. “My brothers and cousins won't believe it either. When we were children, Darian, Leia, and Addie would annoy and rile everybody up and Constance and I would start crying when they fought. I think they learned not to fight around us.”

His lips brushed her forehead. “Your light and goodness radiate from you. It reminds me of my sister.”

She wanted to jerk her face up and look into his eyes, but she sensed the moment he mentioned his sister that he was going to clam up if she made any sudden movements. “What was her name?”

“Angela.” He wrapped his other arm around her as well and she loved being cocooned in his arms.

“I'm sure she and your mom are watching down on you from heaven and are proud of the man you've become.”

Stuart's body stiffened, and his grip on her loosened. Belle was terrified he would pull away from her, but he didn't. Instead, he said gruffly, “Do you really believe there's a heaven?”

It was easy to guess he wasn't a believer, but she refused to lie, especially about something so important. "I know there is. I've felt my Heavenly Father's presence and influence in my life and had some incredible experiences with each of my grandparents from the other side as well."

Stuart's body was almost rock hard against her now. He didn't say anything, and she feared he was going to shove her away, tell her off, or both. Finally, he said, "So is my dad in heaven too?"

He'd lost his entire family? That was heartbreaking. She wanted to tell him yes, his dad was in heaven, but she had a sudden impression to tread lightly. Something was off with his dad and him.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I'm not the judge. I do believe our Father above is more merciful than any of us can imagine."

Stuart grunted. She was surprised he was still holding her because the vehicle felt almost chilly. She suspected he was struggling with a dark demon she couldn't even comprehend. She prayed hard for help, understanding, and a way to let Stuart see how much he was loved from above.

"Mercy." Stuart's voice was hard. "I've never been a big fan."

Belle's insides felt cold. She knew this tough, incredible man had world experience she could never relate to, but she hadn't guessed he was so hardened inside. "Why not?"

"If you'd been around as many evil, depraved people as I have, you wouldn't want them to get any form of mercy. Besides, nobody's ever shown me mercy."

Belle couldn't even speak through her tight throat. What to say to help him? She was falling in love with him, but maybe that was an insane leap to take with a man who had been beaten down by the world. He had reacted by fighting, conquering, and succeeding at any cost. She remembered him jumping off his horse and knocking Malik off of his because Stuart knew he couldn't best Malik in the joust. Winning was

all important to him, and maybe that was because he hadn't felt mercy and love in his life so he had to have something to hold on to? She didn't know, and she really wanted to talk it out. Could she be the one to help him feel light and love from above? She had a lot of doubt that anyone could touch his heart.

Stuart suddenly brushed his lips across her forehead and murmured, "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything. You're so pure and good. I don't need to tarnish you with my sad past or my hardened view of life. Get some rest."

Get some rest? Did he honestly think she would, or even could, sleep after him revealing he'd had some horrific loss of his mom, sister, and dad? There was something dark and cold about him. Had it started with his relationship with his dad? He didn't seem to have even a particle of hope in the Savior's redeeming power. What to say? How to help?

Before she could offer to pray for him, tell him she was falling in love with him, beg him to tell her about his past so she could listen and somehow soothe him, or any of dozens of things she needed to do to heal this amazing man, he released his grip on her, rolled away, and murmured, "Goodnight, Belle."

Belle lay on her side, facing his back, and stared a hole between his shoulder blades. Goodnight? Really? He was honestly going to fall asleep and not talk this out, not let her help him? Was he truly so hardened that he wouldn't even give her a chance, or was he still protecting her? From his past and his hardened heart?

She was so confused that she simply lay there. She didn't know how much time had passed, but his breathing evened out and his shoulders seemed to soften. He'd truly fallen asleep. She wanted to scream and hit him. No, she wanted to talk softly and kiss him. Maybe all of the above.

She rolled away from him, and it hurt to do it. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed aloud, "Thank you for protecting us tonight. Please give us strength and peace, Lord above. I love thee and I know thou art there for me, and for

Stuart. Please bless his hurting heart. Please help him to see thy love, through me if it be thy will. Amen.”

She could've sworn she heard a grunt from behind her, but maybe she imagined it. When she looked his way, he was breathing evenly and hadn't moved. The prayer helped her, and she settled down and felt some peace wash over her. Tomorrow would be another busy day, but all she really cared about was helping Stuart. Was there even a hope he'd soften? For her? For heaven above? Sadly, she doubted it.

## Chapter Twelve



Stuart hardly slept, tortured by how close Belle was yet so far out of his reach. He needed to keep his eyes open to watch for the dissenters if they returned, but as soon as he was certain Belle was asleep, he'd rolled over and mostly studied her beautiful face. It took all of his strength not to gather her close and take the peace and warmth she offered so sweetly to him.

Their conversation last night had pricked at his hardened conscience and pushed far past his emotional safety nets. He'd shut the discussion down and thought he'd done a pretty good job of convincing her he was asleep. When she'd prayed for him, not only for his "hurting heart" but for him to feel God's love, he'd almost rolled over, yanked her close, and cried all over the angelic sweetheart, begged her to share her love and a Father above's love with him.

He was stronger and smarter than to believe any of that was possible. What was she doing to him?

The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her, but Belle was lightyears out of his league and the most merciful thing he could do was get through today and then stay far away from her when they got back to the castle. Maybe it was time for him to leave Magna. What would Wes do? They'd been inseparable for years, but Wes was a grown man and could make his own decisions.

Stuart had foolishly imagined he could find peace and happiness on this idyllic island, but he'd gone too far now with Belle's heart. He would only hurt her if he stayed. Maybe he could talk to Treck about making his move on Stuart's dream

woman. He could encourage the man, tell him how Belle had told Stuart she'd always thought she and Treck would be together.

No matter how much it would rip Stuart apart, Belle and Treck could be happy. They were both good people. Great people. They deserved to be together and to be happy. If Belle could fall for Treck then she wouldn't be hurt over the fact that Stuart could never become involved with her. It was laughable to even think about, and her brothers would do anything but laugh if they found out he'd trifled with her heart. He hadn't meant to. She was so irresistible and perfect and he was an idiot and a jerk to let his guard down and kiss her like he had. In his defense, she'd kissed him first in the pool, and then after she'd literally choked a man out, she'd run to Stuart's arms. How was Stuart supposed to resist such incredible perfection?

Finally, the sky lightened outside. He could hear Belle's even breathing far too close to him. He stared openly at her. Her smooth, brown skin, thick dark lashes, and full, gorgeous mouth were appealing for sure, but it was the goodness and sweetness that oozed from her that he found completely irresistible.

He couldn't do this. Last night had been hard enough and all his supposed self-control was disappearing. As stealthily as he could, he slid the door open and eased his way out, softly closing it behind him. He looked back through the window and Belle's eyes blinked open. She met his gaze. As usual, her deep-brown eyes were guileless and full of acceptance, warmth, and purity. If there was a God above, he'd obviously created this perfect creature for a reason, and anybody with a rational brain knew it was *not* to fall for someone as broken as Stuart.

He pivoted away and ran for the waterfall pool, rocks poking into his feet and the cool morning air brushing against his cheeks. He hit the water and took three long strides before doing a shallow dive. Swimming quickly to the waterfall, he went underneath and tried to let the force of the pounding water hammer some sense into his head. He just had to get through today and get back to Magna. Wes was there. Wes had

been there for him since basic training. His friend would know how to advise him. He hoped he hadn't messed up Wes's dream of staying here on Magna. Wes could stay if he had to go. It would be almost as hard to say goodbye to his close friend as it would to never touch Belle again.

He surfaced and swam quick, weird laps around the small pool. He needed to work out, to expend some energy. Fighting last night had helped a little bit and he felt some kinks, pain, and bruises forming from the battle. But kissing Belle took precedence over everything that had happened. All he wanted was to experience that all over again.

He sensed movement and went upright to tread water. Some small children and teenagers were in the clearing by the medical tent. What were they doing? Did the people expect Belle to take care of them today after the way their men came after them last night? Maybe they were all so disconnected up here that they didn't even know what had happened.

The door to the Humvee popped open and Belle slid out. Securing her hair out of her face, she smiled at the children and hurried toward them.

Stuart swam to the edge of the pool and pushed out of the water. Belle was leaning down, listening to a small boy chatter. Her gaze slid to Stuart and she gave him a warm, inviting, incredible smile before refocusing on the boy. He closed his eyes and tried to ground himself. How was he going to resist her?

Determination filled him. He would because it was best for her. He hurried to the Humvee, dug in his bag, pulled on a shirt, his socks and shoes, shoved a gun in the back of his waistband and a knife in his pocket, and then rushed to Belle's side. It was still just children surrounding her.

"Excuse us for a moment, please," he said to the little people. They all looked at him with wide eyes, as if he were scary or something. Please. Their fathers were probably the jerks who tried to take him eight-on-one last night. And might have succeeded if this beauty hadn't executed a perfect rear choke.



He wanted to touch her, but he simply leaned close and said, “Belle, are you planning on ... working here today?”

She tilted her chin up, giving him a challenging look instead of the warm one he’d seen earlier. “I’m not *planning on* anything; I’m doing it. I’m here for a job and I will accomplish it. Last night can’t change that.”

For one awful moment, he thought she meant the fact that he’d kissed her last night, but then he realized she meant the men coming after them. More admiration filled him. He adored her. Sadly, he could never tell her that.

“All right,” he agreed with a nod. “I’ll be right here helping you, listening to people mutter ‘outsider’ and trying to make children smile.”

Her gaze got soft and the love that beamed from her eyes made him forget the entire world. He had to pull her close and kiss her long and thoroughly.

A small child tugged at her hand and Belle bent down to chat with him. They were forced to pull apart and get to work. It was for the best. More kissing would only hurt Belle in the long run. Stuart was so used to pain that he didn’t even worry about how it would affect him, but he couldn’t be selfish and try to make her fall for someone messed up like him.

Almost twelve hours later, the sun was slanting toward the trees, someone had brought them snacks, water, juice, and then wrapped ham sandwiches and fruit for lunch. Finally, the people waiting dwindled to only a few.

“We’d better load up and get to Treck if we want to get off this mountain before dark,” Stuart told Belle.

She nodded and he saw wariness in her eyes. Despite how brave she’d been today, helping these people who’d turned on them last night and might join forces and do the same thing today, she was ready to be home and safe. Was she ready to be away from him? He should hope for that, but he couldn’t make himself do it. Treck was the answer. She could love Treck and then maybe Stuart could stay in this tranquil paradise, away from the memories of his childhood. Yet if he stayed, he’d

inevitably see Treck and Belle together. His gut and fists tightened at the same time. This was his choice. It was still excruciating.

“We have to head out,” Belle called to the few people remaining. “But we’ll be back the same time next month. Is there anything else you need before we go?”

An older couple asked Belle for some medicine which she handed over, then they waved goodbye and walked off together. A haggard-looking mom brought her teenage boy closer, shoving him at Belle. “Go on, show her.”

“Would you like to go in the tent?” Belle asked pleasantly, radiating her unique and appealing warmth. The light Stuart wished he could bask in.

The young man shook his head vehemently.

His mom groaned. “Then stop complaining to me about it.”

The boy looked over at Stuart. “Can I show you?”

Stuart lifted his hands. “I’m not medical, I’m military.”

“But you’re a guy.” The kid’s dark eyes got to him.

Stuart gestured with his head to the tent. The kid scurried over there and Stuart followed. He caught an approving look from Belle and wished every look she gave him didn’t affect him so strongly.

As soon as he got into the makeshift tent, the boy turned and pulled down his pants enough for Stuart to see a reddened rash on his backside. Stuart’s eyebrows lifted, but he knew exactly what to tell him. “You’re getting older, and when your hormones kick in, you get sweatier ... down there. I’ve got a stick antiperspirant I can give you and some powder. In the morning, take a shower, get all the way dry, and rub the stick thing under your armpits and on your ... rear until this clears up. At night, get dry and put the powder on before you sleep.”

The boy nodded to everything he said, “Thanks. I didn’t want to show that hot princess my butt.”

Stuart laughed. “Understood.” The world over, boys didn’t change. Well some might want to show the “hot princess” their rear, but they wouldn’t want to be embarrassed by a rash. “Just a second; I’ll get the stuff.” He hurried out of the tent and to his bag in the Humvee, pulling out his travel antiperspirant and his travel-sized Gold-bond powder. In the middle east, that stuff had been essential.

He took the two back to the boy.

“Thank you.” The kid shook his hand like a man, then spun and took off.

“Thank you,” the mom repeated, then turned and followed her son into the trees.

