



THE
GRIEVING KING

AND THE
Emissary

Sweet Royal
Romance
Suspense #9

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CAMI CHECKETTS

The Grieving King and the Emissary

SWEET ROYAL ROMANCE SUSPENSE

BOOK NINE

CAMI CHECKETTS



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The Grieving King and the Emissary: Sweet Royal Romance Suspense #9

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Full Court Devotion: Christmas in Snow Valley

A Touch of Love: Summer in Snow Valley

Running from the Cowboy: Spring in Snow Valley

Light in Your Eyes: Winter in Snow Valley

Romancing the Singer: Return to Snow Valley

Fighting for Love: Return to Snow Valley

Other Books by Cami

Seeking Mr. Debonair: Jane Austen Pact

Seeking Mr. Dependable: Jane Austen Pact

Saving Sycamore Bay

Oh, Come On, Be Faithful

Protect This

Blog This

Redeem This

The Broken Path

Dead Running

Dying to Run

Fourth of July

Love & Loss

Love & Lies

Free Book

Receive a free copy of *The Resilient One: Billionaire Bride Pact Romance #1* by signing up for Cami's newsletter at <https://BookHip.com/XXWHVD>.

Books and Characters of Augustine

There are a lot of different characters coming into these stories. I hope it helps to have the couples listed with their books and their status as a couple.

I hope you enjoy the book!

Hugs,

Cami

Sweet Royal Romance Suspense Series:

#1 - The General Prince and the Nerd - General Prince Raymond August and Macey Clifton - Married in a quiet ceremony at the castle that was interrupted by Prime Minister Shule trying to find Hattie Ballard.

#2 - The Brave Prince and the Teacher - Prince Curtis August and Aliya Drummond - Married in their cabin in the mountains, expecting their first baby.

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

#4 - The Ninja Prince and the Investigator - Prince Derek August and Ellery Monson - Married at the castle

#5 - The Charming Prince and the Single Mum - Prince Malik August and Sophie Pederson - Married in the castle courtyard, reception and dancing interrupted by a bomb threat

#6 - The Crown Prince and the Traitor - Crown Prince Tristan August and Jennifer Shule - Married in the castle's ballroom at Christmastime

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

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

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

Christmas in Augustine:

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

#2 The Royal Guard and the Royal Stylist - Private Brad Rivera and Arianna Gunnell

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

Other Characters:

William Rindlesbacher - Fell off a cliff

Naomi Rindlesbacher - On the run

Treven Rindlesbacher - Shot by Chief Jensen

Henry and Leslie Shule - Former Prime Minister and his wife, Jennifer's parents, Helping Leslie heal and traveling a lot

Lieutenant General Philippe Cordon - Killed in a cave

Sunny Pederson - Sophie's daughter

Holly Monson - Ellery's mom

Aunt Elise - Ellery's aunt

Madeline Prescott - Chad's mum

Grace Radisson - Hope and Faith's sister - Murdered by David Zeus III in *Matchmaking the Model and the Beast*

Prologue

KING NOLAN AUGUST spun his new daughter-in-law around the dance floor of the castle's spacious but crowded ballroom. The ballroom was lauded as one of the most beautiful rooms in the kingdom of Augustine. Two stories of windows and balconies made up the exterior wall, scalloped moldings plated with fourteen-karat gold lined the ceiling and decorated walls, and expertly painted murals depicted love stories from long ago. The Baccarat chandeliers combined crystal glass with gilt bronze and were often gaped at by first-time visitors.

Tonight, with the royal wedding of the beloved crown prince, the room was draped in twinkling lights, white chiffon, and white gardenias. It smelled and looked lovely. Any ballroom in Europe would be hard pressed to compare in beauty and majesty.

Throughout his over thirty years of being the king, Nolan had focused on the business of running Augustine and had left the beautifying to his wife Anne. Thankfully, Arianna, the royal stylist and more, and his daughters-in-law, had all stepped up and taken over that role as he would've been lost even attempting to hire the right people for an event such as this.

The traditional wedding dances were over, but the bride Jennifer Shule had felt like one of Nolan's own children even before she and Tristan had wed. Her dad had been Nolan's closest friend for years and they'd worked closely together when Henry was the prime minister of Augustine. Henry had

stepped down as prime minister because his wife Leslie had inadvertently killed Anne, Nolan's beloved wife and the queen.

Nolan pushed that away and smiled and laughed and teased with Jennifer. He missed Anne constantly, but never more than on nights like this. Still, he kept smiling and working long hours for his family and his country. Sometimes the distraction of never-ending demands helped assuage his grief. Spending time with his family, especially his twelve-year-old daughter Kiera, was the only thing that truly took away the pain. Though it still lingered when the thoughts of *Anne would've loved this* or *they need Anne* invaded.

This Christmas wedding had been ideal. No bombs like Malik and Sophie's wedding. No Rindlesbachers showing up. Yet. Only Naomi was still alive, and she hadn't been spotted in months. Interpol, the European Union, and Sutton Smith all agreed she was deep in hiding. His son Ray, the general of Augustine, and Ray's best friend Chief Jensen had sworn to him no Rindlesbacher cronies or threats would get anywhere near this wedding.

The groom was his oldest son, Crown Prince Tristan, and the bride was the perfect fit to someday be queen. They'd loved each other for years, and today was an epic celebration.

Nolan had lost Anne almost a year ago now. He took great solace in each of his sons being happily married and his daughter Kiera being a delight to everyone. He spotted Kiera twirling with Malik and Sophie's adorable Sunny, *the* Princess Sunny if you asked the little one, and of course Nolan was King Papa. He smiled at the pair of them.

"Kiera is darling with Sunny," Jennifer said, following his gaze.

"They're both such a light to all of us." He focused back on his new daughter-in-law. "As are you. I'm grateful T has been blessed with you as his wife, and we're all blessed to have you in our family."

"Thank you, Nolan." Her eyes got bright. "I can't tell you how I appreciate your forgiveness and love for my mum and

dad.”

“Your dad is my closest friend, and we’re all praying your mum can heal and forgive herself.”

“Thank you.”

The song ended, and Tristan appeared by Nolan’s side. “Can I steal my beautiful *wife*?”

“Of course.” Nolan handed her over, smiling at his son’s emphasis on the word wife.

Jennifer laughed. “Oh my, Mr. Crown Prince, you seem to really love that moniker.”

“All the better because you’re all mine now, my dear.”

A new song began, and Tristan whisked Jennifer away. Their eyes lit up and their bodies melded together.

Nolan was thrilled for their happiness. If only he could share this with Anne. It was always more special having her to share these moments with. Most of his sons and especially his sweetheart daughters-in-law had pushed him to ‘think about dating’ or ‘open his heart to the possibility of falling in love again.’

Nolan never scoffed at them, of course. He always kept a smile on his face as he gently told them he wasn’t ready, but inside he recoiled at the thought. He had neither the time nor the energy to date, and he doubted he’d ever find a love like Anne’s again. He and Anne had been friends for years. She’d actually dated Henry in college, but after college Nolan and Anne had slowly fallen in love. Their love had been steady, enduring, and committed. She’d always been there for him, their children, and their kingdom. Anne had been a shining beacon of sweetness, charity, and beauty.

He’d need a sign from heaven to know when the time was right. Currently, several women who had to be closer to Tristan and Ray’s age than his were eyeing him as if he were a Lindt chocolate bar and they hadn’t indulged in years. Blast that internet article claiming he was the most powerful, handsome, and wealthy bachelor over thirty, not to mention a king. The article had shown him stepping out of his

Lamborghini Veneno. It had gone viral, and his guards had become busier keeping conspiring women away than keeping him safe from Naomi Rindlesbacher.

He averted his gaze, searching for one of his family members. He bumped into someone soft and firm at the same time.

“Pardon me,” he said, glancing down into the emerald eyes of none other than Madeline Prescott, Chad’s mum and one of the only members of parliament who always made him smile.

“I suppose I have no choice but to pardon you, seeing as you are ‘King Papa’,” she teased with a smile on her stunning face. She was a celebrated beauty, and he knew men pursued her constantly, but she’d been single as long as Nolan had known her. Chad was his son Tristan’s best friend, and he’d shared with Nolan that his dad deserted them when he was four and he had only foggy memories of a smiling man who had laughed a lot.

Nolan should’ve teased and walked away, but for some reason—melancholy at marrying off the last of his sons, lonely and imagining Madeline might relate to his plight as a brave single mum, or was it recklessly brave as the last time she approached him at a wedding Madeline was carrying a bomb—he eased in closer and said, “Join me for a dance?”

Her eyes widened. She looked him over, and Nolan found himself straightening. He’d heard from different sources, besides the internet articles, that he was ‘devastatingly handsome’ and ‘fit and perfectly proportioned.’ He always laughed at such terms, usually flung at him by Ellery’s Aunt Elise who was as inappropriate as she was fun.

“Your bravery is lauded throughout Europe, but are you certain you want to dance with me? You and I don’t have an encouraging track record at weddings.”

Nolan chuckled, happy he could do so. At Malik and Sophie’s wedding two months ago, Madeline had been drugged and staggered his direction with a bomb disguised as a present.

“A dance with you is worth the risk,” he thought he said as gallantly and charming as Malik or her son Chad might, “Unless you’re hiding a bomb in that lovely dress?”

“I guess you’ll have to find out.”

“Dance with me so I can.” He was surprised by his insistence and how much he wanted this dance.

“Who am I to refuse the king?” She smiled, and Nolan knew it was only a tease. She was confident and independent, and he doubted she’d ever needed a man in her life. Not that it mattered to him if Madeline Prescott was happily single or gave in to one of the many men pursuing her.

He gave her his most alluring smile, practiced when he was younger with his poise coach, and offered his hand. She pressed her palm against his and something warm and real passed between them. Nolan startled and thought she did as well. He threaded their fingers together, hoping he appeared nonchalant. At the exact same moment, he cupped his hand around her smooth waist, his palm covering from her waistline down to the curve of her hip, and she wrapped her palm and fingers around his shoulder.

They each drew in a telling breath, and he felt an impossible tingly warmth work its way through his body at each point of contact. They stared at each other, and neither of them moved or spoke. He’d never seen Madeline at a loss for words. He could hardly blame her as he had no idea what to say and he’d been trained throughout his life to always have the correct response on his lips.

“Mum. King Nolan.” Chad waltzed up to them with his fiancée Hope in the circle of his strong arms. “It’s customary to move to the music.” His charming smile was easy-going, and thankfully he didn’t realize Nolan was at a loss, stunned by the feelings Madeline created in him.

“Thank you for the reminder,” Nolan murmured, smiling as well. “I was so taken aback by your mum’s beauty, I fear I’ve forgotten my own name.”

“And I thought I was the king of charming lines,” Chad teased.

“You are, love, but the king is pretty good.” Hope grinned and then they waltzed off.

Nolan forced his feet into motion, guiding Madeline around the dance floor. He’d waltzed so many times throughout his life the movement was automatic, but he couldn’t recall feeling this energized, alive, and light while dancing. He wouldn’t have been surprised to see that they were floating.

Nolan pushed all those unfamiliar and irrational thoughts away. They felt like a betrayal of Anne. He’d enjoyed dancing with his wife, of course he had, but had it ever been like this? He peeled his gaze from Madeline’s riveting emerald eyes and tried to focus on the crowd. The dance floor was crowded with couples, but there was enough room to move and not brush against or run into another couple. The temperature was perfect, and the sweet scent of gardenias emanated from the decorations. Or maybe that was Madeline. Why was he sweating?

Many of his children were dancing by and giving him significant looks. He’d better not act so besotted with Chad’s mum or he would surely hear about it. He focused back on her, determined to act comfortable and tease as they always did. It wasn’t flirting as Hattie and Aliya had tried to goad him into admitting once. It was light-hearted banter.

Was that any better than flirting? Hmm.

Madeline’s mouth was slightly open as she stared at him. Had her lips always been so full and ... intriguing?

He mentally slapped himself. What was he thinking? It was a simple dance. With one of his son’s best friend’s mums, and a high-ranking member of parliament. Madeline usually baited or joked with him, and he always laughed and responded. He enjoyed their interactions, as nobody but his family and Henry ever seemed confident enough to let down their guard around the ‘powerful, brave, and alluring king’.

Right now, she looked as off-kilter as he felt. No teasing quips were forthcoming.

“I’ve made you uncomfortable,” he said, studying her emerald green eyes. Had they always been so large and sparkled like the jewel they matched?

“Why would *you* make me uncomfortable? You’re only the king.” A hint of mirth mixed with a challenge came to her voice and her gaze. “I’m far too confident to ever be uncomfortable.”

“Yes, you are.” He smiled, grateful the Madeline he expected was back. His voice lowered to a husky timbre he didn’t think he’d ever used in his life. “Your confidence to easily banter with ‘only the king’ is as alluring as your lovely face.”

Then he blinked, shocked at his words and his tone. She blinked too, looking as stunned as he was.

They waltzed together in silence for a few rounds. He was hyperaware of her hand in his, her hand pulsing warmth through his shoulder muscles, his hand cupping her waist and hip. Had a woman’s touch ever been this all-consuming?

He startled. What kind of thought was that? He’d been married to the most incredible and appealing woman in his world.

His startle must’ve thrown Madeline back to reality. as she smirked and said, “Are you prepared for the traditional Christmas snowball fight?”

“Now, what tradition are you referring to?” He arched an eyebrow.

“The best one of the year.”

“Where my sons and their friends gang up on me and plaster me with snowballs?” He chuckled. “Definitely the best tradition of the year.”

“Agreed.” She winked at him. Winked. Madeline had never winked at him before and that enticing move made his stomach flip-flop. “Are you bruised from head to toe after?”

He chuckled and tried not to think about that wink, or her mesmerizing emerald eyes, or the feel of her in his arms. With a bit of pressure, he brought her closer. Her lovely eyes widened as his chest brushed hers, and then it was as if their bodies were two magnets. He wasn't certain who moved first, or if either of them had consciously moved. Similar to a flair move to complete a romantic dance, her body was pressed up against his, her arm slid around his neck, and his hand glided around to her lower back, his fingers and palm enjoying each inch of her firm waistline and lower back encased in silk.

“What was the question?” he asked, caught completely off guard by these strong feelings and how perfect she felt in his arms.

She laughed. A rich, warm laugh that vibrated through him. He laughed with her. It was the most freeing and delightful laughter. Their gazes were locked, and he felt her mirth was directed at both of them. They were acting like teenagers, and he couldn't get enough of it.

The music stopped as the song ended. Their laughter died as well, and they stood far too close, staring at each other.

Madeline released his hand and her grip on his neck and eased back. Nolan had to consciously force his hand to slide from her lower back.

“Thank you for the dance,” she said in a breathless, enticing tone he'd never heard from the independent, tough, and sometimes intimidating member of parliament.

“It was my pleasure,” he said back, his voice so rough and husky he hardly recognized it.

She smiled and then whirled away. He watched her go. Her pale blue dress molded beautifully to her curves, and her blonde hair looked like silk.

“King Papa?” Sunny's little voice came from knee level. “You can ask me if you may please have this dance now.”

Nolan chuckled, bent down, and replied, “Princess Sunny. May I *please* have the honor of this dance?”

As the affirmative answer came in her darling voice, he swooped the little angel into his arms. They swirled around the room, and he laughed and enjoyed every moment of the dance with his granddaughter. The only time he got distracted was when he caught Madeline watching him, smiling at him and Sunny. There was something different about her smile. She was as confused by their connection as he was.

It was best to put it all from his mind. He was not interested in dating or ‘moving on’ as everyone seemed to think he should be. The dance had been exhilarating and unexpected, but his plan was to focus on his growing family and his flourishing kingdom.

William and Treven Rindlesbacher were dead, and Naomi was in hiding. Guaranteed Naomi would recruit more loyal cronies and strike again. He needed no more stress in his life than was already heaped on his shoulders with the everyday responsibilities of running a kingdom, and learning how to navigate the process with a new prime minister to boot.

He was not interested in Madeline Prescott.

Not interested.

But for some reason, he couldn’t get her sparkling emerald eyes and the tingling feel of her out of his mind.

CHAPTER

One

SEVEN MONTHS *Later*

Madeline Prescott kept her spine straight and her chin tilted as if she were the royalty as she thanked the guard who opened the ten-foot wooden castle door for her, leaving the warm July weather outside and entering the gorgeous, light-filled, and spacious castle. She handed her suitcase to another guard, not sure if he'd hold on to it or put it in one of the guest suites, and followed the guard who'd brought her up from the barricade at the edge of Greenville Village. The village was nestled at the edge of the lake and the mountainside, below the towering and imposing castle of the royal family of Augustine. Her fellow parliament member, Joseph Aritheline, had dropped her off. She didn't appreciate his parting words of caution. "Don't fall for the king when you owe me a date."

Silly. She wasn't falling for anyone, and she didn't need to date Joseph or any of the dozen other men who asked. The last man she'd granted a few dates, Roger Pitcher, had used her to try to kill the king and the entire royal family and their guests at Prince Malik and Sophie's wedding. With her track record, she should swear off men completely.

But King Nolan ... The confident, enticing, and revered king.

She sucked in a breath, prayed for strength, and gave herself a stern talking to.

You're tough. You're brave. He's only the king. He's not attractive. His blue eyes are not magnetic. He's not fun to

tease with. Dancing with him seven months ago did not fill you with delicious tingles, mess with your level mind, or change your life's trajectory. King Nolan won't hate you when you reveal why you're here. You have no need of any man but Chad in your life.

