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CAMI CHECKETTS

MATCHMAKING

THE *Model* AND THE *Beast*

Billionaire Protection Romances #4

MATCHMAKING THE MODEL AND THE BEAST

BILLIONAIRE PROTECTION ROMANCES #4

CAMI CHECKETTS



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Matchmaking the Model and the Beast: Billionaire Protection Romances #4

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CHAPTER ONE

Eva Canterbury wove expertly through the crowd of ultra-wealthy and ultra-famous people, most fitting seamlessly into both categories. She skirted the pool and continued across the beautifully landscaped patio area of billionaire philanthropists Sutton and Liz Smith's Southern California mansion.

Friends, work associates, acquaintances, and sometimes complete strangers called to her. She returned each greeting with a beaming smile, but she couldn't afford to be waylaid. Hayden "The Beast" Warren was here tonight, and she was determined to finally meet him, speak to him, thank him, and hopefully flirt with him and secure a date in the very near future. All these objectives needed to be met before she disappeared into the mansion for her nine-p.m. meeting. She had half an hour.

She spied a security guard trailing her. Interesting. She hadn't hired Sutton Smith's men yet, and shouldn't she be safe from the vile David Zeus III in Sutton's stronghold? Thankfully, the scum had not been on the guest list tonight. She doubted Sutton would ever allow the criminal into his home—unless it was to bait and trap him.

The security meeting was the real reason she'd made an effort to be in town and accepted the invite to this exclusive party. She wasn't a fan of parties. Though she recognized rubbing shoulders with the wealthy elite was part of her life as a model and business owner, she'd rather be with her nephew, sister,

and brother-in-law, working, or walking on the beach of her Balboa Island home.

She was here because Sutton Smith and Gunner Steele were prepared to discuss some ‘drastic protection measures.’ The no-longer-veiled and increasingly foul threats from Zeus, the untouchable L.A. crime boss, had been escalating. Her friend Britney Pearl insisted the enigmatic Sutton Smith was the best. Britney set up the meeting for Eva, and she’d been grateful for it. If anybody on this earth could protect her from Zeus, she would do anything and pay anything.

The police and FBI agents assigned to her case were doing all they could to help, but the FBI agent she was working with had suggested it was time to hire private protection. They couldn’t arrest Zeus for the inciting incident—a lewd conversation and threats when he and several of his goons had cornered her coming out of the ladies’ room at an upscale restaurant. She had no record of the conversation to prove he’d made the threats. Since that day, unsigned notes had arrived daily.

Though law enforcement believed Zeus had threatened her and was sending the notes, they didn’t have the manpower to follow her night and day waiting for him to act on one of his ‘suggestions.’ The fact that three other women associated with—or rather threatened by—Zeus had disappeared in the past year had them all wanting desperately to pin something on him and find those women. So far, nothing had stuck.

Eva shoved all of that to the back of her mind. The police and FBI were doing all they could, and soon, Sutton Smith’s highly respected operatives would be officially on the job. Right now, she was taking a break from the stress and fear of Zeus kidnapping her and allowing herself the happy anticipation of her upcoming encounter with ‘the Beast.’ She would finally be up close and personal with the man of her dreams. Her heart skipped, and she grinned.

It was mid-June, and she prayed her antiperspirant was working. San Diego was warm even with the sun going down. She was sweating in her capped-sleeve, knee-length red dress. It wasn’t the temperature or her dress designer’s fault that she

was sweating. The dress was flattering, modest, and made of high-quality and breathable linen. It was simply her nerves at finally being able to speak to a man she'd started admiring several years ago when he rose to fame in the NBA as the leading scorer for the Clippers. She watched his games and any interviews he gave and followed him on social media. When Hayden visited her equally enamored nephew in the hospital a couple months ago, he had risen to superhero status in her mind.

She spotted Hayden speaking with a petite brunette. He was six-eight and as beautifully built as any man had a right to be. He dwarfed the lady.

Eva slowed her steps and kept her gaze focused on the basketball player. At almost six feet and wearing heels, she could see over most people's heads.

As if he sensed her staring, Hayden glanced up. His gaze instantly zeroed in on her. Eva had to stop moving. Those deep-brown eyes captured her like no man's ever had before. She put a hand to her heart, willing it to slow its now-frantic pattern. Warmth filled her body, and she wondered if her infatuation with the famous athlete was written all over her face. She'd told no one but her sister how impressed and drawn to him she was. The past few seasons, she'd watched every game she could make it to, perched on her front row seat, bringing Parley along when he felt well enough. She caught the games online when she was traveling for work. After every home game, she tried to catch Hayden and introduce herself, but he always somehow disappeared.

Not tonight.

Resolve filled her, and she gifted him with her most alluring smile—the smile that many men claimed made them want to fall to their knees and swear their undying devotion to her. Those men were ridiculous. She was only interested in one man and finally, *finally*, he was within reach.

She tilted her head to the side, an obvious invitation to slip away from the party and speak privately in the flower garden or on the bluff overlooking the ocean.

He raised his eyebrows but didn't return her smile. Eva didn't like it, but she wasn't concerned. He'd be smiling at her soon enough. She turned and strode off the patio and toward the ocean, her heels sinking into the grass with each step. She kept plucking her way forward and didn't look to see if he was coming.

Of course he was coming.

Besides the insane money it had brought to her and the opportunities those funds had given her to help children throughout the world, Eva considered her acclaimed face and body shape an annoyance. She hated that men stared unabashedly at her. She hated turning men down for date requests and felt like a bully doing so. She didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but she'd love to find a guy who could talk to her without his jaw going slack.

Reaching the edge of the bluff, she looked around at the moon glinting off the waves crashing far below. The sea breeze finally cooled her off. She pulled one of her signature mint lip glosses out of her clutch and applied it. She studied the ocean, and she waited and waited and ... any minute now, the most impressive man of their day would walk up.

Would the Beast say something clever? Flirt with her? Touch her arm or shoulder to get her attention? What would his touch feel like? She shivered, just imagining his hand on her arm and those deep-brown eyes boring into hers as he bent closer because he didn't want to miss one word she had to say.

Footsteps approached, and she smiled to herself. He was here. Should she whirl to face him or stay facing away and let him make the first move? Her heart thumped with eager anticipation. She liked the mystery and allure of this meeting. Every part of her was on high alert.

A hand brushed along her backside, skimming much lower than she appreciated. Shock filled her. No man was allowed to take liberties like that with her, and that was no way for her dream man to behave. She yanked away and whirled to face him.

“How dare you ...” Her brow wrinkled with confusion. “Trevor?”

Ah, no. Not now. Running into this scum was almost as bad as the man she’d built up in her mind as the best man ever stealing a cheap feel. She was grateful Hayden hadn’t been the one trailing his hand where he shouldn’t, but the disappointment of Trevor coming after her when she’d been hoping for Hayden made her chest tight and her stomach squirm.

Trevor Allred was a wealthy jerk who owned half of California and thought he appealed to every woman in it. He had to be at least fifteen years older than her. She tried not to keep up with his sordid love life, but he’d married A-list actress Samantha Mediera less than two months ago. This wasn’t the first time he’d hit on Eva with no encouragement, and it wouldn’t be the last.

“Oh, I dare,” Trevor said, moving closer. “You look gorgeous tonight, Eva, as always. Absolutely gorgeous.”

“Excuse me,” she said haughtily, refusing to acknowledge his empty compliments. “I’m meeting someone.” The security guard from earlier was closing in. She wouldn’t mind him tossing Trevor off the bluff, but she could handle this scum on her own. Trevor wasn’t a criminal or dangerous like Zeus, and it was important the cheater knew where she stood. She gave the guard a discreet shake of her head, and he stopped and tilted his chin in acknowledgement. He wouldn’t interfere ... unless she needed him to.

Trevor pumped his eyebrows. “That’s right. You’re meeting me.” He ran his tongue over his lips. “Now I’ve only got a few moments until Samantha finishes in the restroom, so let’s not waste time. What are we hoping to accomplish with this *meeting*, gorgeous?”

“The meeting is over.” She reached into her clutch, wrapped her hands around her pepper spray, and pulled it out. “I’ll give you to the count of one to head back to the party, or I’ll shoot.”

His eyes widened. “You wouldn’t dare. We both know you’ve been giving me the eye all night.”

“Oh, I *dare*.” Had he been standing close to Hayden all night? She would never intentionally focus on or encourage Trevor. “I’d be happy to give you a mouthful of pepper spray and to let Samantha know you propositioned me. I’m recording already, as I was prepared for my meeting with someone else.” She was impressed by how smoothly she’d made up that lie. “What’ll it be, Trevor Allred? Coughing, crying, burning throat and eyes, and divorce number six—or is it seven?—on the books, or will you head quietly back to the party?”

He held up his hands and backed away. “Just some innocent flirting. No harm done.”

“Not if you stay away from me.” She arched an eyebrow.

He cursed, spun away, and stormed back toward the house. Eva released a breath and slid the pepper spray back into her clutch. Her shoulders relaxed a fraction. She couldn’t believe Trevor’s nerve, hitting on her in plain sight while his wife was in the bathroom. She nodded to the security guard. He gave her a grin and saluted her. Her shoulders relaxed a fraction at his approval.

She glanced to the spot where Hayden had been talking to the brunette. He was still there, and he was studying her. Even from fifty feet away, she could tell he was completely focused on her.

What was he doing? Why wasn’t he coming? The interaction with Trevor had shaken her, but she still wanted to talk to Hayden, thank him for what he’d done for her nephew, and hopefully flirt with him and get to know him. She lifted her hand and gestured, hopefully in an appealing way.

He gave her an incredulous look and then focused back on the woman he’d been speaking to.

Eva deflated. She’d never seen a man play so hard to get. But he’d come. She knew he would. He’d been watching her. She’d called the security guard off, but she wouldn’t have minded Hayden storming over and putting Trevor in his place. Not that she’d needed him, but it would’ve shown he wanted to step up and be her man.

She focused back on the ocean waves and brainstormed all the witty lines she could say to Hayden when he came. She waited. And waited. And waited.

Her phone beeped a warning. She pulled it out. Her meeting with Sutton Smith was in ten minutes. Shoot. She'd been standing here for almost twenty, waiting for the Beast to come talk to her. She had so many happy fantasies, daydreaming about Hayden and what he would be like. The media and other women lauded him as charming, hilarious, tough and yet kind. He was the man she'd been anxious to meet and hopefully date. He seemed ideal to her. Now if only she could spend some time alone with him. Why hadn't he come?

She turned away from the view of the ocean and scanned the party. The crowd was thinning, and there was nobody taller than average lingering on the patio. Dang. She'd had hundreds of men, maybe thousands, hit on her, pursue her, even stalk her throughout her life. Yet the one man she wanted chasing her was not stepping up to the task. Was he involved with someone else? She hadn't seen that on any of his social media or the many interviews he'd given, but maybe he was keeping it private. Disappointment filled her. What if her dream man was already taken?

Slowly walking across the grass, she avoided looking at Trevor with Samantha by his side, the poor lady, and responded to everyone else who spoke to her. She headed inside, asked for a restroom, and was directed down a side hall. Just as she reached it, the door swung open, revealing none other than Hayden 'the Beast' Warren.

He straightened to his full height and glowered down at her. Eva blinked in surprise. What right did he have to glower at her? She'd motioned to him, twice, and he hadn't come. She should be glowering at *him*. He could've heroically rescued her from Trevor, made her heart sing, and given them an incredible story to tell their grandchildren.

Instead ...

All the dreams she'd had of their first meeting crashed down around her, and neither one of them had said a word. Was the

man she'd fantasized about already taken, or was he a fraud and underneath his charming, perfect exterior he was really a heartbreaking jerk?

"Thanks a lot for the help with Trevor and coming out to meet me," she hurled at him. It wasn't even close to what she'd hoped to say to him, but she was frustrated and off her game. All flirtatious and funny lines of gratitude were shelved for the time being. Unless he had the excuse of the century.

Hayden lifted one eyebrow. He looked gloriously handsome with his smooth, tan skin, trimmed beard, those deep-brown soulful eyes shadowed with black lashes and brows, and his fit, tall, impressive body. He leaned casually against the doorframe with one shoulder and crossed his arms. His dark gray suit was obviously tailored for his tough frame. The silky material draped just right, revealing his broad shoulders.

"Eva Canterbury in the flesh. The most beautiful and successful woman of the century." His voice was deep, with a smooth timbre. Cultured, intelligent, and as perfect as the rest of him. He almost sounded British like Sutton, but his suave pitch and inflection were definitely American.

She flushed at his words, yet there was something in his tone. He looked charming, the words were charming, but the look in his eyes said he was ... uneasy around her. That made no sense.

"I was mentally practicing," he continued, "first a right hook, then an uppercut, then it would've been lights out for Mr. Allred. I was planning it all out if he pushed things too far." He lifted a hand to her. "Being the sassy, impressive, and accomplished supermodel and businesswoman that you are, you called the security guard off who was trailing you and easily took care of Trevor. You obviously didn't need any help from little old me."

"Thank you," she managed. Another compliment. Maybe a compliment. She liked the slightly joking way he talked, but why did his words seem completely insincere? Why did he look at her as if she were a jaguar about to leap at him and rip

out his throat? “I gestured to you twice. Why didn’t you come?”

His answer was of the utmost importance. She’d never wanted a man like she did this one. Being this close to him made him more enticing than ever, but he had to show some effort and interest.

“I have something to tell you, Miss Canterbury, and you should prepare yourself. This may come as a bit of a shock to you.”

“Eva,” she corrected. “What do you need to tell me?” She raised her eyebrows in what she hoped was a sassy yet alluring look. Please let it be something flirtatious, or at least a lead-in to playful banter. All her carefully constructed lines didn’t fit this conversation. He still had that wary look in his eyes and a carefully coiled appearance to his lean, fit frame. He wanted to sprint away from her. Why?

“Though I wish it could be different, and I pray you’ll forgive my impertinence ...” His words were said in a teasing lilt, but that reluctance in his eyes and body concerned her deeply. “I can’t be expected to jump at a summons from you.”

“Why ever not?” she tried to tease back in the same smart-alecky yet formal tone, but something was dreadfully off with this interaction. Was it him or her? Disappointment filled her, thick and heavy.

“Deep-seated reasons that I absolutely refuse to divulge at this time.” He inclined his chin to her and stepped away.

She laughed at his odd answer, but she couldn’t let him just walk off. “Wait, please.” She held up a hand, scrambling to think how to salvage the interaction. This should’ve been an ideal meet-cute and instead it was looking to be a train wreck. “I was only hoping to officially meet you and thank you.”

“We’ve met,” he said, a smirk playing on his lips, but a storm brewed in his dark eyes.

They’d met? No, they hadn’t. She’d remember meeting him. They’d apparently been at the University of North Carolina at the same time. She’d been on the spirit squad as a Tar Heel

dancer her sophomore year when he'd been on the basketball team as a freshman. He'd been a red shirt that year, so never on the court, and she'd been focused on dancing and hyping up the crowd. She could not recall ever noticing him at the university or meeting him in person in the eleven years since she'd left school to pursue her modeling career. She'd only learned the details of his red-shirt year from an interview he'd given.

Her heart thumped painfully against her rib cage. Their first meeting was turning out nothing like she'd hoped.

"Believe me." She forced a smile. "I'd remember meeting the Beast."

"Believe me." His smile grew larger, but his eyes were cold. "You obviously don't."

Dang. She'd met him and somehow offended him. That wasn't like her. With the exception of jerks like Trevor Allred or David Zeus III, she thought she was naturally kind, patient, and warm. She bit at her lip and prayed for some kind of help and inspiration.

"I, um, apologize for not remembering our meeting," she tried again.

His eyes widened even as his body tightened. Something was dreadfully wrong here. "No apology necessary." His words were gracious, but the look in his eyes was carefully guarded. He was hiding something, and she had no clue what it was.

"I wanted to thank you for making my nephew's year," she continued. At least she could accomplish part of her mission. "Your visit to Parley meant a lot to my sister and brother-in-law, and of course to Parley. He told me all about it. He thinks you're the 'baddest and the best'." She held her composure and vowed she wouldn't let him see how his obvious reluctance was confusing and upsetting her. Why had she let herself build up this interaction so high? He had said nothing rude, but he was obviously upset with or uncomfortable around her. She'd never met a man so unresponsive, or maybe frustrated, with her. Men got frustrated when she turned them

down, not the other way around. She had no idea how to deal with this situation.

“Parley’s the cutest,” he said, as warm as anything he’d said tonight.

“He is.” Her adorable four-year-old nephew had acute lymphocytic leukemia. It was heart-wrenching to watch him be sick and miserable for at least a week after each chemotherapy treatment. Everyone from the nurses to the doctors to the volunteers at the children’s hospital knew of his obsession with and worship of Hayden Warren.

A doctor at the hospital had met Hayden at a fundraiser for cancer research and arranged for him to visit Parley. Sadly, Eva had been at a corporate retreat in Cancun at the time. That generous visit from the superstar was partly to blame for why she’d been so enthralled with him. The pictures and videos of this tough, huge, charming, handsome, world-renowned athlete with the nephew she adored had melted her into a gooey mess.

The letdown of their first meeting being a failure crashed into her again. It was silly, and nobody on earth would believe the acclaimed supermodel had an unrequited crush, but there you were.

“Pardon me,” he said, easing away from her. “I have a pressing appointment.”

An appointment? At nine o’clock on a Saturday night? In her experience with the Southern California elite, that usually only meant one thing. She was vindicated and yet more depressed than ever. Hayden Warren was obviously not the man she was looking for.

“No, pardon *me*,” she threw back at him before she could bite her tongue. “While you go meet with one of your many hoochie-mamas. I’m sure they just line up waiting for a star like you. No wonder you aren’t interested in flirting with a woman who has a brain in her head and an undeviating moral compass.”

He laughed, actually laughed. The deep, husky sound was as beautiful as his exterior. Eva fought the sting of disappointment again at this man not being all she'd built him up in her mind to be. She kept a straight face when she wanted to laugh with him.

He sobered but still smirked at her, his dark eyes sparkling. "I'm gratefully lacking in hoochie-mamas. If I dared 'meet' with one of the women who line up waiting for me, my mama would fly down from Wyoming and whoop me. But if you do find a woman with a brain in her head and any sort of moral compass, send her my way, would you?"

She couldn't help but gasp at how he'd thrown her snark back at her. "You are a ... beast!"

His smile grew. "Never heard that one before."

The crazy thing was ... she didn't know that he had. Not in the context she'd meant it, at least. Hannah and Daxon, her sister and brother-in-law, had raved about how funny, endearing, and genuine the Beast was. Parley had told her, 'the Beast is the baddest and the best ever!' She'd seen nothing online or in an interview that hinted he wasn't the man she'd built so high in her mind. Quite the contrary; it was almost impossible to find anything negative about him, even from opposing fans and players.

He saluted her and straightened away from the wall. As he brushed past her, he stopped, gazing down at her with those deep-brown eyes. The delicious scent of lavender-vanilla musk and clean man threatened to soften her to him. He was off-the-charts appealing, but sadly not interested in her. She was heartbroken, which was pathetic, but she'd built him up far too high in her mind.

"Tell Parley hello. Great kid."

"I will." She shouldn't have done it, but rejection was so unfamiliar to her, she heard herself making one last ditch effort to engage him. "You could come with me to visit him at home sometime. Parley calls me 'Beauty.' I think he'd love to see his favorite aunt with 'the Beast'."

His gaze swept over her, then he met her eyes again. His look wasn't full of desire like she usually saw. There was a smidgeon of longing there, but it was mostly full of uncertainty, apprehension, and regret.

“Apologies, Beauty,” he said huskily. “I’m going to have to be the Beast that doesn’t fulfill any of your fairytale dreams.”

He sauntered away before she could overcome her shock enough to respond.

Eva’s hands shook and her chest grew tight. Humiliation made her face flare with heat. She hurried into the bathroom, shut the door, and ran her hands under cold water, staring at her face in the mirror as she tried to calm down. Her Spanish mother and Norwegian father had gifted her with smooth, naturally tan skin, dark-brown eyes, and thick blonde hair. Her face was world-renowned, but Hayden hadn’t seemed affected by her beauty.

She’d hoped to find a man who could talk with her and not be awed by her face or body, but not like this.

Was he simply not interested? Or maybe she wasn’t his type. Was he already involved with someone else? There was this weird churning in her gut that told her his lack of interest was something deeper. When he said they’d met, he’d looked injured and almost stunned that she didn’t remember him. Had she hurt him in some way without even knowing she’d done it? How could she apologize when she had no clue what she’d done?

She dried her hands and looked at her phone. It was five minutes past nine. Shoot. She was going to be late, thanks to that awkward and disappointing interaction with the Beast.

Hurrying out of the bathroom, down the short hall, and through the massive main area of the house, she went toward the front entry and where she’d been told to meet Sutton and Gunner in the formal office.

The security guard from earlier was in the main area. He nodded to her, giving her an appreciative once over. If only

Hayden had looked at her like that. The double doors to the office were open and men's voices floated out.

Eva drew on years of faith in heaven above, schooling, practice, and implementation of poise. She had to put her conversation with Hayden to the back of her mind and focus on whatever proposal Sutton and Gunner had to keep her safe from David Zeus. That should be the most important item of business, not her failure to impress the Beast. She straightened her shoulders, put on her most gracious smile, and swept into the room.

Sutton Smith stood behind his desk, Gunner Steele to his side, and across the desk from both of them—none other than Hayden Warren.

“Not you,” she muttered. Her head started pounding, and she wanted to get out of here, go home, and take a bath. This night had been nothing but a nightmare.

“Beauty,” he greeted her softly. He stepped closer to Gunner and said in an undertone that she unfortunately could still hear, “I love you, bro, but if she's the favor ...” Hayden shot a conflicted gaze her way. “I'm going to have to respectfully and beseechingly beg for another option.”

“I am nobody's ‘favor,’ you beastly jerk,” she hurled at him. She was overreacting and she knew it, but his rejection stung deep. She'd honestly thought they were meant to be, and he obviously thought the opposite.

Sutton smiled smoothly, as if nothing was amiss. “Gunner, the door, please.”

Gunner nodded, hurried around her, and closed the double doors. He returned to Sutton's side and offered Eva an easy smile. She could barely return it. This man was Hayden's ‘bro’? Was that why Hayden was here? What ‘favor’?

“Eva Canterbury,” Sutton greeted her pleasantly. “I'm sure you know Hayden ‘the Beast’ Warren.”

“I know who he is,” she said tightly, “but I have no idea why you would bring him into this meeting.”

“In light of your difficult and threatening circumstances, Gunner and I believe it’s in your best interest to marry Hayden tomorrow eve.”

“What?” Eva managed, her heart racing, her skin cold and clammy. She looked at Hayden.

He gave her a charming, if insincere, smile and pumped his eyebrows. “I’m sorry, Beauty, but they blindsided me with this one. Marriage ...” A muscle jumped in his jaw he was clenching it so tight. “Not my idea, and truly not conceivable.”

Sutton looked to Gunner. The thicker and younger man gave his boss a nod of reassurance, then turned to Eva with a conspiring grin. “Don’t worry; the Beast owes me big time.”

“Cheers.” Sutton chuckled. “It’ll all be aces.”

Aces? Hayden ‘owed’ Gunner? They wanted to force him to marry her to keep her safe from Zeus? Hayden seemed to be trying to be charming, but everything he said and every look he gave her was clearly another rejection.

Eva met Hayden’s gaze. His dark eyes were churning with turmoil and for an instant, she felt bad for him. There was obviously a reason for his angst. If only she knew why it was directed at her. Had he confused her with someone else? Was there some slight in her past against this handsome man that she either didn’t intend or somehow didn’t remember? It looked like he at least agreed there was nothing ‘fun’ about this.

“I can’t marry Eva,” Hayden insisted. “It is impossible.”

Her stomach churned. Impossible? Why? What was wrong with her?

“I think I’ll take my chances with the crime lord,” she ground out, self-defense making her words come out bratty and petty. Her dream man disliked her and was flat-out refusing to marry her. For some reason, that was worse than being targeted by a vicious, depraved, and always-successful crime boss.

CHAPTER TWO

Hayden stared at the exquisitely gorgeous, world-renowned supermodel, ‘the Beauty’ Eva Canterbury. Her exterior was perfect. If only her soul was redeemable. He knew from personal experience she was a deceiving and skilled temptress. Underneath that perfectly desirable exterior, hidden behind her beautiful, warm smile, was a spiteful heart and a snarky and mean soul.

He’d all but worshipped Eva as a gangly, awkward eighteen-year-old freshman Tar Heel far from the comfort and familiarity of his family and Wyoming ranch at the University of North Carolina. He’d stared at her during far too many basketball games when he should’ve been paying attention to his coaches, teammates, and the game. He sat the bench that season as a red shirt while she danced and captivated the male portion of the student body. He’d geekily trailed her home after a few late-night games, convincing himself it was for her safety, but he didn’t think she’d noticed.

She’d shocked him when she had somehow gotten his cell number and started texting him. The texts weren’t anything earth-shattering, but it was Eva Canterbury texting him, so he had been the happiest six-foot-eight-inch freshman geek on campus. Within a few days, she’d asked him to meet her in a dark alley next to her apartment building.

Being the naïve, infatuated fool, he’d met her in that dark alley every night for two weeks, only seeing her tall, shapely outline and cloud of blonde hair. Even in the dark, she wouldn’t turn to face him. They had a shallow conversation each night, and

he tried to be his hilarious self, but she didn't seem to get his jokes. He begged her often to let him see her gorgeous face and to go on a real date with him, but she always changed the subject. He could never forget the night they'd kissed. It had been quick, fumbling, and nothing fabulous, but he was certain that was his fault as an inexperienced, gangly, and unconfident freshman. He swore to himself he'd do it better the next time, and soon he'd make her laugh and convince her to go on an actual date with him.

The next day, she disappeared. Everyone at school was chattering about it. Eva had been modeling since she was sixteen and had apparently landed a huge modeling contract. She'd left school to become wealthy and famous. Hayden had texted her and the response had shocked and devastated him. She told him what an annoying loser he was, how his kiss had felt like dead fish lips and tasted worse, that she'd met him in the dark because she didn't want to be seen with him and ruin her reputation, and if he ever contacted her again she'd get a restraining order and blast it all over her social media how truly pathetic his kissing, jokes, and attempts to flirt with her had been.

Sometimes he still felt his shoulders rounding from her vicious rejection. Basketball had become his complete focus after that. His sport, teammates, and coaches had given him motivation, distraction, and purpose. The next year he'd become the university's basketball sensation and had women begging to date him. He'd been cautious in relationships and had a hard time forgetting the gorgeous, older dancer he'd immaturely conned himself into believing was his dream woman but had turned into one of his biggest regrets. He consoled himself by remembering she hadn't been that fun to talk to, or that interesting. It had all been a physical attraction and didn't matter any longer.

He recognized the entire relationship had been a silly college fling. Maybe she'd reached out to him on a dare from the dance squad or maybe she had liked him a little but then she'd gotten her chance with the big-time modeling contract and needed to cut ties to the university. But why not let him down easy? Why belittle and humiliate him?

Now she had the nerve to act like she didn't even know him? Maybe she truly didn't remember. The beauty had probably dated and kissed so many boys and men she couldn't possibly be expected to remember them all.

Her voice had changed, especially in that she'd lost all traces of her slight Southern accent, but he imagined his voice had matured as well. Had she forgotten him because nobody had known who he was back then and it had been impossible to see each other in that dark alley?

He was making excuses for her, and that wasn't smart for his unstable state of mind.

Hayden had prayed to forgive and forget her when he was young and thought his heart was broken. He'd forgiven her, but he had little use for anyone who put off a public persona of kindness and charity but in reality cut and injured others. He'd dated many women since who were genuine and kind all the way through. That was the type of woman he wanted to be with.

It was a little harder to simply forget her. Eva had become one of the top supermodels in the world. Her beautiful face and body were plastered everywhere, often selling the products she'd helped create. Then, for the past two years, she had the audacity to sit on the front row of almost every one of his home games. If he let himself glance her direction during a game, he'd start imploding almost immediately—missed free throws and distracted playing were always a result. He'd trained himself to never look her way. He had women chasing him and could date any number of accomplished and beautiful women.

Still, coming face to face with her like this was challenging.

Challenging? His heart raced and his palms were clammy, and he felt nothing like the acclaimed 'MVP of the NBA', a multi-millionaire, and 'the most charming man on the planet.' He wanted to drop to his knees in front of her, ask her to explain how she could've been so cruel back in college when she'd always appeared to be so kind and perfect from afar, and then beg her to give him another chance.

No way. He didn't want a chance, or anything else, from Eva Canterbury. He had to keep his walls up and not let her see she was affecting him, then get out of here. Pronto.

“Gunner,” he said quietly. His lifelong friend was acting nothing like a friend should. “I know I promised any favor to repay you for protecting Aimee, and for training me how to fight, but ... give me a different option. Please. Something easy, like assassinating an untouchable dictator or infiltrating the Taliban.”

Eva let out a cute little gasp of outrage. He kept trying to keep his distance with his normal teasing comments, but the hurt he thought he'd buried had been swirling latently inside of him for years, looking for this chance. He wanted to lash out and put the famed 'Beauty' in her place. He prayed he could get through this meeting fast and keep his distance from her. It was the only way to not get snarky and mean, or fall to his knees and beg her to love him like he'd stupidly imagined he'd loved her.

Sutton's eyebrows rose, and Gunner looked to be hiding a grin.

Hayden chanced a glance at Eva. She was biting at her full lip with her arms crossed over her chest. Why had the good Lord blessed such a backstabbing fiend with the most beautiful face and shape ever created? Her dresses were always modest but tailor-made to showcase her perfect curves without being too tight or revealing. He'd think she was his perfect woman if he didn't have the inside scoop.

“We're all out of Taliban-infiltration assignments,” Gunner said with a smirk. “But when the next one comes up, I'll let you know.”

“Thanks, man. I'll owe you then.” Hayden let himself smile. He loved to tease and laugh, often surprising his opponents with quirky comments that diffused any tensions playing at an insanely competitive level of athletics always created.

He folded his arms across his chest and steeled himself to look at her again. She blinked at him, her doe-like eyes appearing injured and making him feel like a beast. His nickname was all

about how hard he played and how ‘beastly tough’ he was. Nothing to do with him being grumpy or mean. He felt both right now. He didn’t like acting closed off when she had obviously been trying to flirt with him outside the bathroom, but he wasn’t sure how to change it.

The fact of the matter was Eva might appear sweet, virtuous, and irresistible, but he’d been injured by her at an impressionable age and he was far too smart now to expose his heart to her again. She wanted to act like she didn’t even know him or remember what had transpired between them? It was probably wise not to dredge up the past. Hopefully he could get out of this meeting and then keep his distance from the too-enticing beauty.

“But the favor I am asking for,” Gunner clarified, “is for you to marry Miss Canterbury, give her the insulation a marriage to someone as famous as you can, and stay close by her side to help us protect her from David Zeus III.” Gunner said the man’s name with all the contempt it deserved.

Marry Eva. Sutton had said that as well. The thought of marrying his former dream woman made him warm all over. There was no possible way he could do it and be able to ignore the fact she was still crazily alluring to him. The second part of Gunner’s sentence took precedence at the moment.