Stuart smiled to himself as he started packing up supplies. He didn’t feel like an outsider at the moment. He felt Belle’s gaze on him and darted his eyes to look at her. She was so beautiful it hurt to look at her, especially knowing he could never have her in his life.

“I can’t begin to thank you for helping so many, especially after their group tried to kill you.”

He shrugged it off. “No worries.”

Belle didn’t seem to like that response, but he focused on taking down and storing the tent. He wished he could extend their time together, maybe steal one more kiss to last him for a lifetime, but that wouldn’t be fair to her. She worked by his side, saying nothing, which surprised him. Usually the women he kissed and dumped had something angry to say to him. Did Belle realize he was dumping her? It wasn’t like they’d ever really been together. Some unreal kisses didn’t make a relationship. And Belle was probably too kind to get upset at him, even if he did deserve it.

They loaded everything in the cargo hold and then he got her door. Belle didn’t climb in, though. She turned to him and said, “Thank you again ... for everything.”

Stuart was rattled. For the kissing? For fighting to protect her? For helping her do her medical care? For loving her even though he couldn’t? He simply nodded and gestured to the

seat. “We need to get to Treck and get off the mountain before the sun goes down.”

She pursed her lips and considered him but instead of telling him he was a jerk, which he was, she nodded and climbed in. Stuart shut the door with shaky hands and hurried around to the driver’s seat. If he could somehow keep her from a serious conversation until they got to Treck, he’d be home free, in sight of the miserable life he had in store for himself.

He climbed in, started the vehicle, and backed out. He drove quicker than he should have along the rutted excuse for a road that led through the mountains to the zealots’ village. He kept waiting for Belle to pin him down to a commitment or tell him off for kissing her when it was obvious he wouldn’t commit to her, or something. She said nothing. He didn’t let himself look at her or he might start blubbering, telling her about his sad past, begging her to love him even though he didn’t deserve it. He couldn’t recall being this weak, not since the day he’d seen his mom and sister’s bodies.

He gripped the steering wheel tighter and upped his speed.

The sun was almost gone when the zealot village came into view. “Thank heavens,” he breathed.

Belle glanced sharply at him, but luckily didn’t curse him and dig her fingernails into him. Not that Belle would ever act like that.

Even better news, Treck was waiting outside, hand shielding his eyes from the setting sun as he watched for them. He lit up like a Christmas tree when he saw who it was. Stuart jammed the vehicle into gear and caught a full breath. He might yet escape without hurting Belle worse or admitting what a pathetic lovestruck wimp he was.

Belle’s soft fingers on his arm startled him. He turned to her and immediately regretted it. Her dark eyes were shining brightly, as if she were fighting tears. “Are you shutting me out?”

Stuart could hardly breathe with her touching him and looking at him like that. Her question was frank, and painful.

“It’s for the best,” he managed. “Treck is a great guy.”

Her eyes narrowed and he saw a feistiness in her that only appeared when she was determined to get something. It was the same look from the arena when she had fixed his dislocated shoulder. The look that she’d had as she kept her grip on that man’s neck last night. The look that had made him sit up and finally notice her ... and never want to let her go.

He tried a different tactic to get her to understand. “You’re royalty, Belle. Your father is the king. I’m nothing. Treck is a better fit for you.”

“I don’t care—” she started.

Her door was flung open and Treck stood there, beaming. “I’m a new man.”

Stuart laughed as if this were all fun and games to him. “You look it.” He opened his door and popped out. “You drive home, new man. I’m going to rest in the back.”

He luckily could barely see as Treck pulled Belle out of the Humvee and into his arms. “Did you miss me?” Treck asked.

He didn’t hear Belle’s answer. That was good. All of his resolutions to push them together might’ve gone down the toilet if she said she missed Treck and Stuart rearranged Treck’s teeth for him.

Nessa approached. “Did it go all right?”

Stuart lifted his shoulders. “Some of the dissenter men came after us last night, but it all worked out.”

“Wait. What?” Treck asked, thankfully releasing Belle. Stuart truly wanted these two good people to be happy, but he wasn’t strong enough to watch it and not react violently.

“Load up and we’ll tell you on the way home,” he insisted, meeting Belle’s gaze for a fraction of a second and almost capitulating, shoving Treck into the dirt, and kissing her for hours. “We’re wasting daylight.”

“All right.” Treck came around to the driver’s side. He slapped Stuart on the shoulder. “Thanks for watching out for

her.”

“Sure. No problem.” He couldn’t let himself look at Belle again or he’d crumple into tears, or something otherwise as pathetic. How had he lost his heart to her so easily? How was he going to get it back?

Treck gave him his easy smile and climbed in. “Thanks, Nessa,” he called. “Tell Henry, Joey, and Ally I’ll come see them soon.”

She raised a hand. “Take care.”

“Thanks, Nessa,” Belle said.

“Thank you, Nessa,” Stuart echoed.

“Stay away from the goat milk,” Nessa teased him.

“Don’t worry, I will.”

Stuart saluted her and climbed in the vehicle. Treck’s easy-going, happy presence filled the vehicle and somehow cut through the tension between Stuart and Belle. Treck asked questions and they both talked as they drove down the mountain road. The story about the dissenters shocked Treck, especially the part about Belle doing a choke hold and succeeding at it.

Before the sun set, the ruts turned into a good gravel road that Prince Quinn and Princess Leia had approved to upgrade a few weeks ago.

Stuart didn’t let himself look at Belle and he started getting a little cocky. He could do this. He could stay strong and away from Belle and let these two fall for each other. It was a good plan.

As long as the princess of his every dream didn’t look at him, talk to him, or touch him.

## Chapter Thirteen



Belle had no idea what to think of Stuart's behavior. He'd kissed her and held her and protected her and in her mind he was as smitten with her as she was with him. Then he'd admitted he was shutting her out and he thought she should be with Treck. He was a humble hero who didn't want praise, which she thought was admirable, but he didn't want her and that tore her apart.

When they got back to the castle after dark, Stuart helped unload everything without looking at her or touching her, then he saluted them both, said he'd see them around, and strode away looking glorious and untouchable. Belle had told Treck she was exhausted and of course the kind, easy-going Treck simply escorted her to her suite. He gave her a hug and his easy smile before he left to let her rest.

She'd taken a bath and actually slept, probably because of how poorly she'd slept in the mountains and especially last night after the drama with those men and Stuart's incredible kisses lingering in her mind.

She woke early to a bright, sunny day. They were still at least two months away from rainy season and it was a perfect day for her sister's wedding. Malik and Addie. What an incredible pair those two were. Belle was going to focus on her sister, her family, and not even think about how she longed for Stuart and didn't have any clue how to break through his walls. Would he push her away completely? How would she deal with that?

No. She wouldn't think about Stuart and the drama that surrounded the two of them. Family, Addie, and Malik; those were her focuses today.

They had a great family breakfast, tragically without Stuart showing up. What would she say to him anyway? She'd probably just stare and make them both uncomfortable.

There was a tournament at the stadium just like every Saturday, so maybe that's where Stuart was. With Malik and Addie's wedding, she didn't think many of the men from her family were participating.

She and all the girls gathered around Addie for the rest of the morning and early afternoon. Some ladies from the village came to pamper all of them with pedicures, manicures, facials, makeup, and doing their hair in updos. It was a lot of fun, and she went long moments without Stuart invading her mind. Except when someone asked about her experience the past few days and she couldn't help but include Stuart and his heroism in the retelling. She'd heard how ticked Alaric and Kingston were at the dissenters who had messed with them, but they weren't going to visit them until Monday after the wedding and the Sabbath Day. That was probably for the best to let everyone cool down. She was impressed with their self-control and cool heads. Samson had seemed truly upset and contrite about the situation, and that should help. She hoped.

They'd had a light lunch in her parents' suite earlier and now it was almost time to get dressed for the early evening wedding. Addie had chosen to be married in the gardens rather than the chapel. It was untraditional, but it was her and Malik's choice and the gardens were exquisitely beautiful with flowers abounding.

Belle had always envisioned a large church wedding personally, but if Stuart didn't believe in a higher power, maybe that wouldn't be his choice. Oh, boy. There she went running away with Stuart thoughts again.

She said goodbye to everyone and headed down the hallway to her suite to get dressed and then meet up for the wedding ceremony. Leia followed her and as soon as they



were alone in the hallway, Leia grabbed her hand. “You ended up alone with the hot American? Tell me all about it, and don’t you dare leave out the juicy details.”

Belle bit at her lip. She loved her cousin, but now wasn’t the time. “We’ve only got half an hour until the wedding,” she said, forcing a smile. “I couldn’t possibly tell you all the juicy details before then.”

“Ooh.” Leia grinned. She released Belle’s hand and splayed her own fingers. “Please just this. Did he kiss you?”

Belle exhaled loudly, looked both ways down the hall, and then admitted, “He did.”

Leia screamed, jumped in the air, and grabbed both of her hands. “How was it? Was his kiss as incredible as his smile? I love that smirk of his. So sexy. He is the perfect mix of tough and appealing.”

Belle looked her cousin over. She seemed to think of Stuart as a plaything or a game. “Are you interested in Stuart?”

Leia shrugged. “I’m just playing the field. I think both the Americans are hot. I really like Wes’s red hair and blue eyes, but I’m waiting for that perfect tourist to come sweep me off my feet. Somebody like Axel Dexter. Wasn’t he dreamy?”

Belle nodded. “We’d better get ready. We’ll chat more later.”

“Okay. Loves!” Leia kissed her on her cheek and hurried off.

Belle slunk into her room, fighting a headache building between her eyes. Stuart wasn’t some “hot guy,” and he wasn’t some game to play. She’d fallen in love with him over the past week. Sadly, one day apart and she no longer imagined he returned her intense feelings. Otherwise, how could he walk away so easily?

\* \* \*

Stuart chafed impatiently in his navy blue suit sitting in a middle row by Wes as they waited for the wedding to begin. It was too warm for a suit. He shouldn't have given his medicated talc away to that kid. At least he had more antiperspirant. Since Belle liked the smell and all. He grimaced. He couldn't keep thinking about Belle, but now that she was in his brain he couldn't seem to stop. The battle was going to drive him insane. In the military, they had psychiatric evaluations and help for those dealing with all manner of emotional or mental disorders. Did he dare ask Dr. Grace if they had someone here who could help him before he went crazy?

He shook his head and glanced around. The gardens were gorgeous. Lush greenery and flowers encroached on the wedding party. Twinkling lights were strung everywhere, highlighting the flowers in the evening light and making everything glow. He supposed it was to make the bride glow, but he knew Belle would glow brighter than anyone, and she was only in his imagination at this point.

He always told Wes more than he told anyone else, but he hadn't breathed a word about kissing or falling in love with Belle. Not even to his closest friend. That worried him as much as anything. Why was he hiding it?

When the bridesmaids started parading down the aisle beginning with Constance and Leia, his nerves ramped up. Belle appeared from behind a large flowering tree and Stuart sucked in air between his teeth. Seeing her incomprehensible beauty and not being able to reach out and hold her, tell her how he felt about her, was worse than a knife slicing his abdomen open. He'd healed from the knife wound with only a minimal scar. He wouldn't heal from aching for Belle.

She walked serenely down the aisle, wearing a flowing pale blue dress that set off her dark skin, hair, and eyes and made her look like a floating angel. The pale blue reminded him of her swimsuit color and that reminded him of the kisses they shared in that waterfall pool. He tugged at his collar but couldn't get enough air. People were murmuring about how

gorgeous their sweet Belle was. Stuart completely agreed, except she could never be his.

“You okay, man?” Wes whispered.

“Hot,” he managed back. Oh, shoot. Wes was an observant guy, but was Stuart being that obvious about how off he was feeling? If he shared how much he wanted Belle in his arms and in his life, his friend would be shocked. Would Wes beg him not to pursue the princess and mess up their comfortable status here on Magna? Or would he tell Stuart some garbage about him being worthy of his dream woman and how he should go for it? He wasn’t going to ask and find out.

She walked to the front of the wedding where her brothers and cousins were lined up, the men on the right side of Malik, the women on the left. Stuart made himself drag his gaze from Belle and it landed on Alaric. His friend’s gaze was steely. Had he read through Stuart’s report of what had happened and the alone time Stuart had with Belle and knew how enamored he was with her? Stuart would be the first to admit he wasn’t worthy of her. He needed to reassure Alaric he wouldn’t pursue her—but wait, wouldn’t that reveal how interested he was? He tugged at his tie.