Her heels clicked on the granite floor as she clung to the strap of the large purse slung over her shoulder and almost believed her pep talk. She was wearing her favorite business suit—dusty pink, knee length with short sleeves to showcase how hard she worked to stay fit at fifty-three years old. She'd heard many times from far too many men that the suit flattered her and made her emerald green eyes pop. The tailored suit helped her feel feminine, attractive, successful, and powerful all at the same time.

Powerful? She wasn't powerful. Not compared to the king of Augustine. He reminded her of Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*—strong, brave, and irresistible. King Nolan August could hurl her out of his gorgeous castle, especially with the strength she'd seen in his chest and felt as she'd touched his perfect shoulder while they danced. He could have her arrested or worse, tell her he would never love anyone but his beautiful, ideal, and angelic deceased wife.

Stop, she commanded herself. None of that talk was helping her nerves at all. The king was too gracious to arrest her or kick her out, though anyone would be angry at the message she brought and the emissary mission she'd volunteered for. In her defense, she was protecting him from worse emissaries. Or was she selfishly wanting him all to herself?

The dreams of him noticing her as a woman were unrealistic and should never be on her radar. King Nolan had loved Queen Anne deeply, as had the entire royal family and country. He'd never even attempted a date in the eighteen months since his beloved wife had died.

He and Madeline had shared that one incredible dance at Prince Tristan and Jennifer Shule's wedding. Any woman would have felt swept off their feet that night. Was it even possible to be at that romantic royal wedding, in the insanelly

gorgeous ballroom, asked to dance by the illustrious and handsome king, and not fall in love?

She rolled her eyes. It wasn't love. Goodness. She doubted King Nolan even remembered the way their gazes had connected, the tension that had crackled between them, the way both of them had stumbled over their words, and his sweet compliments. There was no way he had noticed, or would ever notice, Madeline the way she noticed him. Since their dance, he'd been warm, cordial, and bantered with her when she teased him. Just like normal. Normal was good. Why did she want more than normal with the king, of all people? Impossible.

The royal guard rapped on the door to the king's office. Not the receiving room. Why had the king wanted her to come to his office? Simply busy, or did he want a more intimate setting?

"Please enter," King Nolan called in that deep, inspiring voice that sent tendrils of longing down her spine.

He was commanding and inspiring in all the right ways. She had to stop herself from fantasizing about their dance. It had been eighteen months that he'd been widowed, but it was common knowledge that the king had no intention of moving on or dating anyone. Not for a shortage of options, certainly. She'd watched videos of him climbing out of his Lamborghini, power, confidence, and charm clinging to him as he moved. He could take control of parliament with one well-spoken line. She'd never forget watching him dance with his adorable granddaughter Sunny—tender and alluring.

What woman wouldn't be interested in the king? Maybe that was why he claimed no interest in dating, to keep all the women at bay. She couldn't blame him.

Was Madeline special? Could she change his mind? Good heavens, no. He couldn't possibly be healed from losing his wife.

Queen Anne's death had been a horrific tragedy and quite the scandal with the former prime minister and his wife being involved and the Rindlesbacher family wreaking havoc and

manipulating and blackmailing many people in the kingdom. Unfortunately, that scandal was now being resurrected by two members of parliament and approved by Prime Minister Carrera.

That was why she was here. Not to flirt with the king.

The guard slid the door open. King Nolan and Prince Tristan both stood as she entered. She curtsied to both of them. King Nolan didn't stop at standing to show his respect. He hurried around the desk, his mesmerizing blue eyes lit up and one hundred percent focused on her. That warm look in his eyes made her stomach dance. His handsome face split into a grin. He reached her and extended his hand. Madeline knew she shouldn't touch him—it would mess with her normally well-functioning brain—but how did one refuse the king?

She put her hand against his, and the unfamiliar tingles and warmth she'd felt during their dance and again any time this past year when he'd graciously shaken her hand as if she were his equal, slid along her palm.

His gaze sharpened on her, and he clasped her hand in his. She felt feminine, dainty, desirable, irresistible really as their gazes and hands held. Every dream she hadn't let herself dream in the twenty-six years since her husband had ditched her and her son waltzed through her mind.

Her earlier pep talk disappeared like a puff of smoke. Her pep talks rarely failed her and had pulled her through raising and providing for Chad by herself, working her way up to being a member of Augustine's parliament, and staying impervious to the men who asked her out.

“Madeline,” King Nolan said in a husky tone that made her even hotter than the bright July sunshine outside. “To what do we owe the pleasure of a visit from our favorite member of parliament?”

“I hope it's still a pleasure after I present my mission.” She grinned even though she was serious and terrified to place the paper in her purse in his hand.

“Always a pleasure to see you.” King Nolan said those words in such a deep, melodious tone it made her shiver. As soon as he spoke them, he stiffened. Shocked by his own response?

“You are too kind, oh mighty king,” she tried to tease and was rewarded with his blue eyes twinkling at her.

She forced herself to pull her hand back and turn to Tristan. He was her son’s best friend, so it was hard to keep the title in front of his name. He approached, and King Nolan stepped back as his son gave her a warm hug.

“Mama Prescott. It’s fabulous to see you.”

“You too, handsome. How is Jennifer feeling? I’ve been praying for her.”

“Those prayers are much appreciated. She’s horribly sick. Steffan claims it will pass in a few weeks. I certainly hope so. Watching her throw up is devastating.”

“I’m sure it’s more devastating being the one throwing up,” she teased.

“Oh, for sure. She is tougher than I am. We all know that. How are Chad and Hope?”

“You probably see them more than I do.” Chad had married Hope Radisson last spring, and they were busy between his responsibilities with the Augustine military and running the military training center, and Hope owning a chain of fitness centers and athletic clothing stores throughout America. Lady Fit was hugely successful, and Madeline was delighted with her new daughter-in-law and her sister Faith. Faith seemed to cling to Madeline, much in need of a mother since hers had deserted her at only twelve years old.

“I doubt that. They both adore you, and I know they visit every chance they get.” He smiled, crinkling the burn scars on the left side of his face. The scars had healed and faded somewhat, but they were a reminder that the royal family wasn’t safe or immune to pain. Last summer and fall had challenged them to the extreme. The bomb Roger had used Madeline to try to kill them with at Prince Malik’s wedding

and then his attack on Hope and Faith the next day had been the last of the Rindlesbachers' schemes.

Thankfully, William and Treven Rindlesbacher were both dead and Naomi Rindlesbacher hadn't been seen in over nine months. Unfortunately, two key members of parliament were trying to claim King Nolan was secretly meeting with Naomi, and that the woman on every crime watchlist throughout the world would be the next queen of Augustine.

Madeline, and most of parliament, thought it was ludicrous. But the law stated if two members of parliament brought forth a movement and the prime minister endorsed it, it must be resolved. After the controversy with Prime Minister Shule and the danger to the throne and the kingdom, everyone was on edge. In closed-door sessions, the only consensus that made everyone happy was sending one of their own to personally monitor happenings around the castle. Hence, here she was, volunteering to watch the king and make certain Naomi had no power or sway over him.

She risked a glance at the man himself. His gaze hadn't left her, and she was grateful she'd worn her best suit. What would it be like working in close quarters with the king? Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away.

"Come. Sit." King Nolan took her elbow. Even that simple touch of his palm against her bare skin captivated her. He escorted her to a chair across from his desk. She knew Tristan had his own office next door, but it appeared he had set up shop here as well, with a laptop on a table by the window and a comfortable office chair. Another table and chair were empty. The former prime minister had spent most of his days here at the castle working closely with the king and crown prince. The new prime minister preferred staying in Traverse and working more closely with parliament. He spent hours on Zoom calls with the king and crown prince, together and separately, each day.

The king walked around the desk and sank into his chair. Tristan pulled his chair up next to hers and leaned back, crossing his ankle over his knee. He was completely comfortable with her, as he should be after all the time he'd

spent with Chad at her house over the years. How would he react to the outlandish accusations and her assignment? She glanced back at the king, regal in his kingly chair. It might as well have been a throne. How would *he* react? She'd seen him serious, but never upset. She was betting she might witness that today.

“What brings you to see us today?” King Nolan asked.

Madeline loved to tease with him whenever she could. It helped to hide her unprofessional and undeniable attraction to him. The attraction had blindsided her last Christmas at Tristan and Jennifer's wedding. The king had danced with her. She knew he'd only asked because Chad was Tristan's best man and they both loved each other's sons. They'd danced and teased and laughed, but underlying that, his touch had transported her to a different world full of tingles and light, and his blue eyes had captivated her. She thought of that dance far too often. She'd felt like she was floating. Silly, but she couldn't deny the power of those feelings.

“King Nolan. Prince Tristan.” She cleared her throat and prayed for professionalism. Before they could both insist on her dropping the titles, she rushed on. “I'm here on official business as an emissary from parliament and Prime Minister Carrera.”

“Oh?” King Nolan leaned back, not looking quite as happy at her being here.

She had it on authority from Chad and had seen glimpses herself that the newly appointed prime minister did not have the rapport and comfortable yet effective relationship former Prime Minister Shule had with the royals. Henry Shule had been too comfortable, according to the prevailing sentiment among parliament after all the angst that had occurred. Not any longer.

“What business might that be?” the king asked, his blue eyes piercing now.

Nerves rolled around in her stomach, but Madeline had known as soon as the issues had been brought up by Albert Gustaff, seconded by George Monaco, and approved by Prime

Minister Carrera, that she had to be appointed. The other quick to volunteer members had former associations with the infamous Rindlesbachers and were not fans of King Nolan and his family. Thankfully, she had more loyal friends within parliament and had won the vote.

She had vowed to herself and to parliament and the prime minister that she would be thorough in her investigations and observations and fair with the royal family, particularly King Nolan, and the kingdom she'd pledged her allegiance to. It was a very sticky situation, and everyone had agreed the investigation needed to be done quietly. Thankfully, as it was a closed meeting, it had been sealed and the media should never find out.

She personally did not believe the allegations of misuse of funds, some whispering of embezzling, but worst of all, the association, protection, funding by, and a possible scandalous relationship with Naomi Rindlesbacher. Naomi was a beautiful and conniving lady who had convinced, tricked, or paid a lot of men to be her pawns, but there was no world where King Nolan would associate with that vile manipulator.

Ninety percent of parliament was in agreement with Madeline, but there had been too much controversy, danger, and infiltration, reaching even the former prime minister and the deceased Lieutenant General. Parliament was taking no chances. How long would this investigation take? The bonus—many hours spent with the most enticing man she'd ever known.

“Sir, the members of parliament and Prime Minister Carrera have sent me to work personally with you ...” Her voice trailed off as his gaze became almost smoky. Her stomach lifted, not from nerves but from anticipation of sticking close to this man's side for the foreseeable future.

“Personally?” King Nolan repeated. The way he said that word sounded as if she'd asked him to cuddle up, talk for hours, and get to know each other better.

No. She was projecting her hidden desires, which would definitely stay hidden, onto him.

“Yes, sir.” She made her voice stiff and unyielding. “Until the issues and allegations have been resolved to parliament’s satisfaction via my reports.”

“What issues and allegations?” Tristan demanded, obviously confused at her formal tone and bothered by those words directed at his father. As anybody would be.

Madeline prayed they could all make it through this without her offending either of these important men. She pulled a paper out of her large bag and laid it on the desk. The king didn’t look at it, his eyes fastened on hers.

“The misuse of the people of Augustine’s funds by the royal family. King Nolan in particular.” She started there. She didn’t know that she could spit the rest out. No way was King Nolan in cahoots with that evil temptress, Naomi Rindlesbacher.

The office was silent. King Nolan held her gaze. His blue eyes filled with challenge and injury. She could almost see the question in his eyes. Did she believe these allegations?

How to assure him that she believed he was an honest man and a loyal king while maintaining her purpose here? She had to resolve the issue to the members of parliament and Prime Minister Carrera’s satisfaction without making a mistake and revealing she was enthralled with the king. If she didn’t close this issue, they’d send someone else. The slick-tongued George Monaco had made certain she knew that. After he had asked her to dinner for the hundredth time. The man seemed to relish her constant rejections.

If the king thought ‘misuse of funds’ was damaging, how would he feel when he read that paper, or she had to reveal the rest? She could only pray he wouldn’t escort her straight out of his office and the castle. She’d have to convince him she had his best interests in mind and was protecting him from a much harsher and more devious emissary. She’d have to convince herself she had no personal interest or attraction to the king, or she might mess up the entire mission.

Staring into his blue eyes, she feared the last part of her mission would challenge all of her long-standing self-control

around handsome and powerful men. Was there a more handsome or powerful man in the world than the king of Augustine? Not that she was aware of.

She'd never so much as glimpsed this man's equal.

CHAPTER

Two

KING NOLAN AUGUST stared at the breathtaking woman seated across from him. She had the kind of mesmerizing beauty silly boys wrote songs about. Being loyal to his wife, he'd never dwelt on Madeline Prescott's attractiveness, poise, and resilience throughout their years of association.

Until last Christmas.

Asking her to dance at Tristan and Jennifer's wedding had been a mistake. He had experienced a connection, warmth, and desire with Madeline he'd never thought he'd feel again in this life. Truthfully, he didn't know that he'd ever felt tingles or desire like that, even with Anne. He and his wife had been friends for so long that tingles had never been part of their many years of love and devotion.

Yet Madeline was a surprise and a mystery to him. The yearning to be close to her slapped him in the face every time he saw her, and especially if he got the chance to touch her hand or stare into her emerald green eyes.

Madeline was an expert at maintaining a professional distance while teasing him and making him smile at the same time.

When his close friend Henry Shule or his sons or daughters-in-law gently encouraged him to think about dating again, he could only see Madeline. He had no idea how to approach such a sought-after and accomplished parliament member about dating, and honestly felt a little betrayal to

Anne with the strong feelings for Madeline and concern how Kiera would respond to him dating. His daughter had already lost her mum, he couldn't disturb her world again. It was simpler to claim he wasn't interested.

He'd approved of the rumor of the king 'refusing to move on from his beloved wife' to discourage the far too many interested women. It had sort of worked. The fact that he rarely left the castle and spent most of his time in Zoom meetings or with his family helped as well.

When Anne had been murdered, Ray had basically put the family on lockdown. Even now, eighteen months after Anne's death and with William and Treven Rindlesbachers dead, they'd fallen into a pattern of reclusiveness that they hadn't altered much.

Naomi was still hiding out there. Somewhere. The woman had no end to her schemes, and her thirst for revenge would be even stronger with her husband, son, and illicit lover killed. She'd be recruiting help and coming up with some plan to strike. It was safer and easier to stay home.

Now the only woman he was interested in, Madeline, was bringing allegations of 'misuse of funds' on him and his family. 'King Nolan in particular.' Had she really said that? How dare parliament even intone such a thing?

Nolan strived to be a fair and benevolent king, and he was completely dedicated to his country and his family.

Any illusions that Madeline might return the feelings he repressed every time he saw, or even thought of her, were dampened in the face of reality. Her emerald eyes that always captivated him were currently searching his. Did she think he'd stolen from his country? Did she believe he would lie to her about it or try to hide something from their countrymen, her, parliament, or the prime minister?

"No wonder Prime Minister Carrera declined our invitation to have lunch and work at the castle today," Tristan said, breaking the silence. He dragged the official document Madeline had placed on the desk in front of him and looked it over.

Nolan didn't want to look at it. It would make it too real. The past nine months since his sons had found their perfect matches had been healing and wonderful. He still ached for Anne, but it had been eighteen months since she'd passed and the grief was lessening. His growing family and overwhelming responsibilities kept him busy enough that the pain of her loss usually remained in the back of his mind.

The Rindlesbachers' threat had been quiet, and with untold hours of hard work, stress, and prayer, his country and family were flourishing. He loved being King Papa to his six-year-old granddaughter Sunny, and now Tristan and Jennifer and Curt and Aliya were expecting little ones in the spring.

Apparently, he shouldn't have gotten too comfortable.

"This is signed by Prime Minister Carrera and two key members of parliament," Tristan said. He pushed out a heavy breath. "I miss Henry more every day." His eyes flicked down at the paper, probably to read the document in its entirety.

Nolan missed Henry every bit as much as Tristan did. After it was discovered in October of last year that Henry's wife Leslie had inadvertently killed Anne, and Henry and Leslie had been blackmailed, extorted, and manipulated by the Rindlesbachers, Henry had no choice but to step down. In good news, Leslie was recovering from the physical and emotional abuse at the hands of the Rindlesbachers. They traveled often, as not everyone in Augustine had been as forgiving as Nolan had about the queen's death and Henry's unwilling aid to the Rindlesbachers.

Nolan didn't look at the paper. He held Madeline's gaze and fought for a level tone of voice. "If Prime Minister Carrera and parliament believe I have misused funds, they obviously don't know me or my level of integrity."

He was furious at this very personal attack. What was Carrera trying to accomplish? He'd been voted in by the people and was a politician to the core. The man had shown competence, great intellect, and had been fine to work with. Nolan hadn't sensed corruption in any of Carrera's decisions for the people of Augustine. Their country was flourishing

financially, crime was low, their people appeared happy and opinion polls reflected that, and they had great relations with their neighboring countries and no hint of uprising or war on the horizon.