“Zeus is after you?” he asked, focusing on Eva’s face, his blood running cold at the thought. David Zeus III was a skilled and elusive crime lord. He had a box at Crypto.com stadium and Hayden had seen him at Clippers games. The man oozed evil behind a fake, sadistic smile and his henchmen protecting him at all times.

Zeus had his tentacles deep into L.A. and nobody seemed able to stop him or catch him committing an actual crime. Of course, he had hundreds of paid lackeys to commit the crimes while he grew wealthier, more cocky, and more foul. This year there had been three mysterious disappearances of beautiful and accomplished women who Zeus had previously taken an interest in. No way was Hayden letting Eva be that scum’s next victim.

“He propositioned me last month at Providence,” she said in a quiet voice. He recognized the exclusive restaurant. “Since then, he’s sent dozens of filthy notes, promising all the things he’ll do to me when he gets me alone. Of course there’s no signature, fingerprints, or way to track the notes, each mailed with no return address and dropped in different post boxes throughout the state.”

Hayden forgot all his suppressed anger at Eva in the face of something much more important. “You need to get away from here. Now.” He looked at his friend and Sutton. “You two have the manpower, knowledge, and security expertise. Get her somewhere safe, surrounded by security, where Zeus will never find her. Maybe someday he’ll finally get caught or killed and Eva can return to her life and career.”

“I’m not just going to disappear,” Eva protested, glaring at him.

“If you don’t, then you’ll be another missing woman attributed to that scum and it’s *goodbye forever*,” he hurled back at her. He’d said the last two words sarcastically and dramatically, but they created an aching throb in his chest. Goodbye forever. No matter how she’d damaged him in the past, he couldn’t stand the thought of Eva disappearing and being in that vile man’s grasp. He’d heard far too many disturbing theories about what might’ve happened to the other women.

“You’re agreed to help, then?” Sutton asked smoothly.

“Uh ...” Hayden’s desire to keep her safe from Zeus was overwhelming, but ... marriage? Really? It was an extreme measure for sure. Nothing was more extreme than Zeus’s brand of depraved filth.

He met Eva’s gaze. Instead of the frustration he’d seen outside the bathroom, there was a vulnerability there that tugged at him. She’d wounded him in college and wanted to act like she didn’t remember him or what had happened between them. That was pushed to the back burner in the face of Zeus pursuing her. Hayden would never make himself vulnerable to her again, as he knew how two-faced she could be, but if it protected her from the likes of Zeus, he could keep his walls

up and joke his way through a fake marriage. All of his normal funny quips were failing him at the moment. The danger preying on her was too horrifying to joke about.

“Why him?” Eva asked, still meeting his gaze but obviously talking to Sutton and Gunner.

“If we marry you to someone as high profile as ‘the Beast,’ it will likely dissuade Zeus,” Sutton explained. “And given your shared history as Tar Heels, your current proximity, and Miss Canterbury’s prominent attendance at many of your games, it’s a believable arrangement. We’ll whisk you two away to a very private and extended honeymoon. By the time you resurface, I feel confident Zeus will have moved on.”

“But you’d miss any chance to trap the scum,” Eva pointed out. “And rescue those other women, if they’re still alive.”

Hayden could appreciate what she was saying, but no way would he allow her to be bait for the likes of Zeus. Those women probably weren’t still alive. Zeus was not the type to leave loose ends who could identify him committing one of his heinous acts.

Gunner’s fists clenched, and he looked to be gritting his teeth. “Though I’d love to dismantle him from the inside out, this op is about your safety, Eva, not taking down Zeus. We’re working on finding those women and shutting him down for good from other angles.”

“What are your thoughts, Mr. Warren?” Sutton asked.

“Why marriage? Why not just hide her?” he asked, wanting an answer but also biding his time. If Sutton and Gunner thought this was the best path to keep Eva safe, they were definitely the experts, and he trusted both of them. He might not like her but he’d never let her fall victim to the likes of Zeus.

“A high-profile, media-exploding wedding like the two of you will have might be enough to get Zeus to give up on Eva. The man thinks he’s above the law and everyone else, but we’re hoping he wouldn’t want the horrific publicity he’d get for going after the well-loved Beast’s wife,” Sutton explained. “Plus, Gunner assures me you can fight brilliantly. That gives

us another layer of protection. You never leaving Eva's side will help ease my mind."

Hayden blew out a breath and made the mistake of letting his gaze stray to Eva. For the hundredth time in five minutes. No matter the red flags he knew were there, she stirred something deep inside him. If they were going to be thrust together, he'd need to keep joking to hide his angst, but also be kind. He'd sworn to heaven above years ago that he'd forgiven her for breaking his naïve heart. He couldn't let himself forget the pain, though. It had tainted any relationship he'd had since then. This woman had the power to dismantle him at any moment. He'd have to be smart, sarcastic, and protect his heart. That was the only way to get through this.

"If I do this..." He focused on Gunner. "You'll owe me instead of the other way around, and it might be infiltrating the Taliban on a dare."

Gunner gave him almost a full smile, rare for his most serious friend. "Deal."

Sutton spread his hands. "That's ace."

Hayden's heart raced. He hadn't really agreed, had he? His palms got clammy.

"Miss Canterbury?" Sutton asked before Hayden could clarify he was still on the fence.

She looked torn, confused, and so achingly beautiful. He wanted to gather her close and comfort her, but he looked away and clamped his jaw. Those were the thoughts he absolutely could not be having.

"Can I get back to you in the morning?" she asked. "I'd like to go home and sleep on it."

"I'd recommend you not go home at all," Sutton said. "Since Britney contacted me about your situation, I've spoken with various law enforcement personnel and had some of my men monitoring your whereabouts. They established Zeus has men trailing you at all times. He'll know you came here tonight. I fear he may act promptly and have his men capture you if you

so much as leave this estate without the layers of protection my organization can provide.”

“Are you serious?” she gasped, horror filling her dark eyes.

Hayden had been training on hand-to-hand combat with Gunner in the off season for several years. His friend claimed he was on level with most of Sutton’s highly trained professionals. Hayden wanted to use all those skills when he tracked down Zeus, penetrated his layers of security, and thrashed the criminal for targeting and terrifying Eva.

“I’m afraid so,” Sutton said. “If you’re agreeable to the wedding and honeymoon, I think we should proceed quickly and I would recommend you not return home at all. I can have one of my assistants purchase any clothing, toiletries, or personal items you might need for the near future. We’ll buy your own exclusive and high-quality brands.” He smiled.

Eva had her own clothing, perfume, and skin care lines, like many celebrities.

“Do I have any choice?” she squeaked out.

Hayden found himself feeling sympathetic for the gorgeous super model. That wasn’t an emotion he thought he’d ever feel for her. He hated that neither of them seemed to have a choice, not if she wanted to not be kidnapped and possibly killed by Zeus.

“Not if you want to stay safe from Zeus,” Gunner said quietly, echoing his thoughts.

The room stilled. Hayden could feel the fear and tension radiating from Eva. He wished he could reassure her, but if he was going to keep himself safe from her devastating him emotionally again, he needed to put some firm boundaries in place like not touching, comforting, or flirting with her, or he’d be sunk before he even realized he was in quicksand. Even with what he knew about her calloused and mean-spirited heart, this woman was enticing and had too much power over him. He couldn’t succumb to it, and he had to keep his eighteen-year-old devastation forefront in his mind.

“Okay,” she whispered.

Hayden found his heart leaping at that simple word. Okay, she'd marry him and go on an extended honeymoon with him. There'd be security personnel around, but they'd be in close proximity for who knew how long.

She focused on him, those long eyelashes of hers fluttering becomingly and framing her deep-brown eyes irresistibly.

“Thank you for marrying me even though you don't like me,” she said softly. “It's very kind of you.”

Those words of gratitude hit him like a gut punch. They felt sincere, and they surprised him. He'd assumed she was entitled and pampered. What if she was as sweet as that genuine appreciation felt? He'd be in deep trouble.

He wanted to rush to reassure her that he definitely liked her. He just couldn't allow himself to show it. Instead he smirked at her, “It'll be fun. I'm thinking we focus on a snarky and nonstop teasing relationship. It'll give us the perfect excuse for a quick annulment after Zeus is caught or gives up on you.”

She stared at him as if being married to him was the furthest thing from ‘fun’. He feared the opposite. If he let down his guard for one moment, he'd fall into flirtatious banter, holding her close, and fun like he'd always dreamed of with the Beauty.

He couldn't do it. He kept his smart-aleck grin on his face and he prayed desperately for strength and help. He was going to need lots of heavenly intervention to guard his heart this go around. Eva Canterbury had been enticing as a nineteen-year-old college dancer. As a thirty-year-old successful businesswoman and supermodel, she was mesmerizing.

CHAPTER THREE

A *quick annulment, snarky, teasing* ... Those words in the Beast's glorious, deep voice rang through Eva's brain as he disappeared with Gunner and she sat at Sutton's desk and made a list for him of makeup, skin care, clothing, shoes, etc. Sutton had taken her phone, shut it down, and put it in a drawer. He explained that the last known location would ping his house if Zeus was tracking it somehow.

Tracking her phone. Tracking her. The most demonic person she'd ever been around, whispering awful threats to her while his henchmen blocked her escape and grinned. She'd tried to forget the horrifying encounter with Zeus at the restaurant, but hadn't been able to.

Sutton's sweetheart assistant Agatha hustled her up to a suite for a 'long kip' providing toiletries and a nightgown for her. If only Eva could sleep and escape the mess her life was at the moment. She'd had a charmed life—wonderful parents, a fun and supportive older sister, lots of friends and opportunities, a hugely successful career. The only thing she'd never found was a man to stand by her side and love her for more than her pretty face. Now she lay in bed wondering how on earth she was going to marry the man that she'd been obsessed with until she met him and realized he had some kind of resentment toward her and she had no idea why.

He didn't even like her.

As she drifted off to sleep, she played back their conversation. Why hadn't he contradicted her in Sutton's office when she said he didn't like her?

The next morning, Eva slept in and felt completely out of sorts. She usually started her day with an intense workout with her trainer Karilee and then dealt with all manner of emails, phone calls, in-person meetings, or lunches with her business managers and agent. Today she had nothing to do but wait impatiently for her wedding tonight.

She finally convinced Sutton she had to at least inform all of her work associates and especially her agent and managers, what was happening. He let her draft a generic email telling her people how thrilled she was that she'd eloped with Hayden Warren and that she'd be out of pocket for several weeks with her honeymoon. Sutton's computer genius, Macey, would send the emails after the wedding tonight. Thinking about how surprised and confused her managers and her agent Thomas would be gave her a headache. Sutton did promise that he'd personally contact her parents and sister before the elopement news went viral. They were the only ones who would know the truth about what was really happening.

She was able to use Sutton and Liz's well-equipped home gym, which helped relieve some tension, but not enough.

How had she gotten into this insane mess? Targeted by the likes of Zeus and about to marry the famous Beast. The man she'd been crushing on, who for some reason didn't like her.

What a disaster.

Each of her businesses had a competent and trustworthy manager and ideally they could manage without her, but she liked being involved and available to help. *Entrepreneur Magazine* had written that her personal touch was the reason all of her brands turned to gold.

Thomas would flip out. Her marrying the Beast without even telling him? Maybe she'd be grateful Sutton was sending them somewhere remote for a honeymoon. At least Thomas wouldn't complain about the free publicity marriage to someone more famous than she was would bring her. He knew about the threats from Zeus. He should be able to read between the lines.

After dinner, Liz and Agatha helped her get ready for her evening ‘nuptials,’ as Agatha called them. The two women were very different but both sweethearts. Liz was beauty and class personified with an inborn grace that had probably been honed to a T with being a duchess most of her life. Agatha was an older, round, and rambunctious lady with a fluff of gray hair and wild clothing. Eva instantly loved them both.

“Ah, aren’t you just lovely?” Agatha asked for probably the tenth time as Liz finished curling Eva’s hair around her face. The bulk of Eva’s thick blonde hair was in an elaborate knot on the crown of her head and tendrils curled around her face and neck. It was a bit unnerving to have this famous and philanthropic lady who she’d long admired doing her hair, but Liz insisted she enjoyed it.

“You’re breathtaking,” Liz said softly, smiling at her like her own mom would do. The wedding tonight would be an elopement with only her and Hayden in the wedding photos. She was sad her own mom, dad, sister, brother-in-law, and nephew couldn’t be there, but eloping would be easier than a full-blown wedding. It would also be easier to hide the fact that the groom was not in love with the bride. Very far from it. Hayden didn’t even like her.

“Now let’s get you into this dress, love.” Agatha held up the white satin wedding dress. “I can only imagine how the Beast is going to react when he sees you in it. He’ll go bonkers for sure. I wonder if he’ll kiss you before the vows even happen, like Sutton did at your wedding,” she said to Liz.

“Agatha,” Liz breathed out, with no bite to her tone. Agatha had made similar comments all afternoon.

“Forgive me, love. You keep saying it’s not a real marriage, but *ooh*.” The older lady sucked in a breath between her teeth. “How you’re going to survive being married to that delicious heartthrob is beyond me. I think I’d have a heart attack for sure kissing and loving on that man.”

“Agatha.” Liz shook her head. “They won’t be ... kissing and loving. The marriage is only for Eva’s protection.”

Tell that to my confused and racing heart, Eva thought. How could she be so drawn to a man who seemed to dislike her? Agatha's comments were not helping.

Eva stepped into the dress without responding. Agatha zipped it up and turned her to look into the mirror. The dress was perfect—white satin and outlining but not clinging to her curves. It had long sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. It was classy and not revealing at all. She loved it and appreciated that Liz had found a dress that fit her style. Her own clothing line boasted casual wear, business attire, and formal gowns, but no wedding.

She'd always tried to not flash skin in her modeling career. It hadn't been easy, but it had set her apart and she felt it was a large reason for her success. When people asked why she tried to be modest, she explained not becoming a sex symbol was important to her and her relationship with her Heavenly Father. It had been worth the battles she'd fought to keep covered, and now her modest, classy, and flattering clothing designs were selling like mad.

"Stunning," Liz breathed out.

"Exquisitely beautiful," Agatha agreed. "Now let's get going. I'm ready to drool over the Beast. Sutton tells me I only have a short time to get my fill of staring at that exquisite bloke before you'll be leaving us and flying out for your honeymoon holiday."

Eva hoped she wouldn't also be drooling over the Beast. Every time somebody mentioned the word 'honeymoon', her pulse took off.

"She's very cheeky," Liz murmured.

Agatha grinned.

"It's fine," Eva reassured them. "I'm just a little nervous."

"Well, you don't show it," Agatha chirped. "You're as poised and classy as my Liz."

"Thank you." Eva put a hand to her chest. "That may be the sweetest compliment I've ever received. I've admired you for years," she told Liz.

Liz and Agatha both beamed at her.

“Cheers,” Liz said.

A rap came on the door.

“That’s our cue,” Agatha said.

The three of them walked toward the door.

“I hate how informal this all is,” Agatha said. “At least we should have her wait at the top of the stairs and sweep down them, for the pictures, but also so the Beast can get his fill of staring at her and increase the anticipation of their first kiss.”

Eva was going to fall over. Their first kiss. They would be expected to kiss for the wedding ceremony and for the pictures that would prove they were married. She was leery of Hayden after the way he’d been teasing and obviously not interested in her last night. The problem was she’d been infatuated with him for so long it was hard to change her perception of him from hero to zero in her mind. Not that he could ever be a zero. He hadn’t been openly rude to her, but his emotional distance and lack of interest had gouged her deeply.

“We should do that,” Liz agreed. “I’ll get set with my camera at the bottom of the stairs.”

Liz lifted her camera off the dresser and they exited the door where a tough-looking man she recognized as the bodyguard who’d trailed her last night waited. He nodded respectfully to Liz, grinned and winked at Agatha, and let his gaze travel appreciatively over Eva. She was used to looks like that from a variety of men, but she wanted to see Hayden look at her as if she was the most beautiful and desirable woman in the world, to him. She knew the likelihood of that was next to zero, so she steeled herself for more disappointment at her former crush’s eyes and lips.

Liz hurried ahead with her camera and disappeared. Eva and Agatha walked along the wide second-story landing with the man following like a guard dog. She supposed he was. She’d better get used to constant security trailing her with Zeus marking her as a target. They made it to the grand staircase.

“Okay. You count to ten, then follow us,” Agatha instructed. “Let’s go, Ryan.”

Ryan smiled at Eva, then offered his elbow to Agatha and escorted her down the stairs.

Eva looked past them. She saw Sutton, Gunner, and a gorgeous blonde who she assumed was Gunner’s wife with the way she was clinging to him. Her eyes were drawn to the man she’d been searching for.

Hayden stood in the middle of the group, wearing a tailored deep-blue suit. He looked tall, powerful, handsome, alluring, and ... uncertain? His gaze met hers and she could see that he was troubled. She wanted to reassure him that it would all be okay, but she didn’t know that herself. Was he troubled because of Zeus coming after her? Maybe he didn’t like getting himself involved with a dangerous crime lord. He could be worried about marrying her and going on a honeymoon together since he obviously wasn’t interested in her and didn’t want to spend time alone with her.

She’d thanked him last night for marrying her even though he didn’t like her. Instead of reassuring her that he did like her, he’d said they’d be a teasing and snarky couple.

Tilting her head regally, she broke her gaze from him and descended the stairs like it was a runway. She was far past the point in her career where she had to walk down runways. With her success with her clothing, skincare, and perfume lines, she rarely did photo shoots for anyone but her own companies anymore. But it was all second nature, having worked those angles for almost half her life. Liz’s camera was clicking away, and that was familiar as well.

She made it to the landing and walked across the open area. No one spoke as she approached. Her gaze flickered to Hayden. His jaw was slack and even as she met his gaze, he rubbed a hand along his jawline.

She stopped in front of him and gave him a challenging stare. Still he said nothing.

“You look lovely, Miss Canterbury.” Sutton broke the silence with his usual class and kindness.

“Lovely?” Hayden asked in a disbelieving voice.

Everyone seemed to suck in oxygen. Eva’s back grew ramrod straight. She didn’t think the man had it in him to be downright rude, though he obviously liked to tease, but whatever had made him not like her seemed to be a deep-seated resentment that was simmering below the surface. Was his hidden issue with her about to explode?

“Hayden,” Gunner said in a soft but steely voice.

“No, seriously,” Hayden said, and she couldn’t help but meet his gaze. What she read there made her knees feel weak. “Lovely is that flower arrangement.” He gestured toward a tastefully arranged spring floral bouquet on a nearby table. “Eva looks like the most exquisite and radiantly beautiful angel to ever float down to the good Lord’s earth, inspiring mere mortals everywhere with her breathtaking presence.”

Eva’s breath rushed out at the unexpected compliment. His deep-brown eyes backed up the kind words. She’d thought Agatha saying she was as poised and classy as the former duchess upstairs was the best compliment she’d ever received, but she’d been wrong. The man she’d long fantasized about complimenting her made her want to forget the frustration at his snarky comments last night and give him another chance. She had to guard her heart though because even with the look of appreciation in his eyes, she could tell he still thought she was some kind of she-devil temptress.

“Cheers to that,” Sutton said, smiling.

“Thank you,” Eva managed. Hayden’s compliment had been only focused on the physical. Could she get to know him over the next few weeks and develop friendship and something deeper than attraction, or would he put his walls up and keep her at a distance?

“We’re all chummy and ready to get married?” Sutton asked.

Eva lifted her shoulders and looked at Hayden. The appreciation and longing in his eyes morphed into wariness.

His jaw hardened, and he nodded.

“Let’s proceed to the forest, then,” Sutton instructed. “We’ll give you two some space so Liz can get plenty of photos to send to the media.”

Eva smiled, but she was feeling unsteady. Whatever had come over Hayden when he gave her the sweet compliment had disappeared. He truly had some beef with her, and she had no idea why. Her spine tightened. She hadn’t become a supermodel and an ultra-successful businesswoman by not being determined. Somehow, she’d get to the bottom of his resentment.

Gunner escorted his wife first. Sutton, Ryan, and Agatha walked off together. Liz waited with Eva and Hayden.

He lifted his eyebrows and tilted his head. “No worries, Beauty. We’ll march to the guillotine together.”

Eva couldn’t help but laugh. She really liked his sarcasm. It reminded her of her hilarious and sassy sister Hannah. She fell into step next to him. “Don’t sound so ecstatic, at least we can eat cake,” she said in an undertone, smiling brightly as she said the words in case Liz caught an angle of her face as she trailed them.

“Oh, I am ecstatic, and not just for the cake.” He gave her a flirtatious wink. “If the ‘most charming man on the planet’ has to sacrifice his single status on the chopping block, it might as well be to join forces with the most poised, beautiful, and successful woman on the planet.”

“Ooh, sharpening the blade, I see. Someone thinks highly of himself.” She liked teasing with him. It was disconcerting how quickly her hopes of him being the man she’d fantasized about could be rekindled.

He lifted his hands innocently, giving her a grin that made her stomach flutter. “I’ve heard that line so often I’ve been convinced it must be an irrefutable fact.”

She shook her head and kept walking, hearing Liz’s camera click away. “And what will all your hoochie-mamas do

without your revolutionary wit and attention, most charming man on the planet?”

“Ooh.” He sucked in a breath. “Those poor girls. There will be a lot of crying into pillows tonight.” He gave her a sidelong glance. “I’m more concerned about the devastation of all the heartbroken single men wishing they could have had a chance with you.”

She stopped walking, turning to him on the long span of grass sloping to the bluff above the beach to the west and a thick wooded section to the east and north. Hayden stopped and faced her as well. He was so handsome it made her pulse race to be this close.

“Hayden,” she said cautiously and she felt very bravely. “I don’t know if I made it clear enough last night, but I’d really hoped *you* wanted a chance with me.”

His eyes widened and filled with uncertainty. He rubbed at his jaw and then said softly, “I apologize, Beauty. I shouldn’t have ... I was only instigating playful banter.” He gestured toward Liz. “For the pictures and to put you at ease. This is only a favor to Gunner. I’m not looking to get involved.”

“Oh.” Eva’s stomach churned and her hopes plunged off a cliff again. It was some kind of irony that the one man she wanted to be interested in her wasn’t. He was doing a favor for Gunner and a favor for her as well, protecting her from a terrifying crime lord and her being kidnapped or worse. She was grateful, but she still yearned for him to feel something for her.

“Excuse me?” Liz’s sweet voice was much too close by. “I hate to interrupt, but we need to proceed to the spot and perform the wedding soon or I’ll lose the natural light in the darker wooded area Sutton picked out.”

“Of course.” Eva forced a smile. She looked to Hayden. “Can we talk about this later?”

He looked miserable and Eva felt bad for pushing him into a corner. Yet somehow she needed to get an answer to why he

claimed they'd met and why he seemed to dislike her and wanted to keep his distance.

"Never mind," she said quickly, knowing this wasn't the time. "Thank you for doing this for Gunner and sacrificing your single status to keep me safe."

He nodded.

"Can you please hold hands while you walk?" Liz asked.

"Of course." Eva blew out a breath and extended her hand.

Hayden looked from her hand to her face a few times. She'd watched him play basketball dozens of times, and she'd seen him on interviews and at events. He was always ultra-confident, well-spoken, grinning, charming, flirtatious. Right now, he looked like he was being asked to leap off a cliff with no parachute, or march to the guillotine.

Reaching out, his palm rubbed against hers and then he gently laced his fingers through hers and wrapped his fingers around the back of her hand. An explosion of sensation accompanied each simple move, multiplied by the searing look in his dark gaze. Eva was a thirty-year-old woman who'd dated her fair share of impressive and handsome men, but she had never felt hand-holding like this before. Did Hayden feel it?

She wrapped her fingers around the back of his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Blinding, and now we're walking," Liz prompted. She was clearly very concerned about losing her light.

They walked in front of her and toward the trees. Their hands were their only connection, but it felt incredible, blinding, binding, and exciting. Nervous flutters filled her stomach. If holding hands felt this good, what would a kiss feel like?

Not looking to get involved?

Was she the pettiest woman in the world that she desperately wanted to make him eat those words? If only her quest were simply about changing his mind. But she knew the truth—she wanted him to fall for her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hayden's stomach was performing back flips from something as simple as holding Eva's hand. What was wrong with him? He'd stayed strong moments ago when the most enticing woman on the planet had told him she wanted a chance with him. He'd been impressed with himself for not stuttering as he said he wasn't looking to get involved. Let her ascertain what she wanted from that. No matter how sincere and appealing her deep-brown eyes looked, he knew how it felt to get broken by her. She only wanted him now because he was a superstar, not a scrawny, awkward, eighteen-year-old wannabe who kissed like a dead fish.

All it took was one soft touch and sweet look from Eva and he was ready to pledge his devotion for life and take any scraps of affection she might bestow on him. During their silly college romance, he'd only gotten brave enough to touch her a few times, and she'd flinched each time as if he'd shocked her or his touch was repulsive.

No hand holding had ever felt like this. Not with the college Eva or with anyone else. Shouldn't the teenage excessive emotions be much stronger? He'd think that as an adult with a lot of dating experience, he would be past tingles and over-the-top excitement. He tried to convince himself holding her hand wasn't that great, but the warmth pulsing through him contradicted that.

He didn't dare look at her. He might falter completely, admit he didn't care what had happened to them in the past and he absolutely was looking to get involved with her. He hid a

groan at his lack of resolve. How would he survive a kiss at their wedding ceremony? How would he handle being alone with her in whatever spot Sutton sent them to for their honeymoon?

This was getting out of control. He was getting out of control. Should he say 'I do' at this wedding or take off running? He was widely regarded as the quickest running big man in the game. He doubted anybody at this wedding could catch him. Except maybe Gunner.

They reached the small group of people standing in a clearing. It was a picturesque spot with thick green trees and even some wildflowers. Gunner and Lily both grinned at him. Agatha winked. The security guy, Ryan, looked jealous. Sutton smiled benevolently.

Hayden should probably release her hand, but he found himself clinging to her and rubbing at his jaw with his free hand. Why had he agreed to this? Yes, he owed Gunner, but this was asking too much. Another one of Sutton's accomplished men could step in and marry Eva. Ryan would obviously jump at the chance. Hayden couldn't be close to her, touching her, teasing with her, and not fall for her again. What in his messed-up mind had made him believe he could stay strong being married to *the* Eva Canterbury? Why had he agreed to this? There had to be some other famous fool who Sutton and Gunner could cajole into marrying the most beautiful and alluring woman on the planet.

He was in deep, deep trouble.

Sutton started the ceremony and Hayden's already racing heart notched up to a higher speed. Would he be one of those freak heart attack stories you heard about? No medical expert would be able to figure out how an ultra-athlete's heart could explode. He could easily explain. He was marrying Eva Canterbury. It was unfathomable.

The words blurred and his head felt detached from his body. The only thing that grounded him was Eva's hand fused with his own. They were bound together by that simple touch of their hands. And soon ... the kiss.

What if she still thought he kissed like a dead fish? He'd kissed a lot of different women and only received thanks, compliments, and requests for more. No complaints like Eva's that he knew of. He'd brushed his teeth, flossed, used mouthwash, and popped in a mint before the ceremony. At least he wouldn't taste like a dead fish. But would he kiss like one? Did she even remember her mean words? It seemed like she'd blocked out their interaction eleven years ago. Could he simply let it go? He didn't want to be petty, but he didn't want to be putty in her hands either.

The only thing he knew right now was he had to keep his head when they kissed. He'd show her he was no dead-fish kisser, but he would not let himself get invested in the kiss or lose his mind. He couldn't afford to. Eva would make him think she wanted him, like she'd effortlessly done years ago, and then she'd break him again. He'd like to think he was too strong and confident to be broken, but this was Eva. Despite the humiliation and heartache, he'd never succeeded in burying his infatuation with her. He could lie to himself and say it was all physical attraction, but there was something much deeper with this woman. Especially the Eva now who seemed to get his jokes and could cleverly banter back, unlike the nineteen-year-old Eva who hadn't been fun or even interesting to chat with.

Sutton was asking the standard line, and Hayden had to focus. This was his wedding. Not that it would last more than a few weeks, but it was still important, binding, and significant.

“Will you, Hayden George Warren, take this woman, Eva Canterbury, as your lawfully wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health; for richer and for poorer, forsaking all others, and keep yourself only to her, so long as you both shall live?” Sutton finished and looked at him expectantly.

Hayden's throat was thick, and he felt lightheaded and sick to his stomach. Should he say those all important and committing him for life, or until the annulment, words, 'I do', or should he apologize to Eva and everyone else, explain he couldn't

possibly 'I do' this, and take off sprinting through the trees? What had he gotten himself into?

Eva ran her thumb along the back of his hand. Hayden startled and glanced down at her. Her deep-brown eyes met his, and everything settled inside him. The birds twittered happily in the trees, the warm air kissed his cheeks, the breeze danced lightly with his hair, and he was wholly and completely focused on the beauty holding his hands, holding his gaze, holding his heart. His future. His wife.

"I do," he said in a strong, certain voice that rang through the clearing like a promise made to Eva, heaven, and the good Lord's angels.

Sutton nodded and smiled, then turned to Eva.

"Will you, Eva Canterbury, take this man, Hayden George Warren, as your lawfully wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, forsaking all others, and keep yourself only to him, so long as you both shall live?"

Eva's gaze was full of an appealing light and full of him. This woman was his? To love, comfort, and honor? This was insane, but somehow it made perfect sense.

"I do," she said in a sweet, clear tone that joined the birds' songs of happiness.

Sutton smiled and pulled two white-gold bands from his suit pocket. He handed the larger one to Eva and the smaller one to Hayden. Of course, Sutton had thought of everything. Hayden couldn't think past the quickly approaching wedding kiss.

Nodding to Eva first, Sutton prompted, "With this ring, I thee wed."

Eva slowly slid the band onto Hayden's left ring finger. The movement felt binding and enticing. "With this ring, I thee wed." Her gaze locked on his, and Hayden's entire body filled with warmth.

Sutton looked to Hayden. "With this ring, I thee wed."

“With this ring, I thee wed,” Hayden repeated, holding Eva’s smooth fingers and easing the ring into place. He didn’t release her hand, and she gifted him with a gorgeous smile that made his heart race.

“By the power vested in me by the state of California and in the presence of God, angels, and these witnesses, I pronounce Hayden George Warren and Eva Canterbury husband and wife, legally and lawfully joined until death do they part. What God hath joined, let no man separate. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, amen.”

“Amen,” everyone echoed, including Hayden.

Concern filled him again. God had joined them. This union had been dedicated by heaven above. What was he doing? Mocking heaven above and the holy order of matrimony? Was he insane?

Some favor. He darted a gaze to Gunner. His friend seemed to be enjoying this and not acting like anything was amiss. This was marriage. It was huge and binding, and of course he wanted Eva safe from that vile Zeus, but this was a huge favor. Should he have insisted they find another high-profile man in his place? His gut twisted in jealousy at the thought of anyone but him marrying her. His scattered thoughts were all over the place. Was this what cold feet felt like? It was too late anyway. They’d both said ‘I do’ and Sutton had said a lot of other important and weighty binding-them-together words.

“You may kiss the bride.” Sutton’s voice broke through with the significant line Hayden had been equally dreading and looking forward to.