The preacher asked everybody to rise, the music changed to the wedding march, and the crowd turned to watch the bride glide down the aisle. Princess Adelaide was gorgeous in her classic white satin dress and a sparkling diamond crown setting off her dark hair, no doubt about that, but for Stuart she paled next to her younger sister. It was crazy to him now that he’d ever competed with Malik for Addie’s attention and never given Belle a second glance. Now it was taking all his self-control not to stare with an open mouth like a pimply teenage geek gawking at the prom queen.

He let his gaze dart to Belle. She was looking at him, not the bride, and she offered him the sweetest smile known to mankind. Stuart was an instant away from pushing the bride out of his way as Addie was sashaying up the aisle much too slowly, storming to the front of the wedding party, pulling Belle into his arms, and kissing her good and long. Then he’d beg her to give him a chance, no matter how beneath her he

was or how he would mess her up with his demons and rotten family pedigree. He might have to fight each of her brothers at the same time to have a chance with her, but it would be worth it. Would she jump on Bodi or Alaric's back and choke them out to help him win? That thought made him smile but then he instantly sobered. He wouldn't be the one to tear this incredible family apart. He *had* to stay away from Belle.

The princess made it to her smiling future husband's side, the preacher asked them all to sit, and luckily that simple movement broke through Stuart's crazy thoughts. Sweat dripped down his back. A loser Falslev man with tainted blood running through his veins and the most perfect princess in the world? Sheesh. He was insane to even think it. He felt a dark stare and looked to the happy couple's right as they exchanged their vows. Prince Bodi was now giving him a stern look. Bodi and Treck were best friends. Should Stuart reassure Bodi he was going to push Treck and Belle together? It would be the most selfless act of his life, more so than fighting to protect underprivileged people the world over. Would that just reveal how gone he was over Belle if he brought it up to Bodi? Could he really push the two of them together without knocking Treck out and kissing Belle until she couldn't catch a breath?

He passed a hand over his face and focused on the bride and groom. He was going to literally go insane. Somehow he'd get through today. Tomorrow, he'd take off with a backpack and some water and go hike through the mountains. If he got lucky, he'd run into some dissenters who wanted to pick up where they left off Thursday night. Then Monday morning he'd either throw himself into training, beat up a bunch of Magnite military men to help them improve their skills, or figure out how to finally win at the joust. The other option was jumping on the next plane or boat off this island. He couldn't keep going like this. Belle's innocent sweetness and incredible appeal were going to destroy him.

## Chapter Fourteen



Belle thought everything about the wedding was absolutely perfect. Except for the fact that Stuart was avoiding her. She was seated between Treck and Leia at dinner and the two of them had a great conversation that Belle tried to contribute to, but her gaze kept wandering to Stuart sitting with Kingston and Wes. She caught his eyes on her several times, but every time she so much as smiled at him, he'd turn quickly away. Dang him.

She focused on her family and the gorgeous bride and groom. She idolized and adored Addie like any younger sister would such a fun, vivacious, and beautiful older sister. Malik was incredible too and the wedding in the picture-perfect garden, reception line in the courtyard for anyone and everyone to come congratulate the couple, and now the dinner with their family and close friends in the dining room all went off without a hitch. Now the party was moving into the ballroom for the traditional dance.

The ballroom was magical with lights strung everywhere and flower arrangements on any surface that would hold them. It smelled heavenly and would be the stuff of dreams... if only she was with the man she dreamt about. Would Stuart ask her to dance? She discreetly wiped her sweating palms on the tulle overlay of her satin dress, hoping she wouldn't stain it. She said an internal prayer, *Please, please Father above, I care far too deeply for him. If possible, let me help mend his heart and him find your love.*

She watched with the rest of the crowd as first Malik and Addie danced and then Addie danced with their dad and Malik with his mom. As that song finished, everyone cheered and started pairing off to dance themselves. The ballroom was crowded; Belle couldn't see Stuart. Panic filled her chest. Would he have snuck out? Please no.

She threaded through people, getting stopped far too often for hugs and everyone asking when it would be her turn. She kept her smile in place. If she couldn't break through Stuart's hard exterior and help him heal, would she ever get her turn to have a beautiful wedding day with the perfect groom for her? Would she die a lonely old maid? She was being dramatic, but she knew Stuart was the one for her. She knew it. Sadly, he didn't seem to agree.

She finally spotted him, standing over in a corner with Wes and Kingston. He looked incredible—straight, strong, and handsome. She loved his navy blue suit and that he looked as appealing all dressed up as he had without a shirt on swimming in the waterfall pool or fighting those dissenters to protect her.

He caught her gaze on him, and stopped talking. She met his eyes boldly. His dark eyes seemed to fill with a smolder meant only for her. She took slow, deliberate steps toward him, giving him time to come to her. He didn't move. But he didn't look away either. That gave her the courage to keep putting one foot in front of the other. His dark eyes seemed to say he loved her, even if he'd never admit it.

A tall man stepped in her path, blocking her view of Stuart. Belle stopped so she wouldn't run into him and looked up into the good-looking face and easy smile of one of her lifelong friends. Treck. Ah, no.

He grinned and held out his hands. Belle didn't ever want to hurt Treck—he was such a great person—so she put her hands in his. How she wished she could peek around his shoulder and see what Stuart was doing, what his face was revealing. Would he fight for her like he'd fought Malik for Addie or was she not worth that much to him? Was it hurting him today to see Addie marry? She hadn't thought of that. Her

hopes sank like a lead balloon. She'd thought she meant something to Stuart, but obviously not what Addie had meant to him.

“Can I have this dance, Princess Belle?” Treck asked in a teasing tone.

Belle didn't want to. She wanted to dance with Stuart. But Stuart wasn't asking and how could she tell Treck no? “Of course.”

Treck grinned broadly and swept her into his arms. They waltzed around the room. How crazy that a week ago she'd had her heart set on Treck and thought going away with him to the mountains would kickstart their romance. Now she realized she felt nothing romantic for him. He was a good friend, and that was all.

They danced past Stuart, Wes, and Kingston. She couldn't stop her gaze from straying to Stuart's. His dark eyes were hyper-focused on her and made her chest burn with a desire that only he could fulfill. She expected at any second he would storm to them and ask to cut in. She hoped Treck wouldn't put up a fight. She didn't want them to fight. She only wanted to be in Stuart's arms.

They danced past and she realized two things—Stuart hadn't moved and wasn't going to cut in, and Treck was speaking and she was zoning him out. Her entire focus was on Stuart and her desire to be with him. Could he reciprocate her feelings? Would he choose to, or would he stay all aloof and military? The humble hero, so similar to the Beast, but Stuart claimed he'd never turn into a handsome prince. Everything hurt remembering those words. But so much had changed between them since then ... hadn't it?

“Excuse me. What did you say?” Belle managed a smile. “It's ... loud in here.”

The music and laughter was distracting but not extremely loud. Treck tilted his head and patiently smiled at her. “I was just saying what a good man Stuart is.”

Belle licked her lips. Interesting that Treck's thoughts were along the same line as hers. Stuart was a good man, a great man. He was the right man for her. How to convince him of that?

When she didn't reply, Treck leaned in closer as if he were confiding in her, or trying to be romantic; she wasn't sure which. "Stuart encouraged me to go for you." He smiled conspiratorially. "He ... told me how you've always thought we would be together."

Belle sucked in a loud breath and stopped dancing. "He said *what?*"

Treck appeared confused but not concerned. "That you thought we should be together, and so did he."

"How dare he?" Belle pulled from Treck's arms and whirled to pin Stuart with a glare. So he not only wouldn't let himself commit to her for some reason only known to him, some secret he wouldn't share with her. Now he was also trying to push her off on Treck. Forget fighting for her—he was trying to shove her away. Of all the jerky nerve. Belle rarely got upset, but she was plenty angry now. She glared at Stuart. He tilted his head and regarded her, but he didn't appear as if he was ready to grovel to her, which he should be feeling in heaps.

Treck tilted her chin up with his fingers and broke her concentration on Stuart. Treck was gentle, kind, attractive, and such a great guy. Too bad she felt nothing for him anymore. "I really appreciate him saying something, Belle. I never would've been brave enough to tell the most beautiful woman I've ever met how gone I am over her."

Belle froze. She wanted to go cuss out Stuart—kiss him, slap him, cuss him, and then kiss him again, but she had to talk to Treck. "Treck." She shook her head, took his hand, and led him off to the edge of the room. She glanced back at Stuart. He hadn't moved. He was gripping a glass in his hand tightly and glaring at the two of them. Kingston was gone but Wes was close by his side, watching his friend with concern.



She looked back to Treck, squeezing his hand. “Treck, I used to fantasize about you when I was younger. I’ve always thought you were the greatest guy ever.”

He grinned.

“But this week I realized that it was just a teenage crush and now I only have feelings of friendship for you.”

“You ... excuse me?” His brow furrowed. “But Stuart said —”

“Stuart is a jerk,” she seethed. She knew that wasn’t true. He wanted to come across as a jerk, but he thought he was doing the right thing. He was the epitome of the hero who never wanted acknowledgment or thought he was worthy to win the princess’ hand.

“And I’m falling for him.”

Treck reared back. “Are you serious? I was worried if your brothers would let *me* date you, and they’ve known and trusted me their entire lives. Do you really think they’ll let an American date you? I believe Stuart is a good guy, but he comes across as pretty cocky.”

“It really isn’t their choice,” she said. She was acting all brave and independent, but a fight with her brothers didn’t matter at all if Stuart didn’t want her. “I shouldn’t have told you that anyway. Stuart doesn’t want to date me. I just ... I’m sorry that I don’t return your feelings.”

Treck looked over her face and then nodded. “It’s okay. I always knew you were out of my league.”

“That is not true at all. I honestly wanted to fall in love with you and that was my plan this week, but ...”

“Stuart stole your heart,” Treck supplied.

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing will come of it.” Those words hurt, but she was afraid they were prophetic. “I’m so sorry if I hurt you.”

“It’s okay.” Treck squeezed her hand then released it.

Silence fell between them, and it was awkward. Dang. She hated that she'd done this to their friendship and was tempted to blame Stuart, but it wasn't Stuart's fault she'd fallen so hard for him. He'd tried time and again to stop them from growing closer.

Looking away from Treck's handsome face, she saw the very man that she felt anger, frustration, and above all, love, toward striding around the edge of the dancers and toward the exit. His back was rigid, his head held high, and his fists clenched. He was going to just try and leave now?

"Go talk to him," Treck urged quietly.

"Thanks for being so great." She gave her friend a quick kiss on the cheek and then hurried to intercept Stuart. People called out greetings as she speed-walked directly through the dance floor. She thought she responded.

Stuart was almost to the door before she rushed in front of him. Stuart stopped abruptly, leaning back as if she were going to hit him. Not that any hit from her would affect this ultra-tough man. Maybe he was afraid of her emotionally.

"Princess," he greeted her shortly. His voice gave nothing away, but his eyes did. They were so dark they were almost black, and they looked almost as angry and yet full of desire as she felt. Nobody stirred her up and confused her like this. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

"How dare you," she said quietly, stepping into his space.

"How dare I?" His eyebrows rose. The words were mocking, but there was something so vulnerable in the depths of his eyes.

"Try to push Treck at me. Really?" She lowered her voice. "Does what we have between us mean nothing to you?"

His face softened and he looked her over as if she were a priceless artifact. This was the moment. Belle felt it building within her chest. He was going to tell her how desperately he'd fallen in love with her and vow to fight for her and make it work between them no matter the demons he battled from his past and the opposition they might face from her family.

His jaw worked for a minute and his eyes got dark and deep and wonderful, but instead of pulling her close and declaring his devotion, he asked, “Would you like to dance?”

“Dance?” Was he trying to avoid admitting his feelings, or placate her to keep her from begging him to love her? If they were dancing around and in front of the wedding crowd, she couldn’t kiss him desperately or have the deep discussion she needed to have with him. Sadly, she wanted to dance with him. The fairytale setting made her want to dance with the man she loved, but she wouldn’t care if they were alone near the garbage dump. She wanted to be in his arms. She wanted it almost as badly as she wanted to kiss him again.

He held out his left hand. She settled her hand in his. Instead of doing a traditional waltz stance, he tucked their joined hands against his broad chest and wrapped his right hand firmly around her lower back. Belle rested her free hand on his shoulder. She felt the rightness of his touch and was feeling all bubbly inside from the way their joined hands rested against his chest muscles.

Their gazes locked as they set off around the crowded ball room. His gaze flickered to where her mother and father stood next to her aunt and uncle. He couldn’t really think that because she was royal blood they couldn’t be together. That was stupid and archaic. Her father smiled gently at her and she returned it. He adored her, and he’d support her if she loved Stuart.