“I know you,” Madeline said softly and more seriously than she usually spoke. “Which is why I volunteered for this assignment and thankfully was appointed instead of some of your critics in parliament.”

Nolan appreciated her having his back, but it was all a punch to the kidneys from nowhere, as well as a show of disrespect to him. “I appreciate you volunteering, but maybe the critics should have come themselves so they could see that all funds are used properly by me and my family.”

“Maybe they should have,” she said. Why did she look injured by his suggestion? Had she sacrificed to come herself? Would being the ‘emissary’ who investigated the king’s finances be a stain on her career? He couldn’t imagine it would. He was surprised she hadn’t brought an auditor or accountant, but they could resolve this issue easily and she could email the information within the hour. He’d secretly hoped for more time with her when he’d seen the appointment on his calendar this morning, but he was adept at dealing with disappointment, so he said nothing.

Tristan looked back and forth between the two of them. “Why would anyone make such an accusation?”

Madeline shrugged. “The castle garage full of supercars and your closets full of Brioni suits bother some members of parliament.”

“You understand that the August family money is separate from the allowances paid to us by the country of Augustine?” Nolan asked.

She nodded. “You are each paid an allowance based on your responsibilities and level of involvement. The castle staff, maintenance, and utilities are paid by the country.”

“As well as a clothing and vehicle allowance,” Nolan said. “Which I personally have never touched, using instead the

stipends paid by my family's vast holdings in salt and iron mines throughout Europe to buy any vehicles and personal items myself or my family needed."

"Well, I don't know if anybody *needs* an eight million dollar Lamborghini," she threw the quip out with a slight smile on her intriguing pink lips. Were her lips naturally that pink? They'd been stained red when they'd danced at the wedding. Either color on those full lips was captivating.

"That is a matter of opinion, Ms. Prescott," he tried to tease back. "When you are at my level of driving expertise, a Lamborghini Veneno Roadster is an absolute necessity."

"Oh, I'm sure. I've heard about your 'driving expertise.' Or is it a 'terror ride'?" She smirked, and Tristan chuckled.

"Even the brave and accomplished pilot Major Chad threw up after one of the king's driving exhibitions," Tristan said.

"Weak constitution, that charming Major has," Nolan responded. "I assume you could stomach a drive with me, Ms. Prescott." He arched a brow; he would love to take her on a drive.

"You may call me Madeline, King Nolan." She gave him a challenging look, not rising to his silly barb about her beloved and incredible son or his desire to take her out in his Lamborghini and show off a bit.

"Only if you call me Nolan."

Her eyes widened. As close as Tristan and Chad had been throughout the years, and as often as they saw each other, she'd never dropped the king from his title. Sometimes she said it sarcastically, but it was always *King* Nolan or King Papa since Sunny had named him that.

"Nolan," she said softly.

His name from her lips stirred something deep inside him. Something he'd repressed for eighteen months. Except during that magical dance with her and the times he'd shaken her hand, possibly holding on a second longer than he should have. What would she say if he told her he *needed* to take her

to dinner and on a drive and it was imperative he get to know her on a more personal level?

He jolted at the thought, and she thankfully looked away.

“Well ...” Tristan looked carefully between the two of them. “Perhaps I should slip into my office and let you two resolve these concerns. I’ll take care of any meetings this afternoon.”

Nolan nodded, hoping he imagined the glint of interest in his oldest son’s eyes. If Tristan, Chad, or any of his children or daughters-in-law got it in their heads that he was infatuated with Madeline Prescott, he’d never hear the end of it. His family and Henry would be thrilled. He wasn’t sure what Chad would think. The stories of Chad protecting his mum from would-be admirers were long and sometimes hilarious.

The real question was ... Would Madeline be interested in him in that way? The fact that she hadn’t remarried since her husband disappeared more than twenty years ago showed he’d probably get a firm no if he asked her out.

“That will be fine,” Nolan said. “I’m sure the issue of properly using funds will be resolved within the hour.” Maybe he was being overconfident, but he had nothing to hide. He could send the information he had on and let the accounting or auditing team parliament should hire deal with sorting it out.

Madeline’s delicate brows lifted. He had the feeling he was missing a piece to this puzzle.

Tristan pushed the paper on the desk toward him. “Dad, the financial issue looks to be only the beginning.”

Nolan looked down at the paper he’d ignored, glancing over the fluffy political jargon, the financial concerns, and his eyes stopped on a hated name. He read the laughable suggestions, but he was far from laughing.

“They believe,” he said slowly, but still with too much bite, “I would have *anything* to do with Naomi Rindlesbacher? That I’m aiding her, secretly dating her, and planning to make that appalling woman queen?”

Ridiculous wasn't a strong enough word. Outrageous, bizarre, insane, nauseating ...

Madeline nodded tightly. Did she think he'd ever associate with that vile monster? Naomi and William had caused Anne's death and more misery and tragedy than any one couple should've been able to produce.

He'd wondered when she'd strike again. Had Parliament organized this attack, or was Naomi behind it?

Nolan met Tristan's gaze. His son folded his arms across his chest. "It's completely ludicrous, Pops. I'm sure that's why Madeline has agreed to shadow you until the concerns are resolved, because she knows how outlandish the mere suggestion is and wants you to have an ally."

He looked at Madeline. Her green eyes were shuttered. Was she his ally? Could she know he was intrigued by her and attracted to her, despite how he'd fought it, and she would use that against him? He couldn't think like that. This was Madeline, Chad's mum, a loyal Augustinian and a smart, classy, and generous lady. She wouldn't trick him. Right?

"You've agreed to shadow me?"

"I did."

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes for parliament and Prime Minister Carrera to believe the corruption of the Rindlesbachers and Prime Minister Shule did not reach our highest royal. That you have absolutely no association with and are not harboring Naomi Rindlesbacher."

Thankfully, she didn't add *with plans to make Naomi the queen*. Bile crawled up his throat at the mere suggestion. As a lifelong Christian, he knew he shouldn't hate, but he loathed Naomi. She was so despicable, the thought of being in the same room as her made him sick.

"You understand how bizarre these allegations even are. My family has been the constant target of the power-hungry Rindlesbachers, and Henry and Leslie were manipulated and threatened by them. There is no corruption in the royal

family.” He stood. “I was willing to show you my personal financial information, which, to be frank, is none of anybody’s business, but to be watched like I’m a criminal when I’ve done absolutely nothing untoward is unacceptable.” He wouldn’t mind her being close to him, but only if she wanted to be.

“Nolan.” Her voice was as soft as he’d ever heard it. Madeline was feminine, but she was a tough single mum and parliament member. “I already told you, the other members who volunteered will not be as open-minded and generous as I will be. They have each shown affiliations with William or Naomi Rindlesbacher in the past and they have, at times, been openly critical of you on the parliament floor and even with the media.”

He knew exactly who she was talking about—the brutish Albert Gustaff and slick, or more accurately slimy, George Monaco and a few of their associates. Those two were the ones most likely aiding and abetting and hoping to put Naomi on the throne. If he knew Naomi, this was only the beginning of some sadistic plan.

“So I either agree to have you by my side, or have somebody worse assigned?”

“I’m afraid so. Your favorite parliament member is the lesser of two evils.”

She was more than simply his favorite parliament member. “There is nothing evil about you, Madeline, but you do recognize how absurd and out of line this is.”

“I do. And I’m very sorry it’s come to this. You must know the majority of parliament is supportive of and grateful for you and all you do for Augustine. Unfortunately, the law states that if a member of parliament brings up a motion, another member seconds the motion, and the prime minister approves, the issue does not have to be taken to a vote.”

Nolan knew the law. He couldn’t understand why Carrera would support such a notion and blindside him with it. He wouldn’t take this lying down.

“Let’s work together, Nolan,” she said softly, his name on her lips almost distracting him from this insanity. “We’ll give them no opportunity for recourse.”

Let’s work together. And she’d said his name without his title in front of it. His chest warmed. He liked the sound of together with Madeline. If only she wasn’t here because someone, most likely Naomi, was trying to destroy him and usurp the crown.

When would the machinations of the Rindlesbachers ever end?

CHAPTER

Three

AFTER SORTING through the king's financial documents for an hour, Madeline could clearly see the personal accounts he'd used to purchase his vehicles and clothing and the fact that the vehicle and clothing allowances paid to him from the country's coffers were untouched. She shouldn't have been surprised to see that the king was wealthy beyond what she'd imagined. The man could buy a small country without exhausting his funds.

In the past hour, she'd been impressed with his self-restraint and quiet confidence. She'd also had far too many opportunities to brush his hand or lean close and smell his unique cedar and mint scent, almost as alluring as the man himself.

She wasn't certain if this was the best assignment she'd ever had or the hardest. How was she supposed to maintain a personal distance? The prime minister had told her to expect to stay with the king for a few weeks. It was an odd assignment for a parliament member, but they'd all learned not to take Naomi Rindlesbacher for granted. A hint of her being associated with the revered king, even if it seemed ludicrous, had to be resolved.

She pushed send on her email to Prime Minister Carrera and parliament and leaned back in her chair. "Proving you're insanely wealthy and bought that Lambo with your own money was the easy part."

Over eight million dollars for a car. Insane. But she'd seen those videos of him climbing out of that car. He looked like a supermodel and the most powerful man in the world. Mesmerizing.

Nolan leaned in. "Are you saying spending untold hours by my side will be difficult for you?" His blue eyes sparkled at her, but there was an underlying question. Did she want to be by his side?

Madeline couldn't reveal the truth. She'd be removed from this assignment if anyone caught a hint of her romantic interest in the king. She'd also be humiliated when he kindly told her he'd never move on from his idealistic wife's memory. Queen Anne had been immortalized in everyone's memory. Madeline had no desire to compete with a ghost.

"Very," she said drily. "You thrive on teasing me, while I am stiff and serious at all times."

He chuckled. "I'd believe that if you didn't instigate the teasing, and if you weren't Chad's mum."

"Our boys both know how to keep things light despite the heavy responsibilities they carry."

They shared a look—pride and joy in their children. It was something she'd always wanted to share with someone. As her daughter-in-law's parents had no part in Hope's life, she hadn't even had the opportunity to share that look with them. She did wear Lady Fit workout clothing any chance she got and bragged about Hope and Faith's success. They both appeared to love that.

Nolan leaned back in his chair. His expression turned appraising. "So what next? Since we're working together now. Team Nolan and Madeline." He smiled at that, and she felt a flush of happiness. "How do we prove I loathe Naomi Rindlesbacher and wouldn't help her if she had a pistol to my head?"

"Please don't say that." A bitter taste coated her mouth.

"What?" He straightened. "You don't want to be a team?"

“I do want to be a team,” she admitted. “I can’t handle the image of Naomi with a pistol to your head. We both know she’d thrilled to pull the trigger.”

Nolan shrugged, looking unconcerned. She supposed as king there’d been many times he’d had a figurative gun pointed at his head. Or a bomb. She flushed, grateful he’d been too gracious to ever bring up the humiliation of her having trusted Roger Pitcher. When his bomb attempt failed he’d gone after Hope and Faith. Her brief stint of dating that murderous jerk reaffirmed in her head even more that she was meant to be alone, and that she was right to turn down ninety percent of the dinner invites she received.

“Naomi is hiding in a hole somewhere,” Nolan said. “But you’re right; she isn’t to be underestimated. Are Gustaff and Monaco aiding her?”

“I pray not, but I wouldn’t put much past those two. How they got elected, I’ll never know.” She looked out at the beautiful summer day. “Do you ever get the chance to enjoy the outside air?”

He chuckled. “Not often enough. I hike most mornings with two guards in tow and most evenings I take Kiera on a walk through the gardens, or we swim on the top floor.”

“Kiera is adorable. Is she truly thirteen? I hate that she’s growing up.”

“Me too. So far, she hasn’t been a dramatic teenager. Though her perilous stunts cause drama for the family and heart failure for me. The boy still call her Wild Child.”

She smiled at the term. “I’m certain her stunts terrify you. She continues to idolize Prince Derek and Princess Ellery?” The royal couple often competed in *American Ninja Warrior* events and usually won.

“I think she might become more accomplished than either of them.” His face grew stern. “Don’t you dare reveal I said that.”

“Mum’s the word. I don’t fancy landing on the powerful king’s bad side.” She zipped her lips, though his power was no

joke. He wore it like a second skin. The power had obviously been earned and, as far she knew, had never been abused.

They both laughed.

Madeline appreciated the easy rapport between them. She could spend months with him if it was this comfortable and fun. Would tingles and romance become part of the equation? For her, they already were.

A rap sounded on the door, and then it flung open. Tristan hurried in. “Pops, we have that Zoom meeting with Prime Minister Carrera, and his secretary is insisting you need to be on as well.” He turned to Madeline. “Are you supposed to participate or be a fly on the wall?”

“Fly on the wall,” she told him.

“Sorry. Our meetings are boring enough. Observing will be worse.”

She shrugged, appreciating his concern. “I’ll survive. I’ve sat through years of parliament meetings.”

“True.” Tristan grinned. “Not sure why you’d be a glutton for that kind of punishment.”

“It’s my chance to make a difference, and sometimes protect our distinguished king from unfounded accusations.” She winked at Nolan before she could think better of it.

Tristan chuckled, but Nolan’s gaze was intense. She couldn’t tell if he liked her protecting him or not.

“I’d rather be the one protecting you. The strapping, brave king, you see.”

The image of him protecting her stirred something deep inside her, something long repressed. Chad had always been protective of her, but until he was fifteen and reached six-two, none of the men who pursued her had taken him seriously. She loved her son’s protective nature and devotion to her, but the idea of Nolan protecting her was dreamy and thrilling.

“I don’t need anyone’s protection.”

“You’re very impressive, Madeline.” The king’s voice dropped, and his blue eyes became piercing. “But Chad has told us often enough how many men pursue you.”

If only he would pursue her. And why would Chad share men’s attempts to date her with the king?

“Nonsense.” She waved a hand. “I’m past my prime and rarely pursued any longer.”

“You are hardly past your prime,” Nolan said. His gaze traveled slowly over her. “You are stunning.”

Madeline couldn’t speak. She could hardly breathe through her suddenly thick throat. His words made her heart race and, crazily enough, made her emotional. Stuff and nonsense. She wasn’t an emotional woman. She’d never had the luxury of that. Many men had bestowed compliments on her over the years. Why did this one affect her so deeply?

He was the king. But he was also ... Nolan. She wasn’t certain which title was more enticing. The combination of both was irresistible.

“Pops.” Tristan’s voice broke through their moment. “The prime minister is on.”

Madeline flushed. She should not have let her guard down with the king like that. Especially with Tristan watching. What must her son’s best friend be thinking?

She snapped her laptop closed, stood, and hurried to the desk in the corner. Quietly setting up, she settled in and listened and observed. There was an obvious strain between the three men, and she wondered if one of them would bring it up.

The prime minister knew she was here, but he’d cautioned her not to reveal her mission to anyone but the king and crown prince. They didn’t need rumors flying. Her purpose was to put any rumors to rest.

She’d have to speak to Nolan about what to tell the rest of his family. Only Tristan, Jennifer, General Ray, Macey, and Kiera permanently resided at the castle. Steffan and Hattie lived in Traverse near the hospital. Curtis and Aliya lived in

the mountains a few miles from the castle. Derek and Ellery traveled back and forth to America but were often at the castle with Ellery's mum and aunt in tow. Malik, Sophie, and Sunny lived in Traverse near her parents, running Sophie's catering business and Malik's health and fitness center that he co-owned with Steffan and Derek.

The afternoon wore into evening. She didn't like the inactivity, but she'd grown accustomed to sitting for hours on end in meeting after meeting. She did like how often Nolan caught her gaze or made sure she had water, a more comfortable chair, or walked with her out on his office balcony to stretch and enjoy the sunshine between meetings. On any break, they discussed aspects of the most recent meeting. He asked her opinion, and she shared it. He seemed to value what she said.

It did seem silly to have her sitting through meetings with the prime minister, as if Nolan was hiding Naomi Rindlesbacher under his desk or something, but this was her assignment and she would fulfill it with exactness so nobody could claim their illustrious king was doing anything out of line. She owed it to him and to their country.

Her stomach growled, and Nolan glanced at her. "We'll pick up with the primary school expansion discussion tomorrow morning," he said. "I have a family dinner in five minutes."

Madeline would be going to that family dinner. How would everyone react to her being here?

The members of the school committee all signed off.

"Good evening, King Nolan, Prince Tristan," the prime minister said cordially.

"Prime Minister Carrera," the king said before he could end the call.

"Yes?"

"Madeline Prescott was an ideal choice to shadow me, but I won't be blindsided by issues that you and I both know are far-fetched and absurd."

Madeline wished she could see the screen better, see the prime minister's reaction to that.

"I understand, sir. Albert Gustaff and George Monaco have been bending my ear for months. I wanted to keep any issue out of the public eye, and repressing their motion would only force them to seek other means. In a closed session, I conceded I would support sending an emissary to put the issues to rest once and for all. I sent an ally instead of an enemy to lend you support."

Silence filled the room.

"Please believe I agree at the absurdity of you harboring Naomi Rindlesbacher," the prime minister tacked on. "I know you are beyond reproach, and that you and Ms. Prescott can put this matter behind us."

King Nolan studied the screen with that intense blue gaze that nobody could look away from. Finally, he said, "Good evening," and pressed end on the Zoom call.