Hayden swallowed hard and met Eva’s gaze again. This was it. What if he still kissed like a dead fish?

Focus, he begged himself. Keep it sweet and simple. It’s only about some pictures to protect her from Zeus. Don’t get swept away or invested.

They were still holding hands, and for some reason, that grip seemed to be his tenuous line to sanity and peace. He didn’t want to release her. He lifted his free hand and cupped her

smooth jaw line. Her face felt softer and more alluring than it had eleven years ago. His thumb trailed along her cheek and across her lower lip as if of its own volition.

Eva let out a soft, enticing sigh, and her mouth parted slightly.

Hayden couldn't resist for one more second. He bowed his head and their lips met. The kiss started sweet and simple, but then Eva arched up toward him, pulled her hand free from his, and wrapped both arms around his neck.

Their lips and bodies melded together, their mouths moving in an intoxicating and tantalizing dance. Hayden had no idea where Eva started and where he ended. They were one. They were meant to be one. This kiss sealed their marriage. They were bound together as man and wife. Every possibility and hope and dream of a heaven-approved union was theirs.

"Well, I'll be," Agatha said. "I hope you recorded that, Liz. I want to watch that kiss over and over again."

Eva pulled back and smiled shyly up at him.

Hayden's heart was slamming against his chest in irregular and fierce intervals. What was happening to him?

Keep the kiss sweet and simple? Don't get invested? He was a complete and total mess over this woman. The one woman he couldn't give his heart to. She'd told him he kissed like a dead fish. She'd hurt him when she could've easily told him she was going to pursue her modeling career and it had been nice knowing him.

"That was incredible," she whispered for only him and Sutton to hear.

"Like a dead fish?" he asked quietly.

"Excuse me?" Her brow squiggled, and she looked confused and beautifully irresistible.

Did she honestly not remember? How could she not? Hayden straightened and released his grip on her.

He was a mess. How would he get through the next few weeks? What if it was months before Zeus either gave up on her or they somehow got lucky and captured the weasel?

Hayden would have to start official practice in August, but a very long summer of being close to but having to keep his distance from his dream woman sounded like exquisite torture.

Hayden rubbed at his jaw and glanced at his blushing, irresistible bride. He was in deep trouble. Somehow, somehow, he had to put up thick emotional walls and not let her or her sweet lips in. Humor, teasing, and staying busy. Hours upon hours of weight lifting and sprints until he dropped from exhaustion. That would be the trick. And not touching her. At all. Especially no kissing.

His lips tingled from that kiss.

No kissing.

If he kissed her again when they were alone ... he'd absolutely lose his mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eva's mouth still tingled from Hayden's sweet and all-consuming kiss. No kiss had ever touched her so deeply or lifted her so high. She'd felt like she was floating on a cloud of happiness yet anchored by Hayden's strength, warmth, and delicious vanilla-lavender musk.

He was incredible—the superstar she had a crush on, the most enticing man she'd ever met, and the kind, self-sacrificing hero who was willing to protect her and had made her nephew ecstatically happy.

Her lips turned down. He was also the smart-aleck who'd teased her, didn't like her or want to marry her, and wasn't 'looking to get involved.'

Had that kiss changed his mind? She could hope and pray. The only disturbing and confusing moment of their wedding ceremony had been his 'dead fish' comment after the kiss. She knew he was a joker, but that comment hadn't seemed funny or appropriate.

They had a few weeks to get to know each other while Zeus either lost interest or Sutton, the police, or the FBI found the other women or at least connected their disappearances to him. Eva prayed she and Hayden would be mostly alone so they could grow close and maybe a miracle would happen and they could keep dating when they returned to normal life. Married. That was pretty overwhelming and insane, but somehow it didn't terrify her to be married to Hayden.

The hours following the wedding ceremony were anticlimactic. Eva changed out of her beautiful dress and into gray loungewear. She appreciated Sutton's people picking up her clothing lines and toiletries. They ate a delicious meal and then everyone went to bed, she and Hayden to separate suites. Not that she'd expected or was ready to share a room, but it wasn't how she had ever expected to spend her wedding night.

The next morning, they said their goodbyes to Sutton, Liz, and Agatha and loaded into a black Escalade that looked like a tank, with Gunner driving and his darling wife Lily by his side. Another Escalade followed them with Ryan and a seasoned bodyguard named Lawrence.

Gunner explained they were going to a remote Colorado valley high in the mountains and close to a family of elite warriors, the Deltas, who would offer another layer of protection beyond Ryan, Lawrence, and Hayden's. She would be very safe, especially because Gunner had trained Hayden to fight, to which Hayden had joked, "Despite my wussy and inexperienced trainer, I actually am the best fighter I know." Gunner had only laughed.

They drove to a nearby commuter airport and loaded into Sutton's Gulfstream. It was a beautiful and spacious jet—one of many, apparently. As they flew, Lily and Eva chatted and soon Lily was telling them both the insane story of how Gunner had been hired through Sutton by her sadistic, self-centered mother under the guise of protecting Lily, but her mom had actually schemed to have them both killed and blame Gunner for their deaths to relaunch her struggling acting career.

It was a crazy tale and passed the time of their three-hour flight to Denver. She especially liked the funny quips Hayden interjected. She really liked him. If only he felt the same.

They said goodbye to Lily and Gunner. The impressive couple were flying on to Arizona for another assignment. A gray Suburban was waiting for the rest of them in a parking lot adjacent to the tarmac. Ryan drove and Lawrence sat up front with him. Hayden and Eva sat in the back. Nobody seemed

inclined to talk much, and Ryan kept staring at her in the rearview mirror. Eva closed her eyes and drifted off.

“Eva.” The vehicle had stopped and Hayden was standing outside, holding her door open. “Wake up, Beauty. We’re here.”

Eva wasn’t sure if she liked the smart-aleck way he said Beauty. She climbed out and Hayden didn’t back away. She was right in his space, and it was a pretty great spot to be in. Looking up into his deep-brown eyes, her heart skittered a few beats and then raced.

He held her gaze, but he didn’t move or speak. Time stood still. She’d feared he was too closed off to give her a chance to get to know him, but the look in his eyes right now wasn’t closed off at all. It was interested. She tried to think of something appealing or funny or sweet to say.

“I like how tall you are,” she murmured, and wanted to clap her hand over her own mouth. That was a lame comment.

His mouth softened in a half smile. “It’s a plus, unless I’m flying coach.”

She smiled as well. “I doubt the Beast flies in coach.”

“Not recently, but I have fond memories of my knees touching my chin and wishing I hadn’t given up my yoga master pursuit.”

“Somehow, I can’t imagine you folded into a pretzel.”

“But I like pretzels.” He tilted his head slightly and winked.

“I like *you*.” Eva’s eyes widened; that was the wrong thing to say. Too fast.

His walls went back up and he slid away from her, gesturing to an absolutely exquisite scene. “Not a bad spot to hang with your fake husband for the unforeseeable future, eh?”

Eva wanted to keep staring at Hayden’s handsome face, and she wanted to correct him—the marriage had been real, nothing fake about it, except for his feelings for her apparently. She forced herself to look around at a sprawling brick rambler home set on the edge of a picturesque mountain

lake with green pines and aspen trees framing the water and sweeping up the steep mountainside that surrounded the small valley.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“For sure.” Hayden folded his arms across his chest and looked past the house to a large barn with a new-looking, deluxe motorhome parked next to it and a fenced-in area of dirt beyond that. “Feels like home.”

“Really? Where did you grow up?”

He finally looked at her, disbelief in his eyes. “Wyoming.”

“Oh. That’s right. I was trying to think if you’d said that in any of your interviews, but you did say the other day your mom would come down from Wyoming and kick your butt if you had hoochie-mamas.” Her face heated. Had she really just admitted that she’d watched interviews of him? Not to mention bringing up their first frustrating conversation.

“Ryan and I will stay in the RV,” Lawrence said. He and Ryan had walked around the back of the vehicle without her even noticing, so focused on Hayden and his every nuance of expression. They set Hayden and Eva’s suitcases on the concrete. “We’ve got surveillance equipment in there and will be watching out for you as well as patrolling, feeding the horses, and taking some rides.” He smiled. “We both have experience ranching, so that’s why we got this cush job. From the little Sutton explained about the Delta family, some of whom live right over there,” he pointed across the lake to three beautiful two-story homes, “we’ve got plenty of backup. We’re certain Zeus’s men didn’t follow us, and nobody but Sutton, Macey, Gunner, and Lily have any idea where we are.”

“Thank you.” Hayden shook each of their hands.

Ryan gave Eva one more lingering glance before they both turned and walked to the RV.

Hayden looked at her, and she hated the discomfort in his eyes. It was as if he were fighting some internal battle she didn’t understand. She simply wanted to flirt with him, get to

know him better, and someday very soon try another kiss like the one at their wedding last night.

She doubted the kiss would happen anytime soon. Not with the way Hayden was shifting his weight and looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

“Ryan has a crush on you,” he said in a tortured kind of voice that gave her hope.

“Can you blame him?” She was teasing, but she wanted to get a rise out of him.

“Not one bit.” He grabbed both of their suitcases and tilted his head before she could respond. “Let’s go get settled.”

Eva nodded. She walked in front of him, along the sidewalk to the wide porch complete with rocking chairs, decorative pillows, and flowers bursting from beds in front of the porch’s wrought-iron railings. The door was really tall and made of etched glass and wood. She loved it. She loved this house and this valley. She hadn’t appreciated being forced by Zeus’s foul threats to leave work and take a break from her life, but if she had to do an imposed honeymoon, she couldn’t imagine a prettier place—or a prettier man to be with. She snuck a glance at Hayden. He was looking at her, and he gave her a quick, almost embarrassed smile before looking away. She made him uncomfortable for some reason. How could she change his perception of her?

Shadows approached the door from inside and it was yanked open before Eva knocked or rang the bell. A tall, well-built cowboy with bright blue eyes and a gorgeous woman with brown eyes and long, dark curly hair stood there. The man was probably a few inches shorter than Hayden’s six-eight and the woman a couple inches shorter than Eva’s five-eleven. She found herself hoping they looked as good together as this couple did.

The woman smiled brightly, and her eyes lit up with an almost mischievous look. Eva liked her immediately. The man tilted up his chin and gave them half a smile.

“You’re here. Yay!” The woman clapped her hands together. “I’m Emery Delta and this handsome, irresistible, wonderful, amazing, tantalizing, enticing, alluring cowboy is my husband Greer.”

Eva laughed in surprise. She couldn’t help it. Hayden gave a short chuckle as well. Emery grinned as if laughter was the perfect response.

Greer shook his head slightly at her overzealous description and extended his hand. He shook Eva’s hand and then Hayden’s. “Big fan,” he murmured to Hayden.

“Thank you,” Hayden said.

Emery cuddled into her husband’s side. “Big, huge, highly invested, as in he watches all your games and he’s even got me watching them along with every lacrosse game his brother Chandler plays in.”

“Chandler Delta.” Eva snapped her fingers, putting the pieces together. “That’s where I’ve heard the Delta name. He’s an incredible player.”

“He is.” Emery gestured. “Well, come in, come in. We’ve got everything packed in the truck and are ready to head out. We’re leaving you the wussy Tesla if you need an extra car.”

“Didn’t figure you for a Tesla guy,” Hayden said in a teasing voice.

Greer only shrugged at Hayden, but he gave a full grin to his wife.

“I tease him about it on a regular basis,” she said. “But that car got him across state lines in record time to steal my heart and protect me from a vicious murderer. I now love the Tesla a fraction less than my hunky cowboy.”

They both turned and walked hand in hand through the entry and into a spacious great room. Eva followed, wanting to know their story, but she got distracted and gasped out loud as she took in the gorgeous house with floor-to-ceiling windows in the main area. The huge panes of glass gave an even better view than she’d gotten out front of sweeping grass, the teal-

blue lake, the thick forest, and the wooded mountainside beyond, all framed by the bright blue sky.

“I know, right?” Emery grinned and splayed her free hand. “You’d think I’m the luckiest woman in the world to look at that gorgeous view every day, but I’m the luckiest, most blessed, most fortunate woman in the world to be married to this hot cowboy, my Maverick.” She batted her eyelashes at her husband. He gave her a slow, cowboy grin. Eva could just imagine if they weren’t here, Emery’s ‘Maverick’ would be wrapping her up tight and kissing her.

“You two are adorable,” Eva couldn’t help but say.

Greer shook his head and looked out the window as if Eva’s comment had embarrassed him. That was borderline hilarious as nothing his over-exuberant wife had said seemed to bother him at all.

Eva looked to Hayden. He shrugged. “I thought they were pretty darn adorable too,” he said with a smirk, “but I didn’t want to risk the tough cowboy leveling me for saying so out loud.”

Eva and Emery both started laughing. Greer gave them a wider smile.

“You two are both spot on,” Emery said. “Adorable, endearing, charming, sweet, cuddly, loveable, delectable ... they all define my tough man.”

Greer grunted and shook his head.

“Okay, getting serious. You two are too fun to tease with. I love your vibe, aura, feel, all good stuff with you two.”

Eva’s pulse sped up. She exchanged a glance with Hayden. He smiled, but his eyes gave nothing away.

Emery clapped her hands together. “So when Cap called to tell us Sutton’s request—”

“Cap?” Hayden asked.

“Captain Zeke Hendrickson. He’s a Navy SEAL who ... helped our family. He works with Sutton now and this marriage for protection detail is a focus of his. He was looking

for a quiet, remote spot where you'll feel safe, and I promise both of you beautiful and famous people, this is *the* safest spot in the world." She briefly frowned. "Well, now it is. Since Jessie and Demo blew up the cave at least—"

She broke off, and Greer mussed his hair and gave her a concerned look.

"Anyway. Safest valley in the universe." Her bright smile returned.

Why did that smile feel like a cover-up? Eva wanted to pry into their story, Jessie and Demo's story, who Cap was ...

"The Delta family are ultra tough," Emery continued before she could ask, "and Greer's cousins Braden and Maddie, who also work for Sutton, have all kinds of surveillance set up in the main area of the house, the barn, and the yard. Sutton assured us you wouldn't mind feeding the horses and riding them for some exercise."

"Oh, I'd love that," Eva said. "And Hayden's from Wyoming and part cowboy, so he'll be a natural."

"Perfect. I could feel that cowboy vibe. No wonder you're so likeable." Emery winked at Hayden. "So it's really important to remember, from right to left as you walk into the smaller door of the barn—Bear, Bruin, Beau, and Brooks. And the slow dog is Brave. He's the best, but really tired and old. Please don't ask about the B-names. It's a sensitive subject that we absolutely do not talk about it." She gave her husband a significant look, and he grinned at her.

Hayden chuckled. "We don't talk about Bruno?"

"Exactly. The superstar athlete gets it. You *are* part cowboy. Good job marrying this stud," Emery said to Eva, beaming at both of them. "All right. We're off on our second honeymoon. Three weeks this time, thanks to you two. Greer might go insane without working his tail off for three weeks, but I swear I will keep him distracted, preoccupied, diverted, sidetracked, and definitely in a dreamy state of mind." She pumped her eyebrows. Greer looked to be fighting a smile. Eva's cheeks

and neck went hot and for the first time today, Eva did not want to meet Hayden's gaze.

"Greer's brother Thor will take care of the cattle. They're out on the range right now since it's summer. He'll keep the fence line mended and kill any wildlife who go after the calves. He's a crack shot. The extra bedroom has free weights and a cable machine in it, but you can also hike, bike, ride horses, kayak, and run the trails for exercise. It's so beautiful out there to explore. There's plenty of food in the fridge, freezer, and pantry. Make yourselves at home and enjoy your honeymoon! Mwah!"

She blew kisses and turned her husband toward the laundry room. Greer lifted a hand to them, picked up a cowboy hat from a side table and plunked it on his head as they exited.

The door closed, and Hayden grinned at Eva. "I wonder if the tough cowboy ever gets a word in."

"He did *not* seem to mind." Seeing a loving couple like that made her want that level of comfort and depth of love in their marriage ... if only their marriage wasn't only for her protection.

"No, he didn't," Hayden agreed. "Definitely the strong, silent type."

"They're a fabulous couple. I wish I could get their story."

"Maybe when they come back. Three weeks ..." Hayden's smile faded as he looked around at the huge open room, wood trim, granite countertops, gorgeous wood cabinetry and flooring, and leather sofas and chairs. He rubbed at his jaw. "I have no idea what we're supposed to do for the next three weeks."

She understood what he was feeling. Her life was busy, nonstop, and Sutton hadn't let them bring a phone or a laptop in case they could be traced. "I feel a little off balance thinking I won't be working," she admitted.

He nodded.

"What do you usually do in your off season?"

“Visit my family, go on a vacation or two with some buddies, deal with sponsorships and everything my agent has been bugging me to deal with during the season, train with Gunner, work out ... a lot.”

“It’s easy to see how hard you work.”

“Thanks.” Something passed over his face, as if he were putting up a shield. Concern filled her. They were interacting well, despite the occasional withdrawal or odd look. He was trying to figure out how to keep his distance from her, even if they were in the same room. She wanted to demand to know what she’d done to offend him. It was so odd how he acted like they’d known each other, but wouldn’t spell out when and where they’d met.

He grabbed her suitcase and carried it to the far side of the huge open room. “You can take the master. Do you want to unpack, figure out lunch, and then go explore a bit? Sutton told me we’re safe here in this valley and we can hike or go on a horseback ride as long as one of the guys goes with us or if we stay close by and we let them know where we are.”

“Emery is rubbing off on you,” she tried to tease him.

“How’s that?”

“You’re talking a lot and very fast.”

“At least I’m not using excessive synonyms ... yet.” He grinned, grabbed his suitcase, and hurried toward the other side of the house.

Eva watched him go. She tugged her suitcase into the master suite and into the closet. Lying it flat, she zipped it open. She should unpack if they would be here for three weeks, but she could do it later. Right now, she wanted to spend more time with Hayden.

She used the bathroom, pulled a light jacket out of the suitcase in case it got chilly in the mountains, and hurried back out into the main room.

He was already there, pulling stuff out of the fridge. Glancing over his shoulder, he asked, “Sandwiches and cut veggies okay for lunch, or do you not eat carbs?”

She rarely did, but she wouldn't admit that to him. "Sounds great."

They each assembled a large sandwich, cut up some veggies, filled glasses with ice water, then took it all out to the back patio.

"Can you tell me how Parley's doing?" he asked. "The kid was such a stud when I visited him, just grinning and teasing with me, but I can't imagine how hard a diagnosis like that is on a four-year-old and his parents, and how awful for him to go through the pain and discomfort of the treatments."

Eva appreciated him asking. She told him about Parley's diagnosis three months ago, the chemotherapy treatments, how difficult it was for Hannah and Daxon to watch him be sick, especially as her sister was expecting their second baby in a few months and the lack of sleep was wearing. She moved on to telling him stories about Parley and all the funny things he did and said.

She'd only eaten about half of her sandwich as he'd kept her talking the entire time they ate, but the thick homemade bread, roasted turkey, mozzarella cheese, and loads of toppings had filled her up quickly. She pushed it toward Hayden. "Do you want to finish mine?"

"No way. I can't deprive the too-thin model of calories."

"I am not too thin," she shot back at him. It was a touchy subject for her. As a young wannabe, she'd starved herself and done hours upon hours of cardio to be sickly thin. Once she had gotten established and rediscovered the confidence her parents had tried so hard to instill in her, she'd focused on being healthy and strong. She was often touted as an 'athletic build,' which she loved to hear.

He studied her, and then a slow smile turned his lips. It made her stomach fill with butterflies. "You're right. You aren't too thin. You're absolutely perfect."

The butterflies morphed into a warmth that filled her entire body. "Thank you."

Their gazes held, and she never wanted to look away. Hayden broken the connection first, looking down at her sandwich. "I'll go make myself another sandwich." He moved to stand up.

Eva caught his hand before he could escape. He startled and looked down at her. It was incredible the depth of feeling she could experience from simply holding his hand in hers. "Please eat mine. I truly had more than I want and am full."

"You sure?"

"I didn't want to admit it to you after your snarky question in the kitchen, but I don't eat that many simple carbs. The homemade bread filled me up quick."

"I knew it." He grinned, sat down, and reached for her sandwich. Losing the connection of his hand felt like getting out of a warm hot tub into a freezing night—cold and jarring. "If you're sure you got enough."

"I'm sure." She picked up a piece of cauliflower and munched on it.

"I love your Parley stories. It makes me miss my nephew and niece."

"How old are they?" She ate a cucumber as he chewed and swallowed a bite of sandwich. At some opportune moments, things were sizzling between them. Right now it felt comfortable, like good friends having lunch together. She liked both the comfort and the sizzle. This honeymoon wasn't starting out too badly. Heat filled her face as she thought of a normal honeymoon and how very far away they were from that.

"Five and two. Jake and Eliza."

His comment brought her back down to earth. "I bet they're cute," she managed.

"They are. Jake looks like the spitting image of his Uncle Hayden." He pumped his eyebrows, and she laughed. "Eliza is a gorgeous doll. She's got these big brown eyes, and she can sucker me out of anything with one blink of her eyelashes."

Eva melted inside. “She’s got you wrapped around her little finger.”

“For sure. And Jake is almost as funny as me.”

“So cocky.” She threw a carrot stick at him.

He caught it and popped it into his mouth. “Thanks.”

“Good reflexes.”

“That’s why I make the big bucks. And my impressive biceps.” He flexed one arm.

Her mouth went dry. She loved his build—loved everything about him. Except the fact that he had some unknown gripe against her. At least they were having a decent conversation. Three weeks wasn’t a lot of time, but being alone together could help them grow close. Really close.

“Tell me some funny Jake stories,” she said, rather than commenting on how impressive his biceps really were.

“That kid.” He shook his head and took a long drink of water. “I went to visit a few weeks ago.”

“They live in Wyoming near your parents?”

“Yeah.” He nodded as if she should know that. “Both my brothers and their wives still live on the ranch. My little sister Aimee is at USC.”

“It’s great that she’s close to you.”

“For sure. I can watch out for her.” His face darkened, and she remembered he’d said he owed Gunner for protecting an Aimee. His sister. That made sense. Before she could ask about it, he said, “So Jake says to me, ‘Uncle Hay, I want to be James Bond when I get big.’ I asked, ‘Why James Bond?’ He says, ‘He gets all the hot women’.” He laughed easily. “So I said to him, ‘I get lots of hot women too. Don’t you want to be me?’”

Eva’s stomach turned over, and she was glad she hadn’t eaten more. Hayden did have women swarming him at all times. “Does he want to be you, then?” She picked up a carrot stick and bit it in half.

“No.” He shook his head. “Can you imagine?” He splayed his hands, and she couldn’t imagine any boy not wanting to grow up and be like him—charming, athletic, successful, famous, handsome. “He told me, ‘You only like tall women because you’re Gigantor. Tall women are not my flavor.’” He laughed again.

“I take exception to that,” she teased. “I’m a tall woman.”

“Exactly my type.” His gaze deepened, and the moment seemed to slow.

Eva’s heart thumped hard and fast against her rib cage. He’d said some very complimentary and telling lines today. Maybe the Beast was exactly like she’d always dreamed he would be. If only she could figure out why he claimed they’d already met and had been so averse to her at the beginning.

Before she could ask, he jumped to his feet. “Let’s clean this up and go explore. I’ll show you how impressively I can pretend to be a cowboy.”

“I can’t wait to see that.” She stood as well.

He laughed and winked. “Maybe I’ll be as irresistible, wonderful, amazing, tantalizing ... I can’t remember all the descriptors Emery had for Greer.”

They both laughed at that.

“I think alluring and handsome were in there as well,” Eva said. She looked him over. “You are all of that ... and more.”

His smile slipped, but he held her gaze, staring at her as if trying to figure out what she was hiding. It was frustrating; he was the one hiding something.

“Thanks,” he murmured, then he scooped up their plates, the veggies, the ranch, and hurried for the patio doors. He was equal parts intriguing and frustrating, along with a whole lot of descriptors like Emery used on Greer—alluring, tantalizing, irresistible.

How could she get him to open up and explain why he’d been so upset with her when they first met and why he kept closing off now? Was there any chance he’d fall for her?

She thought she'd been intrigued and interested in the Beast before, but she was completely enraptured by him now.

CHAPTER SIX

Hayden was in trouble. Deep, deep, horse manure three feet thick and threatening to pull him into its reeking filth kind of trouble.

Despite his best efforts, he liked Eva. They'd gone on a short horseback ride and then a walk along some trails. They'd chatted a lot. He'd made her laugh. She'd made him laugh. They'd laughed together. He liked being around her, chatting with her. He liked looking at her. She was spiritual, smart, fun, hard-working, and gorgeous.

Eva Canterbury was the complete package.

Terrifying.

The silly crush he'd had on her as a college student would amount to nothing compared to the feelings he was afraid would develop over the next few weeks being virtually alone with this upbeat, happy, impressive, and captivating lady. He was still baffled that she acted like they had no past, but he wouldn't be the one to bring it up. How he was going to keep his heart guarded was the more important question of the moment.

They walked along the lake's edge on their way back to Greer and Emery's house. The sun was behind the west mountains, but it was still light out. Hayden's stomach growled, and Eva gave him a teasing look.

"We'd better get back inside and cook the Beast some dinner or he's liable to try to nibble on me."

His stomach pitched happily. He'd nibble on her neck, on her jawline, on her lips. Would her skin taste and smell as heavenly as she looked?

He had to shut that train of thought down, and fast. "You're cooking dinner for me? Ah, that is so kind of you, Beauty."

"I did not say I was cooking dinner. We're cooking together." She pumped her eyebrows. "Unless ... Ah, yes, let's have a challenge. I'll ask you a question about me. If you get it right, I will cook you a delectable dinner."

Her lips would be a delectable dinner.

"Easy. I can answer any question about you." He stopped walking next to the lake. Greer and Emery's house was just up the sloping lawn from them. "But just in case ..." It wasn't as if she'd told him everything about her in that dark alley at UNC. He'd asked her question after question, but she'd been ... guarded. So opposite of the way she acted now. Amazing what eleven years of experience and maturity could do for a person. "What if I get it wrong? I cook you dinner? Now that will be some kind of fabulous prize for you. My Top Ramen is top-notch."

"Hmm. I don't think so." She drummed her fingers against her chin. "I think you're teasing me about the Top Ramen, but I'm not a hundred percent. You are very hard to get a read on."

He grinned and splayed his hands, hoping to keep her guessing. In more ways than one. He was the one guessing. Why was her request for the challenge something he knew about her? Was she finally going to own up to their weird relationship in college, how coldly she'd ended it, and why she'd pretended not to remember? He'd love for her to bring it up and end his stewing about it.

The Top Ramen was a joke. He didn't cook often, but his mom had taught him some of her specialties and he helped in the kitchen when he visited the ranch and didn't have his personal chef or the team's chef on the road cooking for him.

Though he was almost always hungry with his lean, tall frame that burned through calories, he didn't care much about food at

the moment. What he wanted to do right now was run at her, pick her up, and twirl her around. He wanted to tease with her, see her laugh, then he'd lower her close, her eyes would fill with longing, and ...

"If you get it wrong, you have to jump in that cold lake," she decided with a cute little smirk.

He looked at the glistening blue water a foot away. They'd tested the lake with their fingertips. Even in June, it was freezing. Mountain lake. Made sense.

"Whoa, that's pretty harsh. Can I jump in the hot tub after?" He pointed to the new-looking hot tub up the grassy slope from them on Greer and Emery's patio.

"I'll allow it."

"You're on." He grinned, loving how cute and fun she was. This was a vastly different Eva from the one he remembered and thought he was infatuated with. The boring Eva that he'd only seen an outline of in the dark and had shared a lame kiss with. The Eva from college felt like a hollow outline, and he wondered how he'd wasted any time feeling rejected by that Eva.

This Eva was full of color, light, and not boring at all. The kiss with this Eva at their wedding ...

He couldn't let his mind go there.

If this Eva stole his heart and shattered it, he would never recover.

"Give me this mind-twisting question, Beauty. I'm tough enough to handle it." He pushed out his chest and postured, flexing his arms.

Her mouth went slack, and her gaze slowly traced over his upper body. He had a T-shirt on, but the way she was staring at him, it was like he was some pin-up model.

She fanned her face with her hand then said breathily, "Pardon me, what'd you say, my Beast?"

He laughed. She was the perfect match for him, and he could really get used to teasing and flirting with her nonstop and

being 'her Beast.' He desperately wanted this Beauty in his life. How could they get past their past? He didn't know how to bring it up. All he knew was he was in deep, deep trouble.

"I need this impossible question I have to riddle out an answer for so I can impress you with my big brain and you can cook me an absolutely delectable dinner," he reminded her before she ogled his upper body for too long. Not that he minded.

"Oh, that's right." She laughed. "I was just pulling your leg. I didn't get *that* distracted by the Beast flexing for me. Maybe just a little." She winked as if they were just playing and teasing nonstop. He supposed they were. How would he keep his promise to himself to not fall for her again? It seemed inconceivable at the moment. "Okay." She rubbed her hands together. "I'm going to make it too easy on you. Where did I grow up?"

"Come on, Beauty, give me a challenge." He winked and then confidently answered, "Savannah, Georgia."

Her brow wrinkled. "No, I didn't."

Hayden stared at her. What was she playing at? She'd told him she grew up in Savannah. "Yes, you did."

"I think I remember where I grew up." She gave a tinkling laugh. "I don't even have a Southern accent. Where'd you get Savannah from?"

She *didn't* have an accent.

His gut twisted in confusion. But she used to have a slight one. Nothing crazy or a deep Southern twang like a majority of the students at UNC, but it had been there. He assumed maybe she'd coached herself not to have an accent, but why would she do that?

Actually, he knew why he'd thought that. Her good friend Britney Pearl had grown up in Atlanta and he'd heard how her mom had forced her to use voice coaches to get rid of her accent. He'd assumed Eva had done the same.

"I grew up in Las Vegas," she said.

"No way."

“Yes way.”

“That doesn’t fit you at all.”

“But Savannah does? ‘Bless your heart, I am finer than a frog’s hair’,” she drawled out, batting her eyelashes at him.

He grinned, though his stomach was knotted. Why would she lie about where she’d grown up? Maybe she hadn’t simply forgotten about their past. Could this impressive lady be a liar? It didn’t add up.

“There it is,” he teased, hiding his confusion. “The beautiful Southern belle. I can just see you in those huge dresses.”

“Ha! I confess I would’ve loved to be from Savannah instead of the ugly desert of Las Vegas, but sadly, I am not.” She put a hand over her heart and curtsied dramatically.

He smiled at her theatrics, but inside he snapped his fingers. Now that made sense. Maybe in college she’d wished she was from Georgia, especially living in North Carolina. She’d tried to imitate an accent and had lied to him about it. But why not own up to telling him that now? He studied her, trying to riddle out what was going on behind that beautiful smile. What was she hiding in that alluring dark gaze?

“Ah, that look ... you are breakin’ ma heart.” She drawled out the words with a put-on accent. “I’m so sorry, my Beast, but you are a big, tough loser who has to jump in the icy lake.” She stepped closer to the lake’s edge, bent down, and skimmed her fingers in the water. “Brr.”