She turned back to Stuart, ready to cuss him for trying to push her and Treck together. He interrupted her lecture with, “You look ... incredible, Belle.”

“Thank you,” she managed, not expecting the compliment.

They danced past Treck and Alaric, who seemed to be arguing about something. Both men paused in their arguing and Alaric turned to glare at Belle and Stuart while Treck gave her a helpless shrug.

“Do you want some fresh air?” Belle asked in a rush. Maybe they could escape before Alaric caused a scene or hurt

Stuart's feelings. It was interesting that she was concerned about Stuart's feelings when he seemed bent on ignoring hers.

"Now you don't want to dance with me, Princess?" There was a teasing lilt to his voice. "Is it almost midnight and Cinderella is going to lose her magic?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You've got your fairy tales wrong. Remember you're the Beast, not Prince Charming."

He lifted his eyebrows. "How could I forget that? I know for certain I'm not Prince Charming. I'm pretty sure I'm still Gaston, not the Beast who turns into a handsome prince."

"Why would you want to be Gaston?" she demanded, frustration filling her. Why couldn't he be her handsome prince? He was no Gaston. Though he was competitive and had something to prove, he was also selfless, humble, and irresistible.

He shook his head. His dark eyes were sad, but the rest of his body seemed arrogant and standoffish, almost as if he were protecting himself. "It's never going to happen, Princess. Please stop torturing both of us with your girlish fantasies."

Belle gasped. She was itching to pull back and slap him, but it felt too right to be in his arms. She pulled her hand from his and he gave her a sad, justified smile, as if he'd expected as much. Her eyes narrowed. She wasn't going to do what he expected.

Instead of pulling from him and running away like a spoiled princess, she interrupted their dance steps by shoving at his shoulders with both of her hands and stepping toward him. He instinctively backed away. "What are you doing?"

"Girlish fantasies?" she challenged. She kept moving forward and though he was much stronger than her and could easily stop her advances or push her away, he kept backing up. People were probably stopping to watch her make a spectacle of herself. She didn't care.

They reached an open doorway and she all but shoved him out onto a patio door that was letting in the fresh sea breeze.

He held up both hands as she backed him up into the balcony railing. “You got me out here, all alone. Now what are you going to do with me?”

She wanted to kiss him all over his handsome face, but she was fired up. “You’ve got some explaining to do. How dare you tell Treck to go after me?”

“Isn’t that what you want?” he challenged. The lights streaming from the ballroom into their private space were reflected in his dark, soulful eyes.

“No, you idiot.” She pressed in closer and wrapped both arms around his neck. “I want you.”

“Ah, Belle.” It looked for a second as if he would soften, but instead of wrapping her up tight and returning her wanting, he shook his head. “It’s not going to work. You have to see that.”

“Why not?” she challenged.

“You’re a princess. I’m just waiting for the king to tell somebody to chop off my head for daring to dance with you.”

She snorted her derision at that comment, but he wasn’t done.

“I’m from ... a much different situation than this, Belle.” He gestured back toward the castle and the ballroom where her family was celebrating her sister’s wedding in opulence and grandeur.

“That doesn’t matter,” she insisted, easing in closer. “Not to me.” She threaded her fingers through his short hair. “I’ve fallen for you, Stuart. You have to see that. Please give us a chance.” She went on tiptoes and softly pressed her lips to his. He didn’t move or respond, but he didn’t push her away either. “Please,” she all but begged against his mouth. Their breath intermingled and she needed him like she needed oxygen.

Stuart pulled back slightly and her hopes fizzled. His gaze went hungrily over her face, resting on her lips. “Hooah,” he whispered huskily and then he wrapped her up tight and kissed her with a longing and passion that sent tingles coursing through her body. Belle returned the kiss with everything she

had. She'd never known joy and ecstasy like this. Finally, finally she was in his arms, and she refused to ever leave.

"Stuart? Belle?" The angry growl came from far too close.

Stuart released her and quickly stepped in front of her as if to protect her. Belle pivoted, looking over his shoulder, and saw Alaric glaring at the both of them.

"What are you doing?" her brother demanded.

"Kissing," Belle said impertinently. "I assume you and Grace have tried it? If not, you should. It's delightful."

"Belle!" Alaric sounded as shocked by her sass as anything. "You need to go back into the ballroom. I need to talk to Stuart alone."

"No." She had never stood up to any of her family members. There had never been a need. Right now, she would battle anybody who tried to keep her from Stuart. Together they could take down anyone who tried to separate them. Even if she had to choke out her own brother.

"Belle." Alaric's voice was sharp and commanding now, but she wasn't in his military forces and not even her kingly father could yank her from Stuart's side right now.

Stuart turned to her, looking over her face as if memorizing it. "Belle, please go back into the ballroom so I can speak with Commander Alaric." His voice was formal and not nearly warm enough for her suddenly uneasy emotions.

"You don't ... want me with you?" she asked, feeling like she was whimpering. Maybe she was. How could he not want to stand side by side, face the kingdom together, especially after a kiss like that? Did he truly not feel for her like she did for him? He'd never said he felt anything for her. He'd only kissed her beautifully a few times and protected her from the dissenters. She thought she'd seen deep in his gaze and through his kiss that he was falling for her, but maybe she'd been deluding herself. After all, Stuart hadn't ever fought for her like he had for Addie. Instead, he'd tried to push her into Treck's arms. She'd either initiated their kisses or thrown

herself into his arms. He had kissed her back, but that might have been just a physical response.

She wanted to hang her head in mortification, but she held his gaze bravely, willing him to love her, to stand up to Alaric for her.

“No.” He said the word quietly, but there was a coldness to that one syllable that she felt clear through despite the warm tropical air. “I don’t want you with me, Belle. I’ve told you we aren’t going to work and that’s the truth. The two of us would never work. I’m sorry.”

It took half a beat for the words to seep in, the rejection, the pain. She did something so completely out of character it surprised even her. She lifted her hand and slapped him as hard as she could. Stuart didn’t flinch. She knew how tough he was. Too tough to let her into his heart.

She whirled away from him and stormed around her stunned-to-silence commander prince brother and into the ballroom. She wanted to flee to her room and sob into her pillow, but Leia came to her side and wrapped a supporting arm around her, seeming to sense her distress.

Belle caught sight of Addie and Malik over by the towering cake in the corner. It was time to cut the cake. This was her sister’s day. She would not ruin it by dissolving into tears and tantrums, no matter how badly she wanted to.

“Are you all right?” Leia asked softly, showing a compassion Leia didn’t usually exhibit.

“Yes, thank you. Let’s go eat some cake, shall we?”

Leia gave her a smile. “Cake is always a great idea.” Her cousin directed her closer to the family, but leaned close and whispered, “You’re brave and strong, Belle. I’m proud of you.”

Belle hugged her cousin. She appreciated the words, but she couldn’t internalize them. Her eyes went back to the balcony where she could barely glimpse Alaric’s back. She couldn’t see Stuart.

All she wanted was to be back out there with Stuart again, kissing him, never hearing those cold words he had uttered. *I don't want you with me, Belle. I've told you we aren't going to work and that's the truth. The two of us would never work. I'm sorry.*

His apology meant nothing. He wasn't sorry. He was a jerk.

If only she could get her heart to believe that.



## Chapter Fifteen



Stuart wanted to chase after Belle, tell her he'd lied. He loved her desperately and all he wanted was her with him, laughing, talking, kissing, facing life with her hand in his. He'd never had sappy thoughts like these, and he loved and hated them. Sadly, he hadn't lied about the fact that they didn't work and never could. It wasn't just that she was hopelessly out of his league; she was so full of light and love. He would ruin her innocent joy.

So instead of following the woman he ached for, he faced her understandably-angry older brother.

Alaric's face was tight and his posture was even tighter. Stuart wasn't one to apologize and he didn't grovel for what he wanted, but he respected and liked Alaric. He didn't want to fight over Alaric's sister, especially because he knew even better than this impressive military commander that he could never be worthy of the beautiful princess.

"I know we talked about you dating women from Magna." Alaric spoke before Stuart had a chance to. That was good because Stuart didn't really know how to apologize even if he decided to. He hadn't had any practice asking for forgiveness.

Stuart nodded warily. Alaric had told him he'd support him dating everyone but Dr. Grace, his girlfriend, but apparently all the princesses were off limits.

"I'm not trying to go back on that, and I do think you're a good man, Stuart, but you have to understand how special Belle is and how protective I feel of her. We all do. She's the

youngest and our angel, the peacemaker who keeps us all together.”

Stuart could see all of that was true and he truly envied this family and the deep and abiding relationships they had. He nodded again. What did Alaric expect him to say? He would tell him soon enough he wouldn't pursue Belle. Hadn't the man heard how Stuart had just ripped his own heart out and told Belle he didn't want her with him?

“But ...” Alaric pushed out a heavy breath and looked as humble as he'd ever seen him. “If you promise to treat her right and never disrespect or betray my baby sister, I will ... give you permission to date her.”

Stuart's heart slammed against his chest. Permission to date Belle? Was Alaric being serious? It was like a benefactor gifting a bankrupt man a billion dollars, or a lifelong treasure hunter discovering the Arc of the Covenant.

Dating Belle. The very idea sparkled and shone in front of him, elusive and tempting as the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow to a leprechaun. But just like all these elusive treasures, it wasn't to be. He and Belle could never work. He would not draw her into the darkness inside of him.

“I appreciate the trust you're offering,” Stuart said quietly, “but there are things in my past ...” He could hardly meet his friend's penetrating dark gaze and it was excruciating to push the next words out. “I could never date Belle. She deserves every happiness, and I could never be the man to give it to her.”

Alaric studied him, his gaze probing for any deceit, any weakness. Stuart held his head high and his gaze steady. He wasn't lying to Alaric. He and Belle would never work.

Finally, Alaric nodded. “If that's how you feel.”

Stuart inclined his chin and strode past his friend. He skirted the wedding party. Everyone was focused on the bride and groom smearing wedding cake across each other's faces and then kissing while they laughed. Everyone but one gorgeous princess. She was looking at him.

He stopped in his tracks and stared into Belle's deep-brown gaze. At the sweet, alluring expression on her face he almost faltered, ran across the room, and swept her into his arms.

But he couldn't do that to her. He pivoted and stormed from the ballroom. His shoulders and head weren't tilted as proudly as usual.

He felt like he'd lost his mom and sister all over again.

\* \* \*

The next week passed in a blur. Stuart hardly slept, was out of his suite early every morning and at the military facilities. He'd lift weights for an hour, then go on a long run, then he'd shower, eat something, and fight with anybody who would fight. He worked on sword fighting, hand-to-hand combat, and most especially jousting. Hour after hour after hour. Only taking breaks to eat or drink or have somebody coach him on how to improve. Kingston and Alaric could still best him at the joust, but they were the only ones, and he got in some vicious hits that almost knocked each of them off their horses.

Wes was concerned about him. Join the club. He was concerned about himself. Maybe he needed to leave the island. He couldn't even stand the thought of it and luckily he hadn't run into Belle. Was she happy? Busy? In Treck's arms? His stomach rolled at that thought, despite his idiotic attempts at trying to push them together.

Alaric tried several times to talk to him about Belle, and Stuart simply shut him down. Even Kingston cornered him and asked if there was anything he could do to help. Stuart told him there sure was; Kingston could let him go "talk" with the dissenters about their treatment of him and Belle last Thursday night. Kingston smirked and said no, he had it under control. He probably knew if Stuart went up there a civil war would soon follow. Kingston left him alone after that.

Friday night, he practiced jousting until everyone else had given up. He kept practicing by himself, working Annalisa

maybe too hard. She had a wimpy name, but he was growing quite fond of this horse. It wasn't her fault Stuart couldn't best a couple of insanely-talented knights, who were riding a war horse before they were walking. Finally, it was too dark to keep going and he didn't want to turn on the stadium lights just for him.

Tomorrow he'd compete in the tournament. Would Belle come watch? Did he have any hope of winning? What did it matter if he won? It would be a salve to his pride and great to see his hard work paying off, but it wasn't like he was going to announce Belle as the "fairest maiden" and ask for a kiss in front of everyone. He could dream about it though.

He led Annalisa into the stables, removed her saddle, bit, and reins, and then got her some water and a mix of oats and hay. He should probably head in, shower, eat something, and go to bed, but he rubbed down the mare's coat with a brush instead.

"Are you going to help me win tomorrow, eh girl?" he asked softly. "Wouldn't that be incredible? You help me win and I'll bring you some apples ... and name Princess Belle the fairest maiden." He smiled to himself, grateful no one else was around.

Suddenly he could swear he heard breathing, human breathing, and one of the horses knickered as if talking to someone.