Madeline was impressed. He had remained calm and addressed the issue like the strong monarch he was.

The men both closed their computers and stood to stretch. Neither of them said anything about the farewell.

Madeline stood as well, admiring the king's well-built frame. He'd kept himself fit. He was a couple years older than her. She hadn't known him personally until Chad and Tristan had struck up a friendship playing rugby in secondary school.

"I'm going to fetch Jennifer and meet you in the dining room," Tristan said.

"See you soon," Nolan said.

"Tristan," Madeline piped up. "Let your dad and I explain to the family why I'm here, all right?"

"I can't wait to hear your explanation." Tristan grinned, and there was a telling twinkle in his eyes as he walked past.

She'd always favored him. She wouldn't put it past Tristan to be matchmaking.

The door closed behind him. Nolan walked up close to her. “We’ll need to inform the staff to prepare a suite for you.”

“Thank you.”

He offered his elbow. “Dinner?”

She slid her hand through, relishing his closeness and the rounded smoothness of his bicep muscle as she cupped it. “Nolan.”

“Yes, Madeline?”

She loved him saying her name and that she didn’t feel she needed to add “king” to his.

“We need a cover story for the rest of your family, for me being here. With a closed session, no member of parliament will spread information about my mission. We deal with too many sensitive issues to flap our tongues.”

“I hope they’ll keep it quiet. The accusations are unfounded and humiliating. Still, I’ve been king far too long to get riled at every rumor flying around the country or the media.”

His parents had died in a small airplane crash when Nolan and Queen Anne had been newlyweds. She wondered if the strain of ruling a country had ever affected their marriage. Of course Nolan was the kind of man who wouldn’t run from hardship or responsibility. Very unlike her husband Bradford. He’d been fun, flighty, and she’d fallen for him hard and fast. Then he’d simply walked away when Chad was four. His last words to her were, ‘We burned bright, but the fire’s gone, sweetheart.’

Madeline was far past the heartache, but the sting of not being enough for her husband had never left. She’d also been leery of falling quickly, and over the years she hadn’t allowed herself to fall at all.

“That’s good.” Madeline looked up at him. She liked how tall and manly he was, liked being close to him. Cedar and mint filled her senses, making her brain a little cloudy. “Any ideas for a cover story?”

“I thought this was *your* lofty assignment. Parliament didn’t debate on a cover story before they sent you over?”

“Sadly, no. And all those brilliant minds could’ve come up with a fabulous one, I’m sure.” Madeline relished being part of parliament. She loved Augustine and felt she was making a difference for her country. She enjoyed all the smart and charitable men and women she associated with. Thankfully, Albert and George were the exception to the rule. It was maddening that the prime minister had given in to their incessant demands, but if he hadn’t, she wouldn’t be here. The prime minister was probably right that they would’ve sought other means to go after the king.

“You have the most brilliant mind of the group,” he told her, his gaze warm. “I want to hear your thoughts on the primary school expansion, but we’d better address this issue first.”

Madeline’s pulse quickened at the compliment. He valued her opinion.

Nolan pursed his lips. “The easiest course of action is to tell my family and staff that we’re officially dating and you’ve taken a leave of absence to spend time with me.” He winked. “And to see if Kiera approves of us furthering the relationship.”

Her heart slammed against her chest. She couldn’t think of a single response, witty or otherwise.

As seconds ticked by, his gaze changed from mirth to solemnity. “Unless that is a repulsive idea to you.”

“R-repulsive? Dating you is the furthest thing from repulsive.”

His lips curved back up, and she wondered if this fake dating idea could include kissing. No! There would be no fake dating or kissing.

“So you aren’t opposed to the idea? As a cover story, of course.”

Cover story. It couldn’t be real. He wasn’t interested in dating anyone, and she was strong and independent.

“I don’t think it will work,” she said. “Word will spread from your staff or guards or someone and we’d cause the scandal we’re trying to prevent.”

“Dating me is scandalous?” He arched one brow. The man could’ve been a male model, but he’d obviously been born to be a king. He wore it well.

“No.” Dating him would be a dream come true. If she were twenty years younger, innocent and naïve again. If he wasn’t a grieving widower with a large family. Kiera was too young to understand and probably wouldn’t like him ‘moving on’ from her mum.

“Well, then. I think it’s a fabulous plan. We’d better hurry to dinner. Kiera gets hangry.” He smiled, but then his face softened. “She and I don’t get near enough time together.”

He escorted her into the hall and they walked down it together, as if they were dating. Could she really run with his idea? She could email the prime minister and parliament and explain what they were doing. It would keep rumors about her investigating the king from coming out, but the rumors that would fly would be of a sort that she wasn’t prepared to deal with. The media and even their own countrymen might not like the idea of her dating the king, of him moving on ... too many worries, and she wanted to talk about Kiera.

“I don’t want to interrupt your time together,” she said as they reached the grand staircase and descended. The offices were above the two levels of the ballroom, dining rooms, library, and various receiving rooms.

“She’ll love you being here. She craves a mother figure and has latched on to her sisters-in-law, Ellery and Macey in particular.” He gave her a sad smile as they reached the main level.

Mother figure? He surely didn’t mean it in reference to Madeline stepping in as a mother figure, though she yearned to nurture the brave young princess.

“The poor thing,” Madeline said. “I can’t imagine losing her mum so young.”

Madeline's parents lived in the village of Providence and had been a great support to her as she had raised Chad by herself.

"She seems resilient, but occasionally overwhelming emotion and sadness will bubble to the surface." They walked slowly down the hall, as if the king wanted to talk to her alone for a bit longer. "Tristan's bombing really shook her, especially because Macey returned to California at the same time. Macey was in love with Ray and didn't know he returned the feelings."

"Your family had far too many attacks and events last year."

He stopped outside the dining room. "That's why our dating won't faze anyone."

She didn't know if that was true and could already imagine the stir the distinguished king dating a member of parliament might cause.

"Dad!" Kiera's happy call came from inside the smaller dining room.

Nolan turned as Kiera bowled into him. He hugged the beautiful teenager close, then picked her up in the air as if she were a small child. His strength was impressive, and Madeline's mouth was very dry. She'd felt that strength under her fingertips and pressed against her in that fateful dance.

"Look who is going to stay with us," Nolan said, turning toward Madeline.

"Chad's mum!" Kiera called happily as Nolan set her on her feet. No matter how often she asked Kiera to call her Madeline, she always called her Chad's mum. Kiera gave her a quick squeeze. She was a friendly soul.

"Hello, Kiera." Madeline couldn't resist putting an arm around her thin shoulders. She hoped the princess got enough attention and love. With all of her older brothers and sisters-in-law and a very concerned father, she imagined she did. "Your dad tells me we're going to swim after dinner."

“You’ll swim with us? Yes!” Kiera did a standing backflip, dislodging Madeline’s arm and stunning her. The girl’s hip knocked into a side table as she landed. An antique bowl teetered on the edge and then fell. Kiera swooped the up bowl before it could hit the ground and lifted it high above her head like a trophy.

“Wild Child,” Tristan teased her. “Stop flipping and let’s eat. I’m starved, and you’ll get to your swimming faster.”

“Okay, okay.” Kiera grabbed Madeline’s hand and tugged her toward the table. “You sit by me and Pops.”

“Gladly.” The word was out before she realized what effect it would have. Tristan and Jennifer exchanged glances. Raymond and Macey did the same, while Nolan gave her the most enticing look known to mankind. Was that part of his pretending to date scheme, or was he interested in her?

Macey and Jennifer welcomed her with hugs, Raymond with a firm handshake. The general was the most serious of Nolan’s children by a long shot. A very loyal and good man, to be sure.

A variety of delicious-smelling food was already loaded onto the table. Nolan sat next to her with Kiera on her other side. He extended his hand and her stomach flip-flopped. She placed her hand in his, warmth and tingles threatening to pop out of her skin. Kiera grasped her other hand.

“Macey,” Nolan said. “Would you please offer the blessing?”

“Of course.”

The darling American princess gave a sweet blessing on the food, the family, and the people of Augustine. She thanked heaven for all their blessings, most of all the love of their family and ‘Chad’s mum’ being with them. As soon as she said amen, she looked directly at Madeline. “Are you only here for the evening, ‘Chad’s mum’?”

“Madeline, please. To answer your question, I ...” Her hand was still in Nolan’s. Kiera had pulled her hand free to dish up grilled chicken. Madeline looked at Nolan. He gave

her an encouraging nod. He would rescue her if she wanted, but he trusted her to tell his family about their relationship.

Their relationship? There was no *their* and no *relationship*. Could they be a team like he'd suggested? And how had she gotten all that information from Nolan from a simple locking of gazes? It was unreal how connected she felt to him.

"Nolan and I are officially dating," Madeline burst out before she could second-guess his crazy plan.

Everybody's eyes widened. Even Kiera stopped with a forkful of pasta salad on her way to her mouth.

"Dating?" Kiera looked at her dad.

He nodded in confirmation, his gaze hesitant. He had to do what was best for his daughter.

"Does that mean you'll come be with us every day?" Kiera looked hopeful, and it warmed Madeline's heart.

"Yes."

Nolan squeezed her hand and glanced around, his gaze returning to Madeline's face and full of a promise she'd never expected to find in this lifetime and certainly not with the king. Was he for real or simply acting? He'd initially been frustrated about her purpose here, but he'd schooled that quickly and treated her with respect and kindness. Maybe even something more than respect and kindness.

"Madeline is going to stay with us for a while." He released her hand and smirked at Raymond. "Since driving to Traverse and taking her to dinner would require an entire platoon to accompany us."

"It would," Raymond said, serious as ever. "Thank you for not creating extra work for my troops."

Nolan laughed. "Of course, son."

The family continued dishing up their plates and eating. They included her in the conversation and didn't act as if their father bringing the woman he was dating into their family meals and staying at the castle was a big deal.

Madeline followed suit, dishing up food, eating, and teasing with all of them. Except the general. He partially smiled at their teasing.

She should've felt awkward and out of place, but she felt like part of the family. Would all of Nolan's family welcome her this easily? Didn't any of them have an issue with her replacing their mother? Especially Kiera. It was possible the young girl didn't understand the implications of them dating.

Her stomach churned. She wasn't replacing anyone. The dating was a farce. She wasn't cut out to be queen, and Nolan would never move on from his wife. Of course the royal family was too classy to throw a fit about their father 'dating.'

Madeline risked a glance at Nolan. Her mission here had taken a twist she hadn't foreseen. She was grateful for how comfortable and welcome she felt. Now if she could not let her heart run away with her head and believe she and Nolan could be real.

She'd made the mistake of letting her heart and passions rule when she'd married Bradford. Never again.

Still, she'd be thrilled to date the most impressive man she'd ever known. Slowly and rationally dating. Not some quick burn like her marriage had been.

If only she and Nolan weren't fake.

CHAPTER

Four

NOLAN COULDN'T BELIEVE Madeline had agreed to pretend they were dating and his one reservation, Kiera, had been absolutely great about it. He shouldn't be surprised as Kiera was uncommonly good-natured but it was still a relief.

The anger he'd felt earlier at parliament and the prime minister for questioning his integrity and daring to believe he would help or get close to Naomi took a backseat to the joy of being around Madeline. Together they'd already proven where the purchases of vehicles and clothing had come from. His wealth was due to centuries-old family money that he had managed well. As a team, he and Madeline could easily prove he had no associations with his remaining Rindlesbacher enemy—Naomi. He looked forward to being a team with Madeline. If only he knew where Naomi would strike next.

Each time Madeline glanced up at him with her mesmerizing emerald green eyes, he was filled with warmth, longing, and completely enraptured by this smart, fun, and teasing woman. For the first time, he visualized a different future than standing on his own and focusing on his children, their spouses, his granddaughter, and his future grandchildren. Could he find love again?

Now as he and Kiera walked up the stairs to the pool with Kiera chattering happily away to Madeline, he met her gaze over Kiera's head. There was definitely a strong connection between them. They were pretending to date, but the issues parliament and the prime minister had raised had to be

addressed and settled before he could truly date her. Maybe he'd been short-sighted to insist pretending to date was the easiest explanation for her staying here. When the media caught wind of the sought-after king having a girlfriend, they would have a field day with it.

They reached the pool area. The retractable walls and ceiling were open on this beautiful summer night, showcasing a million stars. Greenville's lights twinkled below. The valley beyond was mostly dark, with only an occasional light from a farmhouse.

Nolan was blessed to live in such a beautiful place, but the responsibility of taking care of his kingdom and his family weighed on his shoulders. Without Anne, the load had become heavier—much heavier. What he wouldn't give for a partner and support like his wife had been. He glanced at Madeline again. She smiled at him, and his heart raced.

For the first time in eighteen months, he was hopeful. He hadn't realized that though he'd been blessed not to go into a deep depression, he'd definitely not had the light and joy in his life that he'd experienced with Anne by his side. Could he fall in love and be happy like he'd been with Anne, or were his hopes running away with his brain? He didn't know, but Madeline appeared enthralled with him and at the moment, he was willing to put in the effort to find out if he had a chance at the love and happiness he'd once known.

Kiera immediately yanked off her coverup, yelled, "Watch this," ran for the diving board, and did a double front flip off of it.

Madeline cheered loudly when Kiera surfaced. Nolan joined her. Kiera always gave him something to cheer about. His daughter was a delight to everyone who knew her. It was fun to share the cheering with Madeline.

"Come on!" Kiera called, diving underwater to touch the bottom.

Nolan slid his shirt off and dropped it on a chair. He turned to Madeline. Her eyes were wide, unblinking. She was fixated on his chest.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Her eyes trailed over his shoulders and arms before she swallowed and shifted her focus to the dark night. “Fine.”

Nolan tilted her chin up, savoring the smooth skin under his fingertips. “What is it? You can tell me. We’re a team now, remember?”

She blinked up at him, her lovely mouth pursed and worry lines forming around her mouth and eyes. She was beautiful, and he appreciated her wrinkle lines. He didn’t want some young, tight-faced woman. He wanted someone who had experiences and battle scars and was stronger because of them.

“You are unbelievably fit,” she said in a quiet tone.

Nolan couldn’t hide the grin that spread over his face. He hiked most mornings and lifted weights three to four times a week in the castle’s gym, following the strength training program Derek and Malik had created for him. He’d been motivated to stay strong and healthy for his family. Now he had even more motivation.

“Thank you. I’ve worked hard to become so.”

She smiled, but her gaze went to his chest again. He had a hard time not flexing.

A spray of warm water hit his legs.

“What are you two doing?” Kiera demanded.

“Waiting for you to do another trick,” Nolan said.

“Yes!” Kiera bounced out of the pool and to the diving board. This time, she did an aerial twist.

“Amazing,” Madeline called to her when she surfaced.

“Thank you, Chad’s mum.”

Nolan laughed. “Her name is Madeline, sweetheart.”

“Oh. It’s a beautiful name for a beautiful lady,” Kiera chirped. “But I prefer Chad’s mum.”

Nolan agreed about the ‘beautiful name for a beautiful lady.’ “Does it bother you that she calls you ‘Chad’s mum’?”

“I like it. I’m very proud of, and grateful for, my boy.” Her feelings for her son shone from her emerald eyes. “And of course, I adore Hope and Faith.”

“As you should.” Nolan could relate. He was proud of and grateful for every one of his children and their spouses and especially his granddaughter Sunny. She and Kiera brought him such happiness.

“Can you swim now?” Kiera asked.

“Yes, love.”

“I wish Ray and Macey and Jenn and T would’ve come,” Kiera moaned, swirling in the water. “Then we could play chicken wars.”

Nolan had observed his sons and their spouses getting very close physically when they played Kiera’s favorite game of chicken wars. The thought of doing the same with Madeline made heat pulse through his veins.

“I’ll race you instead,” Madeline told her.

“You know how to swim?”

Madeline chuckled. “Swim team in secondary school and at the university. I swim several evenings a week at the gymnasium.”

“Let’s do it.”

Nolan watched this interaction with interest. When Madeline untied her coverup and dropped it on a chair, he stared with an open mouth and unapparelled fascination.

She caught his gaze wandering over her beautiful shape and tossed her shoulder-length blonde hair. “Are you all right, King Nolan?” she asked in a sassy tone.

“Forgive me.” He passed a hand over his face, hoping he didn’t look like an inexperienced young man. He certainly felt that way.

“What is it?” she asked, a purr in her tone that made warmth spark in his chest. “You can tell me. We’re a team now, remember?”

He chuckled at her throwing his lines back at him. He hadn't said them so capriciously.

"You are unbelievably fit," he said, letting his eyes appreciate the way her lean form filled out her one-piece blue suit.

"Thank you. I've worked hard to become so."

He chuckled.

"Are you coming?" Kiera asked.

Madeline smiled at him, turned, and dove into the pool. She surfaced, took a breath, and swam with a quick stroke past Kiera.

Kiera gave a happy cry and took up pursuit. Nolan watched them swim a few lengths. They took a break to laugh and tease about who was faster, and then they took off swimming again. Kiera readily accepted everyone but he felt a special connection between her and Madeline.

As they approached where he stood, he dove in, angling underneath Madeline and surfacing to swoop Kiera out of the water.

"Pops!" she cried out, happy as always. "Throw me!"

Kiera was an interesting mix of little girl, mature adult because she was around adults too often, and teenager. Nolan tried not to baby her, but he liked when she was his little girl. He wasn't ready for her to grow up.