She shivered and straightened, her dark eyes sparkling at him. “That is horrifically cold. Do you want me to go open the hot tub so you can run quick and not die of hypothermia? I’m ‘lower than a snake’s belly in a wagon rut’ because I don’t have my phone to video this.” She faked a Southern accent again. “My social media people would go insane with that video, or I could just hold on to it for blackmail down the road.”

Hayden couldn’t help but smile at her cute little monologue and at the idea forming in his mind. He should’ve possibly second-guessed the impulsive idea, but he didn’t. Instead, he

ran at her, scooped her off her feet, and plunged off the bank and into the shallow water of the lake.

“Hayden, no!” she screamed.

The first few steps weren’t deep, but they were biting cold. Hayden kept pushing deeper. Eva struggled to be free of his grasp, and he held her tighter. He laughed, loving every second of this crazy and fun interaction.

The water was up to his thighs now, but as he held her against his chest, only her feet were dangling in the water. She was kicking her feet and splashing him and laughingly screaming, “Stop!”

Hayden would go a few more steps to tease her, then turn around and carry her back to the bank before he fulfilled his end of the deal and jumped all the way into the cold lake.

He was waist deep when the bank sloped sharply. His feet slid out from under him, and they both plunged under the surface.

The cold water surrounded Hayden like an icy tomb. It was so chilly it gave him an instant cold headache. He found his footing and pushed off the lake’s bottom and to the surface, twisting and scrambling until he regained his footing and got their heads and then their torsos out of water.

Eva was shivering, and he worried she’d be upset at him. He held her in his arms and slogged up the slope until they were finally only knee deep. Instead of fighting him, she now clung to him. Hayden was strong from all his workouts and training, but with their clothes weighing them down and with how chilled they both were, it felt like they weighed a thousand pounds. He refused to let her go. He’d instigated this silly prank and now he had to apologize, get her to that hot tub, and get her warm.

“S-sorry,” he chattered out. “I wasn’t planning to go under.”

She was chattering, but also ... giggling. She was giggling uncontrollably. Hayden looked at her beautiful face, her hair and clothes plastered to her and the irresistible smile on her lips, and he couldn’t help laughing too. He kept moving, one

foot in front of the other, until finally they were on the grass and completely out of the water.

“I can walk,” she said between chattering teeth and giggles.

“No. I got you into this. I’ll get you warm again, Beauty.”

She laughed harder and leaned into his chest, her arms tightening around his neck. He felt like a superhero in that moment. Despite his silly antics, she seemed to trust him and want to be close to him. He loved her in his arms.

He carried her up the sloping lawn until they reached the patio. He had to set her down to unclip the hot tub cover and push it off. Eva plunged headfirst into the hot tub before he could help her. He laughed and jumped in with her, going all the way under. Pins and needles covered his entire body.

His head burst out of the water, and he wiped the excess water off his face and grinned. “Whew! Now this is living!”

Eva had water streaming down her hair and face, black makeup under her eyes, and she was still laughing. She was such a great sport about the entire thing. He wanted to apologize again, but he started laughing with her. They were both laughing so hard that he felt a deep closeness to her. It was friendship, but also excitement and romance like he’d never experienced. Eva appealed to him on every level.

He wanted to keep laughing with her, teasing her, maybe not dunking her in a cold lake, but he’d think of ways to tease and make her laugh even more than they were now.

He suddenly realized how far he’d come in such a short time from disliking the famous model to liking her. He liked Eva Canterbury. A lot.

Could they grow closer over the next few weeks? He could find the right moment to ask her about what happened back in college. She’d explain. He’d forgive her. She wouldn’t break him like that again. Would she?

Their laughter settled, and it was the most natural thing in the world to wrap his arm around her and pull her close to his side. “I really am sorry, Eva. Thanks for being so great about the polar plunge. I promise I was planning to turn around and

not dunk you completely under, but my feet slipped out from under me.”

She smiled up at him. “Sure ... I believe that one.”

“I have no idea how to convince you it was all an innocent accident.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” she teased with a wink.

He turned her into him, pushing any worries about the past or their future into a box and shutting the lid. He’d open it up and deal with it ... sometime.

All laughter slid away as he said huskily, “I’ll save my breath for something more important.”

“Oh?” Her gaze got smoky hot, and she licked her lips. “What’s that, my Beast?”

“I can’t explain it properly. I’ll do a much better job showing you.”

“Hmm.” Her lips twitched as she fought a smile. “And I’m supposed to trust you this time? When you ‘show me’ by picking me up and chucking me into that cold lake?”

He chuckled. “I promise this will be the opposite of that, and it won’t hurt one bit.”

It might hurt him later if she did a one-eighty like she had at nineteen, ditched him, and told him what a loser he was.

Hayden pushed that thought away. He’d locked those insecurities up to examine on a later date.

Right now ... he was going to capture those luscious lips of hers and kiss her more thoroughly than he had at their wedding. No audience, no one to stop them, no worries about needing to keep it short and sweet.

“I believe you,” she whispered, and then she arched up toward him.

Hayden wasted no time meeting her halfway.

He was plunging in faster than they’d slipped into that lake. He should try to insulate himself from that cold shock, but it

might be too late for him. His Beauty might destroy him when she dumped him again, but he couldn't pretend for one more second that he wasn't invested in her, that he didn't want her close. He wanted her kiss more than he wanted oxygen.

"Hayden! Eva!" Lawrence's yell yanked them apart before their lips had done much more than meet briefly. Dang the man. He was supposed to leave them alone. "There you are."

Hayden didn't release his grip on Eva. Lawrence could tell them what he needed, then be on his way so they could get back to a very thorough kissing session.

"What are you doing fully clothed in the hot tub?" Lawrence looked at the two of them like they were nuts.

Hayden and Eva shared a smile.

"Never mind." He shook his head. "Get out, shower, and get dressed quick. We've got to drive to the airport as fast as we can. Greer said we can take his Tesla."

"What happened?" Hayden lifted Eva out of the hot tub and then climbed out himself. Hot water streamed down his body and legs, pooling in his already soaked shoes.

Lawrence looked between them. Hayden instinctively wrapped his arm around Eva, wanting to shelter her from whatever awful news they were about to get. What had Zeus done? Or was there something wrong with one of their family members? Little Parley? Please, not something with Parley's cancer.

"Sutton just got the text on Eva's phone, and his people have confirmed it's true."

"What?" Hayden demanded. Eva cuddled into him, her arm wrapping around his back. His heart swelled. He would protect her from whatever was happening.

"Zeus kidnapped your sisters."

Hayden's chest squeezed painfully, and it was hard to draw oxygen.

"My sister?" Eva squeaked.

"Your sister and Hayden's. He has Aimee and Hannah."

Eva didn't cry or sob or shriek. She leaned heavily against him, as if she couldn't support herself. Hayden held her up, but he wanted to collapse himself. Zeus had his innocent sister and Eva's funny and feisty sister in his grasp?

Hayden's stomach churned, and it was all he could do to stand there and not run to wherever Aimee and Hannah were being held captive, get them to safety, and then slowly rip Zeus apart.

Aimee had been through too much already, stalked by a demented student. Luckily, Gunner had caught the guy and he was in prison. Wasn't Hannah six months pregnant? What kind of monster kidnapped a pregnant mother whose son had cancer?

"Where did he take them? What does he want?" Hayden fired at Lawrence.

"All we know is we have less than five hours to meet Zeus's man on the Los Muertos Pier of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and it's a two-hour drive to Denver and a three-hour flight from there. As far as what he wants ..." Lawrence clenched his fists. "Don't worry, Sutton is figuring out all kinds of contingency plans, but ..."

Hayden needed to know. He loathed Zeus, and the man needed to be eradicated, but Hayden would give him anything to save Aimee and Hannah.

"Please just tell us," Eva begged.

"He wants to trade them both for Eva," Lawrence admitted.

"No," Hayden said immediately. Not that. There was another path to rescuing their sisters and dismantling Zeus. Sutton Smith was the king of security and protection, with the likes of Gunner Steele and Griff Quinn at his command. He could rescue Aimee and Hannah without handing over Eva. Lawrence had said Sutton was working out contingency plans.

"Done," Eva said. Straightening away from him, she nodded her head. "I don't need a shower. Let's wrap up in a towel and get moving."

Hayden couldn't help but be awed by her, even as his stomach turned over and cold sweat ran down his back at the thought of her, Aimee, and Hannah in Zeus's power. She was so brave and impressive, but...

"No, Eva." He shook his head, his voice firm. "No way are you handing yourself over. Sutton will have a plan. We'll keep you all safe."

"It's our sisters ..." Emotion filled her eyes. "I'm not risking either of them. I'll do *anything* to keep them safe."

With that, she broke from his hold and hurried for the patio door.

"What a woman," Lawrence muttered.

Hayden agreed. Eva was the most incredible woman he'd ever met. He'd also do anything to keep their sisters safe, but he couldn't let Eva be in Zeus's grasp. She couldn't do 'anything' to keep them safe. Anything could mean Zeus raping and killing her.

But how did you bargain with, circumvent, or best a man like Zeus? Money, power, prestige, publicity ... he didn't need any of them. And he was evil and demented clear through.

Fear like he'd never experienced made Hayden's gut churn. He rushed after Eva, praying as he went.

Please let Zeus not hurt Aimee or Hannah. Please let Sutton have a brilliant plan that doesn't involve Eva going anywhere near that monster.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eva's head ached and her gut churned so violently she was surprised she hadn't vomited yet. They were ready for takeoff on a chartered Cessna Citation X, apparently the fastest private jet available, flying to Puerto Vallarta with Lawrence and Ryan. Hayden had grabbed her suitcase before they left Greer and Emery's. She'd been able to clean up and change into a T-shirt and yoga pants in the airplane's small bathroom while the pilot readied for takeoff. Hayden was in a T-shirt and golf-type sorts. She sat next to him, clinging to his hand. He cast her concerned glances far too often, but apparently he had no idea what to say either.

Lawrence had given them a rundown as they drove to Denver to board the plane. Zeus's men had kidnapped Hannah out on an evening walk while her husband and Parley were playing catch in a nearby park. They'd taken Aimee as she was leaving her apartment to meet some friends for dinner. When Hannah hadn't returned to the park and Aimee hadn't met her friends, the worry had started. Sutton had then found the anonymous text on Eva's phone and immediately contacted the police, the families, and Lawrence and Ryan.

Lawrence then put Sutton on speaker phone. The impressive billionaire had tried to insist they try one of his alternate plans to free Hannah and Aimee, but Eva had refused. They went the rounds and she finally got feisty, like Hannah would do, and told him she was the one paying for security and Sutton and his people would do what she said. They'd meet Zeus's demands and hand her over and not risk Hannah or Aimee for anything.

Hayden had also tried to argue her out of sacrificing herself, but she'd stayed firm. She'd hidden how terrified she was from him and everyone else. Hannah and Aimee were all that mattered. She'd deal with Zeus like she had with Trevor Allred at Sutton's party.

Sadly, Zeus was a million times scarier, depraved, and smarter than Trevor Allred.

Sutton had finally listened and put his focus into the plan of Eva being traded. A team of men and women would meet them at Puerto Vallarta. They'd have Eva swallow a tracking device and Sutton swore they would rescue her, but he also promised, at her insistence, that they would follow Zeus's instructions to get their sisters back first.

The instructions were simple: only Eva and Hayden on the dock. A boat would arrive at the pier at midnight. They'd hand Aimee and Hannah off to Hayden and take Eva. If anyone tried to interfere, they'd shoot Hannah first, then Aimee, then Hayden. Zeus had explained in the untraceable texts that he was a devoted 'Beast' fan and didn't want to watch *his* Clippers play without Hayden, so he'd only kill him as a last resort.

Nausea rose in Eva's throat. She'd spoken to Daxon before they'd boarded the plane. Her brother-in-law was a mess. Thankfully, Parley had fallen asleep and thankfully her time on the phone had been short, as she had no idea how to comfort Daxon. She could only pray that by the time Parley woke up, his mama would be back home. Eva might be dead—or wish she was, if any of the awful notes Zeus had sent the past few weeks came to fruition—but that didn't matter. All that mattered was Aimee and Hannah's safety.

Lawrence squatted in front of her. "Would you take some Xanax or Valium to help you relax? The pilot has both on hand for people who are afraid to fly."

"No." She shook her head. "Neither would be out of my system in three hours, and I want to be with it to ... deal with Zeus when I have to."

Lawrence looked at Hayden. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see what passed between the two men.

Lawrence straightened, and she blinked up at him. He was probably early forties, fit and graying. His maturity and strength inspired confidence despite their terrifying situation. “You are one brave and impressive lady,” he said softly, then he strode away and buckled in.

The plane taxied to the runway, and they lifted off. Eva’s stomach pitched, but it had nothing to do with the plane’s steep ascent.

Hayden squeezed her hand. “Eva.”

She glanced over at him. The plane’s lighting was dim, but it was easy to read the concern and stress in his deep-brown eyes.

“What can I do to help?”

Eva shrugged. The tears she’d been fighting pricked at her eyelids and then spilled down her cheeks. What could anyone do to help? Nobody had seen this coming. Sutton Smith and his organization were brilliant and accomplished. Maybe they could rescue her before the worst happened. Maybe.

She wanted to puke thinking about Zeus and how foul he was. Her sister. Hayden’s sister. Had Zeus ... done any of the awful things to either of them that he’d promised he’d do to Eva? She tasted bile and prayed she wouldn’t throw up.

Lawrence strode back to them. “I’m so sorry to tell you this...”

“He hurt Hannah or Aimee?” she cried out.

“Oh, no.” Lawrence shook his head quickly. “No, we have no information that way. Sutton just called. The police force in Panama found Grace Radisson’s body.”

Eva sucked in a breath and Hayden shifted beside her. Grace Radisson was one of the three women Zeus had taken this year.

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “Her poor family.”

She'd met Grace and her sisters at a Women in California Business meeting. They owned a hugely successful fitness chain.

"We thought you should know, but ..." Lawrence's voice trailed off, and he looked like he was second-guessing telling them.

"I'd rather know," Eva said, though she wasn't really sure. What was worse though—being defiled by Zeus or being killed by him? She didn't want to think about the fact that both would probably happen to her.

Lawrence turned and headed back to his seat.

A few beats passed as Eva struggled with the horror of Grace being killed by that monster.

"Eva." Hayden's voice was low and gravelly. He released her hand and lifted the armrests between the seats. He wrapped his arm around her, drawing her to his side. Tenderly kissing her forehead, he murmured, "I promise I will find you. He won't hurt you. I promise."

"Hayden." She curled into him. "It's Hannah and Aimee I'm worried about." She was afraid for herself but she wasn't going to make him worry even more.

His grip tightened. "You are brave and impressive. You are also an angel," he whispered fiercely. "An absolute angel."

She wasn't, but she appreciated him saying that, and then it hit her. "Hayden. We haven't even prayed."

He nodded, his eyes serious. "We've been a little distracted. I know my parents and siblings and I'm sure your parents and Daxon have been praying nonstop."

"You're right." And it was some reassurance. She could bet their extended families and church friends had been informed and were praying as well. Heaven would help them.

But sometimes horrible things still happened to those who believed.

She needed to have faith right now, or she'd never make it through this night.

She straightened. “Would you offer it?” She wasn’t sure she could even form a coherent sentence, and she needed this prayer to protect her beloved sister and Hayden’s.

“Of course.” Hayden extended his hands, taking hers in his warm, sure grip. “Dear Father in Heaven. We come before You begging for help. Please protect Aimee and Hannah. We put them in Your watchful care. Please keep them safe in mind, body, and spirit. Please strengthen and comfort Grace Radisson’s family and loved ones. Please ...” Hayden drew in a breath. “Please protect Eva.” His voice broke, and tears streaked down Eva’s face. A long beat passed before he cleared his throat and continued, “Help her to trust in You, Sutton and his operatives, and me. Please bless that Zeus and his men won’t hurt her. Please ... keep her safe and help Sutton orchestrate her safe return. Amen.”

“Amen,” Eva whispered. She felt a measure of peace, but she was terrified—for Hannah, for Aimee, for herself. Those few moments that Zeus had cornered her and threatened her in the restaurant had been too much. He was disgusting, terrifying, and thought no one could stop him. Could Sutton? Could Hayden? What was Hayden planning to do—offer Zeus all his money? Challenge him to a one-on-one pick-up game? It didn’t matter anyway. She’d be alone until Sutton, Hayden, and Sutton’s people somehow found her.

What if the tracker didn’t work and they never found her?

No, she couldn’t think like that. It didn’t matter. She’d die for Hannah and Aimee if it came to that.

Hayden wrapped her up tight. She leaned into his strength and let the tears come. Hayden gently rubbed her back and held her. Neither of them said anything.

What was there to say?

Sutton, Gunner, and Lily were waiting as they stepped off the plane in Puerto Vallarta. The air felt thick and moist and too warm. Eva couldn’t catch a full breath, but she

doubted it had anything to do with the humidity. Sutton kept reassuring her it would all be all right. He had people in boats throughout the bay with the ability to follow her tracker. He had people on land in case Zeus took her to a house somewhere. He had helicopters standing by. They were all just waiting for Sutton's signal to come and rescue her. They'd follow Zeus's boat wherever it took her, and they would come for her. She nodded but couldn't muster a response. There was something in his piercing blue eyes that terrified her. He didn't say it, but she knew he wished she'd accepted one of his contingency plans.

Hayden kept his arm around her as they piled into a Chevy Tahoe XL and sped toward the pier. Sutton had her swallow a pill-looking thing that was the tracking device. No matter if Zeus took her to his yacht or some location along the coast, they would find her. Sutton reminded her not to worry, not to tip off Zeus that they were coming, and if possible, to get in a spot away from everyone so Zeus or any of his people couldn't hold her hostage when they arrived.

Sutton had Hayden turn his head so she could change her shorts for some thicker Levi shorts that had thin ceramic knives hidden in each front pocket that Zeus's scanners hopefully wouldn't detect. He also had her put on some Teva sandals with a knife hidden in each sole.

Eva was caught in the middle of some clandestine spy op, but this was all too real. She didn't know how to use a knife, but at least she would have something to protect herself with.

How could he ask her not to worry? Hannah and Aimee were in that foul scum's grasp right now. Grace had been murdered. Those other women were probably dead as well. Her biggest fear was that Zeus had already hurt them and wouldn't actually release them in exchange for Eva. What better way to keep Eva under his control than to have her sister and Hayden's right there to threaten her with?

Quivering, she pressed harder into Hayden. He'd been all she wanted to cling to through this nightmare.

Please protect Hannah and Aimee.

They parked at the end of a narrow cobblestone street, and Eva could see the sail-shaped pier monument up ahead. It was glowing with LED lights changing from purple to green to blue.

“It’s eleven-fifty-eight,” Sutton said. “Let’s hurry.”

Nobody said anything else as they slid out of the car. Hayden took her hand, and they walked across the cement sidewalk and then up the sloping cement pier. Hayden’s large hand surrounding hers was her anchor. She clung to him, her stomach pitching more violently with every step. Her skin prickled with terror. Her one conversation with Zeus, and the disgusting notes he’d sent, had been enough to know she was turning herself over to Satan himself. Add to that Grace’s death and all the vicious crimes attributed to the man that nobody could convict him of, and she was an unsteady mess.

To save Hannah and Hayden’s sister, she could do this. If only her legs weren’t so wobbly and her head wasn’t about to explode.

The pier wasn’t crowded. A couple teenagers were hugging, and a man sat in a wheelchair with a cup out. Sutton placed some money in his cup as they walked by. She was surprised Sutton, Gunner, and Lily were still with them. Wouldn’t that risk Zeus’s men hurting Hannah and Aimee?

The pier sloped up. As they reached the top, they found a circular concrete walkway with benches on it that made up the base of the sail-shaped monument stretching upward into the night, still slowly changing colors. The lighting effect might’ve been fun under other circumstances. Right now, it only added to her headache. The main ramp of the pier sloped down in front of them, stretching out to the deeper ocean and where she assumed she would step onto the boat.

“We’re peeling off,” she heard Sutton say, then they disappeared around the sail-shaped partition.

Eva’s nerves tripled, and it felt like her skin was buzzing. Hayden either sensed she was nearing an explosion or simply wanted her closer. He released her hand and wrapped his arm around her lower back, cupping her waist and holding her

close to his side as they descended the ramp. There were some steps and then the ramp flattened at the bottom to load and unload boats, but it was still a few feet above the water.

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. The lights were behind them now, the colors angled back toward land.

There it was ... a huge, shiny pale blue speed boat tied off to the side of the ramp loaded with at least eight men and two women.

“Hannah!” Eva couldn’t stop herself from crying out to her sister.

“Aimee.” Hayden’s call wasn’t a cry, but it was heart-wrenching all the same.

Hannah and Aimee both had duct tape over their mouths and were struggling against the men holding them. Neither looked hurt, but who knew what kind of damage Zeus or his men might have done to them?

In the weird, muted lighting from the pier’s changing colors behind them, Eva could see the fire in Hannah’s eyes. Her sister was feisty and overprotective, and if she were free, she would surely rip somebody apart.

Seeing that fight in Hannah strengthened Eva like nothing but prayer could do. She would do this. For her sister. For Hayden’s sister. If she survived, Hannah would cuss her up one side and down the other. That thought almost made her smile.

“The Beast,” a tall, blond man standing by the captain’s chair called out. “I’m a huge fan. Mad respect. Sorry to steal your wife. Apparently Zeus needs her more than you do.” A few men looked like they were Spanish-descent, but this guy and the rest were obviously American.

Hayden’s jaw clamped tight, and he didn’t respond.

“Keep your guns trained on the Beast and hand the sisters up,” the blond commanded. “Then the Beast will hand the Beauty over.”

Eva absolutely hated that this man used the nickname that she loved hearing from Hayden's lips.

The other five men kept their wicked-looking guns pointed at Hayden and Eva. The men holding Aimee and Hannah easily lifted them toward the edge of the boat and up onto the dock.

"Hold on to them until we have Eva," the blond cautioned.

Hayden held her so closely against him she didn't know if he'd let her go. He had to. "I've got to go," Eva said bravely, staring up into his deep-brown gaze. She'd never seen someone look so tormented.

"Eva," he breathed out. "I can't do this."

"Kiss her goodbye and hand her over, Beast," the man instructed.

Hayden shot him a dark glare, but then he complied. He bent down and captured her lips with his. Eva clung to him as she returned the desperate kiss full of longing and all that they might never have. Hayden cared for her, deeply, and he poured that into his kiss. She wouldn't dare say love, but it was obvious he liked her. Their connection and the sparks she felt arching between them were clearly reciprocated as well.

Once she got on that boat, she didn't know if she'd ever see Hayden again in this life. Zeus was too powerful, too evil, and too smart even for the likes of Sutton Smith and his impressive security personnel.

Hands grabbed her from behind and wrenched her away from Hayden.

"No!" Hayden yelled, reaching for her as they pulled her onto the boat.

"Let her go, Beast," the man cautioned. "Unless you want these women dead right now. My men will kill them first, then you."

The other two men still had a hold of Aimee and Hannah, who were both struggling to get free. One man held Eva tightly against him. He stunk of sweat. The other four men had their guns pointed at the two women.

Hayden straightened, his handsome face twisted in agony. “I will find you, Eva,” he promised in a vehement whisper.

Eva couldn’t get anything through her closing throat. Her soul cried out for him.

“You tell Zeus I’m coming for him,” Hayden ground out, pointing at the blond.

“Good luck with that.” The blond smirked. “Take care now, Beast. I’m glad I didn’t have to kill you.” The blond saluted him and nodded to his men.

The two holding Hannah and Aimee shoved them at Hayden. He caught each of them in his arms, taking a step back but not going down.

The men kept their guns pointed at Hannah and Aimee as the two who’d been holding them quickly unfastened the ropes securing them to the pier. The blond started the motor.

“I like you, Hayden,” Eva called to him.

As soon as the words were out, she felt silly. ‘I love you’ would’ve sounded better and from the guffaws of the men, they all thought it was a weird thing for a bride to say to her new husband.

A surprised smile flitted across Hayden’s face. His eyes filled with determination and commitment ... to her. *I will find you Eva.* She’d never forget those words or how he’d said them. He would never give up on her. He would come for her.

Warmth filled her and just for that moment, she thought maybe everything would work out. Somehow, someday she’d be in Hayden’s strong arms again.

Then the ropes were free and the blond eased the throttle forward. They idled away from the dock.

Eva was going to purgatory.

David Zeus III would represent the devil.

Fear filled her and darkness threatened to pull her under.

Nothing would work out.

She would never see Hayden or Hannah again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I like you, *Hayden*.

Those sweet words from Eva's lips reverberated through his mind and made Hayden's chest expand. He liked her too. Despite his best efforts to not fall for her again like he had eleven years ago, he respected her and enjoyed being with her.

He'd realized it earlier before that kiss in the hot tub in Colorado but it was even stronger now. He liked everything about Eva Canterbury, and she would never know it.

And at that moment, Hayden knew what he had to do.

"Get down," he cautioned Aimee and Hannah as he pushed them down in front of him on the concrete dock.

He leaped over the two women, landed on both feet at the end of the concrete dock, then used all his momentum, strength, and his hard-earned thirty-nine-inch vertical leap to propel himself through the air.

"Hayden!" Eva cried his name.

Even if he died, which he most likely would, this insane leap would be worth it. She'd know exactly how much he cared.

For a handful of long seconds, he was Michael Jordan in the 1988 dunk contest, attempting an improbable free-throw line dunk.

He heard cries of surprise and a male voice yell, "Don't shoot!"

Then he thudded onto the slick deck of the boat, launched forward, and rolled to a stop amidst shouts, but miraculously no gun shots. Maybe the blond guy idolized him enough he'd told his men not to kill him. More importantly, they hadn't shot at Hannah or Aimee.

"Hayden," Eva gasped out.

He looked up at her beautiful face staring at him with shock and awe, and five .50 caliber machine guns pointed at his face.

The boat thrust forward as the blond guy shoved it into gear. Then he commanded another man, "Take the wheel."

The man complied, and the blond stalked to where Hayden crouched. "Stand up."

Hayden stood slowly, keeping his hands spread wide and hoping nobody would shoot. Wind whipped through his hair, and he had to bend his knees slightly to keep from toppling. The boat rocked unevenly through waves as it sped away from the dock and into the dark night. It was unnerving that they had no lights on, only using the half-moon for guidance.

His pulse raced out of control and cold sweat covered his back. His jump had been suicidal, and miraculously none of the men had pulled the trigger. Hannah and Aimee were safe. He said a rushed prayer of gratitude. Were there any more miracles he could hope for? He wanted to grab Eva and shelter her in his arms, but he didn't dare take his gaze off the guy in charge.

The blond stared at him for a few beats. The thrum of the motor, waves slapping the boat, and his own panting breaths of air were the only sounds in the night.

"Mad respect doesn't even begin to cover it." The blond smiled, but it was tight. "You just leaped off the dock and jumped onto a boat with five M95s pointed at you. Because your gorgeous wife *likes* you?" The guy shook his head. "You are and will always be my hero, Beast."

Eva gasped out what sounded like a breath of relief. Hayden felt his own heart calm a few beats. Would this guy ... help them?

The man put his hand out. “Jackson Yates. It’s an honor to officially meet you.”

The other men shifted uneasily. Some of them might not understand English, but they clearly knew the guy in charge shouldn’t be shaking hands with the enemy. They might already be in mortal danger from Zeus because, at Jackson’s instructions, they hadn’t shot Hayden.

Hayden extended his hand, and Jackson gave it a firm, warm shake. “An honor,” he repeated.

“Thank you.” Hayden wasn’t sure what else to say. Please let us go? If you respect me so much, don’t take Eva to your sadistic, depraved boss?

Jackson held on to his hand and stepped closer, a glint in his blue eyes that made Hayden uneasy. “I’m going to *hate* killing you.”

“No,” Eva begged, straining to be free of the man holding on to her.

Hayden’s pulse spiked again. He stared down at Jackson, not seeing a gun or knife in his hand, but all he had to do was give the command and any of the men with guns would end Hayden’s life.

“Please,” Hayden said in a low tone. “Let me stay with Eva. Ask Zeus if you can let me tag along. Maybe I’ll have something to offer him that he’ll appreciate. Maybe you’ll get a fat raise for making Zeus’s night more interesting. I’ll Venmo you a huge thank you if I live through this.” He forced what he hoped was a convincing smile. “Come on; you don’t want your favorite player to die young, like Kobe.”

Jackson looked him over. “That Beastly charm. How does anybody resist you?” He looked at Eva. “Am I right?”

Eva’s deep-brown eyes were full of terror but also gratitude for him that made it all worth it. She was worth that insane leap, worth trying to take on Zeus. He had no idea what to offer the scum or how to keep both of them alive through this, and Eva morally safe, but at least they were together and

Sutton Smith's people were tracking them. Somehow, somehow, it would work out.

"I can't resist him," Eva said, smiling even though her lips trembled.

"Ah, you two. I love you together. That wedding ceremony." Jackson clucked his tongue. "I thought maybe your social media people had played up the connection zinging between you two, but I can feel it." He lowered his voice and confided, "I'm man enough to admit I replayed your wedding kiss three times."

Hayden was so confused by this guy. He might be an ally, and he might shoot him. The level of crazy in his blue eyes was disturbing.

"I'll call Zeus. But if he says no, it's a bullet in your head and off the boat you go."

Cold chills covered Hayden's body, but he forced himself not to react. He splayed his hands and nodded. "You understand I had to try. My wife is not only the most beautiful woman in the world, she's also hilarious, smart, adventurous, brave, successful, and she can kiss like a siren."

"I don't doubt it. Lucky man." Jackson laughed, then said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I can only imagine how fabulous your short honeymoon was."

Hayden's stomach churned. He didn't want this guy imagining anything about Eva. They hadn't gotten to have any kind of honeymoon. Would they? It looked impossible right now.

"Give me a minute and we'll see the verdict." Jackson tilted his head to one of his men. "Let the two lovebirds cuddle for a minute. It might be the last chance they get."

The man holding Eva shoved her into Hayden's arms. Hayden happily pulled her against his chest. He might be dead soon, but for this brief moment, she was in his arms. Eva's arms came around his back, and she leaned into him.

The boat rocked with the waves and Hayden stutter-stepped, almost losing his footing. One of the men gestured toward a padded seat. Hayden nodded his gratitude and ushered Eva to

the rear of the boat. He sat and pulled her onto his lap, wrapping her up tight. His body shuddered, the adrenaline and fear still ramped up to hazardous levels, but this stolen moment with Eva calmed and strengthened him.

She looked up at him, trust in those dark eyes, but also far too much fear. He didn't blame her for being terrified. He only wished he could take that fear away. "I can't believe you jumped for me."

He gave her what he hoped was his most charming smile. "Had to show off my impressive thirty-nine-inch vertical for my gorgeous bride—though it was horizontal tonight."

She laughed, but it was unsteady.

It probably wasn't the time or the place, but he could be dead any minute now. He went for it. "Do I get a kiss for my athletic prowess and fearlessness?"

"Definitely."

Their lips met, and even the ugly reality of men pointing guns at them, them skimming across the ocean toward an evil crime lord, and Hayden's execution possibly being ordered any second couldn't detract from the power of this kiss.