He set the brush down and slowly stepped out of Annalisa's stall, securing the door behind him. Pausing, he listened, his gaze darting around. The breath he thought he heard grew faster. The person knew he'd heard them. Who was it? One of the dissenters? A kid messing around? Some other danger he hadn't realized existed on this idyllic island? He stealthily tracked the breathing, all too aware that the person could hear his footsteps, no matter how light he trod. They weren't far, hiding in the next stall over. He slowly lifted the latch. He should be more worried that they could be armed, but Stuart was gunning for a battle. His only hope was the person hiding and possibly planning on ambushing him was up for the fight he was going to bring them. Hooah.

## Chapter Sixteen



Belle hid in the horse stall next to where Stuart brushed his horse, Annalisa. She'd snuck peeks at him while he was training but hadn't spoken to him in almost a week. She was going insane.

Last night, after lots and lots of coaxing, she spilled the entire story to Leia. Of course, Leia wasn't content to just cry over the failed romance with her. Belle had lost the love of her life and wanted to simply mourn him. But mourning wasn't her cousin's style. Leia hatched a plan.

Leia knew everything going on with everybody, so she knew where Stuart's horse was kept and how late he usually practiced each night. She helped Belle sneak into the thankfully empty stall next to where Stuart would bring his horse and she coached Belle on how to sneak out, surprise him, and then kiss him until she convinced him to at least talk to her, if not promise her the future.

The only problem was, Stuart must've heard something as he'd been whispering to his horse. It got quiet and she could barely hear his footsteps, but she thought they were approaching the stall she was hiding in. Her heart raced and her breathing became quick and fast.

She didn't know what she was waiting for. They were alone. This was the moment to show herself and kiss him, but suddenly she was afraid, very afraid. Stuart had told her multiple times he didn't want her, that they couldn't be together. This past week while she tried to keep herself busy at the medical office and snuck to the stadium to watch him a

few times, Stuart seemed oblivious to her and not at all inclined to come find her.

What was she doing? He didn't want her; she needed to get that through her thick skull. She leaned against the wood wall, inhaling the scents of dust, hay, and horses in the near darkness. She'd wait until he left and then slink back to the castle. Leia would be disappointed but not as disappointed as she was. Maybe someday a miracle would happen and Stuart would come declare his love for her. Today was definitely not that day.

She listened and heard no movement. Had he left? He seemed to be a master at moving stealthily. She knew he was a master tracker. He was a master at holding her heart. Not that he cared.

How long should she wait? She slowly started easing toward the stall door when suddenly it sprung open.

Belle screamed in surprise and many of the horses responded with uneasy neighs. Stuart burst into the stall and pinned her against the wood separator. The low lights in the stables reflected the surprise in his dark eyes.

“Belle?”

Her heart raced from the surprise, but it kept going at a frenzied pace at the look in his gaze and the strength of his body so close. She was afraid he'd step back and ask her what she was doing here. Tell her one more time that they'd never work.

“Are you all right?” he asked softly. His grip on her shoulders softened but he thankfully didn't let her go. Her body filled with heat at the tender concern in his voice.

“Yes, I ...” She bit at her lip. “I wanted to see you.”

Stuart's eyes widened. He framed her shoulders with his hands and leaned in closer. Belle loved the smell of him, manly and spicy. “Why, Belle? Why torture me when I know I can't be with you?”

Her breath caught. It was now or never. She lifted her hands and wrapped them around his neck. “I don't know who

decided that. I'd do anything to be with you, Stuart."

He blinked and the conflict and anguish in his gaze tore at her. She knew he was teetering between running away from her and kissing her. She knew it, and she knew she had to tip the scales. She'd initiated most of their kisses, but she didn't care. What did it matter who made the first move if she could savor another kiss with him? This was far more than a simple kiss though. She had to pray it would convince him they should be together.

She pulled herself up closer and kissed him. She gave her all to the kiss and he responded beautifully, no hesitation or indecision like she'd seen in his gaze. He pinned her against the wall and kissed her like he'd been in a drought for years and she was the only water he'd found. The kiss took on a life of its own and she felt like her insides were all lit up, almost singed from the heat of it.

When he drew back, they were both breathing heavily. Belle stared at him, begging him to love her like she loved him.

"Ah, Belle." He softened his stance, tracing his fingers through her hair and then along her neck. She moaned quietly, loving his touch.

He paused. Would he initiate another kiss? She prayed that he'd kiss her like the warrior he was, coming to claim the princess. They'd kiss with wild abandon again, and then he would declare his love.

When his hands stayed still on her neck and his brow furrowed with concern, she tried to help. "Hooah?"

Stuart let out a strangled chuckle. He pulled her tight against him, wrapping her securely in his arms. He didn't kiss her but ushered her head to his shoulder. "No. Not hooah. I can't let myself go like this with you, Belle. I'm not strong enough." He gently kissed her forehead and then released her and stepped back.

Belle hated his words. He wasn't strong enough? That made no sense. He was stronger than any man she knew, and

she wouldn't let him go that easily. "Why?" she demanded. "Why can't you love me? What is it that I don't have that Addie had?"

Stuart straightened and quickly shook his head. "Belle, it's nothing like that. To me you are everything, more beautiful than any woman I've ever seen, sweeter, more intriguing, more fun to be around. Never compare yourself to Addie or anyone. You're perfect to me."

"Then why won't you fight for me like you fought Malik for Addie?"

His shoulders lowered and he jammed a hand through his hair. "It's not what you're thinking, Belle. I didn't love Addie. It was just about the competition."

She blinked at him. "Then what am I?"

Before she could blink again, she was in his arms. He gave her a powerful, lingering kiss and then simply held her close. Joy and light exploded through her as he looked down at her as if she were a priceless treasure. "You're everything, Belle. You're every good dream and desirable thought I've ever had. You are light, sweetness, healing, and beauty. If I could let myself, I would love you like neither of us have ever loved."

Heat and happiness rushed through her. This was what she needed and wanted from this incredible man. Except ... "Why can't you let yourself love me?"

Stuart released her again and stepped back. "Ah, Belle. There's no way I can explain this to someone so filled with light and happiness like you are."

"I'd like you to try." She bit at her lip again. "For me, please try." What if he could explain it and she had to agree that they couldn't be together? She didn't know if she could ever agree to that.

Stuart paced in front of her. Belle clasped her hands together as she waited. She wished she could reach out to him and help him. He was hurting, and it was her nature to soothe and comfort. She wanted to hold him, but something held her back.



Finally, he rounded on her and said in a deep voice that hurt to listen to, “My dad abused us ... viciously.”

She drew in a sharp breath and his gaze pierced through her. He expected her shock, and it seemed as if it proved his point because he nodded slightly. Belle tried to control her emotion. It wouldn't help the situation if she got dramatic about it.

“We lived in Idaho, middle of nowhere. My dad drove the milk truck every day, but the rest of us rarely left our property. My mom homeschooled us the best she could with the few books we had. She had a big garden that she loved. We had chickens and cows for eggs, milk, and meat so we worked really hard but ate pretty good.” Stuart blinked at her and then said darkly, “I won't get into details of the abuse, I can't do that to you, but my dad hurt my mom and little sister more than he did me. My little sister was ... special, and he hated that. He liked to tie me up and make me watch.”

Belle's stomach tried to claw its way out of her throat. She couldn't even imagine something so horrific.

“Until I got big and strong enough to fight my way out of my bonds and stop him. We'd go the rounds then and sometimes I'd win, hurt him so bad he'd stop hurting any of us for a day or two. Most of the time, I'd lose ...” His voice trailed off.

Belle pulled in quick breaths, praying desperately inside while trying not to react too violently on the outside. All she wanted was to hold him close and help him heal, but how did someone heal from ... “Your mom and sister?” He'd told her they died.

He clenched his fists. “My dad and I had a really horrible battle when I was seventeen. He won, but barely. He was still strong enough that he threw me out, locked the door, and yelled at me through it to go and to never come back. It was the most freeing moment I remember as a teenager. I didn't have to go back. I'd never thought of just leaving. Mostly because I feared he'd kill them if I wasn't there, but at that moment I just ... couldn't take it one more minute.”

He shook his head and a muscle popped in his jaw. “I walked away with nothing, walked for hours. A truck driver picked me up and took me to a shelter in Boise, Idaho. I lived there and on the streets, avoiding the authorities until I turned eighteen and could enroll in the military. I loved the military. The fighting, the camaraderie. I’d never had friends before. Wes meant everything to me. I’d never been told I did anything right before, and sometimes I heard that. I couldn’t have cared less when my COs demeaned me. It was a million times better than home. I heard all the time that I was too competitive or a jerk, but what did that mean to me? Nobody was as big of a jerk as my dad, and though I lived to fight, I tried not to hurt someone who was down or wasn’t equal to the battle.”

“And you succeeded in the military?” she asked.

“I did. Wes and I met in basic and worked together for years, worked our way into Army Rangers and onto Axel Dexter’s team. Most people see the most horrible things of their lives on Special Forces missions, but after my upbringing, none of it surprised me. It was the happiest time of my life—friends, success, a purpose in life.” He stared into her eyes. “Well the happiest time until ...”

Belle didn’t want to hear about his mom and sister, but she could sense it was coming. “Until your mom and sister ... passed and you couldn’t be happy any longer?”

He looked surprised and then morose. “No. That happened right after basic training. I skipped ahead. I meant, until I met you. Being with you is happiness I never knew existed.”

She felt a dart of happiness that he felt that way, but she had to know about his mom and sister. “What happened to them?”

He hit his fist against his pant leg and hung his head. “I hadn’t gone back, but I’d taken to ... praying for my mom and sister. Wes grew up as abused as I was, but in different ways. He believed in a higher power and was the brother I’ve always wanted, so I trusted him and tried to pray that God would protect them and I would be able to go back and rescue them.”

He paused and the barn seemed darker than ever. Not even the soft lights seemed to penetrate the gloom. “Wes has this ability to drag crap out of you. I’d spilled the story to him one night.” His mouth twisted and his eyes got so fathomless they lost all color and just became black orbs. “The two of us thought we were pretty hot stuff after basic. We thought we were the heroes and were honestly some of the most idealistic idiots you’d ever meet. We had a break and hatched a plan to go rescue my mom and sister. Now that I’d gotten away from the nightmare, I realized that contrary to what I’d been taught, there were people who would help. I knew I could get the police involved if needed and there were programs that could help my mom and sister get up on their feet. I had money I could give them and most importantly I had the physical training, to finally beat my dad in any fight.”

He blew out a breath and Belle waited. She found herself leaning against the stall, her legs suddenly wobbly.

“When we got to the house ... it was quiet and there was this awful feeling, worse than even I remembered, and I remember it being pretty awful.” His jaw worked and he passed a hand over his face. “Nobody answered, so we broke down the door and ... they were all dead.”

Belle gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “All of them?” she managed, her stomach churning.

He nodded shortly. “The police figured it had happened a few weeks before. He shot them both then killed himself.” Never had Belle heard despair as deep as what was in Stuart’s voice when he uttered, “That’s what I got for my prayers.”

Stuart didn’t look at her and he didn’t say anything else. Belle wanted to hold him, comfort him, somehow make this better. How in the world did she think *she* could make this better? He was irreparably damaged inside. How did someone recover from abuse like that and then losing his entire family?

She had to try though. She slowly eased closer to him, as if he were an untrained filly. He studied her warily, but he didn’t say anything, and he didn’t back up.

Carefully, she wrapped her arms around his back and tried to just hold him. It was awkward. He was a lot bigger than her and she was terrified that at any moment he'd shove her away and regret sharing so much with her.

His body was stiff as a board. As long minutes ticked by, he softened and his arms came around her, pulling her in tighter. He was so strong it almost took her breath away. His body shuddered and he murmured, "Your touch has healing powers."

Belle ran her palms up and down his back, praying she could somehow heal him. It might take a lifetime, but it was a lifetime she was very willing to give.

They stood there, holding on to each other, and Belle prayed like she'd never prayed before. Stuart needed help and healing. Could she help him? Only the Father above could truly heal him, but maybe her love could help.

Stuart's body was warm, and it felt to her like he was comforting and protecting *her*. Finally, he drew away and mustered a smile that was more of a grimace. "Thank you, Belle. Thank you for listening to my awful story. Thank you for holding me." His mouth tightened and his eyes darkened. "Now you understand why ... we could never be together."

"Excuse me?" They were progressing, together. They could heal, together. What made him think sharing that horrific story would change that?