He launched her into the air. She hit the water with a terrific splash.

Kiera popped up and swam back to him. "Again, please. But this time, can we make a trick out of it?"

"Of course we can." She stood on his legs, and he threw her into a controlled launch. She twisted and flipped before diving into the water.

Madeline watched them with a sweet smile on her face. With her hair wet and slicked back, the exotic beauty of her

high cheekbones and glowing emerald eyes was even more pronounced.

He threw Kiera several more times, and then his daughter turned to Madeline. “Pops should throw you.”

“Oh, sweet girl, I am much too old to throw.”

“You’re old?” Kiera looked her over, her brow creased with confusion. “You don’t look old. You look younger than Pops, and he’s very strong and young for a dad.”

“The king is *unbelievably* strong,” Madeline said, giving him a secretive smile.

Nolan felt strong and as if he were thirty again, seeing appreciation and a yearning in Madeline’s gaze. He tried not to puff out his chest and flex, but it was hard to resist.

“Will it hurt you if he throws you?” Kiera asked.

“No, I don’t think so. I only ... no one has thrown me since I was a child.” She looked vulnerable, beautiful, and as if she hadn’t played around like this in years. Why would she? Chad was grown, and she had no grandchildren like adorable Sunny to beg her to play. The highlight of Malik and Sophie’s visits for him.

“Well, it’s high time you were thrown, then,” Kiera said, sounding as mature as a twenty-year-old. “I saw how lovely you dove into the pool. So here’s what we’ll do.” She gestured to Madeline. “Come close, please.”

Nolan’s pulse sped up as Madeline pushed through the shallow water, her eyes fastened on him.

“Now Pops will bend low. You’ll stand on his legs, and you’ll crouch too, you see?” Kiera demonstrated. “Then Pops will wrap his hands around your bum and toss you into the air as you leap at the same time. Timing is crucial with tricks. Then you’ll dive into the water, and it won’t hurt one bit. All right then?” She nodded eagerly.

Nolan’s heart was thumping out of control, and Madeline’s eyes went wide.

“Um, not her bum, love,” Nolan said. “Maybe her legs.”

Kiera scrunched her nose and lifted her hands. “Whatever you think, Pops. You’re the expert thrower.”

“I am.” This time he puffed out his chest. Kiera laughed, while Madeline’s gaze seemed to grow hotter.

Kiera tugged Madeline close to him. Nolan squatted as instructed and then he had no option but to wrap his arms around Madeline’s waist and help her stand on his thighs. She squatted down close, and Nolan lost track of his thoughts. Madeline was pressed back into him, her hair tickling his nose and chin. All he wanted was to turn her to face him and see if kissing was included in their fake dating arrangement.

“All right, you can’t keep holding her stomach, Pops. You’ve got to grab her bum, or legs, or whatever.”

Nolan slid his hands from her waist down to her legs. He realized instantly he should’ve released her and repositioned his hands, but his excuse was he wanted to hold her steady. Running his hands from her waist, along her hips, and to her firm thighs did not make him steady at all. In fact, he felt lightheaded and not strong like Madeline and Kiera had both said he was.

“Okay,” Kiera called. “3 ... 2 ... 1!”

Nolan straightened and launched Madeline as instructed. Thankfully, he hadn’t failed in his duties, or Kiera would’ve reprimanded him.

Madeline straightened at the same time he did. She flew into the air, curved her body, and dove smoothly into the water. Absolutely breathtaking. She surfaced and wiped the water from her face. “Did I do all right?”

“All right?” Nolan asked. “That was incredible. You looked breathtaking. You should be a swim-diving model or a mermaid.”

Madeline smiled, and then she laughed.

“A swim-diving model? Pops, you’re acting really weird. Like my bros when they’re trying to get their wives to kiss them or something.”

Nolan met Madeline's gaze, hope making him more lightheaded. He'd act weird if it would get Madeline to kiss him. "Sorry," he managed. "But she did fabulous, right?"

"Yes! Chad's mum *is* a beautiful mermaid. Now let's play colors."

Nolan and Madeline played the silly game, each choosing a color silently. The person on the diving board said different colors with their back turned and their eyes closed. When the right color was guessed, the swimmer had to stroke for the opposite end of the pool before they were caught and had to be 'it.'

They played for at least an hour. Nolan finally had to break up the fun. "Bedtime, sweetie. Let's walk Madeline to her room, then I'll come read scriptures after you shower."

"Plus songs and prayers," she reminded him.

"Of course."

They climbed out of the pool, dried off with the towels stacked on a side table, and walked out of the pool area. The luxurious spa was attached to the pool. The other half of the castle's top level was the beautiful solarium full of flowers, greenery, and waterfalls. The solarium offered the most picturesque view of the valley. Could he bring Madeline up here alone sometime? It was a very romantic spot.

Walking along the hallway and down level after level of stairs, Kiera chattered about what a fantastic swimmer Chad's mum was and how they should swim every night, and then she asked, "How long will you stay with us, Chad's mum?"

Madeline looked to Nolan, and he wasn't certain what answer would be appropriate. He was thrilled Kiera didn't have an issue with him 'dating.' Kiera and Madeline's interactions tonight had been ideal. With his daughter giving her approval of them dating he was ready to push ahead.

The problem he hadn't foreseen, which he could blame on how invested he'd been in Madeline at the moment of asking her to pretend date him, was that Kiera would easily fall in love with Madeline as she had all of her sisters-in-law.

Madeline leaving when she finished her assignment would be a hit for his daughter. It would be a hit to him too, but he was a grown man and would survive. Kiera didn't need to love and lose someone again after losing her mum eighteen months ago. If only he could work into something more permanent with Madeline.

“Only for a short time,” Nolan said cautiously, cringing at the crestfallen look on Kiera's face. It was smarter to set that parameter now, and pray he could change it. “We'll savor the time while we have it.”

Kiera nodded bravely. “Unless we talk you into staying longer.”

Exactly his thoughts. Kiera being on the same page was the push he needed to pursue Madeline.

Madeline smiled at that. “Your dad is right. Let's enjoy the time we have.”

Nolan wished she'd corrected both of them and said she'd never leave. How to convince her?

They reached Madeline's door, and Kiera gave her an impulsive hug. “See you at dinner tomorrow.”

“I'll see you then, sweet girl.”

Kiera turned.

“Goodnight,” Nolan said.

“Night.”

He forced himself to pivot and follow his daughter down the hall toward the staircase. The guest suites were a floor below the family suites.

“Nolan,” Madeline called.

“Yes?” He turned back. Would she ask for a kiss goodnight?

“Could I come hike with you in the morning?”

“Of course. You're supposed to monitor me at all times, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

Hiking together might be an excuse to monitor him, but he'd make the most of their time alone, though they'd be trailed by guards. With all of his meetings and large family, they wouldn't get much time to simply talk.

“I'll come for you at six,” he said.

“Perfect.” She slipped into her room.

Nolan immediately felt the letdown of not being in her presence.

“I like Chad's mum,” Kiera said, beaming at him and squeezing his hand.

“Me too, love. Me too.”

What if they both liked her too much? He'd been worried about upsetting Kiera and that issue had resolved easily. Now he was worried about how Kiera would take the hit of her leaving. He should probably be *more* worried about how he would survive.

Nolan shook his head. He was fifty-five years old, a father of seven, a widower, and a king. He'd survive.

Why was he falling so quick? That was the better question.

The memory of touching Madeline, her quick wit, and the way her emerald eyes mesmerized him all came to mind.

It wasn't hard to riddle that one out.

Seeing her and Kiera interact so beautifully inspired him. If Kiera could accept and embrace a loving new mum it would be irresponsible of him not to work toward that goal.

Pursuing Madeline seemed not only alluring but sensible and commendable.

He smiled to himself. He could hardly wait for the morning to see her again.

CHAPTER

Five

MADELINE STRUGGLED to fall asleep despite the highest-quality mattress, pillow, and sheets she'd ever slept on or in. Her mind was consumed with Nolan. He'd always been friendly to her, but she'd kept him on a pedestal of the illustrious ruler of their country. After spending the afternoon and evening with him, she knew she was in deep trouble. She was wading in his blue gaze, his tingly touch, and she never wanted to ever climb out.

Nolan was down-to-earth, kind, smart, an invested father, and more impressive to her than ever. She liked seeing him as their hard-working, confident king all afternoon and as a warm, fun dad all evening.

Somehow, in the midst of excelling at both roles, he'd also given her plenty of attention and made her feel like the most important person in his world and the most desirable woman in Augustine. To have him ask her opinions and draw her out about each of his Zoom meetings made her feel valued. To have his blue gaze sweep over her in her swimsuit and tell her she was 'unbelievably fit' made her stomach do loop-de-loops, even after the fact.

She'd gradually convinced herself over the past seven months that she'd created a fantasy, believing his touch inspired her and lit her up from head to toe. She realized now she'd underestimated how incredible his touch was.

When her alarm went off at five-thirty, she was groggy and wanted to curl back into the pillow that made her head feel

like it was floating on a cloud. Instead, she slipped to her knees and begged the good Lord to help her keep her head on straight and clear the king's name without falling desperately in love and making a complete fool of herself. The tingles and smiles and touches of the night before didn't seem as probable in the pre-dawn light.

Flipping open her computer, she checked her email. A message from Prime Minister Carrera said he was fine with the 'fake dating' idea. It would take pressure off anyone wondering why a member of parliament was staying at the castle. She'd asked him to have parliament keep the fake dating quiet just as they would her mission here. If possible, she'd love to not go through the drama of a media explosion. Nolan had assured her the castle staff and guards wouldn't spread rumors about him or his family.

She rushed to brush her teeth and get dressed, appreciating the way her red Lady Fit T-shirt and black ten-inch inseam running tights flattered her. Hope and Faith were incredible and successful. She was very proud.

She was in the hall pacing when the king strode toward her from the main staircase. Dressed in a t-shirt and knee-length shorts he still managed to look as commanding as he did in his Brioni suit.

His welcoming smile lit a fire in her chest. She was going to personally thank Faith for creating this outfit.

"Madeline!" He hurried across the space between them, and it appeared he'd either plow her over or wrap her up tight in his arms. Her heart sped up.

He stopped a few paces away. "I woke this morning, and a horrible thought struck me."

"What was that?" She leaned into the wall, weak from the intense look in his blue eyes.

He eased closer. "I feared that I'd dreamed it all up and that you weren't really here, in my castle, officially dating me, and ready to spend every moment with me."

Madeline's eyes widened. There was no one else in the corridor. She suspected no one else was even staying in the guest level. Was he in earnest? Officially dating wasn't fake dating. Not at all. She wanted to admit that she'd stayed up half the night thinking and dreaming about him, but she couldn't be that transparent.

"I'm honored to be on your team," she tried to tease.

Some of the sparkle dimmed from his blue eyes. He eased closer, and she smelled the unique cedar and mint combination that messed with her brain waves.

"What kind of team are we going to be, beautiful Madeline?" His gaze was piercing. He lifted a hand and gently cupped her chin.

Madeline's eyes widened and her pulse skittered. Could this happen? Her and King Nolan?

She glanced away to get her bearings when all she wanted to do was arch up and press her lips to his. Two tall, broad men at the end of the hall cast furtive glances their way.

"Oh. I didn't realize ..."

Nolan followed her gaze and let out a resigned breath. He released her face but slid his hand down her arm until he engulfed her smaller hand in his. Her arm and hand tingled, and she felt lightheaded with dreams and hopes she'd never let herself dwell on. Even slightly dizzy from his touch, she was somehow stronger than ever with her hand in his. Team Madeline and Nolan.

They walked down the hall together, and Nolan nodded to his guards. "Madeline, this is Captain Levi Favor and Sergeant Braxton Mueller."

"I know Levi." She smiled at the young man who worked closely with Chad.

"Good to see you, Ms. Prescott," the dark-haired man said.

"You as well. Nice to meet you, Sergeant Mueller."

The broad man nodded. Obviously the strong, silent type.

“These two used to be my favorite hiking buddies,” Nolan said. “But now I have you. An impressive upgrade, right, Captain?” The look in his eyes thrilled her.

“Yes, sir.” Captain Levi had a twinkle in his dark eyes.

“I only hope I can keep up with all of you,” Madeline said. She loved to jog and swim, but she lived in Traverse and ran the river trail in the morning and swam in the evening. She didn’t head to the mountains to hike and give herself an incline challenge very often.

“I’m sure you’ll lead the way,” Nolan said.

She laughed.

Nolan directed her down the stairs and within minutes, they were on a trail heading through thick trees at a steep incline. The morning air was brisk and the scenery picturesque. The sun rose and danced through the trees. Levi and Sergeant Braxton stayed just behind them. At first it was awkward to converse with her panting for air and the two men close by but not participating. Especially as Levi had come to her home with Chad on several occasions. Would he report back to his major about Chad’s mum flirting with the king? Guards constantly shadowing the king had to be annoying at times.

Eventually the trail mellowed out. She caught her breath and relaxed, and she and Nolan chatted like old friends. They *were* old friends, but there was a definite spark between them now. She didn’t know what to make of it, or if she dared act on it. She had to slow down and focus on the assignment she’d been sent here to do. Maybe after she cleared his name, she and Nolan could talk about dating. A slow, controlled dating. One date a month to keep things from progressing too quickly like they had with Bradford, and to make it easier on General Ray to provide security. Maybe after a few years, she could let herself fall for him and know she wasn’t simply falling too fast like she had with her husband.

She and Nolan spoke mostly of their children, but they also discussed some of the issues with improving education, offering more advanced degrees at the university, and what her

thoughts were on Prime Minister Carrera. She'd been impressed with the man. He seemed level-headed, and she believed he had Augustine's best interests at heart. She agreed with Nolan that he was 'no Henry Shule.' It was hard to imagine anyone could have the rapport with the king, parliament, and the people that former Prime Minister Shule once had. The effects of the Rindlesbachers' nightmarish schemes would continue to hurt their country for some time. Until Naomi stuck her head out from whatever rock she was hiding and struck again, none of them could really relax.

They were headed back to the castle when Nolan said, "Tell me truthfully, Madeline. Did you believe the accusations of Gustaff and Monaco about me associating with Naomi?"

"Though I usually think the worst of you," she winked to show she was teasing, and he chuckled, "no, I would never believe that. Chad told me, and I've seen on the news, what they've put you and your family through. I know you, Nolan ..." She paused, and he gave her a heated look. His blue eyes yanked her in. She could get lost in the depths of those eyes for the rest of her life.

She tripped on a protruding root and would've gone down if Nolan hadn't wrapped an arm around her to steady her. They stopped in the middle of the trail. She stared up into his mesmerizing gaze.

"All right then?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she whispered back.

She heard movement behind them and realized Levi and Sergeant Braxton had caught up to them on the trail and were now backpedaling, trying not to interrupt their moment. They effectively did interrupt, but it was for the best. She couldn't be having 'moments' with the king when she was on a mission for parliament. What was she saying, claiming she 'knew him?' She didn't. Not deeply. Her rational brain needed to step back up to the plate.

She stepped back, and his arm dropped away from her. "Teach me to stare into the king's blue eyes when I should be walking."

“You can stare into my eyes anytime.” His voice deepened. “I’ll happily return the favor.” The sincerity in his gaze shook her.

What alternate reality had she entered? Everyone knew Nolan had desperately loved Queen Anne. Madeline didn’t want to step in and try to replace his wife, and she didn’t want to be a shallow substitute for the relationship he’d once had. That was all that would happen if they both fell hard and fast. Shallow, not lasting. The king was too honorable to ditch her like her husband had, but it wouldn’t be a lasting and fulfilling relationship, and that was what she needed. If she ever allowed herself to commit to a man again.

Turning, she hurried down the trail. Nolan caught her easily and kept pace with his longer strides. She was almost jogging.

The silence between them crackled with an uneasy tension. Madeline was losing sight of her purpose here. She’d come as a representative of parliament but also as a friend of the royal family. She wanted to protect Nolan and his children from whatever Gustaff and Monaco tried to throw at them. Not even a day into her task and she was getting lost in the king’s blue eyes. Nobody would believe her report if she acted like a starry-eyed girl smitten by the appealing and powerful yet also benevolent king.

Madeline shook her head and hurried faster, not even appreciating the gorgeous greenery and the perfect summer morning. They reached the castle, and Nolan escorted her up the stairs with the guards following. At her floor, she tried to wave him off. “I’ll see you soon.”

She had no idea his schedule, and she hadn’t really thought out this task of staying by the king’s side at all times. She would not follow him to his suite and wait while he showered. Her face flushed at the thought.

“I’ll walk you to your room,” Nolan said.

She bristled. “Amazingly enough, I’ve been walking myself wherever I need to get for twenty-six years. I think I’ll manage.”

Instead of looking annoyed or put in his place, the king smiled. “I like your spice.”

She stared at him. Did he honestly? “King Nolan—”

“Oh, no. We are not regressing.” He wrapped his arm around her waist, and she went hot from head to toe. “Captain. Sergeant.” He looked at the two men who had stopped in the stairwell. “Please clear the hallway and Madeline’s suite. I require a private word with her.”

They both nodded. Nolan swept her to the side while the men checked the hallway. Of course they obeyed him. He was so powerful and enticing she had no clue how she was going to resist. Even Russell Crowe had nothing on him.

Nolan said nothing as they waited, but the warmth of his body pressed against her and the strength of his arm around her made her stomach do a happy flip. She glanced up and his piercing blue eyes were fixated on her. How was she supposed to resist those blue eyes?