Hayden was filled with joy and an unparalleled connection to this brave, inspiring woman in his arms. The silly heartbreak of their past and the imminent death or at least miserable pain of their future didn't matter one iota right now. All that mattered was the warm pressure of Eva in his arms, lighting up his world with her luscious lips. No one and nothing could separate them. Somehow, he'd live through this. Somehow, he'd rescue her. Somehow, they'd get to know each other better, talk through their past, plan a future, and behave as only a man and woman desperately in love and newly married could behave.

"I hate to break up this incredible kiss." Jackson's voice was far too close.

Eva pulled back, and Hayden's blood pressure skyrocketed. Was he about to get shot in the head and tossed overboard or

would he have a chance to somehow bribe, beg, or charm the almighty Zeus into not killing him or hurting Eva?

They both turned to look up at Jackson. The wind ruffled his blond hair and plastered his clothes against him. The man had a far too serious look on his face. "I regret to inform you ..."

Hayden's heart sank. He and Eva could fling themselves out of the boat, but he wouldn't risk Eva like that. If this was his time to die, he'd stand up and take it like a man. He could only hope Sutton got to Eva before Zeus took advantage of her.

Eva clung to him and whimpered, "No."

"Zeus said ..." His face split into a creepy grin. "To bring you along."

Hayden caught a breath. He wasn't dying. At least not right now.

"Thank heaven above," Eva breathed.

"Sorry. I had to tease you," Jackson said. "I've heard you when you're mic'd up during games. You can dish it out, am I right?"

"Right." Hayden's voice was shaky. He didn't feel much like teasing or joking at the moment.

"But I do need to warn you. Zeus will most likely torture you before he kills you. The bullet to the head might have been more merciful." Jackson's blue eyes were deadly serious.

"Torture?" Eva croaked, clinging more tightly to him.

Hayden had been raised tough on a ranch with older brothers bent on 'making him act like a man'. He'd worked his butt off to succeed at the highest level of athletics through injuries, sprinting until he puked, and many practices and games where he'd been knocked to the hardwood repeatedly, bruised from vicious elbows, and pushed past his limits. He knew pain, but he'd never been deliberately tortured.

He pushed it from his mind. Stressing about it would only make it worse.

“I appreciate the warning,” he said evenly. “But I’ll take any extra time I can get with Eva.”

“I can respect that.” Jackson smiled again. “And if you live, I want courtside seats to all your home games. Zeus’s box is great, but I like to be up close and personal.”

“You can have mine,” Eva told him.

“I’m holding you to that.” Jackson winked at her, then headed back to the captain’s chair.

They had a measure of privacy, except for the two men still pointing guns at them.

“You can’t give up your front row seats,” Hayden said to Eva. “I want you there cheering for me.”

How many games had he avoided looking at her? Now he’d catch her glance every chance he got on the court. So much had changed in the past two days. He’d still like to know why she wrote him off in college and pretended not to remember him, but it was the least of his concerns right now.

Eva stared at him like he’d lost his mind. “H-Hayden,” she whispered. “Zeus is going to torture and kill you. You shouldn’t have come. I’ll make a distraction and you can jump overboard. Sutton’s people will find you. They have to be following us, right?”

He shook his head and pressed his lips to her forehead, gathering her close. “Ah, Beauty. Just when I think you can’t get any prettier, you start worrying about me and look at that ... you’re more gorgeous than ever.”

“Don’t tease me about you dying,” she whispered fiercely into his neck.

“I’m not dead yet,” he said. “A little faith in your beastly man, please.”

She let out a half-laugh and then her body trembled against him. “It’s not that I doubt you, but we’re going to the devil’s lair, and you weren’t invited.”

He chuckled. “Ah, that’s where you’re wrong. The Beast doesn’t need an invitation. Everybody wants me at their

party.”

She shook her head against his chest.

Hayden ran his hands up and down her back. “Keep praying,” he whispered in her ear. “I’ll win Zeus over somehow, buy us some time, and we’ve got Sutton Smith and heaven above on our side.”

She swallowed and admitted, “I’ve never been so scared. I can’t handle even the thought of Zeus torturing you.”

“Let’s think about something else. Like how many kisses you’re going to give me when we’re home safe and sound again.”

“Millions,” she promised.

“Now that’s more like it.” He wanted to talk to her about so many things, but if he died tonight, none of the junk in the trunk mattered. What mattered was she knew how crazy he was about her and he tried to distract her from worrying too much. “Now I have a more important question. Whose house are we going to live in when we get back home?”

“Mine, of course.” A little of her adorable sass returned to her voice. “I have one of the most beautiful oceanfront homes on Balboa Island.”

“Ah, of course my Beauty has a castle on Balboa. But my mansion has the best view and is on the quiet, gorgeous Laguna Beach. Hard to beat that location or soft sand.”

“I can’t wait to see your house.” She quivered in his arms again. “Do you think we’ll ever get home again?”

“Yes. I swear to you, Beauty. By tomorrow at this time, you’ll be bragging to everyone you know about how your personal Beast rescued you from the likes of Zeus.”

“I’ll start composing my speech.”

He appreciated she was trying to tease and grinned at her. “Perfect. Don’t forget to mention how incredibly handsome your new husband is, and that I’m the best kisser *and* the most charming man on the planet.”

“Noted. I won’t leave any of that out.” She gave him a half smile, but then she buried her head in the crook of his neck and clung to him. He could feel the moisture from her tears.

Hayden had no idea what to do but hold her and pray harder than ever.

CHAPTER NINE

Hayden didn't know if it was his nerves about what was coming, but Eva was the only thing that felt real as they cruised through the night. The boat ride seemed to last forever and go far too fast at the same time. His unease grew when he saw through the murky night air that they were angling for land.

They pulled into a small bay, thick with trees and greenery. Hayden thought they'd tie off to a dock, but they kept motoring through mangroves and headed up a river he never would've noticed in the dark. It snaked through such thick foliage he wondered how the boat wasn't being scratched on every side.

Everything felt too quiet. Especially Eva. He wanted to tease her out of her worries, but his own were multiplying by the second.

Faith, not fear, he begged his mind. Please help us.

They pulled up to a dark, deserted pier of sorts. It looked long-abandoned, but the men tied off the ropes and then ushered them out of the boat and onto land. Two of the men stayed with the boat, cast off the ropes, and motored back down the river.

"They'll make sure to kill anyone who dared to follow us," Jackson said with a wide grin. "This way."

Hayden and Eva exchanged a look. He could see his escalating fear reflected in her deep-brown eyes. Should he try to fight the six men surrounding them? It'd probably be a better

chance than when they got to Zeus's lair. Especially if those two men in the boat really did take out Sutton's people who should be trailing them. It would be easy for them to hide behind the mangroves and shoot Sutton's people before they even knew what was coming. Fifty-mil rounds would catch them by surprise and shred any speedboat.

Would Gunner and Lily be aboard?

Hayden's stomach churned.

Jackson led the way with a man on each side of Eva and Hayden and three more bringing up the rear. With five men pointing weapons at them, Hayden didn't dare risk Eva by leaping at the nearest one.

They didn't walk more than a few hundred feet into the jungle before Jackson gestured to the right and the men quickly cleared brush and palm leaves off of two side-by-side Razors. Eva and Hayden were helped into the backseat of the Razor Jackson was driving. The man in the front seat turned around and leveled his gun at Eva. Though the threat was there, these men hadn't treated them harshly. Why? Were they following Jackson's lead since he so obviously liked Hayden?

Hayden had a feeling their special privileges were about to end.

They flew through the barely passable jungle road in the Razors. Each seat had a five-point harness so he couldn't hold Eva close, but they clung to each other's hands. Hayden usually had something funny to say, but his head felt vacant at the moment. Except for the dark swirl of suffocating terror that told him he would soon be tortured and killed for entertainment.

He couldn't allow his mind to travel to what a scum like Zeus might do to Eva.

Faint lights pierced the trees occasionally. Then he could pinpoint a large structure that lit up the night air. Finally, they rounded a corner and came face to face with a massive three-story stucco home. Light spilled from numerous windows.

Two guards were stationed on the wide front porch and two more prowled around from the front to the sides of the house.

It looked like everybody had stayed up late to greet the newcomers. How nice. Hayden's stomach tightened. He'd never been in a war, but he had prepared for a battle of sorts before every game from rec leagues to comp leagues to high school to college to professional ball. This was just another game. He said a desperate prayer for the right strategies to win, but most importantly, to protect Eva.

The guard got his door, and he had to release Eva's hand to unbuckle and climb out. He straightened his shoulders and walked around the vehicle to wrap his arm around her, making sure everybody knew she was his and he would protect her. He eyed all the guns pointed their direction. He wouldn't give up until his body was riddled with bullets. Which might be sooner rather than later.

"Not bad for a retreat in the middle of the jungle, eh, Beast?" Jackson asked.

"Impressive," he admitted.

"It's impossible to get anything bigger than the Razors in or out of the path to the river. The road from Puerto Vallarta to the nearest village of Yelapa is a rutted-out nightmare and doesn't come within ten miles of this spot." He gave Hayden a significant look, and Hayden realized he wasn't just talking about bringing in building materials for the house. Sutton's people would never reach them before the worst happened. Unless they could follow her tracker and land the helicopters close by?

Why hadn't Zeus's people checked them for trackers?

"We brought some stuff in by helicopter once we'd cleared the land, but we mostly had to boat in the materials," Jackson continued, "and then transport everything from the ocean on mules. Crazy. Took three years to get it built." He tilted his head. "Ready?"

"Not getting any younger," Hayden said.

Jackson laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. “I sure hope Zeus doesn’t kill you. You’ll always be a superstar to me. I haven’t missed a game in years. It’s been an honor being around you.”

“Thanks,” Hayden managed. At least he had one person on his side. Sort of. Jackson had already told him he’d kill him, and he was obviously loyal to Zeus and had been with him for a while now.

“Let’s do this.” Jackson led the way.

Hayden held Eva close to his side and followed. She blinked up at him, so beautiful, so perfect for him. His one regret right now was letting himself care about some stupid, clandestine college romance and not enjoying every moment he’d had with Eva.

They walked up a couple stairs and past rocking chairs on the front porch. So normal and so odd.

“It’ll be all right, Eva,” he said to her as Jackson swung the door wide.

“I trust you, Hayden,” she said, resolve filling her brown eyes.

Hayden felt the confidence and warmth of that fill him. He held his head high and his shoulders straight and for some reason thought of his mama who’d coached him from a young age as a too-tall, gangly kid who wanted to round his shoulders to hide his size.

You’re one of the best boys I know, Hay. Hold that head up high and show people what you’re made of.

His mama was certainly praying for him and Eva. Heaven above was watching over them. Maybe Sutton Smith wouldn’t be able to reach them, but Hayden would keep praying, believing in miracles, and following every bit of inspiration heaven might be willing to bestow on him.

He and Eva stepped across the threshold and into a well-lit, three-story foyer. A darkness he’d never experienced tried to penetrate through Hayden’s pores, piercing every exposed fear and worry and digging deep into his soul.

Eva drew in a breath and burrowed into his side. He knew her sweet soul would feel that darkness and fight to repel it.

Repel it. He had to do the same.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

The Psalm came to his mind, and it fit perfectly. Fear no evil. God was on their side.

Jackson walked past the grand staircase, his boots tapping on the gray-slate floor. The walls were painted a soft white, the side tables and decorative chairs and floral arrangements were all beautiful. The house was spotless and looked professionally decorated. The lovely décor did nothing to dispel the gloom that clung to the place. It was as if death itself lived here.

They walked past an office on the right and a formal dining room on the left and then the house opened up into a two-story living area with a massive kitchen and gathering area with leather sofas and recliners spread throughout as well as a long island-type bar with lots of seating. The kitchen had a door leading into the dining room they'd passed, and the entire living room was ringed with two-story windows. He imagined the view would be beautiful during the day. It was an impressive space, beautifully decorated with gorgeous artwork and fresh flowers, their scent trying to overpower the raw scent of unkempt men. It seemed like a normal wealthy person's home, but there was nothing normal about the feeling here.

A few men lounged in recliners watching a soccer match on the huge TV above the fireplace. They both jumped to their feet when Jackson walked in and one of them grabbed the remote and turned off the television.

"Where's Zeus?" Jackson demanded.

"Upstairs."

"I'm here. Calm down, friend."

Hayden whirled, keeping Eva close as they faced the monster.

The monster looked like a successful American businessman. He was about six feet and a polished kind of handsome, wearing a white button-down shirt open at the collar and dark-gray slacks. Hayden had seen Zeus at games and events before, but he'd never been this close to the man. His blue eyes were piercing. He was obviously intelligent but more obviously evil. The multitude of crimes, disappearances, and murders attributed to him seemed to radiate from his too-smooth skin.

"Welcome to my home," he said, grinning widely and spreading his hands. "I didn't expect the bonus of hosting the Beast as well as the most beautiful woman in the world." He smiled as if they were invited guests and he was about to roll out the red carpet.

Eva stiffened against him and glared at Zeus, but she didn't say anything.

"Jackson told me how convincingly and heroically you pled your case to him. You must understand, he's an enamored fan. He's had a man crush on you since he was sixteen and his daddy took him to your games at UNC."

"It's true," Jackson piped up. "The Beast is my fave. Go Tar Heels!" He thumped his chest and then pointed at Hayden.

Hayden hated all this fake fluff and wanted to cut to the chase. Except cutting to it probably meant Zeus shooting him, so he decided to bite his tongue.

As if Hayden had conjured it up, Zeus pulled out a pistol from his pocket and pointed it right at his heart.

"No," Eva begged. "Don't hurt him. I'll do anything you ask. Please."

"Eva," Hayden cautioned. She could not promise something like that to this crude, manipulative man.

"*Anything*, love?" Zeus asked, chuckling softly. "I like the sound of that. But you have to understand it'll be much easier without your husband around. Jackson, would you like the Beast to sign something for you before he dies?"

At least he wasn't going to torture him.

“Let me go get a basketball,” Jackson said, sounding like an overeager teenager. “Can you imagine what it’ll be worth with the Beast’s last penned signature?”

He ran around them and toward the foyer. His footsteps pounded up the stairs, and Hayden felt like he was in some twisted alternate reality. Death was coming soon. He’d never imagined he’d die young, but apparently his future was short.

Please protect Eva, was all he could think to pray.

Zeus patiently held the gun on Hayden and looked the two of them over. “You two are acting so devoted to each other, but let’s cut the crap. You set up a fake marriage to dissuade me from coming after Eva. Right? Sutton Smith himself marrying you. So touching. Where’s the security enigma now?” His lips curled. “Hopefully that pathetic James-Bond wannabe is dead. I have my men scattered throughout this forest, watching every trail. You probably noticed I didn’t have Jackson check you for trackers?”

Hayden nodded.

“I wanted you to lead that washed-up Brit to me. I’ve got the manpower here to win any battle and no chance of any American police or military interference.” He grinned toothily. “Getting rid of Sutton Smith will be almost as good as having Eva Canterbury all to myself.”

He looked Eva over as if he owned her. Hayden wanted to tear the man apart. He’d never felt such hatred and fury inside. He couldn’t even think of something to barter or bribe Zeus with.

He would go down fighting. He’d try to kill the man before the scum touched Eva. Could Sutton and his men really be killed by Zeus’s henchmen or possibly already be dead? The thought made the darkness of this place, the evil oozing from Zeus, seem impenetrable. They couldn’t win.

“I’ll tell you what,” Zeus said.

Footsteps pounded down the stairs and Jackson came back into the room, slightly out of breath. He grinned as he ran up to Hayden and held out a permanent marker. “I’ll hold the ball steady so it looks good,” he said.

Hayden had no clue what to do but release Eva for a second and sign his name on the ball like he'd done thousands of times.

To Jackson, my biggest fan - Hayden 'The Beast' Warren.

Might as well try to keep Jackson on his side—not that it would help much.

“Thanks, man,” Jackson said, still staring at him with hero worship. How twisted that this ultra-fan would kill him the instant Zeus ordered it.

Hayden nodded, capped the marker, handed it back, and put his arm around Eva again.

“They’re insane, aren’t they?” Eva whispered into his neck.

“Certifiable,” Hayden agreed.

“So here’s what I’m thinking,” Zeus started again as Jackson set the ball and the marker on the nearby counter. “I’ll give my buddy Jackson’s idol a few more hours to live ... maybe.”

Hayden’s heart thumped quicker. Was this the torture part?

“I heard how Eva so sweetly called out, ‘I like you, Hayden’ before you did your suicidal leap onto my boat. The phrasing is more than a little suspicious. Wouldn’t a newlywed say I love you? Hmm. Backs up my theory of this marriage being a fraud. Which brings me to our test. Eva, tell the Beast everything you love about him. If you convince me the two of you are genuinely in love, I might let him live a bit longer. Just to prove the kind of nice guy I am.”

Zeus was toying with them. Hayden and Eva were two bugs under his microscope in the sun, and he would enjoy singeing their wings before he lit them on fire.

Despite that, Hayden’s heart thumped out of control. Eva seemed to like him, a lot, but she didn’t love him. Could she convince Zeus? He’d take any stolen moments of life he could get right now and keep praying that somehow Sutton’s people wouldn’t all be killed trying to get to them. Or maybe he and Eva could find a way to escape.

He also wouldn't mind knowing if Eva returned his feelings before he died.

Eva turned to face him and wrapped her arms around his lower back. His hands encircled her upper back. As she met his gaze, all the ugly darkness of Zeus's presence fell away. Her deep-brown eyes shone with light, love, and hope. A hope from heaven above that pierced through the fears and the impossible desperation of their situation.

With Eva in his arms, staring at him like he was her world, Hayden could solve any problem, conquer any foe, even the all-powerful Zeus, and rise above this bleak misery.

"Hayden," she said softly. "I've long admired you for your kindness to your fans, especially children like Parley, your hard work ethic, success on the court, fabulous attitude, irresistibly handsome face, those dark eyes I get lost in, your perfect body..." She winked adorably, and Hayden felt like they were in their own cocoon of love and happiness.

"Nobody can blame you for noticing that," Hayden teased.

Her smile grew, and he completely shut out the darkness surrounding them. It couldn't touch him and Eva. Not cocooned in this perfect bond of love and trust.

"As I've had the chance to be close to you and get to know you better, that admiration has grown into a love I never thought I'd find."

Hayden schooled his expression but was stunned. Could she mean that?

"I love our banter and how you make me laugh all the time. I love every time you touch me, and your kisses transport me to another world..." Her smile fell away, and her voice deepened. "When you jumped onto that boat and I realized that you would take a bullet for me, that selfless love surrounded me like angels from heaven—strengthening me, lifting me, inspiring me. I love you, Hayden, my Beast. I will never stop loving you."

The air seemed to shimmer as Eva finished. She went onto tiptoes and tenderly kissed him.

Hayden was shocked by the depth of feeling to her words, backed up by the sweetness of her kiss. She really felt all of that. She truly loved him. He wanted to shout back all the things he loved about her.

Clapping pulled them apart.

“Ah,” Zeus said, the gun back in his pocket as he clapped mockingly. “That was beautiful. Perfect. I will let you live at least a few more hours, Beast.” He pulled the gun back out and pointed it at Hayden. “Let’s head upstairs, Eva. You told me you’d do *anything* to keep Hayden safe, and those loving words have convinced me you will. It’s time to prove your love for Hayden even more by doing *anything* I want.”

Hayden’s stomach turned over. He pulled Eva behind him, desperate to keep her from Zeus’s foul touch.

Please, Lord, he begged. Any idea. Any way to save her from ...

He couldn’t even stand to think what would happen to his Beauty at this monster’s hands.

Zeus was sadistic and wanted to torture them. What if he appealed to the man’s bloodlust, let him be the emperor sitting on the side of the arena, deciding if his gladiator lived or died?

“Let me fight for her,” he cried out.

“Excuse me?” Zeus cocked his head to the side. “Why would I willingly let a prisoner fight?”

“Have your toughest man fight me,” Hayden said, clinging to Eva as he held her behind him. “If I win, Eva stays with me tonight.”

Zeus’s eyes glinted, but he shook his head. “No. Sorry. I like the idea, but I’m ready for Eva now.”

No way would he turn Eva over to Zeus. Never.

“I know how to fight,” Hayden said, desperate for him to agree. “It’ll be a great show.”

Zeus and Jackson exchanged a look.

“I’d like to see the Beast fight,” Jackson said, excitement in his voice and pleading in his blue eyes.

“I’d like to sleep with Eva,” Zeus said, “And I *always* get what I want.”

Eva clung to Hayden, and hopeless misery filled him. Zeus was in charge, not Jackson. What could he offer? How could he keep her safe?

“I’ll fight your toughest man to the death,” Hayden said.

“Hayden, no,” Eva breathed.

“Truly?” A sick sparkle glinted in Zeus’s eyes, and Hayden thought he might have him. “The MVP of the NBA thinks he can win against *my* toughest man?” He looked at Jackson. “Shawn?”

“Oh, for sure, boss.”

“Shawn is a former Marine and was a trainer for the Marine Corps Martial Arts. He’ll rip an untrained glory-muscle athlete like you apart. I wanted to let you live,” he shrugged, “but if you insist on an empty sacrificial gesture, it’ll just heighten my experience with Eva.”

Hayden wanted to plow his fist into this jerk’s face more than he’d wanted the championship title last season. He held steady; it was torture not to fly across the room and pummel this jerk. The man would never let him live. Zeus could hardly wait to see him get pummeled to death.

Was there any way Hayden could win?

Please help us, he begged every guardian angel who might have some free time.

“You truly want to get torn apart by a highly trained special ops weapon on the fleeting chance you might have one more night with your wife?”

Hayden nodded, sweat forming on his brow. He might have no chance at all, but he’d try anything, go through any pain, to keep Zeus from touching Eva. He prayed this idea to fight was inspired by heaven and not just his desperation.

Zeus licked his lips, looking far too eager. For the gruesome fight or for his plans with Eva? Hayden didn't want to think about it.

"I understand why you worship him," he said to Jackson. "This guy is a gladiator for the ages."

"I know. I'm going to *hate* watching him die."

"Can't say I agree. Watching him die will be almost as good as sleeping with his wife. Go get Shawn." He grinned. "You asked for your own execution, Beast."

Hayden had asked for it. An idea born of no other options. It didn't matter now. This Shawn might be the most elite fighter in the world, but Hayden was fighting for a higher cause. He would fight with everything in him. Eva's virtue was on the line, and he'd rather die than let her be in Zeus's power.

Marine Corps Martial Arts. Gunner had trained him, but had his friend trained him well enough? This Shawn guy had training that Gunner himself probably didn't have.

Hayden was in desperate trouble, but Eva was semi-safe. At least for a few more minutes. Until some Marine ripped Hayden's head off.

Please help us, Lord. Please, please let me win and let Sutton and his people live and somehow get to us.

Even his prayers were dripping with desperation.

Desperation seemed to be the word of the hour.

Faith, not fear.

Hayden would cling to that.

The Savior performed miracles all the time for those who believed.

Even in a fight to the death?

Immediately the fear crept in, dark and terrifying.

Lord, I believe, he promised. *Help thou mine unbelief.*

He thought of the story of David. The young shepherd had been facing a giant twice his size, but he'd discarded the

king's armor, took up his trusted slingshot, and trusted in the Lord. How could Hayden show he could do the same? He could drop all his confidence and swagger, humble himself to the dust, and trust in a power greater than himself. It wasn't only a show of faith.

It was his only chance.

He looked down at Eva. Her deep-brown gaze was begging him to live through the next few minutes.

He would do it. He would fight and he would survive. For her. With God on his side.

But if not ...

*I'm trusting in You, Lord, but if the answer is no and I lose ...
Please somehow get Sutton here and protect her.*

CHAPTER TEN

Eva's heart threatened to burst out of her chest. Her head pounded with each beat and fear made her throat thick and her body chilled despite the too-warm room. Hayden was about to fight some ex-Marine martial arts expert, to the death, to keep her safe for one more night?

To the death. To the death.

Those horrific words pounded through her brain, banging against her fledgling faith like a hammer. She couldn't let Hayden die. He was sacrificing himself to keep her away from Zeus. She was terrified Zeus was right—that it would be an 'empty sacrificial gesture'.

What was Hayden thinking, offering to die for her? Was he hoping a miracle would happen and Sutton's people would find them? Zeus had men waiting and watching, happily ready to gun down Sutton and anyone who got anywhere close to this mansion. There was no hope, no rescue coming.

Men were filing into the house, moving furniture out of the way, placing bets with each other. Piles of American dollars and Mexican pesos were stacking up on the long kitchen counter and on side tables.

Hayden kept his arm around her as if his large frame could shelter her from all the filthy animals encroaching on their space, but they were in worse than the lion's den. They were in a den of murderers and paid mercenaries. Hayden was the only comfort she had. She kept praying, but there was no peace in her heart and little hope of the miracle they needed.

Please protect Hayden. Please help me to have faith. Please protect Hayden.

A man stormed into the open living area and the men started hooting and chanting, “Shawn, Shawn, Shawn, Shawn!”

Eva’s eyes widened, and she leaned heavily into Hayden. That was Shawn? He was close to her height but three times as thick, with not an ounce of fat. He only wore athletic shorts, socks, and shoes. The powerful muscles in his upper body rippled under his skin. His head was shaved clean and reflected the overhead lights, and his face and body were scarred with puckered skin and the evidence of many vicious fights.

If this brute was really trained as a martial arts expert for the Marines, he would rip Hayden apart. She couldn’t let Hayden fight this brute to the death. He wasn’t some fighter. He was tough and athletic, but he was a basketball player, for heaven’s sake.

She could hardly speak through the terror coating her airway, but she tugged at Hayden and begged, “Don’t do this. Please don’t do this.” She could go with Zeus upstairs, and stick all four of those knives in him. “I’ll just go with him,” she whispered for only Hayden to hear, so terrified at the thought of being alone With Zeus she could barely breathe.

“No,” Hayden’s voice was firm. “The only way you go with him is if I’m dead.”

Oh, Hayden. She loved him, and he was going to be killed by Shawn while she helplessly watched. Her mind scrambled for other ideas, any idea. “We haven’t even offered Zeus money,” she said desperately. “We both have lots and lots of money. Let’s try that. Please.”

The men were noisy and pressing closer as they bet and argued and got ready for the fight. Eva tried to push it all away and focus on Hayden.

“He doesn’t want our money. I have to do this.” Hayden kissed her tenderly and whispered against her lips, “I love you, Eva.”

She sucked in a breath. He loved her? She wasn't even sure he liked her. They hardly knew each other, but she'd bared her soul earlier and now he was saying he loved her too.

"I *will* keep you safe," his voice was so strong and determined she believed him. "Zeus will never touch you." His gaze held her captive. "You believe me?"

"I do," she managed. She had no idea how Hayden would keep her safe and keep Zeus from touching her but she was putting her trust in him and in heaven above. *Please, please help him*, she begged.

"That's my Beauty." He smiled at her. "Now give me one of those inspiring kisses of yours before I go win this battle."

Eva didn't hesitate, certain the men would pull them apart soon. She kissed him, desperately and deeply, trying to pour her love for him and her gratitude for his bravery and willingness to sacrifice himself for her. He was a truly honorable hero.

Hayden returned the kiss, wrapping her up tight and taking the kiss to new levels. The pounding in her head disappeared, the fear leaked out, and all she could feel was Hayden. His strength, his love, his devotion to her.

The men chanted, "Beast! Beast! Beast!" far too loudly.

As Hayden released her from the kiss, Eva sadly came back down to earth and to their hopeless situation.

He smiled down at her, trailing his fingers along her jawline and tucking her hair behind her ear. "Have faith, love, and keep praying for a miracle."

She loved him, and she loved that he wasn't giving up. Nodding, she promised herself she'd have faith and believe until they were both killed.

"I have the best motivation in the world to thrash this loser." Hayden's eyes trailed over her face. "You."

She forced a brave smile and worked up some inspiring words to say to her man who was heading into deadly battle. All she came up with was, "Kick his trash, my Beast, and then let's go

home.” The words were falsely courageous and so far from realistic that he should’ve laughed.

He didn’t. “So fierce, my Beauty. But I’ll do it. For you.” He gave her one more peck on the lips, then released her and strode toward the open circle they’d made on the floor. All the fear crashed into her again. She almost fell over, but she spread her stance wider and prayed harder than ever.

Please, please protect him.

Zeus stood there with the fierce-looking Shawn by his side. “So the rules are ...” He grinned. “There are no rules. Except ...” He looked at Shawn. “Kill him quick for me, will you? Then I’ll spend the rest of the night comforting his gorgeous widow.”

“You will never touch Eva,” Hayden said in a low growl that actually made Zeus take several quick steps away from him.

Eva’s heart filled with even more love for him. The Beast. Her husband. Hayden. A few days ago, he hadn’t even liked her. She couldn’t have imagined at their first meeting that the smart-aleck athlete who didn’t want to marry her as a favor to his friend could be so in love with her he’d be willing to give his life for her.

If only he could somehow win.

Please if it be Your will, let him win.

But even then, how would they get away from Zeus and all these men? She had to have more faith, but she glanced around and counted almost twenty men crowding the room, most of them armed. There were still guards outside as well.

Zeus would keep toying with them until he killed Hayden and took advantage of her.

Sweat trickled down her back. She thought she’d been terrified when she’d walked along that pier to Zeus’s boat, but she hadn’t known true terror until this moment.

“All right, Beast,” Zeus said easily, as if he hadn’t just scurried back. “Let’s see if basketball taught you any useful fighting

skills.” He raised his hand, and Eva’s gut churned with apprehension. “Rip him apart, Shawn.”

Then Zeus dashed out of the way.

Shawn snarled like an animal, making the hair raise on her arms. The huge man dodged forward and curled his fist up toward Hayden’s jaw.

Hayden dodged the hit and slammed his fist into the side of the man’s temple. Shawn was already off-balance from missing Hayden’s jaw. He stumbled and almost went down.

“Yes!” Eva cried out. Did she dare hope Hayden could win? He was quick. That was a bonus.

Shawn regained his balance and whirled to face Hayden, but Hayden used his longer arms and didn’t give him a chance to get close. He lashed out with his fists, sure and accurate, jabbing over and over again into the man’s torso, driving him back slowly but steadily.

Shawn hit and kicked at Hayden, but Hayden deflected or stayed out of range on most of the hits. The ones that did connect threw Hayden back momentarily or to the side, but he never stopped. With his longer reach, Hayden could hit the monster while still keeping his distance. He kept pummeling and pummeling and pummeling the man until he pinned Shawn up against a huge window.

“Beast, Beast, Beast!” the men cheered.

“Yes!” Eva cheered as well, clapping her hands together, bouncing on her toes and praying that Hayden could keep this momentum going. She wanted him to win with every fiber of her being. He’d said Gunner had trained him, but she hadn’t expected him to fight like this. She’d heard height was an advantage for a boxer. Thank heaven above.

Hayden’s fists moved from Shawn’s torso to his face, and he knocked the former Marine’s head into the window repeatedly. Blood sprayed from Shawn’s nose as Hayden broke it. Blood trickled from cuts on the man’s forehead and lip.

Shawn hit and kicked Hayden as well, but Hayden deflected or dodged at least half. The hits that landed looked painful, but

Hayden hardly flinched and just kept pummeling Shawn. He was a man motivated by love and protected by heaven and nothing was going to stop him.