Stuart blinked at her and then tenderly cupped her cheek. "Belle. You're sweet, pure, and perfect. I'm from trash and that's what's inside me. I don't believe in a higher power and never will and you are the epitome of an angelic Christian. I could never be worthy of you. I won't pull you into my darkness. You have to see and understand what I'm saying now."

She covered his hand with hers and said fiercely, "I don't see that at all. You aren't your father. You tried to protect your mom and sister and went on to protect many people in your career with the military. You're good, pure, and perfect to me."

Stuart shook his head and tugged his hand free, backing up a step. “You see the best in everyone, but you can’t understand the darkness inside me, the hatred that eats me up and makes me competitive and mean, the things I’ve done in the military. Worst of all, I abandoned my sister and mom. It’s because of me that ...” He shook his head and stated flatly, “We are not compatible, Belle, and there is no world where we could be.”

Belle’s mouth dropped open and her stomach rolled. Stuart turned to go, as if the discussion was completely over.

“Wait!” She hurried after him, grabbing his arm.

Stuart looked down at her, sadness in his gaze. “Belle, please don’t make this harder than it is. I trusted you with my horrific past so you would let me go. No matter how hard it is. Please let me go.”

She released his arm, but thankfully he didn’t walk away. Everything hurt. She felt like she had the flu. He wanted to go. He didn’t want her. She heard her voice squeak out a request that she knew he would scoff at. “At least let me pray for you.”

His eyes widened and his mouth went slack. He didn’t scoff but he did say in a voice rough with emotion, “I told you what prayer got me.”

“I’m so sorry,” she managed. “Sometimes awful things happen to good people. Our Father above wants us to have happiness and He wants what’s best for us, but he can’t take away our agency or anybody else’s.”

Stuart’s eyes went dark and stormy. She thought he’d lash out, but he simply said, “This is why we can’t be together, Belle. You and I ... we’re polar opposites.”

That hurt almost as much as anything he’d said, but she knew he didn’t want to hurt her.

He pushed a hand at his hair and said exactly what she was thinking, “I don’t want to hurt you, Belle. That’s why I’m trying to walk away.”

She nodded. She knew he was trying to protect her, from him. If only he could see the light and goodness she saw inside

him. "I know you don't want to hurt me. You could never hurt me."

The moment went slow and beautiful between them, but right as she thought he was going to soften, he turned to walk away again.

"Please," she said softly. "Just one prayer."

He angled back to face her, studied her for so long she wasn't sure what he was thinking or what he would say. Finally, he reached out both hands to her and said, "One prayer. But when a man like me fails to receive any miracles, I hope it doesn't crush your faith."

She swallowed and prayed fiercely inside to somehow soften his heart, but more importantly for him to know his worth in God's sight. She placed her hands in his, feeling the rightness of that clear through. Bowing her head, she said quietly and fervently, "Dear Father, we come before thee with joined hands and pleading hearts. Please help Stuart to feel thy love and to be enveloped by thy peace." Stuart jerked slightly and his hands around hers tightened. "Please heal this incredible man. Please bless him to know that his family is at peace, his mom and sister aren't hurting, that they're with you. They're happy and they want him to be happy. Again, please help Stuart to feel thy love and to feel of my love for him as well. Amen."

Belle felt peace wash over her. Did Stuart feel it? She lifted her head and opened her eyes. He was studying her intensely. Long beats of silence passed and then he smiled sadly and traced his hand along her cheek. He bent close and gave her a tender kiss, as pure and beautiful as anything she'd felt in her life. "Goodbye, Belle," he whispered against her lips.

Turning, he walked away. He didn't look back.

Belle sank to her knees on the rough concrete. The peace she'd felt evaporated. Stuart had left. Had he felt anything? Could God soften him? Help him feel loved?

She didn't know, and suddenly her faith was lacking. She closed her eyes, wishing tears weren't leaking out, that she didn't feel like light and joy was leaking out with her tears. Stuart had been concerned that him not receiving a miracle would damage her faith.

She did the only thing she could. She prayed harder.

## Chapter Seventeen



Stuart spent the worst night of his life. He didn't go back to his suite. He walked the beach for hours, cursing himself, his dad, and the Lord above alternately. He waited for a tropical storm to appear and either lightning to strike him or a typhoon wave to sweep him out into the ocean and drown him. At least he'd be with his mom and sister then. But if anything he'd heard was true, they should be in heaven and Stuart was definitely headed the other direction.

Were his sister and mom truly at peace and happy? Belle thought so. Wes had told him so before, when Stuart had let him talk about it. He wished he could see them, know they were okay, know somehow they didn't blame him for deserting them and letting them die. If he hadn't selfishly run away, could he have protected them? Or would he be dead too? There had been times in his life that he'd wished for that. He'd never been hesitant to take any dangerous mission because what did he care if he died?

He was angry, sick to his stomach, and all he wanted was to run back and find Belle and hold her until he felt that peace, light, and warmth that she exuded. He loved her. His head hung forward. He didn't deserve her. If only somebody could kill him. Then Belle could mourn what she thought he was, some hero, some illusion he could never live up to. Eventually she could move on, love Treck or someone equally happy and light-filled.

He finally slumped into the sand. The words to Belle's prayer swirled around in his head. She wanted him to know his



mom and sister were at peace and wanted him to be happy. Could that be true? Everything felt disjointed and out of place. He must've slept at some point because the sun awakened him with light and heat. He blinked and stirred on the sand. He was a sweaty, dirty, hungry mess but he didn't even care.

He pulled himself to his feet and walked to the castle. It was early enough and a Saturday, so nobody was up and about. He went through a back door and up to his suite. He took a long shower, put on the deodorant Belle claimed she loved the smell of, and made himself a large omelet. He ate slowly, his head pounding. Two hours until the tournament started. Should he even show up? His competitive nature made it impossible not to, but how would he handle seeing Belle? Ah, Belle. Stuart loved her so desperately. He'd fight in this tournament and then he'd tell Wes, Kingston, and Alaric that he had to leave. He couldn't stay here and not pursue Belle. He wasn't strong enough.

He started toward the door to get ready for the tournament but he slipped on something. Going to one knee, he cursed and looked to see what had downed him. A book. A simple leather-bound black book.

He didn't have a book like this. He picked it up and saw the engravings on the front The Holy Bible.

Oh sheesh. What were the odds? There was a white note marking a page. He flipped it open and saw the beautiful penmanship. Somehow he knew it was from Belle and wondered how he'd missed it when he'd come in this morning.

*Dear Stuart,*

*I hope this isn't too presumptuous of me, but I was up late praying for you and when I woke these are the verses that came to my mind. If you believe anything I've said, please believe that God loves you. He loves you even more than I love you and I love you with every fiber of my being.*

*Blessings and all my love,*

*Belle*

*1 John 4:7-8*

Stuart's hands trembled as he held the book and the note. Up all night praying for him. She loved him with every fiber of her being? Stuart wanted to sink to his knees and cry. He should never have let down his guard around her, but he couldn't regret the time they'd had together. The love he felt for her and from her filled him up and threatened to spill over in tears. That made him straighten and blink fast. He hadn't cried since he was a small child. He hadn't even cried when he'd seen his mom and sister's long-dead bodies. He'd only gotten angrier.

Looking down at the open book in his hand, he pressed a hand to his eyes and then read the marked verses.

*7. Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. 8. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.*

In the book, Belle's flowing script covered the entire margin. He turned it to the side to read. *You have love in you, Stuart. I've seen it and I've felt it.* That made warmth tingle through him. He'd felt her love too. Not just in her kiss but in her words, example, light, and touch. *God loves you and I love you. Trust in that love and turn to it. I pray someday you'll love me like I love you, but more importantly that you'll love God.*

Belle. Stuart clung to the book and her note. She had no idea how much he loved her. Why couldn't she understand that was why he was trying to stay away?

He reverently put the note in the book, closed it, and set it on a side table. He suddenly felt weaker than he ever had in his life. Sinking into a chair, he buried his head in his hands. What did God want from him? At times he'd tried to doubt He existed, but he'd never been able to. He could believe a higher power was there, but love from that power? Love stronger than the love Belle showed him? That was far-fetched.

Leaning back against the chair, he blew out a breath. He hated the idea of an all-powerful father figure, like his father, in control and pulling all the strings. He hated even worse the

idea of humbling himself and throwing words like love around with some all-seeing, all-knowing being in the heavens.

Instead of letting his mind dwell on all of it, he focused on today. He'd take some ibuprofen, try to finally defeat Kingston and Alaric at the joust, and then he needed to leave. He could walk away with his head held high. He'd find somewhere to fight; Axel would have something for him to do. It was a big world and there were a lot of people he could protect with his skill set. Maybe he could give his life for a greater cause.

If he didn't escape the gorgeous sweetheart Princess Belle, she could destroy all his pride, his independence, and his well-constructed emotional barriers. It was time to leave. Then Belle could be happy.

## Chapter Eighteen



Belle wrung her hands together as she waited in the stands, watching the tournament that was well under way. Had Stuart seen her note and the Bible? Would it affect him? After praying long into the night, she had drifted off but woke early in the morning with that verse ringing through her head. *God is love*. If it didn't touch his heart, if her heartfelt words couldn't penetrate it, she had no idea how to soften him or help him believe how much she loved him and that God loved him as well. Maybe after what he'd been through, the way he'd been raised, love was too much to hope for.

She watched the tournament in awe. Stuart was like a well-trained machine as he swung his sword with strength and precision, downing opponent after opponent. He even bested Alaric in the sword. Belle got numerous surprised and angry looks from family members as she cheered for Stuart to best her own brother.

The top three from archery and sword-fighting would move on to the jousting portion of the tournament. Kingston, Treck, and Malik were the top three archers. Stuart, Alaric, and Bodi were the top three from sword fighting. There was a break before the jousting. Leia forced Belle to walk with her out into the town square to buy an iced lemonade and soft pretzels from the vendors.

“Are you doing all right?” Leia asked quietly as they ate their treats.

“I'm ... anxious.” Belle had shared briefly about what happened at the stables but she hadn't told Leia about the

Bible and the note she'd left in Stuart's room around five a.m. this morning. He hadn't answered her soft knocks. When she'd tried the door it hadn't been locked, so she'd quickly opened it and set the Bible with the note inside. She had no idea if he'd seen it. He'd glanced her way a few times during the tournament—well, maybe more than a few—but his gaze hadn't given anything away.

Leia finished her last bite of pretzel, shifted her drink to her left hand and reached her right hand around Belle's waist. "Maybe I just need to teach you how to sass him properly."

"Maybe," Belle agreed, though she knew from Stuart's words and kisses that he thought she was perfect. It wasn't her that was stopping him from loving her; it was him. She should take comfort that it wasn't anything she needed to do differently, but her changing would be easier in her mind. She didn't want to change Stuart, but she sure wanted him to let her love him.

They took their drinks back into the stadium. Belle pasted on a smile as she chatted with friends and family, but her gaze kept darting to where Stuart was preparing for the joust. He looked so strong and incredibly appealing in his armor. It made her neck flush with heat as she imagined running to him and kissing him if he won.

What if he did win? Would he name her fairest maiden and kiss her? She shook her head. No one ever beat Alaric or Kingston, and no matter how she'd lain her heart and love out for him, Stuart had rejected her. She needed to stop with her girlish fantasies. She glanced over at Stuart as he swung up onto his horse and took the helmet from Mary, one of the girls who worked in the stables.

He glanced Belle's way. His dark eyes met hers and the world seemed to stop. She would've done anything for even a smile from him. He didn't smile though. He tilted up his chin in acknowledgement and then put his helmet on.

Belle's air rushed out. It would be much easier to stop her fantasies if that irresistible man wasn't the stuff that fantasies were made of.

\* \* \*

Stuart had to force himself to tear his gaze from Belle. Throughout the sword fighting, he fought as hard as he ever had for any military training, exercise, or assignment. Each time he glanced Belle's way, she was looking at him. It filled his heart with joy and made his chest swell. If only he could be a good, normal guy and simply love her. But no, he wasn't worthy, and she wanted him to feel God's love. That wasn't happening.

He thanked Mary for the help with his horse and took the helmet. He rode Annalisa over near the end of the list, watching as Bodi and Malik battled it out and then Treck and Alaric. Malik and Alaric were the victors so far. Stuart would face Malik and Alaric and Kingston would be pitted against each other. That was great news. He could take Malik, and not having to go against both Alaric and Kingston would improve his chances. Maybe they'd injured each other and give him a break. He grimaced. Just more proof that he wasn't a good person. He hoped for good men to injure each other so he could win a tournament with no stakes.