The guards returned and bowed. “Ms. Prescott’s suite and the hall are clear, King Nolan.”

“Thank you. I’ll be a few minutes.” He glanced down at her and smiled. “Or more.”

She heard Levi chuckle, then cover it. “Yes, sir.”

Madeline’s heart was thumping too quick against her rib cage. What did he mean, or more? He surely wouldn’t kiss her in this hallway and make all of her dreams come true.

Nolan kept his arm around her waist and escorted her down the hall as if she were royalty. As if she were his queen.

No! She couldn’t let her thoughts wander like that.

They reached her door, and he turned her to him. “Madeline...”

“We need to restructure the fake dating idea,” she said, cutting him off.

“Oh?” He arched a brow. “I see. You want to make it real.”

His gaze traveled over her face, settling on her lips for far too long before his eyes lifted to meet hers again. Madeline was short of breath from a simple look. She couldn't 'make it real.' Was he in earnest?

"Nolan, please." She caught a breath and backed away from his embrace, running into the door. "I'm on assignment here, and you're not ..."

"Not what?"

How could she tell him he wasn't ready to move on, as if she knew his thoughts? All she knew was she had to take this slow. She knew little about serious dating or long-term love. She'd been deserted by her husband. Some, mostly her parents, thought she should've moved on. But she'd been focused on Chad and her career, and she'd never found a man she was interested in pursuing more than a few dates with.

Until now.

"Let's focus on proving you have no association with Naomi," she said. "Let's not get distracted or forget my purpose here."

He looked injured—the confident king of Augustine. Injured.

Finally, he nodded.

"Thank you." Madeline pushed down the handle and started to slide into the room.

"Madeline." His hand on her arm stopped her and made her long to rewind and try again. Yes, she wanted to make it real! How could she not?

She moistened her lips. "Yes?"

His gaze focused on her lips, and then his blue eyes grew determined as they met hers. "We have to keep up the dating farce unless you want to tell everyone why you're really here."

She sucked in a breath and admitted, "The prime minister thought it was a good idea when I emailed him last night. If the media finds out I'm here as a member of parliament on an

emissary mission, it might cause a mess. I guess the fake dating is the lesser of two evils.”

He studied her. She could easily see he didn't like her terminology. “Please meet me in the family living area for breakfast.”

“How soon?” She had no idea how to tell him no. She needed to practice in the mirror, pray for strength, remember how awful it had been when Bradford ditched her and Chad had cried himself to sleep for months. Chad was a strong, self-sufficient man now, but she worried she'd cry herself to sleep when Nolan moved on.

“As long as you need, Madeline.”

She quivered at those words and the look that accompanied them. It seemed he was saying he'd wait for her as long as she needed. He would take it slow?

“I'll be there in half an hour,” she said.

He nodded.

Madeline slipped into her room, closing the door behind her. Leaning against it, she wondered what she was doing. The king seemed to be interested in her, invested even.

If she couldn't reciprocate, was she ruining her chance at love with that unreal man, or was she saving herself from another heartbreak, a loss of her independence, and a whole load of responsibility?

CHAPTER

Six

NOLAN'S STOMACH churned as he showered and dressed in a gray suit. The royal stylist Arianna filled his closets with the perfect clothing for each season. This suit was much lighter fabric, and the white button-down underneath was short-sleeved.

And you're not ... And you're not ... Those words rolled around in his mind. He had no idea what Madeline had meant. He wasn't the right one for her? He wasn't the man she was looking for? Why did he even go there?

Nolan had been king for thirty years. He couldn't rule a flourishing kingdom and especially navigate through all the havoc of last year and pain of losing his wife without being confident, decisive, and never second-guessing himself.

Madeline not responding to his flirtations had knocked his confidence out at the knees. How could he get her to fall for him? She and Kiera getting along so well last night had felt like a green flag.

Nolan knotted his red tie and eyed himself in the mirror. Was he ready to date, to move on? He hated the terminology of moving on. He'd never forget Anne or replace her. If he and Madeline fell in love, the relationship would be different than his and Anne's had been, but he hoped it would be just as fulfilling and a true partnership.

He needed to stop thinking about these things, as Madeline didn't seem to be on the same page. At all.

Maybe he was just lonely. With Anne gone. Henry gone. All of his sons married off. He was fully invested in his children and thought of them as his friends and support, but it would make sense that he was searching for the closeness and understanding and friendship of someone closer to his age. He simply hadn't spent time with a gorgeous, smart, intriguing member of the opposite sex in his age demographic. It could be possible he was over-exaggerating the connection and spark he felt when he was around Madeline, and especially when they touched.

He exited his suite and strode down the hall into the large two-story family gathering area. The space had an open living room with a kitchen stocked with snacks and easy meals and a dining area. It was much more informal than either of the dining rooms downstairs, and he often took breakfast here.

Madeline stood by the open patio doors. She wore a white dress with small red flowers on it. The dress was a V-neck, had short sleeves, and ended below her knees. It clung to her in a way that made his pulse quicken. He'd liked her pink business suit yesterday and had loved her blue swimsuit last night, but there was something about this dress—feminine and alluring and as if she'd worn it with the sole purpose of drawing him in.

She glanced over at him, and his mouth went dry. Her emerald eyes drew him in quicker than any well-fitting dress could. His theory that he'd over-exaggerated their connection and was simply lonely blew away like cotton in the summer sky.

“Madeline.” Her name came out in a husky groan of need, of longing. In ways it felt too quick, but these feelings had been building since their dance seven months ago. He needed her in his life, not as some fake girlfriend, not as a member of parliament, but as the woman who would stand by his side, the woman he could love and be loved by.

Forget being the confident king. If she'd have him, he'd drop to his knees and plead for her to have mercy on his heart.

Actually, he needed to be the confident king. He needed to prove that she needed him in her life. A poised and successful woman like Madeline would not be drawn in by some shrinking wimp.

Nolan didn't think about the consequences of dating again or the very real possibility of rejection as he strode across the room and into her space. Her pulse was going like mad in her neck. She leaned against the frame of the patio door, clinging to it with her hands as if to stabilize herself or maybe to keep from reaching out to him.

"That is an unbelievably nice suit," she whispered.

"A closet full of Brioni, remember?" He smiled, but he didn't want to talk about his suit. "I absolutely love your dress."

"Clearance rack at Harrod's."

He shook his head and chuckled, certain that dress was from no clearance rack. He gently swept her hair over her shoulder, then cupped her neck with his palm. The smooth skin was perfect under his fingertips.

"Madeline." He leaned down. Could he kiss her now? It was too quick, but everything about his feelings for her was powerful and quick. It was so unlike the slow way he'd fallen in love with Anne. With Madeline, everything was fire, sparks, and intensity. Was that wrong or simply different? He'd thought about her too often since that dance at Christmas. Had he built up a fantasy that would never be, or were all of his dreams about to come true?

Nolan wanted to capture her full lips with his, but he also wanted her to feel this draw as deeply as he did, and he didn't want her to push him away again. He bent low, narrowly dodging her lips, and was rewarded with a quick intake of breath. He pressed his lips to the pulse point in her neck. She gasped, and time seemed to stand still. Would she push him away, dart out of his arms, tell him all the reasons they couldn't date for real, give him a feisty retort?

Instead, Madeline flung her arms around his neck and held him tightly against her. His head was buried in her neck. His senses came alive with her floral scent, her softness, her allure, and the beautiful fact that she appeared to finally be yielding her heart to him.

As powerful as these feelings were, he wouldn't second guess this gift. It was heaven sent for sure. Could heaven endorse a match strike of yearning that immediately turned into a bonfire?

Nolan wrapped his arms around her lower back and easily lifted her off her feet. He held her aloft, glancing up into her beautiful face and certain dreams he hadn't let himself dream were coming true.

Madeline gazed down at him, arms wrapped securely around his neck, her green eyes full of him and him alone. She slowly bent toward him, and he let her body slide along the length of his until their mouths were aligned. Fire filled him from head to toe. The anticipation of capturing her mouth was sweet torture.

The door flung open and Madeline startled, arching away from him. Nolan wasn't ready to let her go. He clung to her but turned to see who had entered.

Tristan stopped two steps into the room, eyes wide as he stared between them. "H-hey," he sputtered, sounding nothing like the charming and teasing crown prince.

"Good morning, T," Nolan said.

"Jenn needed something to settle her stomach," he said in a rush and then hurried toward the kitchen area.

Madeline slipped out of Nolan's embrace and walked to meet Tristan. Nolan hid a groan of disappointment while Tristan gave him an embarrassed shrug.

"Did Jenn say what sounded good to her this morning?" Madeline asked Tristan.

"No. Nothing really settles her, but she knows if she gets something in her stomach she'll feel better."

“Just a moment.” Madeline opened cupboards and must’ve found what she was looking for. She held up a packet. “Ginger tea. You make her some dry toast and I’ll get it brewed.”

Nolan watched Madeline. The white floral dress swirled around her in a most becoming way as she moved, but it was much more than the way she moved. She was nurturing, helping Tristan to take care of Jennifer with her morning sickness. It touched him deep. Similar to her being so incredible with Kiera last night. It was almost as powerful as her being in his arms a few minutes ago. Almost.

Tristan loaded a tray with the toast and tea and gave Nolan a head bob as he walked out. He’d been shocked catching them an instant from kissing, but Nolan knew Tristan wouldn’t bemoan him finding love again. He’d asked him several times over the past few months if he might be ready to date again.

As the door closed behind Tristan, Nolan strode to Madeline. She turned to face him, her back against the countertop. He wanted to press into her and kiss her, but he stopped. She looked uncertain. He didn’t want her to look uncertain. He wanted her to look smitten.

Straightening his suit coat, he wondered how to get back to her in his arms.

Slow down, he cautioned himself.

“Thank you for helping T and Jenn,” he said instead of sweeping her off her feet.

“I’m happy to. I hated morning sickness.”

He wondered who had taken care of her. Had her husband been a great guy or a punk? He hadn’t known her and Chad until Tristan was in secondary school. Anne had liked ginger suckers during those first months of pregnancy. Nolan had ordered hundreds of them, which had made her laugh.

The moment was lost between them. When Ray and Macey walked in, he knew they weren’t getting back to the closeness of a few minutes ago.

“Good morning,” Macey called out, her happy, bright self as always. “Breakfast?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Nolan teased.

Their simple breakfast of boiled eggs, oatmeal, and fruit went well as Macey and Madeline chatted about Macey’s brother Gage and his wife Cassandria and their new baby. Macey showed them pictures, which Madeline oohed over. Ray gave him a confused shrug about the fuss over a newborn. Nolan smiled. He’d been thrilled with each of his children from birth on up, but he hadn’t fully known how to engage them until they had started smiling and interacting with him. He knew women were smitten with newborns, though. The little ones were angelic, and you could feel heaven from that wide-eyed stare.

After breakfast, they headed to his office. The day was busy with meetings and a luncheon with Prime Minister Carrera and his wife Chandria. They were both friendly, more friendly than normal, in Nolan’s opinion. It was just the four of them as Tristan had gone to spend lunch with Jennifer. Nolan liked having Madeline by his side and he loved her insights on everything to do with their country.

Things were far from settled between them. Very unsettled, in fact, if the lurch in his stomach each time their knees brushed under the table or she turned her sweet smile on him was any indicator. Even with the unfamiliar and intense feelings making his head a bit cloudy, she was a great companion to have by his side—witty, informed, smart, and pleasing to the eyes. She smiled at him. Very pleasing to the eyes.

Before Carrera left, he apologized again for the ‘business’ with Naomi. Nolan assured him it would work out, but he put steel in his tone when he told him he expected them to work well together and to have each other’s backs. Carrera rushed to assure him he did have the king’s back and as soon as they quieted Gustaff and Monaco’s concerns, the two men would lose credibility and clout. It would be a win for Nolan and his allies.

Nolan wasn’t certain if the prime minister was fumbling for excuses or truly on his side. He couldn’t alienate the man, but he also couldn’t be too careful. If the Rindlesbachers had

been able to use his closest friend against him as the prime minister, they could turn Carrera too.

The afternoon was busy with meetings again—no alone time with Madeline besides their brief breaks between meetings when they stretched and walked onto the balcony and discussed the most recent meeting.

Finally, it was time for dinner. Tristan hurried upstairs to get Jennifer. Madeline slid her hand through Nolan's arm and cupped his bicep, smiling confidently up at him.

Nolan felt as if he could do anything with her at his side. He'd missed that feeling more than he'd realized.

Glancing down at her as they walked along the hall, he tugged her to a stop before they reached the staircase. "Thank you for being with me today."

"I'm actually on assignment to be." There was a tease in her voice, but that was no reassurance that she returned his feelings.

"Madeline, I love your insights and your presence here, and I need to make something crystal clear—"

Footsteps came down the staircase. Tristan and Jennifer. Nolan pasted on a smile, and Madeline seemed to do the same.

It was time for dinner with his family and then time spent with Kiera. It was always the highlight of his day. With Madeline by his side, he knew it would be even better. Would they swim again tonight? Heat filled him at the memory of his hands on Madeline's smooth skin as Kiera instructed him to throw her.

Jennifer thanked Madeline for the tea, and they walked together down the stairs and toward the smaller dining room. Jennifer was thankfully feeling better tonight but still lamenting that she wasn't accomplishing much. Since she'd stopped traveling on humanitarian missions, she now used her contacts, the castle's reach, and the August family resources to organize humanitarian trips and help children throughout the world.

Voices came from the dining room. A lot of voices. Madeline glanced up at him. “Are you expecting a crew for dinner?”

“I didn’t think so.”

They cleared the dining room door and the noise grew louder as everyone rushed to greet them. Nolan’s eyes widened. Every one of his children and their spouses were here. Kiera was bouncing around, grinning and holding Sunny.

“King Papa!” Sunny called, scrambling out of Kiera’s arms and running to him.

Nolan released Madeline to swoop Sunny off the floor. “How’s my princess?”

“I’m good, King Papa.” She grinned at Madeline. “Hi, pretty lady. Mama says you’re gonna be the queen.”

The room went silent except for Sophie’s hushed, “Oh, Sunny ...”

Nolan had no idea what to say and, for the first time in his memory, he wanted to escape from a dinner with his family. He wanted to be alone with Madeline, assure her he hadn’t put those words in anybody’s head, and replace the panicked look in her eyes with yearning for him.

He’d been afraid he was rushing too fast, but he couldn’t deny the intensity of his feelings for her. As he looked around at the stunned but also very hopeful gazes of his children, it appeared some of them were rushing at warp speed. Who had told them all about him and Madeline ‘dating’? He knew it wouldn’t be Tristan or Ray. He could never get after Jennifer, Macey, or Kiera for sharing.

No. He needed to focus on the most important issue.

How was he going to keep Madeline from running screaming from the castle?

CHAPTER

Seven

MADLINE STARED in shock at the adorable child cuddled in the king's arms. Princess Sunny August had asked if she'd be the next queen. No, not asked—she'd stated it. Oh my.

She looked at Nolan. His blue eyes looked panicked. It didn't appear he'd instigated such a comment. Something about that scared her in a completely different way than the thought of being queen. Nolan had obviously wanted to kiss her this morning. She'd never felt such desire and yearning for and from someone. He seemed very intense and passionate about her, but maybe he didn't want her to be queen. She would never imagine the moral, upstanding king of Augustine would be looking for a fling with no strings attached, but what did she know? She'd assumed her husband was committed to her and Chad.

“Silly Sunny,” the king said in a teasing and only slightly tight voice. He tipped the little girl upside down, and she squealed happily.

“Madeline, it's wonderful to see you.” Sophie rushed up to her and gave her a hug. “I'm sorry about my girl.”

“Oh, no, it's fine.” Madeline waved a hand as if it were no big deal, but her insides were squirming and her heart hurt. She hadn't imagined the alarm in his reaction. Was she only a distraction for Nolan? Her feelings were intense and miles deeper than stealing a kiss and moving on. If she let herself

keep falling for him, she'd be hurt just like she had been years ago. Time healed, but she'd never forgotten.

The family who'd arrived for dinner each came to greet her, thankfully distracting her from her doomsday thoughts.

Malik and Sophie; Derek and Ellery; Steffan and Hattie; and Curt and Aliya were all as friendly and welcoming as they could be. She loved Hattie and Aliya's southern accents and feisty quips.

The family settled down to dinner. When Nolan took her hand in his and offered a deep, sincere prayer, she felt like she belonged here. Was it all an illusion, a pipe dream she'd never see fulfilled?

Dinner was loud and fun and rushed by quickly. The initial awkwardness of Sunny's statement dissipated, and everyone teased and laughed with each other. After dinner, Kiera begged everyone to swim. They all agreed, and it was a much different experience than their swimming last night. There were no intimate moments with Nolan. She thought back to the embrace of this morning, the feeling of his lips on her neck, the pressure of his body against hers, the yearning in his eyes that she'd wanted to fill.

No. She couldn't let herself get into that situation again. This was safer for her heart. She didn't want a quick burn with Nolan. She wasn't sure what she wanted, but that little girl saying she would be queen and the panicked look in Nolan's eyes dug at her confidence that they could ever be together long term.

After swimming, everyone said their goodnights, Steffan and Hattie insisting it was their turn to do scriptures, songs, and prayers with Kiera. Before Madeline knew what was happening, Nolan was walking her to her suite. Alone. There weren't even bodyguards trailing him tonight. Did that only mean the castle was secure, or had he purposely sent them away?