“Yes!” Eva called out. “Go Hayden!”

“Beast, Beast, Beast!” the men roared, drowning out even Eva’s cheers. She had never wanted to fight anybody or to attend boxing or ultimate-fighting events, but watching Hayden thrash this brute was one of the most incredible things she’d ever seen. God was too good, and all was right in heaven.

Thank you, Lord.

Hayden would win and she would stay safe from Zeus for one more day.

Relief filled her, followed closely by overwhelming love for Hayden.

An eerie roar sounded from Shawn. It was so loud it permeated through her chest and overpowered even the men’s chants. The men’s voices faded away as if Shawn’s roar had silenced them, and Eva screamed in horror.

Shawn propelled himself off the wall, barreled into Hayden, wrapped him up tight, and body-slammed both of them to the ground.

The sound of their combined body weight hitting the floor echoed through the now-silent room.

Hayden’s head cracked so hard against the floor she expected blood to gush out. Thankfully, his skull didn’t split open, but he didn’t move.

Was he still alive?

“No!” Eva ran at them. She would shove that monster off of Hayden and cover her husband with her body. Shawn couldn’t kill him.

Shawn continued hitting Hayden in the face as Hayden lay motionless.

Arms wrapped around Eva's waist and lifted her off her feet. "Calm down." It was Jackson's voice. "You have to let them finish, Beauty."

"No!" she screamed, clawing at his arms. "Hayden! No!"

She could hardly stand to watch as Shawn returned the hits that Hayden had given to him. Hayden had blood streaming down his face, and his head kept getting knocked around.

The room was oddly silent. It was as if the men didn't want to see Hayden get killed either, but nobody moved to stop Shawn.

Zeus was smiling like an evil tiger. He looked over at Eva and his creepy smile grew.

She struggled harder to escape Jackson.

Please, please, she begged somebody in heaven. Please let him live. Please stop Shawn. Please!

"Hayden!" she yelled as loud as she could, straining against Jackson's hold, stomping on his feet, and digging her fingernails into his arms.

Please, she begged heaven above.

Shawn paused in his pounding of Hayden's face. He leaned to the side, reaching for the metal poker from the nearby fireplace. Zeus leaned forward as if in anticipation of seeing Shawn smash the life out of Hayden and finish him off with that metal weapon.

"No!" Eva cried out.

The room was silent as Zeus's eyes lit up and Shawn wrapped his fist around the poker.

"Hayden!" Eva screamed into the silence. "I love you!"

Eva heard a loud inhale and then Hayden's eyes flew open. He flung himself upward, and with Shawn leaning to grasp the poker, he bucked Shawn off.

"Hayden?" Eva stopped fighting and stared. She sagged against Jackson, not sure if this miracle was really happening.

Hayden slowly rose to his feet, blood streaming from his eye, his nose, his cheek, and his jaw. Shawn stood also, staring warily at him as if he were an apparition from the other side.

He was! Hayden was from heaven above. Somehow, angels had breathed oxygen back into Hayden's lungs, cleared his head, and woken him. It was a miracle. Eva knew it as surely as she was standing here—or rather leaning against Jackson.

She straightened away from Jackson, but he held on to her waist. "Hayden!" She clapped her hands together. There was hope.

Hayden stripped his T-shirt off, wiped his bloody nose and face with it, crumpled it into a ball, and hurled it at Zeus's face.

"Hey," Zeus cried out in protest, flicking the bloody, sweaty T-shirt away.

Hayden smiled and then flexed. Eva stared at all the muscle rippling in his toned chest, shoulders, abdomen, and arms. He was glistening with sweat, and her husband was an awe-inspiring sight.

"Beast, Beast, Beast," the men started cheering again.

Hayden pointed at Shawn. "Let's finish this."

Shawn roared and ran at him, holding the poker aloft. Hayden dodged to the side, grabbed Shawn by the back of the neck, and brought his knee up into Shawn's face. All of Shawn's forward momentum added to the powerful movement. The man's face looked horrible, like it had exploded.

Hayden drove his elbow into the back of Shawn's neck, and he crashed to the floor. He bounced once and then settled, unmoving.

The entire room seemed to suck in a breath and then the men roared as one, "Beast, Beast, Beast!"

Hayden bent down and checked for a pulse. He nodded that it was there, grabbed the poker out of Shawn's slackened grip, and straightened.

“Well done, Beast,” Zeus said over the clamor. His blue eyes glinted with evil. “Finish him,” he snarled.

Eva’s stomach flipped over again. Shawn would’ve killed Hayden, but she couldn’t imagine Hayden would kill a man in cold blood.

Hayden held Zeus’s gaze for long enough the men settled in their cheering and watched the silent battle.

Hayden let out a loud roar and lifted the poker above his head. Eva drew back against Jackson. Her stomach tumbled and chills pricked at her skin. Would Hayden kill Shawn to appease Zeus and give them a better chance at survival?

“No!” Hayden hollered and threw the poker to the floor. It clanged ominously. He glared at Zeus, looking larger than life, the ultimate hero who would never compromise or back down. “I don’t answer to you.”

Then his gaze zeroed in on Eva, and warmth filled her. Her Beast had fought honorably, he’d won, and he’d done it all for her. He’d protected her just like he said he would. Hayden loved her. Every part of the vicious battle was miraculous.

“Let her go,” Hayden commanded Jackson.

Jackson released her and stepped back.

Eva ran to her husband, crashing against that perfect chest of his. Hayden grunted but held his ground. Blood still trickled down his nose and his eyebrow needed stitches. He was sweaty and had to have a concussion, or worse.

For the moment, none of that mattered.

“You won,” she breathed out, wrapping her arms tight around his back.

“It was a miracle,” he whispered into her ear. “Everything was black. I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, and I knew I was going to die, but then I heard you yell that you loved me, and heaven breathed oxygen into my lungs.”

“You’re my miracle,” she told him, then she arched up and kissed him.

The kiss was full of gratitude, love, and hope that they might actually have a future. The yells of “Beast” and then of “Beauty and the Beast” echoed through the room. Eva ignored them and kissed and kissed and kissed her husband, her love, her protector, her Beast.

He lifted her off her feet and spun her around and the men yelled louder.

Suddenly the yelling ceased, and Eva felt the darkness she’d felt try to overwhelm her when they first walked into the house wrap around them again.

Hayden lowered her to her feet, keeping her in the protective circle of his arms. She glanced around to see what was happening.

Zeus and Jackson both had pistols pointed straight at Hayden.

“Sorry, Beast,” Jackson said, his blue eyes full of regret. “You were incredible.”

“I enjoyed that,” Zeus said, grinning. His eyes roved over Eva, and he was breathing fast. “Now it’s time for the main event. I’ve graciously let you live. Now hand over the Beauty, Beast.”

“No,” Hayden growled, keeping her tight to his chest. “The deal was if I won, I got to keep her with me tonight.”

Zeus laughed. Several of the men joined him, ugly laughs that reverberated through her bones. She hated their laughs.

Then all sense of amusement fled Zeus’s face, and he locked eyes with Hayden, unflinching and unintimidated. This man could stare down a boulder and win. “I’m a world-renowned criminal with strongholds in five first-world nations and dozens of third-world hideouts like this one. The U.S. government is afraid of me and the U.N. leaves me alone. You think I’m going to keep my end of the bargain with the likes of you?”

Horror made Eva’s blood run cold. Like a criminal would ever keep his word.

“Eva Canterbury is mine. Hand her over,” Zeus said in a cold, commanding voice that she doubted anyone would dare argue with.

Hayden jutted out his chin. “Over my dead body.”

“Always with the sacrifices. Fine with me. If that’s the way you want this to go.” Zeus leveled his pistol at Hayden.

“No!” Eva cried out.

The men in the room seemed to suck in a breath.

Hayden tugged Eva to his side and pushed out his chest. “Do it, then,” he said with no fear in his voice.

“No!” Eva tried to step in front of him, but Hayden held her back.

“Happily.” Zeus grinned.

And the doorbell rang.

Everyone froze.

Zeus cursed. “Go kill whoever that is.”

Jackson scurried for the front entryway.

Zeus and Hayden locked gazes. Neither of them moved. Neither of them would back down. But Zeus was the one with the gun and dozens of cretins to back him up.

Hayden was going to die. She’d have to watch the bullet enter his beautiful chest and take him from her, and she would wish she could die with him.

Eva prayed like she’d never prayed in her life, and she’d said some desperate prayers during the past few hours.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hayden didn't want to die. He wanted more time with Eva.

But he would never stand by and let Zeus take advantage of her. The problem was—once Zeus shot him, no one would stand in the scum's way of doing anything he wanted to Eva.

It had been a miracle that he'd somehow woken back up after being knocked out or whatever half-dead state he'd been in. From the amount of blood on his face, how bad everything ached, and how swollen one of his eyes was, Shawn must've thrashed him while he was out of it. But somehow he felt lucid and strong and unafraid.

Was it possible another miracle could happen for them? Why would heaven breathe life back into his lungs and give him the strength to wake up, stand up, and then take down that monster Shawn with two well-placed hits only to let Zeus shoot Hayden in cold blood?

Nobody moved as Jackson hurried to the door. Hayden kept his gaze stony and unflinching as he focused on Zeus. The man could, and probably would, shoot him any second. It was doubtful Hayden would survive at this close of range. He'd never been more unnerved in his life than he was looking down the wrong end of a pistol held by a vicious, demonic crime lord.

But Hayden refused to die groveling to this waste of a human heart. He'd never been around someone so evil. The depth of his depravity oozed from Zeus's pores. Maybe the miracle would be Hayden would die, but somehow Sutton's people

would come before Eva was defiled. He could at least pray for that.

Footsteps came back into the main room and Jackson walked in with ... Sutton Smith.

Every man in the room sucked in a breath. Sutton was well known in many circles—including the criminal ones, apparently. Hope filled Hayden making even the pain in his head lessen.

“Sutton,” Eva whispered, her voice full of the same hope he was experiencing.

Some of the men backed into each other; others backed into the wall or the windows. “That’s Sutton Smith,” was whispered over and over again.

Zeus moved his pistol from aiming at Hayden to pointing it at Sutton. Interestingly, Zeus’s hand was trembling.

Sutton didn’t even look at the crime lord. “All right then?” he asked Hayden.

Hayden couldn’t help but let out a surprised laugh. “Been better, mate, but it’s good to see ya.”

“Cheers to that.” Sutton nodded to Eva. “Morning, Mrs. Warren. Let me take care of business, then we’ll have a cuppa together.”

Hayden pulled Eva against his side and wrapped her up tight, prepared to shelter her if Sutton set off a gun fight.

Miracle number two might be more impressive than miracle number one. How on earth had Sutton waltzed into Satan’s lair like he was strolling into a business meeting? He was dressed impeccably in his suit and tie and not a hint of anxiety showed in his clear blue eyes or his confident posture. Zeus had been right about one thing: he did look like James Bond.

“Sutton Smith,” Zeus sneered. “This is going to be the best night of my life. I’ll kill you, then I’ll kill the Beast, then I’ll celebrate with the Beauty.”

“Lovely home,” Sutton said, glancing around at the décor, unruffled as ever. “’Twill be a pity when I destroy it.”

“Like you could,” Zeus hurled at him. “I can’t believe you were stupid or cocky enough to walk in here alone. How did you get past my guards?”

Sutton finally looked at him and gave him a patient smile, as if Zeus was a disobedient teenager who needed some correction.

“You’re a petty criminal, Zeus,” Sutton said, straightening his tie. “I’ve been waiting for this day for quite some time, and I’ll be chuffed to rid the world of your filth.”

“You’re old, washed up, and out of touch,” Zeus screamed, the pistol in his hand shaking now. “You’re going to die!”

“You first.” Sutton yanked a pistol out of his suit coat. Both men pulled the trigger in sync.

A bullet slammed into Sutton’s chest and knocked him to the floor.

Sutton’s bullet caught Zeus right in the forehead, and he also went down.

Hayden instinctively wrapped Eva up and dove to the floor. He covered her with his body as windows shattered and bullets lodged into the walls, the cabinets, and the men standing in the room.

Cursing, shouting, cries of pain, more shots, the sound of fistfights, and general pandemonium broke out. Hayden tugged Eva toward a nearby couch, and she army-crawled with him.

“Stay down,” he cautioned, pushing her farther behind the couch. “I’ll be right back.”

Eva clung to him. “Don’t.”

“I have to help.” He begged her with his gaze to understand.

Eva drew in a breath, nodded bravely, and released him.

Hayden stood in a half-crouch, still sheltered by the couch. He glanced around and saw Jackson a foot away, aiming his pistol at someone outside the window.

He launched himself at the man and tackled him to the slate floor.

“Hey!” Jackson hollered.

Hayden grabbed the guy’s hand, slammed it to the floor, then stripped the gun from his fingers. He smacked Jackson in the side of the head with the butt of the gun. The blond looked stunned.

“Stay down,” Hayden commanded, pointing the pistol at him. “Or I’ll hate to have to kill you.”

“But you’re my hero,” Jackson whined, as if he couldn’t reconcile a world where their roles were reversed.

Hayden shook his head. The guy was insane.

He glanced around and saw Zeus and almost a dozen other men sprawled on the floor. Where was Sutton’s body? Had one of his men moved him? Grief for the downed icon filled him. Sutton had given his life to save Hayden and Eva. The guilt of that was thick in his throat, but he also felt immense gratitude.

He looked over, glimpsing Eva still behind the couch. She was safe. For the moment.

Gunner and Lily were by the windows. Lily surveyed the room and picked off anyone who dared point a gun at her husband while Gunner fought two men at once. Should Hayden go help Gunner or would Lily shoot him by mistake? The sounds of fighting were dwindling. He pointed the gun at Jackson, in case the guy got any ideas.

Jackson put his hands up. “I watched you fight Shawn. I don’t have a death wish.”

“This is finished,” a commanding voice called from the kitchen area, like an avenging angel had descended from heaven to end the chaotic battle. “Lay down your weapons and put your hands up and you might get the luxury of an American prison, instead of death or rotting in a hole in Mexico, which I personally think you all deserve.”

Hayden stared in awe. “Sutton?”

“Sutton Smith, Sutton Smith,” Zeus’s men repeated in whispered awe. “He’s a ghost. No, he lives. No, he’s a ghost.”

The remaining men set their guns on the floor and straightened with their hands up. Hayden stepped back from Jackson and gestured. "Go stand with your men."

Jackson obeyed, but he stopped and asked, "Do I still get those courtside seats?"

"If you ever get out of prison, sure."

"Sweet." Jackson bumped his fist against his own chest and saluted Hayden.

He was crazy, but it also proved how above the law Zeus and his men thought they were.

Gunner, Lily, and the rest of Sutton's team were searching Zeus's men for weapons, then cuffing them with thick zip-tie cuffs. A few of Sutton's men moved through the injured and dead, checking pulses and the severity of injuries.

Hayden eased back to Eva. She stood and hurried to his side. He set the gun on a side table so he could wrap his arms around her.

"I can't believe we survived." She shuddered against him, looking around at the nightmare mess of bodies, the destroyed house, and the handcuffed men being herded together.

"So many miracles tonight. I can't even wrap my mind around them," Hayden agreed. He glanced down at her beautiful face, wanting to tell her how deeply he liked, respected, revered, adored, and loved her. But for some reason, the words got lodged in his throat.

It had been so easy to tell her he loved her when he was certain he was going to die. Now the connection between them was still strong, but their relationship and future felt like tenuous ground. They were married. What did that mean to her, to them? They'd teased about whose house to live in. Would they really just move in together and be ... married? What about a honeymoon? Should he date her first, show her that he liked her, and make sure she truly loved him and was comfortable behaving like they were ... married? He wasn't sure how to ask his questions, and he didn't want to push her too far or too fast.

“Hayden. Eva.” Gunner and Lily approached them.

They pulled apart to hug each of them.

Gunner clapped him on the shoulder. “All my hard work training your un-talented self, and you look like an over-tenderized piece of meat.”

“I earned every bruise. You would’ve been proud.”

“I am proud.” Gunner pointed to Shawn, who was awake and in the crowd of criminals, looking murderous. “You took that beast out and he’s a former Marine?”

“When you’re good, you’re good,” Hayden said.

“Overconfident men.” Lily laughed and shared a look with Eva.

“Seriously, thank you,” Hayden said, getting a little choked up. “I would’ve been dead ten times over without your training. I owe *you* now.” Marrying Eva was a blessing he could never repay. He owed Gunner and Sutton everything.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Sutton strode up to them, tilting his head to the group of prisoners. “Well, this is going to be a right barmy mess to figure out which country gets the privilege of imprisoning each of these gits.”

“How did you survive that shot?” Hayden demanded.

Sutton smiled. “Bullet-proof vest. It was all ace. He was aiming for my chest, and I have superior training and instincts, obviously.”

“I can’t believe you risked your life for us,” Eva said. She gave him a hug.

“All part of the job description.” Sutton appeared as unruffled as ever as Eva stepped back.

“No, I’m pretty sure that went above and beyond,” Hayden said, shaking his hand.

“I don’t think Liz would agree,” Gunner said with a lifted brow. “Any of us could’ve walked in here.”

“Ah, don’t deny an ‘old, washed-up Brit’ some fun,” Sutton grinned, but rubbed at his chest. “Though I may be bruised for a spell. I’m not as spry as I think I am.”

They all laughed.

“Thank you,” Hayden said sincerely. “Did you ... lose anyone?”

“Thankfully no,” Gunner answered. “Some injured, but nothing life threatening. Unless you’re going to keel over on me?” He cocked his head and studied him.

“I’m perfect,” Hayden insisted.

“He is,” Eva murmured.

Hayden smiled at that.

“This whole night is miraculous,” Lily said.

Hayden and Eva exchanged a look. Lily was right. This whole night was a miracle.

Now if Hayden could have one more miracle and know how to ask his wife who married him for protection to be his wife who stayed married to him for love. She’d proclaimed love for him at Zeus’s request, and he’d felt it deeply. Why was he doubting it now? There was the worry that she’d only said it to protect him, and there was still the niggling weirdness in their past that needed to be brought into the open and then buried once and for all.

Sutton nodded. “Eva and Hayden, I’ll take you with me and those who need medical care. Gunner, Lily, you’re all right guarding this mess for a few hours? We’ll work with the Mexican and American governments to match up rap sheets, make arrests, and arrange extractions.”

“Sure thing.” Gunner winked at Lily. “All part of the job description.”

“After this job, I think we deserve a vacation,” Lily shot at Sutton. “Watching them take Eva away and Hayden leap into that boat and not knowing for hours if they were dead or alive took years off my life. Then watching you get shot in the chest

through the window. And let's not even talk about the poor, distraught sisters ..."

"Hannah!" Eva cried out.

"Aimee." Hayden looked at Sutton. "Are they okay?"

"Yes," Sutton reassured them. "I left Ryan and Lawrence watching over them. Let's get you to them."

"Let's hurry," Eva said. "Hannah is going to cuss me."

"She's a cheeky one for sure," Sutton agreed.

"Gotta love her," Eva said.

She turned to smile at Hayden. He offered his hand, and Eva took it. It felt right to have her hand in his, and it settled some of his worries. They'd made it through this nightmare. They could figure out how to navigate a life together. He hoped.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Eva felt unsteady and exhausted as she and Hayden thanked Gunner, Lily, and some of the other men who'd fought for them, trying to avoid looking at the bodies of Zeus and his men lined up in the living room. So many dead. It was hard to feel sorrow for vicious criminals.

She and Hayden walked to a helicopter in the next clearing over with Sutton escorting them. The heroic Brit explained that pilots had flown them as close to her tracker as they dared without risking detection and then his team members had been lowered to the forest floor and started infiltrating the exterior of Zeus's stronghold, using heat signatures to take out any sentries or guards. Other ops came from the river and some even made it through from trails in the jungle.

Three of Sutton's men were injured and waiting for them in the helicopter. Luckily, none of them were at death's door—a gunshot wound to the leg, one to the shoulder, and a vicious knife wound to the back. They flew quickly back to Puerto Vallarta. Sutton used a first aid kit to clean up Hayden's wounds and steri-strip the cut on his forehead, then he kept attending to the injured men.

It was loud in the helicopter and there wasn't a lot of space. That had to be why neither she nor Hayden started a conversation when there was so very much they could be talking about.

Why had it been so easy to tell him all she admired about him, that she loved him, and then kiss him desperately while they'd been in mortal danger? Now that they were safe, she wasn't

sure how to ask what his plans or intentions were, or how to proceed with a relationship. He'd teased about whose house they would live in, but previously he'd also said they'd get an annulment as soon as she was safe.

Before their fun interactions in Colorado and their intense experience at death's door, he hadn't even liked her. What if he'd been caught up in the moment when he told her he loved her or asked where they would live? What if now he remembered that he didn't like her, for some unknown reason, and he returned to his charming, hilarious, and kind self yet put up barriers between them again?

Her mind replayed the insane and horrifying night they'd just experienced and how many times Hayden had proven himself willing to die for her. He wouldn't distance himself now because of some grievance in the past that she still didn't know or understand. Right?

They landed at an airport in Puerto Vallarta and were almost immediately inundated with hugs and questions and stories from each of their sisters. They thanked Ryan and Lawrence before the two men took the injured men to the hospital. Eva tried to insist Hayden needed stitches too—he looked like a brave hero who had earned bruises and cuts for his love—but he promised he felt great and Sutton had done a fabulous job cleaning him up.

Sutton directed them to his Gulfstream. Luckily, it had recliners facing each other so Aimee and Hannah could sit across from them and keep talking and grilling them with questions.

The flight to John Wayne Airport in southern California seemed to pass far too quick. Eva thought they would all run out of things to talk and ask details about and she could have a private conversation with Hayden. It didn't happen. She wanted to hold his hand or something, but his hands were swollen and battered. He'd gone through that intense pain for her, but the longer they went without one of them bringing up their future, the further apart from him she felt.

Maybe she was simply too overwrought and exhausted to reason anything out. She was likely worrying about nothing. The connection and bond between them had started developing in Colorado, though those light-hearted and teasing interactions seemed to be months ago, not a single day. Their bond had solidified as they'd been threatened by Zeus and Hayden had bravely protected her over and over again.

She wanted to gush over and kiss her husband and explain to him he was not getting away from her, no matter what. But she didn't quite know how to voice any of her thoughts and concerns. As beat up as he looked, she didn't dare climb on his lap and shower him with kisses. Or maybe that was just an excuse to hide her growing insecurities.

They landed in California and a driver was waiting to take them to Sutton's mansion. Everyone got quiet on the drive. It was seven in the morning, and none of them had slept. It had been the most stressful night of Eva's life. She'd fussed about Hannah and too much stress on the baby in utero, but her sister assured her babies were tough and promised she'd get to her OB tomorrow for a stress test.

As they drove through the gates and up the hill to Sutton's mansion, people spilled out into the early morning light. All the women in their vehicle cried out happily, recognizing little Parley and Hannah's husband, each of their parents and their siblings, and Hayden and Aimee's niece and nephew.

Eva and Hayden were pulled apart for many hugs and exclamations, especially about the scrapes, bruises, cuts, and swelling on Hayden's face, arms, and hands. He looked more battered than he had initially. Eva wanted to be the one fussing over him, but there was no denying their distraught moms. She welcomed each loving hug, but she didn't like being separated from Hayden and she hated the insecurities roiling inside her.

She met Hayden's parents, siblings, in-laws, niece, and nephew. They were all great, and she could see Hayden got his height and his teasing from his dad and his deep-brown eyes and kindness from his mama.

It was adorable to see little Parley greet Hayden. “The best Beast ever!” Parley proclaimed as Hayden lifted him into the air and Parley chattered on and on about basketball and stats and how high he could jump, which made Eva remember how impressive that leap had been in real-life action.

Agatha and Liz had a huge breakfast spread laid out for them. They ate and talked and recounted the stories and miracles. With Hayden seated next to her and many opportunities to laugh, relive the miracles, be overcome with gratitude for him, brush hands, and exchange glances, she felt like everything would work out. They were both past the point of exhaustion, so she didn’t know why she was so worried about some heart to heart conversation. Their whole future was before them. They would talk and plan. Soon.

They finished breakfast and their moms and sisters insisted on helping clean up the meal, though Agatha kept telling them the ‘sweet maids’ would be coming. Everyone ended up pitching in to help and then thank Sutton, Liz, and Agatha over and over again, especially Sutton for risking his life for Eva and Hayden. Liz tensed every time someone said that, and Eva imagined the legendary billionaire was in for a stern talking to from his beautiful wife.

“Can you come to Hannah’s house with us?” her mom requested. “Or are you going with Hayden?”

Eva looked over at Hayden, also talking to his mom. “I, um, don’t know. Can you wait a minute?”

“Of course.” Her mom hugged her and headed to the Escalade waiting to take them home.

Eva walked over to Hayden. His family was also loading up in the vehicles. Several of them noticed her and waved or called goodbye.

“I’ll see you soon, Eva,” Aimee said.

“Of course.” Eva smiled. “See you.”

Hayden’s mom gave her a hug and then pumped her eyebrows at her son. “We’ll be waiting in the cars.”

“Thanks, Mama.” Hayden turned to Eva.

They were finally alone, yet not really alone. Sutton, Liz, and Agatha had gone into the mansion, but her family and his were all loaded in the Escalades and Eva could imagine dozens of eyes riveted to them as they were all probably peering through those tinted windows.

“Hey,” Hayden said softly.

“Hey.” She smiled up at him.

“I, um ...” He cleared his throat and looked as uncertain as she felt. “My family is all crashing at my house to rehash for the dozenth time the screws loose in my head for risking my life so many times.”

She laughed, and he grinned. She wanted to gush her gratitude for his every insane risk, all he’d done for her, but she already had as they’d recounted the stories. Hayden had tried to downplay his bravery and she’d been able to contradict and brag about him over and over again.

“You’re all headed to Hannah’s?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she managed, her stomach tightening and the worries that their quick-burning love would quickly burn out compounding. Was it possible he could love her but not really like her because of whatever he thought had happened between them in the past?

She waited, hoping he’d ask her to come with him. Her family would understand. Hannah and Daxon lived close, and her parents were only a four-hour drive or an hour flight. She’d see them all soon.

“Can I call you later?” he asked.

“Oh ... of course.” She smiled and held her composure, though she wilted inside. They’d been head over heels in love last night and now it was like the goodbye of a semi-awkward second date, wondering if there would be a third.

How could she change this moment and this entire trajectory? All those feelings of love, devotion, and gratitude for him were still inside her, waiting to burst out, but she had no idea how to give them voice. What if now the adrenaline rush had

worn off and he was back to ‘not wanting to get involved’ like he’d told her right before their wedding?

Hayden bent down, and a thrill of anticipation filled her. At least she’d get a kiss goodbye. That might be the gateway to both of them sharing what they were feeling.

He gently kissed her cheek and murmured, “I’ll see you soon.”

Eva’s entire body wilted with disappointment. She masked it, nodded, turned, and hurried to her family when she wanted to call out like she had on that boat, ‘Hayden, I like you’ or scream like she had when he was knocked out and Shawn was grabbing the fire poker to finish him off, ‘Hayden, I love you.’

Sadly, she did neither. She simply opened the back door and slid in next to her sister.

She’d fallen hard and fast for the Beast. She wanted to stay right by his side, get to know his family, like him, love him, kiss him, and focus on developing a fully invested marital relationship.

But apparently, now that the danger was over, he was having second thoughts.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hayden cursed himself as he watched Eva walk away and then climb in the car with her family. He'd obviously taken far too many hits to the head from Shawn to have messed that up so horribly. His gut churned. How could he fix things now? He was tired and irrational. Maybe he should give them both a minute to rest and then figure things out.

Blowing out a breath, he walked away, instead of chasing after his wife, telling Eva everything he loved about her, and holding her close the rest of the day.

He spent the drive to his house getting razzed about his gorgeous wife and the speculation of if the 'gorgeous Eva Canterbury aka the Beauty' really loved their beastly brother, uncle, son, etc. or if it had all been a ploy. His brothers kept saying his face was so battered no Beauty would love him. Hayden barely restrained himself from correcting them. Her title was—the 'gorgeous Eva Warren aka *His Beauty*.'

He teased so much; he had to know how to take it. So he shut up and took it.

Once they got home and everyone was settled, he begged exhaustion, went to his master suite, took a long shower, and said a long prayer of gratitude. He was a needy disciple. Along with the many thanks for miracles and heavenly protection, he also beseeched the Lord for any help wooing his incredible wife. Then he finally stretched out in his customized Alaskan King bed, nine foot by nine foot.

Surprisingly, he did sleep. He woke late in the afternoon with a pounding headache, his stomach grumbling, and his back feeling like he needed a chiropractor, a masseuse, a hot tub, and a handful of ibuprofen.

Hayden groaned and rolled out of bed, stretching. He needed to go find his family and some food, but the only thing he wanted to do was call Eva. He'd asked if he could call her later. It was later.

He grabbed his cell phone off the dresser. It was nice to have it back. He looked at the display of dozens of missed calls, hundreds of missed texts, and thousands of missed emails, and his head hurt worse. He pushed on the phone icon and realized ... he didn't even have his wife's phone number. That was messed up. Was their entire relationship messed up?

No. They just had to figure out how to proceed from their crazy beginning.

He looked in his contacts and thankfully, he had Hannah's number. At the visit to meet Parley in the hospital, he'd gotten the number so he could check in on the little man. Crazy how much had changed since that simple visit.

"Hayden?" Hannah answered on the first ring and sounded surprised to hear from him. "Everything all right?"

"I need Eva," he burst out with.

"Oh." That simple word had a lot of inflection in it. "Course you do. Just a minute, handsome Beast. I'll get your world-renowned Beauty."

"Thank you, my favorite sister-in-law."

"Now that's what I like to hear, and I'd better be your favorite." She laughed at herself. Give me two shakes."

He paced to his window while he waited, looking out at the beautiful view of Laguna Beach.

"Hello." Eva's voice came on the line.

His head instantly felt better, and his stomach settled. "Hey. I said I'd call you later ... it's later."

She laughed. He missed her laugh. He missed her. Why were they twenty minutes apart right now?

“Did you get some shut-eye?” he asked.

“A little bit. I couldn’t relax.”

“Maybe if I was holding you?”

“Maybe.” Her voice sounded flirtatious, and her next words confirmed it. “But maybe I wouldn’t want to sleep at all if you were holding me.”

Yes! He did a mental fist bump. “I think we’d better try that out.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Hayden grinned, and all the pains in his back and head and his empty stomach faded. “I want to be with you,” he said before he could wimp out. He held his breath, waiting, praying.

“I want to be with you too,” she said softly. “I wasn’t quite sure how to ... proceed with being married.”

“Neither was I.” He sank into an overstuffed chair next to the fireplace and the bank of windows. He still didn’t dare ask if they could live together as husband and wife. It felt like they’d gone about this all backwards. “Can I take you on a date?” It was lame, but it was probably the best path.

“Sure.” The response was fine, but she sounded as uncertain as he felt.

He stood and started pacing again, back to shifting relationship ground. “I feel like there’s so much I need to ask you and tell you, and ...” He trailed off as the looming dark spot in their past suddenly filled his mind.