Part of him wondered why he fought so hard. What was he trying to prove? It wasn't as if he'd claim a kiss from Princess Belle if he won, no matter how badly he wanted to. He'd have to be satisfied with the kisses they'd shared. It wasn't fair to pretend he could ever be what she needed. She'd thank him someday.

He shook his head. If only he wouldn't live in misery. Not that misery was anything new to him. The past twelve years had been all right—busy, rewarding, and for the most part he'd pushed his past and the anguish over his mom and sister to the back of his mind. He needed to head back to America and see what Axel had for him, or start his own security company, or find something to keep busy and help somebody.

Crown Prince Quinn, Belle's oldest brother, announced Malik and Stuart. Stuart rode into position and accepted the lance from Gerald, thanking him. He felt a dart of

apprehension, but he pushed it away. He had this. Malik had only finished his honeymoon with Princess Adelaide yesterday. The man's head would not be anywhere in the fight.

Stuart flipped his helmet shield closed, lifted his lance to Malik in salute, and watched for the signal. Jacob dropped the flag. Stuart kicked his heels into Annalisa's flanks and yelled out, "Hooah!"

The crowd's cheers sounded far away. He was hyper-focused on Annalisa, the angle of his lance, and Malik's position. They thundered toward each other and the thrill of battle washed over him. This was what he lived for. This was who he was. Not some lover of a beautiful princess, Gaston, the Beast, or Prince Charming. None of that was real.

Fighting was real.

They were almost upon each other when he jabbed his lance across his body with all his strength, aiming straight for Malik's chest. The impact rang through his arm. Malik's lance hit high, right at the top of Stuart's chest plate. Malik's arm had probably jerked up from Stuart's hard hit. Stuart's helmet ripped off. Everything went black and then exploded with light.

He'd heard the term "out of body experience" but never thought anybody actually experienced it. He could see himself leaning all the way back on his horse, but his legs gripped tight to keep his seat, as if something otherworldly was holding him in place. His shattered lance dropped to the ground, and Malik flew off his horse and hit the ground.

He only had a moment to feel triumph because he heard a voice in his head...

"Stuart, Stuart."

The voice was unmistakable. It was his mom.

He searched around for her, but he couldn't see anything but the stadium.

"I love you, my boy," she said softly. "Angela and I are happy. We're safe. It's time for you to be happy ... Belle. Love Belle. For us."

Stuart sucked in a breath. “Mom?”

The spell broke.

Everything came back into focus. The crowd crying out in concern, Annalisa nervously moving underneath him as if she could sense he wasn't right. The pain in his chin and forehead from Malik's lance hitting him and the helmet being wrenched violently off.

He shook his head and clung tighter to the reins. Annalisa stopped and Gerald was right there. Dr. Grace was running his way, but he only wanted to see Belle. He looked to the stands. She was clinging to the railing, staring at him with concern.

*Belle*, his mom's voice had said. *Love Belle*.

Could he? Was any of that real or just a figment of his imagination? He wanted so badly to know his mom and sister were happy, and he wanted to love Belle more than he wanted to win the joust today. What should he do? What was real and what was his desperate longing? He really didn't know.

He saw Malik sitting up and then standing. He looked rattled but okay.

Gerald had his helmet in hand. “Are you all right, sir?”

“How many times have I told you I'm not a sir or a knight?”

Gerald laughed. “You sound all right.”

“I am. Thanks.”

“I don't think Malik meant to.” The stable and equipment manager clutched the helmet, obviously apprehensive. He'd seen some of the battles Malik and Stuart had fought.

Stuart tried to smile—the man probably needed reassurance that Stuart wouldn't go pummel Malik while he was down—but his insides were still swirling with the experience he'd just had. Part of him wanted to run to Belle and hold her. Part of him wanted to run away.

He waved to the crowd, and everyone cheered. He'd bested Malik and though his helmet being wrenched off like



that could have killed him, he was fine.

Belle was clapping and smiling at him, but there were tears on her beautiful face. Had she been worried about him? He smiled back at her and then placed his gloved hand to his heart. Her smile grew until her beautiful face and dark eyes seemed to beam at him. This was the moment he had to make a decision. Did he trust that God cared for him and had sent him some heavenly vision, or did he keep fighting God and everyone else in his life?

He kept his focus on Belle. He'd never be worthy of her. He wiped at a smear of blood on his forehead. It was just a scratch, but it reminded him that his father's tainted blood still ran through his veins.

But his mother's angelic blood did as well.

Was light stronger than darkness? Could he be the man who could love, protect, and honor Belle? His past didn't seem to matter to her. He'd told her the bitter, ugly truth. She loved him regardless.

Were his mom and sister truly happy and in heaven? Did the Savior's mercy extend to Stuart? If only he knew. Then maybe his path wouldn't be so hard to choose.

Was a bargain with Heavenly Father acceptable or would that just show the good Lord that Stuart didn't fully trust Him and was a beggar and gambler at heart? Stuart didn't know, but he said an internal prayer. *If I win the joust, I'll try to believe in You. If I can be tournament champion and kiss Belle, I'll do everything in my power to be the kind of man Belle deserves.*

He waited but didn't hear any heavenly confirmation. He didn't get struck down by lightning either, so maybe there was hope.

But winning against Kingston or Alaric? It would take a miracle. He'd told Belle he hoped a hardened man like him not receiving a miracle wouldn't damage her faith. Sadly for him, it all hinged on a miracle that would probably never happen.

He wouldn't give up trying though.

He gritted his teeth and ground out, "Hooah."

## Chapter Nineteen



Belle wanted to run out into the arena when Stuart's helmet popped off, but as he was flung back in his saddle, his grip on his horse with his thigh muscles stayed unbelievably strong. It almost looked like angels were holding him in place. The moment was quick, and Belle wondered if she'd imagined it when he quickly righted himself.

His helmet being ripped off like that could've killed him, but miraculously he looked to be all right. A small trickle of blood ran down his forehead. It couldn't be more than a scratch, or it would've bled viciously as head wounds were prone to.

Stuart turned to her and she smiled, hoping to show her support. He smiled in return then put a gloved hand to his armored chest. Her smile grew and warmth filled her. Did that mean ... anything? She had his heart? He loved her? The Bible verse had touched him and he felt loved? How she prayed any and all of those things were true.

Malik had been knocked off his horse which meant Addie had run down to fuss over him. It also meant Stuart was advancing in the tournament. If only Belle had the right to fuss over Stuart, but he didn't appear to need or want that. She watched as he dismounted and led his horse away. Mary offered him a glass carafe of water, which he guzzled. He looked to be feeling pretty good.

Alaric and Kingston lined up to joust. Belle watched the action, trying to appreciate the regal arena and even more regal Commander Prince Alaric and General Kingston battle it out.

Her family. The dust in the air, all the knights in full armor, the crowd cheering, it was like a scene from a movie. But only Stuart had her attention and her gaze kept straying to him. Every time she looked at him, he was staring intently at her, and several times he smiled, winked, or pressed his glove to his heart again. He looked strong and perfect in his armor and her heart was racing faster by the second. Had something changed from last night when he'd told her goodbye in the stables? Had her note and the Bible verses touched him?

Alaric and Kingston's match was a draw; each of them had broken their lance on each other's chest every time. It was just like those two to do so well that it had to go to the judges.

Belle wrung her hands together as she quietly waited with the rest of the crowd for the decision. Finally, Quinn conferred with the judges and then climbed onto the podium. "The judges have decided that the competitor who will advance is ... Commander Alaric!"

The crowd cheered wildly. Belle had rarely seen Kingston beaten, and though everyone loved General Kingston, Alaric was the more approachable military leader. He was also dating Dr. Grace who the people adored. Plus it was just fun to see an upset.

Would they see another one?

Her gaze strayed to Stuart again. He was conferring with his friend Wes, but as if he sensed her gaze, he looked her way. His handsome face split into a broad grin. She grinned back, praying—praying that he would win, that he would name her fair maiden, that he would love her and turn his heart to God. Lots of prayers. Was she hoping for far too much from some significant looks and a few smiles?

Alaric got some water and a lingering kiss from Grace, which everyone loved, and then Alaric and Stuart rode to different ends of the list. Belle couldn't sit. She sprang to her feet and leaned against the stadium railing. Her parents each gave her concerned looks but she simply smiled in response and focused on Stuart.

Stuart accepted the lance from Gerald, but he didn't have his face shield down. He looked to Belle and raised his lance as if in salute to her. Every eye in her section of the arena turned to her. She waved back at Stuart, hope lighting her up from the inside out. He was riding for her. She knew it.

Now if only he could win.

She loved Alaric, but he or Kingston won almost every week. *Please, please, if it be thy will. Let Stuart win. Let him know thou helped him win. Let him know we both love him.*

She clung to the railing and bit at her cheek as the flag was dropped. She could hear Stuart's "Hooah!" over the crowd's cheering and it made her think of when he'd said that before he'd kissed her.

"Hooah!" she yelled out, and then she was screaming as loud as anybody in the crowd.

Stuart and Alaric were almost in line with each other when they both jabbed hard with the lance. Stuart's lance glanced off Alaric's right shoulder and didn't break. Alaric's lance broke squarely on Stuart's chest. Somehow Stuart stayed in the saddle.

Most of the crowd screamed even louder, including Belle's family. Disappointment filled Belle and she questioned her prayers and her intuition. Maybe Stuart needed to be humbled. Most of the people on Magna would say he did. Belle would've agreed a week ago. Now that she knew him and his story, she didn't think he needed to be humbled. He needed to be loved and find true success and confidence, not the fake bravado he'd hidden behind for so long.

The horses slowed and Alaric jabbed his broken lance in the air. The crowd roared again. Stuart's shoulders were straight, defiant, and he didn't lift his visor up. Belle wished she knew what he was thinking. Maybe it was crazy to think he could win against Alaric. Everyone else would say so. There were numerous soldiers who had trained their whole lives and couldn't beat her brother.

Stuart and Alaric wheeled around to go again. Gerald traded out Stuart's lance, even though it hadn't broken, a superstition she'd seen before that you didn't want an unlucky lance. Alaric accepted a new lance and wheeled around to face Stuart. His visor was up, and he was grinning happily as if he'd already won.

She adored her brother. She'd never wanted anything but happiness and good fortune for him. Right now she wanted Stuart to knock him off his horse and wipe that confident smile off his face.

She tried to pray for Stuart, but her faith was lacking. Her stomach churned.

*Please, Lord, was all she could think. Please let him win.*

Maybe it was a vain prayer or a selfish one, but she wanted him to win so badly. It might be the catalyst for him to know God loved him, to know he was worthy.

The flag dropped, the cheers became deafening, and the horses raced toward each other. The score was two to one; two points to Alaric for breaking his lance on Stuart's chest and one point to Stuart for hitting him with the lance but not breaking it.

Stuart had to knock Alaric off to win.

Could Stuart really unseat the commander, her brother who'd lived and breathed the military and jousting his entire life? Up until six weeks ago, Stuart had never ridden a horse.

The men came thundering together and Stuart raised his lance early. Over the screams of the crowd, she heard something that made her tingle all over: "For Belle!"

Then he jabbed his lance across his body and into Alaric's chest. Lance shards flew everywhere as Alaric's lance made contact with Stuart's shoulder.

The power behind Stuart's hit knocked Alaric back into thin air. He grasped in vain for the horse that was speeding away. And then he bounced and flipped onto the ground, landing on his abdomen.

Belle screamed in exultation as Stuart jabbed his lance in the air. The crowd was going nuts, except for her family who was watching in concern to see if Alaric was all right. Grace vaulted over the separator.

Stuart jerked his horse to a stop, wheeled around, and rode quickly to Alaric. He slid from his horse, under the fence line that separated the jousts, and reached Alaric first. Leaning down, he wrapped his hands around Alaric and helped him to his feet. Alaric flipped up his helmet visor and gave the crowd a wave. The stadium went wild. The commander was okay, and against all odds, the determined American had won.

Grace slowed her steps and Belle decided it was time for her to copy her future sister-in-law's move. She was in a lacy, white summer dress, but she flipped over the post and dropped to the dirt.

"Belle?" her family seemed to all say at once, her father's voice louder than the others. She ignored them and ran across the packed dirt of the stadium.

The cheers kept coming, but now she could hear, "Princess Belle?" among them.

Stuart turned to her. He still had his helmet on. She couldn't tell if he was smiling. He said something to Alaric. Her brother smiled and shook his head. Stuart released him and Alaric wobbled on his feet but kept standing.

Stuart took off at a run toward her. He ripped off his helmet and dropped it and she could see then that he was grinning broadly. He threw down his gloves and then he was upon her.

"Belle." Her name came out in a happy breath.