She trembled at the thought of being alone with him, but she had to slow their developing relationship. One touch from him and she was quivering to be held close, to kiss him and

forget her purpose here, his very heavy responsibilities, and his deceased wife that she didn't want to compete with or be compared to.

What if they kissed and it was a failure compared to the many kisses he'd shared with the beautiful and perfect Queen Anne? Goodness. Did she need one more worry to add to the list?

They reached her door. Her suit was damp and her swimsuit coverup had wet spots on it. Nolan wore a T-shirt and swim trunks, but she could easily envision the well-formed chest, shoulder, and arm muscles under that shirt. His stomach wasn't some six-pack like his sons', but she didn't care. They weren't young anymore. She admired everything about Nolan, including the shape he'd kept himself in. If only she could trust his intentions toward her.

Leaning against her door, she murmured, "Thank you for a fun evening." She grasped her door handle. It would be much easier to not address the elephant in the hallway.

"Madeline." His voice was husky and filled with need. A need for her.

Her stomach flip-flopped. She looked into his blue eyes. How could she slow this down when she longed for him as much as he obviously did for her?

"Can we ... talk?" he asked.

"Nolan," she breathed out.

"Yes?" He leaned closer, and her brain waves short-circuited.

No! She was a successful and independent single mum. She didn't fall to handsome men. Even if the man standing in front of her, staring at her as if he wanted her and only her, was the most intriguing, impressive, and powerful man in the kingdom. More handsome than Russell Crowe in her opinion.

"Whatever is happening between us needs to stop," she rushed out before she could second guess herself.

“Stop?” His brow furrowed. He looked like she’d just ran over his dog, then backed up and hit the poor animal again for good measure.

She nodded in the affirmative, though she feared her lower lip quivered. The thought of not kissing him, not touching him, not growing closer as they had been was devastating. And that was far too dramatic for her to even think.

He gently cupped her chin with his palm. “You want *this* to stop?”

Madeline pulled in a quick breath.

His blue gaze grew in intensity as he trailed his thumb slowly across her cheek and along her bottom lip. Her mouth parted under his touch, her pulse racing.

Leaning ever closer, Nolan whispered huskily, “Madeline ... I’m falling for you hard and fast. Please don’t tell me to stop.”

Madeline could not catch a full breath. His words were beautiful, his gaze consuming, his touch a fire she wanted to feel over and over again.

Something snagged in her mind. Her prayers for help and strength came to her rescue. His words weren’t beautiful; they were full of need, desire, and passion. She would not be consumed by those worldly desires. She was a Christian and lived her life with God’s help and strength, not the devil’s. As a single mum, she never would’ve survived without Jesus’s help. She wasn’t about to let her appetites rule her now. Even if the most enticing man in the world was asking her not to stop.

“No!” She shoved at his chest, pushed her door open, and backed away from him.

Nolan’s eyes were wide and injured. How could the strongest, most capable man in the kingdom be such an expert at making her fall for him?

“This isn’t right, Nolan,” she said. “I’m not some quick burn, and I’m not here to fill your passionate needs.”

“Oh ...” He straightened and instantly looked remorseful. “I apologize. I didn’t intend ...”

“Let’s focus on why I’m here.”

“Madeline, please.” He didn’t come toward her, but his eyes were intense. “I’m rushing you too fast, but ‘filling my passionate needs’ is not my purpose. Please forgive me. I’ve never felt like—”

Madeline held up a hand, cutting him off. She didn’t need him to bend the truth and claim he’d never felt like this. Obviously he had. He had felt deeply for his beautiful and sweet wife. “We’ve been friends, Nolan. Let’s keep the focus on our friendship and helping our kingdom.”

“Don’t cut us off before we’ve even begun. You know there’s something special between us. I’ll slow down, but I can’t stop pursuing you. Not feeling the way I do about you.”

Madeline’s eyes widened. How could she fit his words into the fears that festered in her? He’d take it slow. He felt something special. Oh my.

She searched his gaze, reading only sincerity there. “Let’s take it slow. Slow and steady wins the race.”

He gave her a ghost of a smile, but then his lips tightened with determination and his gaze deepened. “You’ve never seen me drive, but I can best most race car drivers. I don’t drive slow and steady, but for you ... I will. I *will* win this race, Madeline.”

Madeline’s heart thumped out of control. Nolan, King of Augustine, wanted to win her? Was it only because of the passionate need she’d seen and felt earlier, or could it be deeper?

There was no way to answer that right now.

She nodded to him, backed up, and shut the door. Leaning against it, she prayed for strength, thanked her father above for his help earlier, and at the same time cursed herself for not simply kissing Nolan and seeing where that would lead.

No. As deeply attracted as she was to Nolan, she had no clue if either of them would stop at kissing. Letting passion rule would lead to a quick burn and nothing good. She'd always expected Chad to honor women, be morally strong, and wait for marriage. She had to follow her own advice.

She had to be strong.

Now to figure out how to do so when Nolan was determined to 'win this race.' Whatever that meant to him.

CHAPTER

Eight

NOLAN WAS DISCOURAGED and frustrated with himself as he walked away from Madeline's door that night. She thought he was driven by passion and need. He couldn't deny those two factors were present, but it was much more with Madeline. He was falling too fast, and it was a heady feeling. With Madeline, it wasn't only about her beauty. She was a smart, classy, yet sassy woman. He saw all of her and wanted all of her in his life—discussing issues about their kingdom, bantering and flirting, spending time with each other and their families, and growing closer and comfortable. He'd been very comfortable with Anne. The thing he couldn't remember was feeling these sparks and this drive to be close every moment. It had probably been too long.

Nolan focused back on Madeline. He knew self-control; he'd slow down and prove to her that they were friends and that friendship could develop into much more.

The following month passed far too quickly. Each day was sweet torture. Madeline became a constant figure in Nolan's life, and he savored every moment of it. Forcing himself not to pull her close and hold her was a relentless exercise in self-restraint.

They hiked each morning, discussing numerous topics, laughing, and teasing. Three mornings a week, she'd taken to lifting weights with him. It'd been fun to 'teach' her, and he'd

enjoyed touching her as he did. They ate every meal together, always with plenty to talk about, and often he caught her giving him longing and interested glances. He sent his fair share of yearning looks her way too. She sat through the endless meetings that he and Tristan had to take part in or be the instigators and conductors of. After each meeting, they'd discuss and she'd give him and Tristan insight and ideas they both appreciated. She was brilliant and well-read and helpful.

The evenings were his favorite. He and Madeline had dinner with Kiera and whoever else was at the castle. His children had come by a lot more often than usual. Chad, Hope, and Faith came only twice, busy between his military career and traveling to America to keep Lady Fit running.

Nolan wasn't certain if his family was simply interested in what was developing between him and Madeline, or if they were drawn to be close to her just as he was. For as strong, brilliant, and independent of a woman as she was, she was also a natural nurturer. Even his adult children wanted to talk with her, get her advice, and always seemed to savor her 'lots of love' hugs hello and goodbye. He'd gladly take lots of love from her. Maybe someday.

After dinner, they'd either swim or go on long walks with Kiera, his adorable girl showing off her 'tricks'. Sometimes Kiera would let them use the spa therapy section of the upper level. The pace of the spa was a little slow for his daughter. Kiera was constantly hugging, showing off for, and chatting with Madeline. She seemed as comfortable with and invested as Nolan was. Well, maybe not quite as invested, but he was in so deep at this point nobody could be at that same level. Who could blame him? Madeline was captivating and mesmerizing. A year ago, when people asked if he'd date or marry again, he'd tried not to scoff at them. Now being with Madeline nonstop was all he yearned for.

Nolan had done as she requested and hadn't tried to kiss or hold her in the past month. They did touch often, him escorting her with her hand through his elbow or Kiera having them get close in the swimming pool. He loved those times, but it was also driving him insane. Holding back became more

difficult with every passing day. If only he could show her with his words, touch, and kiss exactly how important and all-consuming she was to him. He would never push moral boundaries, but he would definitely kiss her thoroughly.

Parliament seemed content with Madeline's reports that Naomi Rindlesbacher was in no way involved or in contact with the king, but they hadn't ended her emissary mission. The press somehow hadn't caught wind of Madeline staying in the castle and 'dating' him. It seemed parliament was better at keeping their mouths shut than he'd realized. It warmed his heart that the guards and castle staff were loyal to him and hadn't gone spreading rumors.

They finished up meetings early on a beautiful August evening and had almost an hour until dinner. "Could I persuade you to accompany me on a drive?" he asked Madeline when Tristan excused himself to go find Jennifer.

She was wearing a pink blouse and fitted navy blue skirt today, with high heels that showcased her lovely calf muscles.

"I've been wondering all month when you'd ask me that." She gave him a sassy look. "Here I've been worried that the overconfident king had exaggerated his driving skills. Why else wouldn't we have gone on a drive for you to show off?"

He chuckled, loving the way she teased him, but that reminder of his 'driving skills' sent him back to that torturous night when he'd almost kissed her and she'd accused him of using her for a quick burn and then asked him to slow down their relationship. "It's time to prove my skills."

Offering his arm, he walked her to the side staircase and down to the garage. Two guards followed, Sergeant Braxton and a newer man. He'd introduced himself, but Nolan hadn't nailed the memory of the guard's name in his mind yet. That was one problem with getting older; names didn't stick as well.

"Does it bother you that we rarely leave the castle?" he asked her as they walked.

“No.” Madeline glanced up at him. “We hike every morning. It’s near impossible to go stir crazy with all the space, windows, balconies, retractable walls, and absolutely gorgeous scenery inside and out. When you have your own gym, spa, and swimming pool, it’s difficult to complain.”

“True. But I know you’re accustomed to your freedom and being an independent woman.”

“I’m hardly captive here.”

Nolan walked her to the passenger door of his black Lamborghini Veneno Roadster. The door lifted for him, but he stopped her before she could climb in.

“I wish for you to be captive, or rather captivated ... by me.”

Her eyes widened, and she blinked up at him. “I guess that all depends on your driving ability,” she said breathlessly.

Nolan chuckled. He yearned to lean in for a kiss right then and there, but the guards had already climbed into a Lexus LFA, a supercar that might have a chance of keeping up with his Lamborghini—if *he* were the one driving the Lexus. He never ditched his guards, at least not for long, but driving was a freedom and happiness he savored, and he was exceptional at it.

Madeline slid into the seat. He was frozen for a moment as he studied her. “You look unbelievably enticing in that seat.”

“Thank you.” Her emerald eyes were full of him, and he thought maybe tonight would be the night he could speed things up, just a little.

He strode around the car and into his seat. Easing out of the garage, he slid sunglasses on and directed the powerful vehicle down the road to the village. The guards had the gates open before he arrived. He lifted a hand as they bowed and kept his speed at barely above an idle as they drove through Greenville. Mothers curtsied and children waved to him. Teenagers pointed, and young adults stared in awe. The Lamborghini was beautiful, but it was the woman seated at his side who was breathtaking.

“I feel like I’m the main attraction of a parade,” Madeline said.

“Everyone is gawking because of how unbelievably beautiful you are.”

“It’s not me. It’s the car, and the king.”

“I beg to differ.” He took her hand and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. She let out a sweet sigh that made his muscles tighten.

He had to release her hand as they reached the valley floor. His guards stayed tight to his bumper.

“I know you prefer slow and steady,” he teased, actually the first time he’d teased her about those words of a month before, “but are you ready for a taste of speed?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She gave him a challenging look that had his heart racing out of control. After a month of constantly being together and growing close, maybe she was ready to take the next step in their relationship.

Nolan wanted to punch a fist in the air. Instead, he shifted and pressed the accelerator. They shot off down the highway, backs and heads flattening against the seat behind them from the burst of power. He was rewarded with a cute little gasp from her. He worked his way quickly through the gears, pushing for top speed on this open highway. Thankfully, no tractors, buses, or minivans cluttered the road. It was as if everyone knew to leave the road open so their king could impress his lady.

“Nolan,” she breathed out when he accelerated past three-hundred kilometers per hour.

“All right then?” he asked. He wanted to impress but not scare her. Some were terrified to drive with him and, regrettably, Anne had been one of those he’d learned to slow down for.

“I love it,” she admitted.

Nolan grinned and upped the speed. The Veneno topped out at three-hundred and fifty-five kilometers per hour. He

almost hit that ceiling before they reached the mountain pass that led to Traverse.

With the more challenging road, he slowed his speed and downshifted. The Veneno took the curves easily, and Nolan enjoyed every second of this ride—the pace, the control, and the power of his car, but most of all that Madeline was by his side, and she *loved* it.

She let out a whoop as they raced around a corner. He couldn't stop himself from glancing at her and laughing at the glint in her green eyes.

They reached the end of the canyon. He shot out onto the highway, glanced both ways, and spun a smooth one-eighty through both lanes.

“Yes!” Madeline cheered.

They sped back the other direction. Halfway through the canyon, they flew past his guards. He waved to them, and Madeline laughed. Sergeant Braxton was driving, and he looked stressed. The guy was tough and brave, but a bit too serious for Nolan.

“I have to slow down and let them catch up, or Ray will cuss me,” he told Madeline, slowing his speed.

She giggled. “I'd love to see the general cuss out the king.”

“Now that is hurtful. I thought you were on my team.”

“Always.” There was a promising look in her emerald eyes.

Joy filled him at that one word. *Always*. They would be a team in every way. Somehow, he would convince her.

“You look unbelievably enticing in that seat,” she added, her gaze trailing over him.

Nolan's heart rate refused to slow, and his chest seemed to expand. “I know.”

She laughed beautifully at that. “I guess I can't expect a humble king. Who would obey you if you were humble?”

“Good point.” He was still going slow and waiting for the guards, so he took his hand off the gearshift and wrapped it around hers. “I only humble myself for you, beautiful Madeline.”

They shared a look that had him full of hope and dreams of a future with her.

The guards caught up.

“Let’s go fast,” she said.

“Your wish is my command.” He had to release her hand to focus on driving. They left the guards in the dust. Nolan savored each laugh and happy cheer from Madeline.

Too soon, they were back at the castle gate. Late for dinner. Tonight Chad, Hope, and Hope’s sister Faith were joining them. They drove quickly up the hill and parked in the garage. As he got her door and assisted her from the vehicle, she smiled up at him. “Do I look flushed and excited?”

His body tightened, and he wrapped his arms around her. “Not yet, but you will.”

Madeline’s eyes widened. She leaned up, and every good dream he’d ever had of them together seemed on the verge of reality. Madeline was in his arms, where she belonged, and soon her luscious lips would be his.

Sergeant Braxton and the new guard drove into the garage. Nolan knew the men wouldn’t care, but Madeline shifted away. He wanted their first kiss to be special, so he released her and took her hand. They climbed the stairs silently and Nolan escorted her into the dining room. Madeline greeted Tristan, Jenn, Chad, Hope, Faith, Ray, Macey, and Kiera with hugs and ‘lots of love’ as this mesmerizing lady by his side liked to call her greetings.

Chad shook Nolan’s hand a bit tighter than usual and gave him some penetrating glances throughout dinner. Did Chad notice their relationship was progressing? Nolan wondered what Madeline had told him about them, but the accomplished major said nothing to indicate he could see how smitten the king was with his mum.

Chad and Tristan were as charming and full of jokes as ever. They all laughed so much through dinner that Nolan's cheeks ached. After dinner, the group went on a long walk through the mountains to Tristan and Jennifer's favorite waterfall.

Kiera and Faith adored each other, and it was fun to see them reunited. They skipped and danced and laughed throughout the hike. Faith was twenty-seven, but she seemed much younger. She was creative and whimsical, and the entire family loved her and was protective of her. Captain Levi in particular seemed fixated on her. Perhaps there was some history there.

They reached the waterfall, and Tristan announced, "It is tradition that we all have to jump into the waterfall pool."

Everyone started laughing and protesting. It had been a warm August day, but the sun was hiding in the thick trees. They were all fully clothed and nobody wanted to slosh back to the castle wet and miserable.

"No protesting. If you love me, you will jump in." Tristan winked at Jennifer, then pumped his eyebrows at them. "That trick works on my beautiful wife every time."

"Yes, it does." Jennifer grinned at him, grabbed his hand, and they ran together for the rock ledge and leaped. His oldest son and his perfect match flew through the air, united, and hit the water with a terrific splash.

They burst out of the water. Tristan whooped and Jennifer laughed.

"Come on!" Tristan called.

Nolan looked to Madeline. Her eyes were wide. "How cold is that water?"

"It's a mountain lake. Even in August, the water will feel like a chilled soda."

She gave an exaggerated shiver, hugging herself. He laughed. She was adorable, and far too appealing. He had to look away or he might grab her and hug her in front of all his children, forgetting all about the 'taking it slow' admonition.

They'd made some strides on the drive and in the garage. He could feel their momentum building.

Ray, Macey, Chad, Hope, Faith, and Kiera all exchanged glances. The four guards stepped back, watching with slight smiles on their faces, knowing they wouldn't have to jump as they were guarding the family.

Kiera grabbed Faith's hand and hollered, "Let's go. Gainer for me."

Faith laughed, and they ran to the edge. Kiera released her friend's hand and launched herself up and out, flipping and landing almost without a splash.

"I guess we do it." Chad tilted his head to Ray.