“Hayden.” Her voice was tentative. “You won’t get distant and smart-alecky again, like the night we first met outside Sutton’s bathroom, will you?”

He wanted to reassure her that of course he wouldn’t do that. He’d been hurt over something in their past that hardly mattered anymore. Now that he knew her and loved her, and

...

Why did she keep insisting that was the first night they'd met?

"I'm sorry I acted like that," he said, proceeding cautiously. "I was upset because of how harshly you ditched me in college and then you acted like you didn't even know—"

"Hayden," she interrupted him. "I have no clue what you're talking about. Ditched you in college? I didn't even know who you were in college."

Silence filled the line. Hayden felt as if he knew Eva so well from their shared intense experience over the past few days, but maybe he didn't know her at all.

"Eva ... when I was a freshman and you were a sophomore. Right after basketball season. End of March. We texted for a while, then we met in that alley behind your apartment every night for a couple of weeks." He paused, waiting for her to interject something, but he could only hear measured breaths on the other end.

"You got the offer to go full time with your modeling and you left," he reminded her. "You sent me a vicious text telling me what an annoying loser I was, how my kiss had felt like dead fish lips and tasted worse, how you met me in the dark because you didn't want to be seen with me and ruin your reputation, and if I ever contacted you again you'd get a restraining order and blast it all over social media how truly pathetic my kissing, jokes, and attempts to flirt with you were."

Hayden shoved it all out there. It had been a silly college romance, but it had happened and it had hurt and she had texted him all those things. She could simply say she was sorry, he'd tell her he'd already forgiven her, and they'd move on. He waited, his heart racing and his palms clammy, and paced in front of the windows, clinging to his phone.

"Hayden. I have no idea who you met in that alley or who texted you those awful things, but it wasn't me."

Hayden stopped walking and sank into the nearest chair, confused. "You think some girl impersonated you in college? Why would she do that?"

“I don’t know,” she shot back. “But it makes more sense than *you* making the entire thing up.”

He grunted at that, his gut churning. Made it up? Was she serious? “I guess it does, unless for some reason you blocked the memory, or you’re lying about it.”

As soon as those words were out, he knew they were wrong. Very wrong.

“Eva, I didn’t mean ...” He swallowed hard. “I don’t think you’d lie to me. I’m just really confused right now.”

“So am I,” she said, her voice stiff.

He should probably grovel, but he also needed to figure this out. If there was a slight possibility that the woman he loved was the one he’d texted, met in the alley, kissed, and then ditched him, he couldn’t proceed with a relationship until she came clean about it. “Is there a chance you dated so many guys you just ... don’t remember?”

“No!” Her voice was full of fire now. “How dare you act like I’m lying about this or conveniently forgetting. Why would I meet you in a dark alley? Why would I text those rude things to you? I have never and would never do either of those things.”

He didn’t think so either. All these years, he had believed it was Eva. Had some other female student toyed with him? He couldn’t wrap his mind around why somebody would do that.

“That’s why you were avoiding me and were so off with me when we first met,” she said. “You had this decade-long grudge against me for something I didn’t even do.”

“It seems like it.” He should apologize. Right now. But ... what if she was lying? Could Eva do that to him? He couldn’t imagine she could or would, but ... he’d believed that entire interaction was with Eva for so long, he needed to figure out how to un-believe it now. “I, um, I need a minute to unclog my head and figure this all out.”

“Take all the time you need,” she said, and then the line went dead.

Hayden sat staring at the phone and then staring out the window at the scenic view he couldn't even focus on.

Eva hadn't been the girl he'd met in that alley?

He didn't know. And he had no way to figure it out.

His head hurt worse than ever. His back ached. His stomach churned.

He had to take a leap of faith and trust that Eva wasn't his college debacle and go find her and reassure her he'd been wrong and wanted her to be his future. He could hold her and reassure her that someday they'd laugh about the misunderstanding. They'd been through so much. Of course this little thing didn't matter.

Or he could sit here miserably and keep trying to riddle out a possibly unsolvable puzzle.

He sat there miserably.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Eva hung up the phone with Hayden, stunned, angry, and full of disbelief. Some crazy interaction that happened in college had poisoned Hayden against her and now he needed time to figure it out?

Oh, she'd give him time.

She hurried from the front entry of Hannah's beautiful Santa Ana Heights home. Her mom and dad were sleeping and Hannah, Daxon, and Parley were watching a Crusaders' movie. Well, Daxon was asleep on the couch. Hannah and Parley were watching the movie. Last night had taken a toll on everyone. Her eyes were gritty, and she was so tired her head ached.

"Hi, Auntie Eva," Parley called.

"Hey, sweet boy." She bent down and kissed his soft cheek. Tilting her head to the side, she gave Hannah a look.

Hannah immediately stood.

"Where you going, Mama?"

"Just to chat with Auntie Eva. Be right back."

"Okay." Parley focused on his show.

Hannah ushered her back to the front entry room. "What's wrong?"

Eva handed her the cell phone back, fighting tears.

"Is Hayden on his way?"

“No. He needs some . . . time to think.”

“About what?” Hannah tilted her head to the side, her shiny blonde hair spilling down her arm.

“About if I’m a liar, apparently.”

“Excuse me?” Hannah immediately reared up, feisty, protective older sister going into hyper-drive. How Eva adored her.

“In college at UNC, it sounds like some chick impersonated me, texted Hayden pretending to be me, and they had some relationship, meeting in dark alleys.” She raised her brows to emphasize how weird and stupid it was. “Then when I left to model full time, this girl sent Hayden a rude text about how lame he was and how he kissed like a dead fish.” She sucked in a breath. “That’s why he whispered that to me at our wedding.”

“What?” Hannah’s glare could melt a glacier.

“It doesn’t matter.” She waved a hand, her gut churning. But it did. It all mattered. She loved Hayden, and he didn’t even trust her. “Anyway, she ditched him, probably because she realized I was gone and the farce was up. He thought it was me all these years and hated me and avoided me, until he couldn’t. When I first met him, he was funny and teasing, but the undercurrent was definitely hostile.”

“I guess I can understand being standoffish when he first met you if he thought you were some horrible harpie who’d done him wrong, but once he got to know you, and with what you’ve been through together, I thought he adored you.”

“Me too.” She wrapped her arms around herself, miserable.

“Did he seriously call you a liar?”

“He said, ‘unless you’re lying,’ but then he immediately said he didn’t think I was a liar. He obviously thought it, or he wouldn’t have said it.”

Hannah stared at her. “I’m ticked at Hayden. Seriously ticked. He should know you couldn’t possibly lie or treat anyone badly. You’re an angel. I’m the feisty and sassy one!”

Eva smiled, but it didn't linger. She was too upset.

“Do you have any idea who impersonated you?”

“Does it matter?” Yet it did. She wanted to prove that she was innocent and have Hayden beg her forgiveness, grovel for her, promise he'd never doubt her again.

Hannah shrugged. “I want to find the lady and give her a piece of my mind. As if you and Hayden haven't been through enough with that evil Zeus.” Hannah shuddered. “Now, when you should be starting your relationship, you have this between you. So some girl who must've wanted a fling with the hot basketball player pretended she was you to get him? Then when you left school, she knew the gig was up but couldn't just let him down easy. She had to be rude about it and poison Hayden to you for years. That ticks me off. Is there anybody who looked like you at school?”

Eva laughed. “There were almost thirty-thousand students at UNC. There were quite a few tall blondes who might pull off being me in a dark alley.” She shook her head, mind ticking through people she'd known or seen in her college days. Nobody fit, but then an image of the girl who'd lived two doors down flashed before her eyes.

“Hannah.” She grabbed her sister's arm. “There was a girl with a sad situation who was a tall blonde. I felt so awful for her, but her actions were a little creepy.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah sank onto the sofa. “Sorry, sis. No sleep and all this stress is wearing me out.”

“No worries. I can't sit, though.” She bounced on the balls of her feet. Was the lack of sleep affecting her? She felt overwrought, but her frustration was giving her energy.

“This girl—her name was Olivia, I think. She was about my height and had gorgeous blonde hair, but her face ... she was burned horribly. Her roommate, my friend Sara, told me about how she was burned in a house fire as a teenager. The right side of her face and body was scarred, mottled flesh. It was so sad. She hid what she could with her hair. I always noticed her

and smiled at her but she'd look away." The poor girl had been horribly self conscious.

"At the basketball games, she'd sit low in the stands," Eva mused, "right close to my spot on the floor. But when I'd smile at her, she was never looking at me. She was always studying the team bench. Probably studying Hayden, right?"

"That makes sense," Hannah said.

"I tried to talk to Olivia a few times, ask about her classes or where she was from and she just turned and walked the other direction. Sara told me Olivia assumed everyone was making fun of her, but I don't think anyone was, at least I never saw that. I think they all felt bad for her and didn't know how to help. After I left school Sara said she had a complete breakdown and her parents came for her. They assumed she just couldn't handle other students staring and obviously feeling bad for her. It was a really sad situation."

"That is sad. Maybe she is the one who impersonated you."

"Crazy."

That poor girl had obviously been struggling emotionally as well as physically with her scars. Eva's heart broke for her. It was more comfortable being angry that someone had done her wrong rather than realizing the person who had probably done it had a harder challenge in life than most people could ever relate to.

"Now I feel like a jerk being so angry. If it was Olivia."

"It was easier to be mad before we realized she was struggling too," Hannah agreed. A few beats passed before she said, "You need to call Hayden and tell him."

"No." Eva shook her head. "No way. If he doesn't trust me, he doesn't trust me. I won't have him think I'm making up an excuse or giving both of us a scapegoat." She jutted out her chin. "He needs to trust me."

"He does, sweetie. He does, but you've spent all of ... forty-eight hours together? And he's believed for eleven years that you played him dirty. We might need to cut him a little slack

and realize he probably did need a minute to wrap his mind around everything.”

Eva worried her lip and didn't answer. The problems and possible solutions swirled in a haze of exhaustion in her mind, and nothing was coming together in any sort of helpful fashion. Hayden was probably more tired than she was and most likely had a concussion from all the hits to his head. She did need to cut him some slack, but right now it was smarter to give them both some time.

“I think I need to go home and sleep,” Eva said.

“Mom is going to flip if she wakes up and you're not here. Last night took years off of all of our lives.”

“Ah,” Eva groaned. “I know, I'm just ... so tired and a mess inside. Even before Hayden revealed the college thing, we were both weird. We were so devoted to each other and head over heels last night and then in the light of day and in the real world, I didn't know how to act, how to proceed. I'm not sure if he even likes me. What if he doesn't want to be married to me now that I'm safe? He only did it as a favor to Gunner and to protect me from Zeus.”

Hannah stood and hugged her fiercely. Her baby bump came between them, but the hug was perfect. “If he doesn't want to be with you, he's a loser who doesn't deserve you.”

“The Beast is the furthest thing from a loser.” Eva could picture him now. The Beast was everything she'd ever wanted. Actually he was more. She'd never envisioned a man willingly fighting to the death to protect her.

If that was true, why couldn't she drop her pride, call him and tell him about her suspicions about Olivia, and ask him to give them a chance to be together and develop a lasting relationship?

She sank onto the couch. She was so miserable and so not willing to drop her pride. Was she too tired to think reasonably? Probably.

A rap sounded at the front door.

Hannah gave her a look, and Eva's stomach hopped. Could it be ... ?

"Can I get it?" she asked, nerves making her skin tingle. She stood quickly and tried to peer out the window, but she couldn't see the front door from this angle.

Had he really come? Her husband. Hayden 'the Beast' Warren. Ah ...

He'd apologize. She'd apologize. They'd kiss desperately. They could talk for hours, only taking breaks to kiss some more. Her heart raced out of control.

"Sure." Hannah smirked.

Eva straightened her sundress, licked her lips, and hurried to the door. She flung it open, expectation making her short of breath.

A young man in a T-shirt and shorts had his hands full of Café Zupas plastic bags. "Door Dash order?"

"Oh ..." Eva deflated. Door Dash. Dinner. She didn't want dinner. She wanted Hayden.

"Sorry." Hannah brushed past her. "I forgot I put an online order in for dinner tonight. I knew none of us would want to cook. Hold on one second while I grab some cash for a tip."

"Thank you," the kid said.

Hannah rushed off and Eva was left standing there.

The kid looked her over and then recognition flared in his eyes. "Aren't you that hot, older supermodel who's married to the Beast?" he asked.

Eva's eyes widened. Older? She supposed to a sixteen-year-old boy a thirty-year-old woman would seem older. "Oh ... yeah, I am."

It sounded so lame, so unconvincing.

The young man tried to crane his neck to see past her into the house. "Is the Beast here?" His voice pitched up in excitement. "This isn't his house, right? I bet his house is way bigger than this. I heard it was on the beach. Can I meet him?"

Eva's stomach squirmed. "This isn't his house, and he isn't here," she said dully.

"Dang ... that sucks."

He had no idea.

"Do you want to ...?" The kid held the bags up.

"Oh, yeah." She held out her hands, and he extended the bags. They made the awkward transfer and Hannah rushed up with the cash, handing it over.

"Thanks," she and Hannah both said at the same time.

"Sure." The kid tilted his chin and turned to go. "Tell the Beast hi for me."

Eva tried to smile, but the whole interaction was miserable. Was she married to the Beast? Maybe, but not for long if they couldn't talk things out and trust each other.

"I will," she lied. She stepped back into the house with the bags of food.

A dark-gray Range Rover pulled up to the curb. Eva froze. The door opened and one tall, handsome, battered, and enticing Beast eased out of the driver's seat.

Eva wanted to fling the food and run to him, throw herself into his arms, feel his strength and protection surround her, feel the tingly warmth of his touch, know that he did love her like he'd said last night.

Their gazes met. His dark eyes were full of determination. She wasn't sure what that meant.

"Beauty," he said, just loud enough that she heard him.

"The Beast!" The Door Dash driver shoved his tip into his pocket and ran across the sidewalk. He stopped in front of Hayden. The kid didn't even reach Hayden's chest. Sticking his hand out, he gasped out, "It's such a pleasure, sir. I'm your biggest fan. What happened to your face? I bet the other guy looks worse."

Hayden shook his hand, sadly taking his gaze from Eva to focus on the young man. "Thank you. He sure does look

worse. It's nice to meet you ...?"

"Gavin. Gavin Blanding, sir. Can I get a selfie?"

Hayden nodded. The kid ripped out his phone and sidled in next to him.

"Give me that food and go get your man," Hannah demanded.

Eva silently handed over the bags of food. She gave her sister a pleading look. "Don't leave me."

"Goodness sakes." Hannah shook her head. "Did I raise a confident supermodel and successful businesswoman or a mouse? Get your butt across my front yard and go kiss that handsome Beast." She gave her a little shove.

Eva tripped over the doorjamb, grabbing on to a porch chair for stability and glaring back at her sister. Hannah gave her an imperious look and shut the door in her face.

Letting out a breath and praying desperately for help to know what to say, Eva turned. The good Lord had miraculously protected and rescued them last night, but right now resolving their past seemed like another miracle request.

Hayden was still talking to the young man, but his gaze was fastened on her. Even with his cuts and bruises and swelling, he was irresistibly handsome. Maybe he looked more handsome because of them, knowing he'd taken the beating to protect her.

She didn't move off the porch, her stomach clenched and every fear that they weren't meant to be together was right at the surface of her consciousness. She'd been through horrific terror last night and she'd survived, because of Hayden. Could she trust him and together help their marriage survive in the light of day? Did he trust her?

"Excuse me, Gavin." Hayden's deep voice easily carried across the front lawn. "I need to kiss my wife now."

Eva's stomach pitched happily.

"Oh! Sure, Beast." Gavin didn't move, a big smile on his face.

Hayden strode up the sidewalk, his long, determined walk bringing him toward her far too fast. Eva didn't know if she should run to him or hold her ground. He thought she'd lied. He didn't trust her, but oh man, he looked good in a black shirt and gray pants that molded to all his lean muscles, his gaze full of her. She loved him. She loved him deeply.

The door opened behind her. "Oh, good grief," Hannah muttered, then she planted both hands on Eva's back and shoved her forward.

Eva's legs must've been waiting for the shove, like a signal to run to Hayden. She didn't trip or stumble or hesitate. She flung herself forward and leaped off the porch steps right as Hayden reached the bottom stair.

Hayden's gaze was full of surprise and happiness as he easily caught her in his strong arms. He held her close, murmured, "Eva," and then he kissed her.

Eva kissed him back, flinging her arms around his neck and clinging to her husband. They kissed for a very, very long time. It was beautiful, and it was thorough, and it filled her with love, devotion, and the desire to never, ever leave this man's side.

Her mind partially registered people's voices and doors closing and then opening, a car starting and driving off, more people's voices, and then doors closing again, but all she cared about was Hayden.

When he lowered her to the porch step in front of him, they were close to the same height. He drew back and murmured, "Eva," again, tenderly caressing her face.

The evening shadows were deepening, Hannah's porch light was on, and as far as Eva could tell, they were alone. No Door Dash. No bossy older sister.

"Please forgive me," he said, staring at her with those deep-brown eyes she loved. "I was an idiot to question you. I trust you, Eva. I believe you. For eleven years, I was sure I knew what I knew. It was just a silly college deal but I'd been so

infatuated with you that it hurt more than I want to admit. I'm sorry it took me a little while to process it all."

Her heart had already been threatening to burst, but with these words, she was in even more danger. "I understand. It's crazy that happened, and it took me a minute to wrap my head around it too. I think it was a girl named Olivia. She was my height and a similar build with long blonde hair, but she was burned severely."

His eyes widened. "I remember her. At every basketball game, I stared across the court at you any chance I got. She was always sitting right past you and staring at me. I saw her everywhere on campus."

"Did you ever touch her face during your meetings?"

"I tried a couple times, and she shied away. When I kissed her, I do remember feeling some ridged skin on her cheek, but I thought I'd imagined it. That poor girl."

"I know she struggled emotionally and with her self confidence."

They were both quiet for a few beats then Eva mused, "I still can't believe you met some girl in a dark alley, never saw her face, and believed it was me."

"I was a six-eight freshmen geek in love with the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. Can you blame me for going for it?"

"You could never be a geek."

He lifted his eyebrows. "I'll show you pictures."

She laughed. "I was so confused by your dead fish kiss comment at our wedding but now it makes sense."

"Sorry. You probably thought I was nuts."

"A little," she admitted.

He laughed and then he kissed her. It was shorter than their earlier kiss, but not by much.

The porch light flashed on and off, but they ignored it. The door opened behind them. "Oh my crap," Hannah called. "I'm

stoked you worked it all out and true love forever won, but can you two stop making out and come eat?”

“Eat without us,” Eva told her, not looking back. “I’m not even close to done making out.”

“What will the neighbors say?” Hannah said dramatically, then she laughed. “Good to see you, Beast. We’ll save you something.”

“Thanks, Hannah.”

The door shut.

Hayden framed Eva’s waist with his large palms. “I’m sorry that I got as awkward as a college freshman this morning.”

She laughed. “College freshman awkwardness has given us a lot of trouble.”

He pumped his eyebrows. “Don’t knock those hormonal boys. They might make a mess out of things, but they need love too.” His gaze turned serious. “I was afraid after the adrenaline rush was over you’d remember you only married me for protection and wouldn’t want to stay married to me.”

“I was worried about the same thing. You’d only married me to keep me safe and as a favor to Gunner. I was afraid you didn’t even like me.”

“Oh, Eva. I like everything about you ... you are unselfish, fun, thoughtful, beautiful, smart, brave, caring, and you kiss like a siren. I don’t just like you ... I love you.”

“Thank you, Hayden.” Emotion made her throat thick. “I worried that maybe we were a quick burn because of our dramatic situation, and going to burn out just as quick.”

“I won’t let that happen. I burn for you, my Beauty. I’ll chop down forests to keep the fire burning if I need to.”

She laughed and ran her hands through his hair, massaging his scalp. “I like that image. My Beast, chopping down a forest.” She softly kissed him and then touched the skin below the cut on his forehead. “Thank you for protecting me, and thank you for loving me.”

“It’s a sacrifice, but I’m willing to make it.” He winked.

Remembering him almost sacrificing his life for her made her quiver. “We’re both committed to making this marriage work?”

“Deeply,” he whispered against her lips.

“You promised me a date, remember?”

“Could never forget that.” He swept her off her feet and held her against his chest, turning and striding toward his SUV.

“Where are we going?” she asked, holding on to him and loving every second.

“On date number one.”

Her stomach pitched happily. “You want to know the best part about dating as a married couple?” she asked as he lowered her to her feet to swing the passenger door open.

Hayden pinned her against the car and took advantage of her lips for a beautifully long time. “Making out any time we want?” he asked.

She laughed against his lips and cuddled in closer to him. “Yes, and the date never has to end.”

He froze and looked seriously at her. “Eva. You realize this means we’re choosing your house on Balboa Island?”

“I love my house.” She grinned. “Why did I win on that point?”

“Because my house is full of my family, and though I love them, I got cheated out of my honeymoon and I am ready to be alone with my beautiful wife for a very, very long time.”

Eva laughed and arched up to kiss him. “It’s a good thing you like me now, because I’m not letting you out of my sight until your first practice in August. Overwater bungalow in the Maldives?”

Hayden chuckled against her lips. “Now that is a plan I can get behind.”

He kissed her very, very thoroughly, and Eva knew one thing: she liked her Beast almost as much as she loved him.

I hope you loved Hayden and Eva's intense and flirtatious story like I did! Keep reading for the unedited first chapter of *Matchmaking the Spy and the Heiress*.

Hugs and thanks for the support,

Cami

Billionaire Protection Romances

Matchmaking the Singer and the Warrior

Matchmaking the Duchess and the Commander

Matchmaking the Entertainer and the Firefighter

Matchmaking the Model and the Beast

Matchmaking the Spy and the Heiress

Matchmaking the Bodyguard and the Philanthropist

1ST CHAPTER - MATCHMAKING THE SPY AND THE HEIRESS

Cassandra Mikelson walked toward the river that bordered the extreme sports camp Jex and Pearl Steele had established near La Fortuna, Costa Rica several years ago. It had been built for the children of refugees pouring into Costa Rica from Nicaragua. The Steeles' vision had been a safe and fun atmosphere for the younger children and babies during the day and the older children and teenagers after school while their parents worked and tried to secure the necessities of life.

Her focus at this camp was helping the children, teenagers, and sometimes their parents with their English fluency, but she was able to enjoy some of the fun parts of the camp with the children as well. Since it was summer vacation and no school, the camp was bursting at its seams.

Cassie had come here from the Ecaudor on the recommendation of a co-worker last week. She'd been looking for any reason to leave Ecaudor. After five separate incidences of men coming after her and luckily a local men coming to her aid each time, she was relieved to be in a safer environment. Thank heavens her dad didn't know how much danger she'd been in. She hated to think of stressing her dad after all he'd been through losing his beloved wife and with Cassie needing to leave Texas and escape last month. At least she could report to him that she was in a safe spot now. If only he didn't ask every phone call if she was coming home soon.

Guilt. She loved and missed her dad, but she'd reached her breaking point and had needed to escape. It had gotten too hard to be in Wimberley without her mom and she was sick

and tired of the media always fixin' to be part of her life. They stuck to her backside like a tick on a horse, and called her the 'Ice Queen' because she rarely responded to their incessant questioning.

Sometimes she wished somebody would call them out instead of the other way around. After several media vans had blocked her dad's Maserati trying to exit their property and drive her mom to the nearby heart clinic rather than wait for an ambulance when he realized her mom wasn't responding she'd grown every more leery and annoyed with the whole passel. She'd never claim they killed her mom, but they sure had hurt her chances of surviving with their thirst for a story and inability to see past what they wanted.

When her boyfriend Duncan's former fiancé, Angela, returned to him and Duncan asked Cassie to give him 'some time' to sort out his feelings, it had given her even more motivation to leave town in a hurry. The media had a field day with that one, especially because Angela was a newscaster out of Austin.

"Miss Cassie, Miss Cassie," the children called to her from the rubber boat.

"I'm coming." She waved and grinned, quickening her pace. These happy children restored her spirits and hope in the future like nothing else could. Most of them literally had nothing but the clothes on their back and yet they smiled at, loved, and inspired her.

Two men held the boat next to the shoreline. They both turned to face her as she walked up. Josh, a twenty-two year old from Idaho who never stopped smiling and ... hello, where had this beautiful man come from and who could she thank for getting him to volunteer here? She laughed at herself. She was not in the market for a new man, no matter how appealing this one's exterior was.

"Cassie," Josh greeted her as she reached the shoreline. "This is Gage Remington. He was in the military with Gunner Steele. He met Jex and Pearl, heard about this place, and decided to come volunteer with us. Cool, huh?"

“I’ll decide,” she teased, putting a little Southern inflection in the words.

“Yes ma’am, you will,” Gage teased right back. It was obvious he wasn’t from the south but could she hold that against him? He had an amused smile on his lips. She liked his smile, regrettably she couldn’t let herself like him. She was not fixin’ for a man in her life right now. She had enough to heal from what with her mama’s death, Duncan moving on, and the media hounding her like a possum up a tree.

He shifted the rope to his left hand and extended his right. “Nice to meet you, Cassie.”

“You as well, Gage.” She liked his name. He didn’t appear to have any idea who she was. That would be nice. Would someone else at camp fill him in?

She shook his hand. Nice, large hands, nice firm grip. Military, eh? That fit like a glove, but he looked more kin to a Mission Impossible or James Bond type of guy. He had short, dark hair and trimmed facial hair to match, a few scars on his cheek and forehead that kept his perfect face from being too pretty and were begging to have their stories told. His deep-blue eyes captured her. They were full of kindness and interest and intelligence. He was delicious all the way around. Not that it should matter to her. She could be friendly but her heart needed distance from handsome men and healing not another heartache to add to the stack like too-thick pancakes that gummed up in your mouth.

“What branch of the military?” she asked, pulling her hand back even though she wasn’t ready to. She’d liked the warmth and strength of his grip. For some reason it made her feel like she wasn’t alone. Silly thoughts. He was just another handsome man. She’d met thousands and dated hundreds. Duncan had been one of the rare gems, or so she’d thought, who wasn’t bothered by the media pressure, didn’t need or care about her money, and seemed to like her for her. The joke was on her, and once again she’d had to smile and not respond to the incessant questions and push through reporters like she was the ice queen.

“The Navy.” He tilted his chin up, appraising her. “Where are you from Cassie? I like your accent.”

“The big ole’ state of Texas.” She grinned, unable to stop herself. She loved Texas. “Everything in Texas is best,” she bragged, a proud Texan saying.

“That fits.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Ah, you agree. Why?” She planted her hands on her hips and gave him a challenging look. She didn’t need to fall for an intriguing pair of blue eyes, but she could flirt. No harm, no foul, or all’s fair in love and war her mama would say.

“Everything in Texas *is* best.” He looked her over with appreciation and she felt warm all the way through. “But everything is also bigger in Texas, right?” He grinned and she wondered where he was going with this. Being the best was great. No woman she’d ever met wanted to be ‘bigger’. “You’ve got the biggest, best, most welcoming, and prettiest smile I’ve ever seen in my life. Very Texas of you.”

“Ooh, that was a good save, Mr. Remington. You fixin’ to shower any other compliments on me?” Teasing banter was right as rain. All fun and games, until somebody gets their heart broke. Not her. Not this time.

“Oh yeah.” He gave her a slow, sexy grin. That combined with the smoky, alluring look in his eyes was a killer for her plans to keep her distance. “I’m fixin’ to shower a whole lot on you.”

Whoa. He was a master at flirting.

“Vamos, vamos, vamos!” the children started chanting.

“Y’all hold your horses,” Cassie teased, gesturing them down with her hands because most wouldn’t understand her English. Sometimes she felt badly that her Southern accent, expressions, and inflections made it harder on them to translate. “I’m a comin’.”

She stepped into the boat, brushing too close to Gage. He smiled at her. It was a megawatt, knock a girl’s socks off,

smile. Whew. That boy needed to hold his horses and stop trying to reel her in. This was not her first rodeo.

She eased away from him, though she was surprised to realize she didn't want to. The children deserved their rafting ride, not watching her make a fool of herself over some yahoo who'd be out of sight, out of mind soon. Something told her she wouldn't soon forget this one.

"Vamos, vamos, vamos," the children chanted again.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go," Cassie called out, moving farther into the boat.

The little ones cheered.

The rubber bottom of the boat gave with her weight just as Gage and Josh both shoved off from the shore and leapt in. Cassie flung forward with a cry of dismay. She was going to take out at least two children.

Strong arms caught her and she was lifted onto the inflated, rubber side of the boat.

"You all right?" Gage's grin and those deep-blue eyes sparkling at her was the most alluring sight she'd ever seen.

"Yes, thank you kindly, sir." She was breathless and it was too telling. She'd been trained to always be the picture of class and elegance, but she'd like to see her poise teacher deal with being held close to this buff man. His life jacket buffered the effect a little bit, but nothing could take away the exciting tingles of his hands on her arms and him up close and personal. What was happening to her and should she let it happen? Mayhap she should just shove Gage overboard?

"I'm here to serve, ma'am." He released her and tipped a pretend cowboy hat to her.

"Very Texas of you," she teased.

He chuckled.

"Gage," Josh called, tossing an oar to him.

Gage caught the oar, nodded to her, and slid to the back of the boat to start rowing them into the current.

“I can row too,” Cassie told the men.

“Nah, you’d throw off our rhythm,” Josh told her.

Cassie could see he was right, with each man rowing on their respective sides of the eight man raft they could direct it easily. She admired the striations in Gage’s arms as he buried the end of the oar in the river and sliced through. He grinned and winked at her.

She turned forward, finding herself smiling. She should’ve been embarrassed to be caught staring but Gage’s grin made her stomach lurch happily.

Since she’d left home she felt free and as if society’s rules didn’t apply to her here. She’d always been friendly with everyone but she’d also had to keep her guard up. She was expected to act in a classy and upright manner as the daughter of Peter Mikelson. Everyone claimed she was a media darling, but the media loved to pick her apart if they caught her without makeup on, food in her teeth, talking too Southern, or living in shorts, a t-shirt, and Texas like she was now.

The first set of rapids were fast approaching as the river narrowed. The anticipation in the small rubber raft was palatable as the eight children squeezed close and chattered excitedly as they clung to the ropes. A couple of them slid into the interior of the raft and closed their eyes as the churning white water was feet away.

“Miss Cassie,” Maria, one of the smallest children on the boat cried out as she looked back at her, “¿Dónde está tu salvavidas?”

“Where was her life preserver?” “Oh!” she exclaimed as the raft hit the first wave.

The tip of the small boat flew up into the air and then plunged down. The children all laughed or screamed in excitement. Cassie clung tight to the rope with her hands and dug her knees and inner thighs into the rubber side of the craft. She’d hold on tight, ride through this rapid, then get a life jacket on. She’d been so distracted by the handsome newcomer she hadn’t even thought to grab one.

The boat dipped in front as it plunged down another wave. Her eyes widened and Cassie screamed as loud as the children. The wave straight in front of them was the most massive and terrifying one yet. The front end of the boat lifted up, launching children backward, and the rubber craft folded in half like a taco.

“Hold on!” Gage yelled.