He swept her off her feet and against his armored chest. His lips claimed hers and joy overcame her. She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and held on, returning the kiss with all the love she had for this man.

Hoots and hollers tried to intrude on their moment, but they kept on kissing. Suddenly the cheering tapered and then stopped. A rustling noise filled the stadium.

Stuart pulled away and whipped her around behind him to protect her from whatever was coming.

Belle's father strode across the dirt toward them. Everyone was bowing. Stuart held onto her but went down onto one knee as well.

The king reached them. He glanced around and gestured for the people to stand. They all did, except for Stuart. There was an uneasy feeling in the stadium, as if nobody knew if the king was going to accept the American kissing his daughter or if he was going to tell Alaric, "off with his head" like a nightmarish medieval novel.

"Stuart Falslev," her dad said.

"Yes, sir." Stuart glanced up but stayed on one knee, holding Belle's hand.

"Stand, please."

Stuart straightened. Belle came around to his side, clinging to his hand and praying. He'd won. He'd kissed her in front of everyone. Her prayers had been answered.

*Please don't let Father mess it all up with some archaic idea that I can't love an outsider.*

"My son Alaric informs me that you're an honorable man who's protected our sweetheart Belle."

Stuart swallowed and Belle could tell he wanted to refute the praise, but he simply dipped his head. "Thank you, King Kendrick."

The stadium was so quiet; Belle wondered if everyone in the large crowd could hear them, or was straining to.

"Our Belle is special, not just a princess but a ministering angel who loves everyone. Can you promise me that you will treat her with respect and the love and honor she deserves?"

Belle was one the swallowing now. Stuart wasn't proposing, though she wouldn't mind that in the near future. What if her father's strong words pushed him away?

Stuart glanced down at her and a soft smile grew on his face. “I love Belle, sir, and I want everyone to know it.”

Belle felt tingles spread throughout her body.

“I promise to love, respect, and protect her until my dying breath.”

“I love you too,” Belle said.

The king extended his hand. He and Stuart shook, and the stadium erupted as if on cue. Her father held their joined hands high. As the stadium settled a little bit, he hollered, “I name Stuart Falslev as tournament champion.”

Everyone roared again. King Kendrick lowered then released Stuart’s hand and said with a teasing grin, “Well, son, are you going to name a fairest maiden?”

Belle’s body flushed with warmth as Stuart turned to her and wrapped his arm around her.

“I name Princess Belle as the fairest maiden in the land.” The way he said it was so commanding and alluring that Belle’s knees felt weak. She was his princess, and he was the knight pure and good who’d come to sweep her off her feet. Even better than having her father the king’s approval was knowing that Stuart felt worthy of her and knew of her love.

He looked down at her, his dark eyes twinkling. “And now I guess she has to give me a prize.”

She laughed and tugged his head down. “A kiss for now, and more coming later.”

“Hooah,” he whispered against her lips and then he was kissing her again.

The crowd roared around them. Stuart gently released her from the kiss, tugged his chest plate off and dropped it and then swept her off her feet and into his arms. Her father had stepped a bit away and was conferring with Alaric. She blew him a kiss, then waved to the crowd and her family. Most of her family still looked stunned, but they’d be fine. They all loved her and trusted her, and Alaric and her father approved.



Alaric stepped up and slapped Stuart on the shoulder. “She’s my baby sister. Keep it righteous, my friend.”

Stuart nodded, his smile becoming more serious. “I plan to.” He nodded to the king again. “Your highness.” Then carried her toward the closest stadium exit. The crowd cheered in approval.

Belle wrapped her arms around his neck and looked up into his handsome face. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she wanted to know. He carried her out onto the street, over the bridge, and toward the beach. She wanted to talk and kiss more, but she appreciated he was taking her somewhere private. People were already spilling out of the stadium and watching them.

They finally made it through the hedge and onto the sand. Stuart looked down at her, his gaze traveling over her face. “Beautiful Belle.” Then he kissed her, long and deep. He let her feet slide to the ground, framed her face with his hands, and continued to kiss her.

When they both had to pull back for air, they simply stood close, staring into each other’s eyes. “What happened?” She had to know.

Stuart tilted his head. “Your prayer, your note and the Bible verses, more of your prayers, your kiss. You happened to me, Belle.”

Her eyes pricked with tears.

He kissed her softly and said, “When I got hit so hard by Malik that my helmet popped off, I had this weird out-of-body experience and I heard my mom’s voice. She told me she was happy, and she wanted me to find love, with you, for her and Angela.”

The tears overflowed then. Her prayers had come to fruition and Stuart knew he was loved.

Stuart tenderly wiped her tears away. “Then I made a deal with God. I told him if I could win then I would do everything in my power to be the man you deserve.”

“You already are,” she said.

He shook his head. “No, but I want to be. It’s going to take some time for me to learn how to love, how to trust in God, and love you the way you deserve. Will you help me, Belle? Can you be patient and love me?”

She grinned, though tears were still streaming down her face. “You’re talking to the princess of patience and love, my beast turned into a handsome prince.”

He laughed and nodded. “No one could tame this beast but you.”

“That is for sure.”

“I love you.”

She circled her arms around his neck. “I love you.”

Then he was kissing her again and she didn’t have to be patient at all. His lips took command of her world like the warrior he was. It would be no trouble to love this man, this incredible, competitive former-beast. The man who had won her heart.

\* \* \*

## **The Hidden Kingdom Romances**

*Royal Secrets*

*Royal Security*

*Royal Doctor*

*Royal Mistake*

*Royal Courage*

*Royal Pilot*

*Royal Imposter*

*Royal Baby*

*Royal Battle*

*Royal Fake Fiancé*

## Royal Courage

Princess Leia Magnum tried to keep her gaze from straying to the handsome redheaded American as he strode confidently into the castle's conference room. He shook her cousin, Prince Bodi's hand, and then greeted Bodi's girlfriend Julia.

Wes turned to her and his blue eyes seemed to sparkle. Whew. There was power in those eyes, lightning and thunder and ... he could do a very good Thor imitation with those eyes and his handsome face and lean, well-built body.

She stood, smoothing down her white shirt and blue skirt, wishing she had sharp business clothes like Julia, especially the sassy heels. Leia had one pair of black heels and she wore them far too often. Every day in fact. She used permanent marker to cover up the scuffs. Their country was coming out of a deep financial crisis and Manalo Blahnik's weren't an essential import item.

Wes crossed the room and extended his hand. He was tall and fit and she appreciated pretty much everything about him, except for the fact that he hadn't seemed to so much as notice her in the six weeks he'd lived on her island.

"Princess," he murmured in a deep voice with the soft drawl that made her stomach hop.

"Leia is fine," she said crisply, trying to be professional, despite how good her hand felt clasped in his warm grip.

"Princess Leia," his smile grew. "Do you ever wear your hair in Princess Leia braids?"

She tilted her head, appraising him and his odd question. “Not since I was five.”

He chuckled. “I bet it was cute.”

Cute? She didn’t know why that annoyed her. She had been “cute” at five. Now she didn’t want this handsome, tough yet incredibly kind man thinking of her as “cute” as if she were some little girl. Maybe she shouldn’t let it annoy her. She was too feisty and easily annoyed, she knew that as her younger brother Darian reminded her every other day.

“Let’s sit and get started,” Bodi said, saving her from having to respond. She didn’t know why she was getting all bothered by Wes Hunsaker, American military stud and all-around nice guy. She wasn’t interested in him. She was interested in the wealthy millionaire who she’d been emailing back and forth with for the past month. He was flying to their island tomorrow on his private jet. Romeo Angelino was handsome, charming, had family money from Italy but was now living in the exciting city of Las Vegas, a veritable Garden of Eden to hear him tell it. Most importantly her modern-day Romeo could make her dreams come true.

Leia loved the island of Magna, her country, her people, and most of all her family, but she dreamt of seeing and experiencing the world. She’d come back home ... eventually. Now that the tourist industry was going well and their country wasn’t in dire financial straits she thought it was incredibly perfect timing that her Romeo was coming to whisk her away. Bodi and Julia didn’t need her as much as they had at the inception of tourism. Leia planned to spend a week showing Romeo her small island country and then he’d show her the world.

Wes pulled out a chair for her and she had to ignore the tingle she felt from his fingers brushing her upper arm as he helped her into her seat. Wes was a nice guy, he was simply not in Romeo’s level of ... romance. She smiled to herself. Wes was too nice and boring.

The devastating grin he gave her as she looked his way made her stomach flip. She looked away. Boring. Definitely.

She snuck another peek and his blue eyes seemed to light up. Maybe ... not ... boring?

“Thank you Wes for coming to advise us,” Bodi began.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t informed,” Leia interrupted. “What are you advising us on? Kingston and Alaric run the military not us.” She gave him a sassy wink.

Wes gave her an appealing chuckle back. “Kingston and I thought it was important you understood military tactics, self defense, how to spot a would-be criminal.” He pumped his eyebrows at her. She’d never met a redhead in person before Julia came to their island. Who knew redhead men would be so appealing? Wes’s hair was dark reddish-brown, his face was sculpted in manly ways that were just far too attractive and his tall, lean frame shouted tough and confident. Above all it was those irresistible true-blue eyes that yanked her right in, as blue and warm as the ocean that surrounded their island. She loved how they were framed with brown lashes, had an intelligent and spiritual light about them, and just the way they looked at her ... Whew.

\* \* \*

Keep reading [here](#).

## About the Author

Cami is a part-time author, part-time exercise consultant, part-time housekeeper, full-time wife, and overtime mother of four adorable boys. Sleep and relaxation are fond memories. She's never been happier.

Join Cami's VIP list to find out about special deals, giveaways and new releases and receive a free copy of *Rescued by Love: Park City Firefighter Romance* by clicking [here](#).

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## Five Free Books

Download the complete Echo Ridge Romance Collection [here](#) when you sign up for Cami's newsletter.

### *Christmas Makeover:*

Chelsea Jamison has been infatuated with Drew Stirling longer than she's loved playing basketball, high-top sneakers, and the Knicks. Unfortunately, all Drew sees is the kid who kicked his trash in the high school free throw contest and not the girl whose heart breaks into a fast dribble when he's near.

Drew makes an unexpected visit home to Echo Ridge and their friendship picks up where they left off as they scheme to make a teenaged boy's Christmas dreams come true. When Chelsea realizes she's fallen for her best friend, she wonders if there is any hope of a relationship with Drew or if she's stuck in buddy-status for life.

### *Last of the Gentlemen:*

Despite the hardships she's faced, Emma Turner is determined to make a good life for her three children. Working nights and struggling through life doesn't leave much time for romance, which is just fine as far as Emma is concerned. But when her son's good-looking lacrosse coach takes an interest in her children, Emma has to fight off the smolder in her stomach and banish her daydreams. This schoolgirl crush needs to end before she embarrasses her son and herself. If only she could tell that to her heart.

### *My Best Man's Wedding:*

Jessica Porter made a vow to marry her best guy friend, Josh, when they turned thirty. When Josh calls with the news that he's coming home to Echo Ridge for his wedding, Jessica is determined to break up the happy couple and take her rightful place as his bride. Gentry Trine, a coworker, agrees to pretend to be her fiancé to stir up feelings of jealousy. However, Jessica didn't realize fake fiancés could kiss like champions, and make a girl smile nonstop. Can she figure out which is the right man for her before she loses them both?

*Change of Plans:*

Kaitlyn knows who she's destined to spend her life with, until superstar Axel Olsen turns her dreams upside down.

Kaitlyn Johanson is chosen by heartthrob, nationally-acclaimed lacrosse player, Axel Olsen, for a dream date. She didn't know a man touching her hand could feel like heaven, but she awkwardly blacks out then admits to him that she's in a relationship.

Kaitlyn comes home to Echo Ridge hoping to rekindle her relationship with her high school boyfriend, Mason. She never expects Axel to show up in her hometown, hosting a lacrosse camp with Mason and his stepdad.

When Axel steals her attention and possibly her heart from the man she is supposed to marry, she has to decide if she'll take a risk on new love or give old love a second chance.

*Counterfeit Date:*

Mason Turner only has eyes for Lolly Honeymiller. She's vivacious and hilarious and unfortunately thinks of him as her best friend's ex. Lolly's friends cook up a scheme: pretending Lolly is making him over for a special date with his dream girl. The more time he and Lolly spend together, the harder it is to keep his feelings a secret.

Lolly offers to help Mason Turner prepare for a date with his dream girl. Through makeovers, shopping, and practice kissing, she tries to keep her distance but finds herself falling for a man she can never have. As the date approaches, both

wonder if they can keep things fake or if the farce will implode and shred both of their hearts.

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