Cassie listened and clung tight. Most of the children landed in the middle of the rubber boat, but cute Maria sailed past her. The little one was going into the river and nobody but Cassie could help. Cassie instinctively released the rope to grab Maria. She caught Maria’s life jacket and hauled her against her chest.

They hit another wave and Cassie bounced off her precarious seat and into the water. She heard Maria and others crying out before the river swallowed them both. Cool water closed around her head before she had a chance to fill her lungs with oxygen.

Cassie clung to Maria. She kicked ferociously, determined to get to the surface, keep the little girl from a traumatic experience and somehow get a breath of fresh air. She could see the sunlight sparkling through the water. They weren’t horribly deep but the current had her in its grips. She was held down and could not break through to the surface.

She pushed Maria up with her arms. If Cassie drowned, at least the little girl would survive. Why had she stupidly not put a life jacket on?

The pressure was building in her head and her chest. The need to take a breath overwhelmed her and it was all she could do to not suck in water. If she did, she’d probably drown and Maria would be in danger. She kicked harder, but it was all she could do to keep Maria’s head out of the water.

Arms circled her from behind and she was lifted up through the raging river. Her head broke through and Cassie sucked in blessed oxygen. Her arms were locked straight and she was holding Maria almost completely out of the water now. She

pulled the little child in tight as the person behind her held onto her.

She looked down at strong, tan arms and then back at a wet, handsome face. Gage's deep blue eyes were full of concern and relief.

"I've got you," he called to her over the rush of the water.

"You're right as rain," she called back, relief filling her. She wasn't going to die. This brave man had saved her.

They quickly rode through the worst of the rapids, the raft off to their right.

"Keep your feet up," Gage cautioned.

Cassie lifted her feet and Maria's legs laid on top of hers. She held tight to Maria as Gage held tight to her. The little girl clung to her arms and her little body trembled. Was she scared? Oh, the poor thing.

"It's all right, mi Corazon. Estamos bien."

"Muy bien," Maria said clearly.

Muy bien? Maria was not just all right but very good? That made no sense.

The river slowly calmed and the raft floated toward the bank in front of them and to the right. Gage wrapped one arm around Cassie's waist and swam them toward the raft. He stopped swimming and said, "We can touch here."

Cassie put her feet down, holding onto Maria. Gage grabbed onto the side of the raft with one hand and held onto her with the other. She wanted to gush over Gage but she turned Maria in her arms so she could see her face. Maria looked ... elated.

The children in the boat were all talking rapidly, so rapidly Cassie couldn't distinguish everything they were saying. She liked to think she had a good grasp on the Spanish language but she definitely wasn't fluent enough for this excited conversation.

Maria was firing back at them just as quickly, her dark eyes lit up and a huge smile on her face. The other children were

laughing now and gesturing madly, obviously recapping the story from their vantage point.

“Are you getting any of that?” Gage asked, smirking at her.

“Every twentieth word.” She laughed. “But the good news is I think she’s fine.”

Josh put out his hands and Maria grabbed onto him and launched back into the boat.

“Mees Cassie, Meester Gage. Vamos, vamos, vamos,” Maria declared, water streaming down her darling face but happiness and excitement lighting her dark eyes.

The other children laughed and chanted, “Vamos, vamos, vamos!”

Cassie shook her head in amazement that none of them were traumatized. She was a little traumatized and she’d rafted rivers that boasted some of the highest category rapids in the world. She looked around. They hadn’t gone far enough down the river to leave the camp behind. The river formed a natural border to the camp but when they did the river raft they went miles downstream and a van waited to bring them back.

“We can walk back if you want,” Cassie said to Maria.

Maria looked to Josh. He translated quickly and Cassie realized she was so rattled she’d forgotten to try in Spanish.

“No Bueno!” Maria called to her. “Balsa el rio.”

Cassie was amazed by the little girl’s pluck. She couldn’t have been more than six years old, a refugee, living in a tent, her parents working in the fields or whatever intermittent work they could find to feed their family and try to improve their situation. This little girl was unafraid, happy, and impressive.

“I think she’s fixin’ to keep riding. Did that not scare her?” she asked Gage as the children were all talking excitedly again.

“Apparently not.” He pushed the water out of his hair and turned her toward him. His deep-blue gaze was serious. “Did it scare you?” She was keenly aware of his hand on her lower back, warm through the dampness of her shirt. His dark lashes

were clumped with wetness and his face seemed to sparkle in the sunshine.

“When I was under and couldn’t surface ... I didn’t get a good breath before I went down and my lungs and head were fixin’ to explode. I reckoned I might not last a moment more,” she admitted. She could hardly believe she was admitting all of this to him. “But then you came and rescued me.” She was gushing like a breathless teenager, it was out of character for her, but what could she say ... this man had saved her life. Gage was impressive and interesting.

“It was incredible how you held Maria up out of the water. That’s why it didn’t scare her.” He looked her over and she felt ... respected. For something she’d done, not for her family name. She’d seen that in the eyes of her clients, her parents and some close friends, but not many other times. “You were willing to sacrifice yourself for her.”

She swallowed. “It was simply gut instinct.”

“I like your instincts.”

“I like yours. Thank you for jumpin’ in and savin’ me.”

“Anytime.” He sounded like he meant it.

They shared a smile that had her heart thumping out of control. She didn’t even know him, but this heroic man was getting harder and harder to resist.

The kids were talking excitedly again, thankfully not screaming, ‘Vamos’ for a minute. The water had been cool initially but it felt great right now, especially with the warm tropical sun. Cassie wanted to stand right here, and keep talking to Gage.

“You don’t have to get back in,” he said softly.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, forcing the brave pluck that had carried her through many uncomfortable situations. “I’ve rafted the Salmon River, the Rogue River, and the Tully River.”

“The Tully River in Australia?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Impressive.”

“Well thank you kindly.” He was the impressive one.

“And you want to keep going?”

“Of course. I can’t let these darling children down.”

“Vamos, vamos, vamos,” the children started chanting again. Josh was watching both of them for the verdict.

“Let’s go.” She turned to the boat.

“I can’t let you do it.” Gage looked her over and she wondered if she looked like a drowned rat.

“Well I don’t believe it’s your choice what I can or can’t do, now is it?” She could not let him boss her around. He hardly knew her. Though she tried to stay positive, grateful, and happy, Cassie had learned to stand up for herself when handsome men thought they could push her into dating them because they were interested in the publicity or her money. Some even assumed she was simple minded or easily swayed because of her ready smile and Southern expressions. Gage felt different and she didn’t think he knew about or was interested in her money or her fame. Maybe the military had kept him under a rock and he didn’t watch the news or follow social media. She could hope, but she’d have to proceed cautiously.

“I can’t.” Gage gave her a wolfish grin and she got ready to show him exactly how independent and smart this Southern girl was. “Not without a life jacket.”

“I ... what?” She started laughing as it sunk in.

Josh must’ve been listening in because he handed a life jacket out of the boat. Gage took it and helped her into it. Cassie’s breath rushed out as his warm palms brushed her arms. His gaze was warm on her as he secured the life jacket, the river flowing past them making the process take longer, or was he taking longer on purpose? His knuckle brushed her collar bone as he clicked the top buckle into place. Cassie felt warm and suddenly weak.

“Thank you, kindly,” she managed, sounding like she’d just run sprints.

“Anytime,” he said, his voice husky and as telling as hers.

He wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her into the boat. Cassie laughed in surprise at the quick, decisive movement. She slid into the bottom of the boat. The children cheered. Gage planted his hands on the rubber side and flung himself in next to her. He landed close. Really close. Their faces were inches apart and Cassie had never been so tempted to lean in and steal a quick kiss from a man she’d just met.

“Vamos, vamos, vamos!”

Gage chuckled. He knelt in the boat and helped her back into her place behind Maria. “Hold on this time,” he teased her.

“Where would be the fun in that?”

He chuckled, eased back to his spot, and took the paddle Josh handed him. “Vamos!” he called out, lifting the paddle into the air like a conquering hero, his arm muscles bulging in all the right places.

“Vamos!” the kids all cheered.

Gage and Josh used their oars to direct them back into the current. Cassie couldn’t stop smiling. She snuck a glance back. Gage was watching her. He lifted his chin to her and gave her a knowing grin.

She faced forward again. Her face heating up. Maybe she would have to get to know this man better. Give him a chance.

She thought she was upset over Duncan and not ready to date for a long, long while. She’d have to be careful and observant, but flirting with a handsome man wasn’t out of line. It would be a good distraction from missing her dad, missing her mom, and worrying about when she’d have to face the real world again.

Duncan? Who was Duncan?

Find *Matchmaking the Spy and the Heiress* on [Amazon](#).

1ST CHAPTER - MATCHMAKING THE SINGER AND THE WARRIOR

Chapter One

Gray Denizen, Smokey G to most of the world, sat in the steaming hot tub on the deck of his Wengen rental home overlooking the picturesque, snow-covered Lauterbrunnen Valley in the Swiss Alps. The sun had set while he marinated in the water and the valley of seventy waterfalls, the real home of the Hobbit, was now just some twinkling lights far below. He loved it here. He wanted to come back in the summer and hike, bike, and soar down the mountain slopes with a parasail, see it green and flowering instead of covered with mounds of snow. It was insanely beautiful with its blanket of snow, he could only imagine the mystical beauty of this area lush and green.

The snow skiing for Christmas had been insane, but all of his friends had gone back to “real life”. They loved to tease him that his life was a vacation, but Gray’s life was his work. He loved composing songs and recording them. He didn’t love the endless travel, performing in front of huge and raucous crowds, or all the details involved with social media, media, and being afraid any word he spoke might get misconstrued.

He’d finished his European tour right before Christmas and sent his staff and assistant, Janie, home for the holidays. Instead of going to his house on the Fort Lauderdale intercoastal he’d decided to beg some friends to come here. Janie had found this unreal mountainside village, only accessible by train or helicopter. He’d had to opt for the helicopter simply to keep a fan from seeing him and letting it

slip where he was. Apparently he was in danger. He was always in danger, had been since childhood so it didn't bother him much.

The few single friends, who hadn't bit the marriage bullet, and he trusted not to post on social media or brag about spending Christmas with him, had met him here. They'd skied the famed Wengen, Grindelwald, and Jungfrau resorts. Incredible. And he'd been able to stay incognito with helmet, goggles, and a face shield on. No Russian mafia busting through the door to ruin the holidays.

But now he was semi-alone. He was used to his assistant Janie, his cook Liam, his personal trainer Joseph, his two incredible housekeepers Quincy and Nellie, plus millions of fans looking for any opportunity to talk to, stare at, or touch him. It was odd to have true peace and quiet. His security guys were still here, led and trained by his trusted stepdad, Russ.

The four tough men claimed they had to stay with him. There'd been some backlash about him helping a beautiful woman escape her Russian mafia-affiliated boyfriend so now his security team refused to leave his side. Apparently even if you were a famous billionaire singer you didn't mess with the Russian mafia. What was the good of being famous and wealthy if you couldn't right some wrongs in the world?

He swirled the hot water between his fingers. He should get out, fix himself something to eat, read, and go to bed. In a few days he'd fly to Grand Cayman and his staff would meet him there. They'd have two weeks to relax on the beach, which usually meant beach runs, lifting weights, and long hours working on new song lyrics. He'd start a short five-stop tour of the Caribbean Islands after that. He thought he wanted these few days after Christmas to decompress, but peace and quiet alone wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

He liked all his security guards but with twelve hour shifts of either monitoring the cameras they'd set up in the basement or doing their rounds inside and outside the house they only had twelve hours off to exercise, run get groceries or supplies, or have a tiny bit of free time. He tried not to bug them during their moments off, unless they'd spar or lift with him.

Great guys, most especially his stepdad Captain Russell Brown. He loved and respected Russ above anyone in this world. He knew retired Marine felt the same, but he wasn't exactly a profuse or friendly person. Tim, Kaden, and Cameron were each twenty years younger than Russ give or take a few years. They were all willing to go pickup dinner, help keep things clean without the housekeepers here, have a conversation with him, or work out with him, but none of them were big on brainstorming song lyrics, or discussing the latest clean romance novel he was reading. He smiled to himself, not that he'd admit he read clean romance to anyone.

A thud came from around the side of the house. Gray straightened, staring that direction, but with the low lights glowing through the three-story windows behind him he couldn't see anything. A dart of apprehension made the hot tub feel even hotter. Had the Russian mafia somehow found out where he was? The house had been rented in an umbrella company's name that wasn't affiliated with his name at all, and he hadn't so much as gone to dinner or anywhere besides skiing, where his face was completely covered.

He'd waved to Tim a few minutes ago as he'd walked by the side of the massive patio through one of the trails he and the guys had dug into the deep snow. The backside of the patio dropped off into nothingness so at least there was one angle that couldn't be approached.

Scrambling out of the hot tub, his bare feet hit the cold patio and steam rose from his body. His body temperature was high enough from his soak and the quickening of his pulse that he welcomed the piercing cold air.

Not bothering with the stack of towels, he hurried to the edge of the patio where Tim should be, and tried to peer into the darkness. If there was trouble, more of his men would come running, but Gray knew he was way around a fight. He'd been raised in East L.A. and he'd learned young how to keep him and his mom safe from thugs, and his own father.

"Tim?" he questioned.

A small person sprang out of the darkness and knocked him flat on his back. Gray bucked his body and rolled, holding onto the person's arms and pinning his assailant underneath his much larger frame.

His attacker was a ... woman. His eyes widened. An exquisitely beautiful woman. He could only stare in shock as she smiled sweetly up at him, her blue eyes lit with mischief and her smooth skin crinkling at the edges of her lips and her eyes. Her gorgeous smile conveyed she was ecstatic he was pinning her down.

He felt a rush of desire fill him that was completely out of line for the situation. This woman had attacked him. He should be afraid, or at least annoyed. Was she an ultra-fan, affiliated with someone who was targeting him, or a completely different kind of danger to him? There were sparks swirling between them and her small frame underneath him felt really, really nice. He listened for other sounds, but the night was still. Was she alone? Where were his men? Even if she'd bested Tim, which was highly unlikely, someone would've seen on the cameras this woman knocking Gray down. They should be bursting out the patio door with guns drawn.

"Well, hello handsome," she was slightly out of breath, probably because he was twice her size and pinning her down, but he liked the sound of her voice and the breathlessness of it. "I liked the reversal. Don't tell anyone I let you get away with that. I do have a reputation of ruthlessness to uphold."

He almost laughed at her smart-aleck response, but he realized immediately ... This woman wasn't a fan or dangerous to him. He knew this woman and he really shouldn't be feeling sparks of desire, or pinning down this famous and very happily married woman. Why was Scarlett Lily sneaking onto his back patio and knocking him down when she should be in California with her husband and son? It was out of character for her to flirt with or tease anyone besides her husband.

"Scarlett?" he questioned, easing off of her, standing, and offering a hand up. She took his hand and stood easily, still grinning at him.

He pulled his hand back quickly, trying to ignore how right her smaller hand had felt in his. What was he thinking? He helped all manner of women around the world, but if they were married, even if their husbands were despicable scum balls, he was very careful not to cross any boundaries or have untoward thoughts. He'd controlled himself even around the gorgeous Malory Grange when she was married to that loser Senator Ted Malouf. After she'd been divorced Gray had made his play, and been shot down by a woman for the first time in his life. But if he could control himself around the likes of Malory, he could definitely keep himself from feeling attracted to Scarlett.

Scarlett Lily Quinn was one of the top A-list actresses in the world. He'd known her for years, hosted the Grammy awards with her, and ran into her at numerous events and parties. Her husband, Griff, was a tough ex-Navy SEAL who Gray had been impressed with, the farthest thing from a scum ball. Gray knew Scarlett was expecting their second child. He thought she was due soon. He looked and her stomach was far too flat to be almost through a pregnancy. She looked fit in tight black clothing that outlined her lean frame and all of her curves. Very, very fit. And he shouldn't be looking at her like that. He scrubbed at his beard with his fingertips.

"Close but no cigar," Scarlett drawled out. "Sara Sanderson. I'm Scarlett's stunt double."

"Oh. That's right." Relief filled him. He wasn't attracted to a married woman. *Thank you heaven above.* But Scarlett's stunt double ... interesting, very interesting.

He still had no clue why she was here or why Tim or one of his other security people weren't rushing out here to intercept her. He stared at Sara's beautiful face with startling blue eyes and smooth dark hair. It was incredible how much she and Scarlett looked alike with the exception of the eye and hair color. Did Sara dye her hair, or wear a wig for her stunts? Colored contacts, or did they not really get close enough to show a stunt doubles' eye color?

"We met in ..." He was grappling. He remembered meeting her. Very well. But he traveled so often, most of the locations

blended together. It had been tropical. An incredibly lush jungle. The cloud forest. A high-profile wedding. A benefit concert.

“Costa Rica,” she supplied. “Colt Quinn and Kim Heathrow’s wedding, and you did a benefit concert for Jex and Pearl Steele’s extreme sports camp for the refugees’ children.”

He nodded. All the pieces clicking. It sounded like she remembered their first meeting too. He liked that. She’d been beautiful, sassy, and grinning then as well. He’d felt an instant attraction to her, but hadn’t seen her since and finding her phone number had proven tougher than he’d imagined it would be. That had been a couple of years ago and he’d been busy composing songs, playing on his saxophone or the keyboard, recording songs, and exhausting traveling tours like the one he just finished, and the one he was set to start in a couple of weeks. At least the Caribbean was a short tour.

“It’s good to see you,” he said.

“It’s good to be seen.” She winked and looked over him. “You’re looking *fabulous* as always.”

“Thank you.” He was pretty sure she was teasing him not flirting with him. He resisted flexing to make sure she knew how hard he worked to look ‘fabulous’. He stayed extremely fit with both his own personal trainer and a world-renowned chef who cooked healthy and delicious food traveling with him.

“You’re not going to return the compliment?” She flipped her long dark hair over her shoulder and winked.

He laughed. She was irresistible. It was the same impression he’d had last time he’d met her. No wonder he’d tried so hard to track down her number. But Scarlett had insisted she couldn’t give Sara’s number out to any of the many men who asked, he’d hated that response, and even his impressive assistant Janie had struck out. But Janie was always jealous of any woman he was interested in so he suspected she hadn’t tried as hard as she should.

“You look even more gorgeous than last time I saw you. Your beautiful face is more exquisite and mind-blowing than the sunrise over the Jungfrau.”

“Ah.” She patted his cheek and said almost condescendingly. “That smooth tongue of yours. Maybe if you wrote a song about me I’d believe you were sincere.”

He chuckled. “All right. Challenge accepted.” He shivered, the cold wind brushing over his half-clothed and wet body. His temperature was dropping and quick. The water still dripping from his suit had gone from warm to freezing. He’d probably gotten her wet from pinning her down, but she didn’t shiver or act cold.

“Let’s get you inside,” she said, tilting her head toward the glass doors.

He gestured for her to go first. Sara smiled and shook her head. “Gentlemen,” she said in a scoffing tone.

His eyebrows rose. What was that about? He had a lot of questions for her. But first ... “How did you get past my security guy?”

“Oh, Tim?” She looked back at Gray. “He’s fine, but he is duct-taped and zip-tied next to the garage.”

“Excuse me?” He stared at her, pretty certain she was joking but admittedly not a hundred percent. His security guys were top notch and he couldn’t imagine Russ not coming himself with an intruder penetrating Russ’s intricately-woven security web. No matter how gorgeous and welcome this intruder was.

“I’d tell you to go look, but you need to get dressed and wading through that snow might give you frostbite. It’s freezing out here.” She did the cutest all-over body shiver he’d ever seen. Maybe cute was the wrong word. He could write an entire song about how appealing she looked right now. “I know, I’m gorgeous. I can read it in your eyes, and yes you did get me wet pinning me down.” Shaking her head and laughing at him, she said, “Come on, my irresistible saxophone player and singer extraordinaire. Let’s go.” She bounced to the patio door and flung it wide, slipping inside.

Gray grabbed a towel and hurried after her, squeezing some of the water out of his suit before securing the towel around his waist. He shut the door behind him, appreciating the warm house, the in-floor heating making even the wood floor warm. She walked over to the fireplace, picked up the remote, and clicked it on.

“Nice place,” she said, giving a cursory glance around at the three-story open area with the massive three-story stone fireplace on the wall next to the double doors to the master suite, the wall perpendicular to that was three levels of windows overlooking the valley almost two thousand feet below, the huge living room and the state of the art kitchen and dining area on the opposite side of the windows. The ‘nice place’ was a twenty million dollar mansion perched on an exclusive mountainside a short walk from the high-dollar resort village of Wengen and one of the most gorgeous settings in the world, but it didn’t seem to impress this lady too much.

“Thanks,” he murmured, so confused right now. Why was Scarlett Lily’s stunt double in his living room, teasing and flirting with him, and had she truly bested his highly-trained security guards? If that was true, why had she let Gray pin her down? He thought himself a great fighter but he hadn’t bested even Kaden yet, despite the tips Tim always gave him when they sparred, and Russ and Cameron were ten times tougher than Kaden. Russ was a decorated and accomplished former marine who Gray thought would win a battle against any man, or woman, in the world.

“Come over here and get warm,” she said again. “I’ve got a bit to tell you and then you can shower while I get settled and we’ll chat more as I’m sure the questions will keep coming.”

“Did you really tie Tim up?” he asked in disbelief, walking to the fireplace and getting in her space, staring down at her beautiful and seemingly-innocent looking face. He could see that her exquisite blue eyes that seemed so lit up and friendly were actually guarded. He’d met and helped many, many woman over the years and could usually read what they needed and the anguish they’d been through. This woman had a shield up that he doubted anyone could get through.

“Zip-tied and duct taped,” she corrected in a sing-song tune. “Of course I did. The rest of your security men are equally incapacitated. You’re right. We should actually go say hello to them quick and let them go. They can go free Tim. He might be getting chilled out there. Though I needed to prove a point, and I checked the surrounding area thoroughly and put up extra perimeter security when I disabled yours. I’ll know if anyone but me tries to infiltrate your beautiful rental home, but it’s probably not smart to leave your guys out of commission with all the people you have after you at the moment. Plus, if I’m going to be working with your security I shouldn’t make enemies out of them. I might get my hand slapped for that one.” She grinned.

Sara was equal parts gorgeous, appealing, cute, baffling, and possibly unstable. Hand slapped? Did she ever get in trouble for her sassy tongue and antics? Who could get upset at a woman with a smile that friendly and seemingly-sweet? If she’d truly bested his security, she was light years from sweet.

He had so many questions but he started with. “All the people after me?” He scrubbed his fingers through his beard. “The Russian mafia?”

“They actually aren’t the most worrisome party at the moment. You like to tick people off, don’t you?”

His eyes widened. He ticked bad people off when he helped those who needed him, but most of the world loved him and his music.

“Come on. Sorry to put off your shower and getting warm, but you do look mighty fine in that swimming suit.” Sara’s voice was still lilting and happy as if she were teasing or laughing at him at all times. He couldn’t imagine any world where this small and innocent-looking woman could take out his well-trained security. She must have help hiding somewhere outside.

“Who’s working with you?” he asked, looking around.

“We’ll get into that soon, but for the moment I’m here alone.”

She turned and walked toward the stairs. No, this woman didn't know how to simply walk. She bounced or danced or skipped. With each step she lifted slightly onto tiptoe, her hair floated around her shoulders, and she pranced to the stairs and down them. Gray was certain he'd never been around a more fascinating woman in his life. He'd thought he was in love with Malory Grange for almost a year and a half, regularly begging her to marry him, but Malory had shockingly found and married her former fiancé two weeks ago. He'd imagined it would hurt more, but he knew Malory had always been in love with Van Udy. Gray had helped her escape her horrific ex, Senator Ted Malouf. He was happy for her. Even Malory hadn't held the appeal Sara did, and he hardly knew Sara.

They descended the stairs and walked into the massive living area of the basement with its own kitchen and living section, four bedrooms, a workout room, and a separate theater. The carpet of the basement was warm with the radiant, in-floor heating on here as well. It felt good on his toes. Sara looked over her shoulder and for a brief second her gaze focused on his chest, her cheeks turned a becoming pink, and she tripped over something.

Gray reached out a hand and steadied her. She stilled under his touch and he found himself wrapping his hand around her waist and slowly tugging her toward him. She stared up at him, all traces of laughter and teasing replaced with a warmth that made his heart race faster than when she'd knocked him down on the patio.

She rested her palms on his shoulders. The warmth of her fingers and palms seared into his bare skin. Gray let out a telling groan and focused on her summer-sky blue eyes. Her gaze captured him completely and lyrics raced through his head. He was lost and found in her gaze. Her touch lit a fire in him he'd never known existed outside of song lyrics and romance novels.

"Mpmf!" A strangled yell came from across the room and a body scooted from behind the pool table.

"Cameron?" Gray questioned, stunned by what he was seeing. His tough bodyguard. Incapacitated just as she'd said. Zip ties

secured the man's hands behind his back and to his feet which were also secured together. His mouth was covered with duct tape.

"Apologies." Sara's grin was back and that teasing, almost-mocking light filled her blue eyes. She pulled from Gray's grasp and strode toward Cameron, pulling a knife out of her pocket and flipping it open.

Russ and Kaden stormed out of the bedroom they'd converted into their security headquarters. Russ's face and neck were mottled red, the skin around his mouth looked raw and there were patches of his beard missing. His dark eyes were furious. Kaden was actually smiling, but the kid had perma-grin and he didn't have a beard so maybe he wasn't as upset about the effects of the duct tape.

"Ah, good job." Sara straightened and faced the two security guys who would make most people run the other direction if they were marching their way. She held the knife loosely in her hand. "You two get gold stars. Did you both get free, or did one of you free the other one?"

Russ reached her first and knocked the knife from her hand. It skittered across the nearby countertop. "I broke the zip ties," he grunted out.

He reached out with both hands, blood dripping from one wrist, most likely from his struggle with the zip ties, and moved to grasp her upper arms. Sara knocked his hands away, dodged underneath his arms, landed a vicious punch to his kidneys, and then she leapt, and kicked him in the side of the head. Russ stuttered, but straightened quickly.

"Gray," Russ grunted out. "Move away while we take care of this problem."

"Stand down, Russ," Gray commanded. "Do you know who this is?"

"I don't care if she's the President. She incapacitated and took down my men. By herself."

She really was alone and had taken out his security? What in the world? He'd never been so impressed, confused, and

interested in a woman.

“I don’t hit women,” Russ growled at Sara. “So you still have the advantage, but you got the drop on me last time. I will have you hogtied and answering some questions.”

“Russ!” Gray sharpened his voice. “You work for me and you will keep your hands off of her.” He’d never talked to Russ, any of his security, or probably anybody since dealing with high school bullies, like that. But even his respected stepdad would have to be called out, and stopped, if he wanted to hogtie this woman.

Sara gave Gray a sweet smile. “Ah, that’s so cute. You’re trying to protect me, Smokey G? Just like you protect all the beautiful women who flutter their eyelashes at you?” She fluttered her eyelashes and it was an enticing move on her part. If only it hadn’t been done sarcastically.

Gray’s chest tightened. Did she realize the danger she was in? Russ was obviously ticked and no way could she best him and Kaden at the same time, and without the element of surprise to aid her. He didn’t like the derogatory way she’d referred to his propensity to protect women in danger. He personally thought it was one of his best qualities, but she seemed to be making fun of him.

“Thank, you sweet boy,” she said, pumping her eyebrows at him, “But I don’t need your protection.”

Sweet boy? Wow. She was a smart aleck to the tenth degree.

She looked to Russ. “I took you down once tough guy, I’ll do it again. Oh, and so sorry about the beard. It looks awful, by the way.” She patted him on the cheek before darting away.

Russ let out a roar and lunged at her. Kaden came around to his other side. The two men were huge and despite her obviously impressive training, skills, and bravado, it had to be terrifying to see these huge bodyguards coming at her like that.

Gray rushed to protect her. He wouldn’t let any woman be hurt while he was there to keep her safe.

Sara squatted and used Russ’s shoulders to launch herself into the air. It looked like a move off an action movie. She kicked

Russ in the head again and he knocked into Kaden. She flipped and landed next to Gray. Scrambling behind him and onto his back, she wrapped both legs around his waist and one arm so tight around his neck he was immediately gasping for air. She shoved a pistol into his temple that he hadn't even seen her pull out.

Russ and Kaden were rushing their way, but they both froze. They looked angry enough to chew up and spit out nails. But they also looked helpless, which he'd never seen out of his security team. Russ's eyes were desperate. He'd do anything to keep Gray safe. Gray knew Russ had made a deathbed promise to his mom to protect her only son with his life.

The room went cold, despite the warm woman wrapped around him from behind. This was no romantic move. Sara was tough, crazy, an impressive fighter, and she was going to kill him. Gray had assumed because of her association with Scarlett Lily that she was a good person and had stupidly let her in his house. He wasn't sure why she hadn't killed him outside, but he suspected she was enjoying the game and ridiculing all of them before finishing them off.

At the moment, he didn't have time to philosophize about her motives or how tough, accomplished, and insane she was. She must've been sent by the mafia or maybe by that crazy Princess Byoode to kill him. It didn't look like Russ or Kaden could intervene before she pulled the trigger. Could he talk her out of killing his men? His life flashed before his eyes. He'd helped a lot of people, especially women in danger, but he had no family left, no legacy but his music and all of his money to leave behind. Was this how it would end for him?

"Please," he croaked out. She was letting in just enough oxygen to keep him from passing out. "Kill me if that's your objective, but let my men go."

"No," Russ barked out. "Don't kill him," he demanded, desperation making his voice even rougher. "We'll do anything you want."

"Please," Gray repeated. He appreciated Russ and knew he truly would do anything for him but if this woman was going

to kill him there wasn't much hope of him living through a bullet inserted in his brain. "These men aren't part of your hit," he said in what he hoped was a logical and sane tone. "You'll still get paid by whoever sent you and you won't have four great men's deaths on your hands as well." He squeaked in another quick breath. "If there's any humanity left in you, please let them live."

The room went quiet. Sara held on tightly to him but she quivered slightly. Russ and Kaden stared at him in horror. He could see Cameron out of the corner of his eye, struggling to move around the pool table and get closer, even though he was bound.

He focused on his stepdad. The man's dark eyes were full of frustration and despair. He couldn't handle letting Gray die after they'd both lost Gray's mom. Gray understood Russ's anguish, but this was a sacrifice Gray would make every time.

He knew Cameron, Tim, and Kaden would also give their lives for his. He knew they would. But right now it was his turn to take that burden.

Gray waited for her to pull the trigger, praying that she'd honor his request and his last act would at least preserve the four men who had protected and served him and their country. He wasn't ready to die, but there were worse things. He'd see his mom and meet his Savior soon. That was a comforting thought. All of his billions were earmarked for Jex and Pearl Steele's charities. His money would help many children throughout the world.

It wasn't the worst way to end his sojourn on the earth. As long as Sara let his men live.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cami is a part-time author, part-time exercise consultant, part-time housekeeper, full-time wife, and overtime mother of four adorable boys. Sleep and relaxation are fond memories. She's never been happier.

Join Cami's VIP list to find out about special deals, giveaways and new releases and receive a free copy of *Rescued by Love: Park City Firefighter Romance* by clicking [here](#).

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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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