"Go for it." Hope pushed at her husband's chest.

"I'll cheer you on," Macey said to Ray.

Chad lifted his eyebrows. "General?"

"Definitely," Ray said.

The men both smiled, swooped their wives off their feet, and ran for the edge. Hope and Macey protested and struggled, but then they were over the edge and in the water and their objections were cut short.

Madeline laughed at their sons' crazy behavior. She turned to Nolan and warned, "Don't you dare carry me into that freezing water."

Their children were all laughing and splashing behind them. Even Macey and Hope were taking part in the fun.

Nolan smiled and extended his hand, praying she'd take his offer. "I won't carry you, but we have to jump or we'll never live it down. As a team?"

He wanted to be a team with her in every way and hoped someday she'd agree.

She looked at his hand, then back up at him. Nolan waited.

"Come on, Pops," Kiera called to him.

"Mum!" Chad hollered. "You'll love it."

Madeline smiled and shook her head. “I doubt I’ll love it, but ...” Her smile grew and her emerald eyes were full of him. “How could I possibly resist the king?”

Nolan’s heart rate picked up. Did she mean that? Did her words only apply to this circumstance, or was she done fighting the connection between them? A month wasn’t a long time to ‘date’ and be together constantly in the scheme of life and love, but they’d known each other for years and he’d been interested in and hyperaware of her for over eight months now. Apparently, she’d taken a little longer to notice him.

Nolan was tired of hiding the depth of his longing and need for her. He wanted her as his partner, his friend, his wife. Not that he would admit it yet, or she might push him away again.

Madeline placed her hand in his, and Nolan interlaced their fingers. He could hear everyone in the lake calling to them, but he could only see Madeline. Their hands clasped together meant everything to him. This might finally be his moment.

“Let’s do this before I wimp out. I hate cold water.” She grinned impishly and tugged him toward the ledge.

They stepped onto the rock and looked at the expectant faces and chattering teeth of their children.

“Count them down!” Faith cried out. “Three ...”

“Two ...” Everyone joined in. “One!”

Nolan and Madeline locked gazes. And then they leaped.

Falling. Together. A thrill and the joy of companionship. With Madeline.

The icy water enveloped him, cold prickles stinging every inch of his skin.

Nolan burst out of the water and gasped for air. Madeline surfaced beside him.

“Cold!” she cried out.

Everyone laughed and cheered.

Nolan wrapped his arm around her waist and swam with quick strokes with his free arm and kicking hard with his legs. He touched the bottom and lifted her against his chest, cradling her close. "I'll warm you up."

He heard a low whistle from Tristan and a mutter from Chad to Hope, "I guess this is more serious than she led us to believe."

The look in Madeline's emerald eyes warmed him up, but Chad's comment was sobering. Madeline might not appreciate her son and daughter-in-law seeing how besotted Nolan was with her.

Nolan slogged through the water and then carried her up onto the shore. He had no intention of setting her down. Her arms were wrapped tight around his neck, and she leaned into him, her warm breath on his cheek deepening his awareness and yearning for her. Water dripped from his hair and his clothes, pooling in his shoes.

"That was amazing," Tristan crowed, escorting Jennifer out of the water. "Now we slosh home in wet shoes and clothes and then use the spa to warm up."

Everyone cheered at that.

"We could've slowed down long enough to take our shoes and socks off," Ray muttered.

"Buck up, tough General," Macey teased. "If you had slowed down, you wouldn't have gotten me in there."

They all continued to laugh and tease.

Nolan was focused on Madeline's beautiful face, her blonde hair darker and plastered to her head. He didn't want to release her. He could easily carry her home. She was substantial and perfect in his arms, and he prayed the torture of holding himself away from her was finished.

Madeline slid to her feet. He let her, no matter how he didn't want to. He slid his hand down her arm and clasped their hands together. She glanced up at him with a question in her gaze. He hoped his answering look reassured her. This was

no quick burn for him. He was fully invested in her. He wanted her, all of her, by his side and in his life permanently.

Nolan didn't know when or how he'd tell her all of this, but it needed to happen soon. He couldn't let her finish her 'emissary mission' without knowing how deeply he'd fallen for her. If it wouldn't scare her away, he'd admit the truth ... he loved her.

CHAPTER

Nine

MADELINE SMILED to herself as she slid into a comfortable tank top and shorts and brushed her hair. Tonight had been fabulous. The drive in the Lamborghini, feeling the power in the vehicle and seeing how powerful and alluring Nolan was. The dinner and hike with their families. The crazy jump into the lake and the connection she'd felt to him. The warmth and tingle of being in Nolan's arms. Holding hands as they walked back and staying close throughout the spa therapy as if they were a true couple. She savored laughing and teasing with his children and hers, and she felt closer to him than she ever had to any man.

Nolan had listened to her and respectfully taken things slow, just as she'd requested. The past month, she'd fallen for him. He valued her opinion, treated her with the utmost respect, was the closest friend she'd ever had, and made her laugh and smile often.

Would she have to be the one to make a move? Since she was the one who'd asked him to slow down, the ball was in her court now. They'd teased about her being ready for some speed on the drive. He'd almost kissed her in the garage earlier. Hopefully he'd try again soon.

Madeline didn't know how to proceed from here, but she felt like a teenager. She longed to have Nolan hold her close and kiss her. It was time to express all these feelings that wanted to burst out of her. Was it too fast? Was he only driven by his passion and need for her? It seemed much deeper than that. Maybe it always had been and she'd wrongly assigned

those emotions to his actions earlier, but she appreciated him going slow and proving she was special to him.

If only she could be as special as his wife had been.

That was a selfish and unrealistic thought, and she pushed it away. It wasn't Nolan's fault that he'd loved and lost his wife to a tragic death. She needed to focus on now and the future, not a past neither of them could control.

A rap sounded on her door. Madeline straightened in surprise and set the brush down on a side table. That rap was familiar. She heard it every morning before their hike, every evening before he escorted her to dinner.

Nolan had come for her.

Heart racing, she bit her lip to stop a cry of anticipation. Had he come for exactly what she had been fantasizing about? Would they kiss and talk and hold each other close?

She hurried to the door, stopping with her hand on the handle and calling out, "Yes?"

"Madeline." Nolan's deep voice came through the door. "I need ... you."

Oh my. Madeline clung to the handle with suddenly slick fingers. He needed her? He needed her.

He could need her for something with parliament. He could need her as his partner for gin rummy. He could need her to brew up the perfect tea for whatever Jennifer needed for her pregnancy.

She laughed at herself and bit at her lip.

"Madeline. Please."

Her heart leapt at the supplication in his tone. He needed her.

She flung the door open.

Nolan stood there. Dressed casually in a gray T-shirt and blue joggers, he couldn't hide the depth of his character or his royalty. He looked as regal and enticing as ever.

His blue eyes zeroed in on her. They swept over her face, her lips, her body, then back up. His gaze fastened on hers and she leaned toward him, drawn in by his intensity, his draw, all that he was and could be to her.

Nolan released a low groan and then he stormed into the room, swept her off her feet, and cradled her against his chest.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and questioned softly, “Nolan?”

His gaze suddenly looked tortured. He easily carried her to the nearby couch, sank down into it, and held her even tighter.

“Madeline,” he began softly. “I’ve been holding back as you requested, trying to show you this is no quick burn for me. On our drive and afterward in the garage, I felt like we broke through some barriers. Then leaping off the ledge together, as a team, holding you close in the waterfall pool tonight and holding hands as we walked back ...” He searched her gaze. “I’m praying you felt that shift. It hit me harder than a hammer on an anvil. I need you in my life, in my arms ... If I’m moving too fast, please tell me. I’ll walk out that door and I’ll wait another month. I’ll wait another year. Whatever you need. But please ... if you feel the same, will you put me out of my misery?”

Madeline blinked at him, emotion rising to the surface. He’d wait for her. He needed her in his heart, his life, and his arms. Her heart thumped quick and light. She felt head over heels in love.

How did his feelings for her compare to Anne?

She pushed those worries away and focused on the very real and incredible man holding her close.

“Misery?” she questioned, running her fingertips along his neck.

He drew in a breath and said on the exhale, “Abject misery. Having you right here and not being able to hold you close... I can’t imagine a worse form of torture.”

She didn’t want to smile at his misery, but she couldn’t hold it in.

“Oh? My misery brings a smile to your beautiful face?”

Emotion filled her, and she hoped she wouldn't cry. “That you're miserable for me, Nolan. That you feel so deeply about me. I've never had that in my life. Never been so invested in, taken with, drawn to, connected with, consumed by a man as I am by you.” She didn't dare say love. Not yet.

Now he was the one smiling. “Do you mean that?”

“I do.”

Nolan released one hand from her waist. He gently cupped her chin and drew her face closer to his. Sitting down, they were closer to the same height. She focused on his blue eyes.

“You consume me, Madeline. I've fallen so hard for you, I'm sure I've broken bones and torn ligaments, but I don't care. I'll break anything, go through anything, simply to have you close, to know you care, to believe there's a hope that we can be together.” His voice lowered and his gaze grew even more intense. He whispered fiercely, “Anything, Madeline. Anything for you, love.”

Love? He'd just called her *love*.

Madeline wanted to hear him say he loved her. She could listen to his sweet words of devotion all night long. They'd get to the 'I love you' part, but right now it was time to see if his lips could seize her like his blue eyes did.

She blinked up at him and moistened her lips.

His gaze grew hungry. “What can I do for you?”

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

His smile broke through. “With pleasure.”

Nolan's mouth captured hers, and Madeline realized she'd had no idea what consumed meant until this moment. His mouth moved against hers and she was completely captivated, devoted, inspired, addicted, obsessed, and consumed by him and with him.

She slid her arms around his neck as he cradled her in his arms. The kiss continued and continued, and she never wanted

it to end. Nolan was her everything—her passion, her love, her perfect match.

She'd never felt this depth of connection and love—not with her husband, and not with any other man. Had he felt this with Anne?

The very thought of his deceased wife yanked her from the moment and from his lips. She pulled back and stared at his handsome face. They were both pulling in quick breaths. His hair was mussed, and she could bet her lips were swollen.

She'd grown so close to him the past month, and they'd never spoken about Anne, even though her picture was in various rooms in the castle and sometimes his children brought her up. She didn't want to be jealous of a deceased and angelic woman, but she wanted her love with Nolan to be unique, to be theirs, to not have a shadow in the room making a knot of jealousy grow inside her.

“Madeline,” Nolan moaned softly. “That was incredible.” He softly kissed her and then pulled back. “I wish I could kiss you all night long, but I'd better get out of here if I want to stay in control.” His smile was teasing, but his gaze was deep and heated.

“You're right.” She all but jumped out of his arms, off the couch, and hurried to her door. He was right that they had to stay in control. She needed some time to wrap her mind around loving another woman's husband. Jealousy was ugly and would taint the friendship and love she and Nolan had built together. She didn't want to bring it up, didn't want him to know what was fixated in her mind. She'd appear immature and selfish, and that wasn't her.

Nolan stood from the couch. Madeline's eyes widened as she appreciated how strong, tall, and manly he was. The king. The man she'd fallen in love with and had just kissed the dickens out of was the king. The king who mourned the loss of his perfect queen. Of course he still loved Queen Anne. How could he not? Everyone had revered the Queen Mother, and Nolan had been married to her for over thirty years. The

sweetheart of a woman had been beautiful, pleasant, and was now immortalized.

Nolan strutted toward her. She'd always appreciated his confident walk, but she'd never seen him strut quite so smugly.

He stared down at her. "This is to be continued," he said huskily, making her quiver inside. "When we're not in your bedroom, it's not late at night, and my exemplary self-restraint is firmly in place." His smile was confident and alluring. "Let's plan on kissing standing up next time. Maybe then I won't want to throw any reservations in the garbage and kiss you for days and nights and weekends and holidays ..."

Madeline wanted to laugh and cry. Nolan was incredible. She was in love with him, but he loved someone else.

Why were all these questions about Queen Anne surfacing right now?

Nolan cupped her jaw. She leaned into his hand, savoring his touch. Savoring him. He bent and kissed her once, twice, three times. Then he backed her into the wall and devoured her mouth with his. He deepened the kiss, and she forgot all her worries. Forgot her own name.

Madeline wrapped her arms around his strong shoulders, held him as close as possible, and returned kiss for kiss. She'd found heaven on earth.

Finally, Nolan yanked himself away. She couldn't catch a breath, and he seemed to have the same problem. He released his hold on her, backed up a step, and folded his arms across his chest. She leaned into the wall, weak and so in love with him.

"Standing up while kissing is unfortunately not the solution. Maybe we can only indulge in public places?" He smiled, but it was crooked and she could see the pulse point in his neck going like mad.

She half-laughed. "I don't know that there is a solution. Your kiss takes me to another dimension."

“Heaven on earth,” he said huskily. She moistened her lips, and his gaze caught and held there. He unfolded his arms and eased closer, wrapping her up again. “Marry me.”

Madeline searched his gaze, her heart racing. Her thoughts scattered.

“Marry me ... soon.” His voice became gravelly, and his blue eyes held her captive. That look and voice and his touch were more enticing than anything she’d experienced. Except for his kiss. His kiss was the most enticing experience on the planet.

Her legs threatened to give out, but thankfully he held her tight.

Marry him? It was insane and too fast and she didn’t even want to think about being queen, but ... She’d be with Nolan. They would be a team. With him by her side, holding her hand, she could do anything, be anything.

“We can kiss the nights away and love and lift each other and our family and country throughout the days.”

Madeline swallowed and wanted to scream yes. Instead, she burst out, “Do you still love Queen Anne?”

It was the absolute wrong question to ask at this moment, but she had to know where he stood. Where they stood. Was she second best? How could she not be? Anne was the love of his youth, the mother of his children, the queen mother, the perfect and ideal woman.

Nolan blinked at her, and he did the absolute wrong thing in her mind. He released her, stepped back, and looked more tortured than when he’d claimed he was in abject misery, unable to hold her close.

Apparently thinking about his deceased wife was worse than that misery. She didn’t blame him, and she felt selfish and small, but she couldn’t marry him without knowing where things stood with them and with Anne.

“Of course I still love Anne,” he said softly. “I always will.”

Madeline pressed her lips together and nodded, appreciating his honesty even if it gouged her. She prayed she wouldn't cry and have him know how deeply devastated she was. Her feelings were unfair to him, but she couldn't bury how she felt.

“But Madeline...” He stepped closer, and his cedar and mint scent wrapped around her. “That doesn't mean I don't love you. I'm sorry I haven't said the words. You asked me to take things slow, and that's the opposite of what I'm doing by beseeching you to marry me. Forgive me, love. I'm so deeply and passionately in love with you I lose my head, forget I'm the level-headed king, and want to rush everything just to be with you.”

Madeline could only stare at him. He loved her, deeply and passionately, but of course he still loved Anne.

“I won't lie to you and claim that Anne isn't still in my heart. We were friends for years and slowly fell in love after college. We were together for many years, building a family and running a kingdom together. I can't forget about her or not love her.”

Madeline understood, but it still was something to wrap her mind around. All she could do was nod.

“But I promise you there is plenty of room in my heart. My love for you feels like it's bursting from me.” He paused as if searching for something, then said in a rush, “It's similar to when you have a new baby, you see? You love each of your children with a deep and abiding love. You can't comprehend or explain that love; it just expands in your heart, and you have more and more love to give.” He eyed her carefully. “You understand what I'm saying?”

Madeline wanted to cry. She had one child. Of course she didn't understand how a parents' love could expand and grow with each new child added to their family.

“I want to understand,” she said quickly before he tried to explain further. She'd been on the highest high kissing him and in his arms, and she hadn't crashed completely, as he did

love her. But she had to figure out how to share his heart with the beloved Anne.

“You do?” He eased closer and took her hand, bringing it to his lips and pressing a heated kiss to her palm.

Madeline wanted to sway into his arms and never leave him.

“I need to rest and process and ... let’s just talk tomorrow, all right?”

He studied her. “You’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Where am I going to go?” She forced a smile. “Despite my reassurances to parliament that Naomi Rindlesbacher is nowhere in sight and not in contact with you, they’ve asked me to stay with you.”

“First thing parliament’s done right.”

She smiled. “Are you really going to go there?”

Nolan chuckled. “You know I’m teasing.” He blew out a breath. “I need to let you rest.”

She nodded, hoping he couldn’t read how conflicted and sick she was inside.

“Do you need me to slow down?” He held her hand to his chest. She could feel his lean muscles and his strong heartbeat. “On the kissing or the marriage talk?”

“Probably on both,” she whispered.

He straightened and pulled in a breath. “Well now, I hate that ... But I’ll do whatever you need, love. Anything.” He studied her deeply, kissed her hand again and repeated, “Anything.”

Madeline had no idea what to say. He appeared fully invested in her. This was all on her to figure out where she stood next to Anne and how to commit to marriage and love without letting the jealousy of his wife and first love fester in her heart.

“Goodnight,” she managed.

“Night.” He released her hand and eased out the door. She shut it behind him.

He’d do anything, but he couldn’t give her his whole heart. It wasn’t his fault, but how could she reconcile her need to fully love him with his only choice—to split his heart?

CHAPTER

Ten

MADELINE HAD A VERY RESTLESS NIGHT.

She prayed to know how to drop all the envious and selfish feelings. She wanted to love Nolan with all her heart. It wasn't his fault that his wife had been amazing and perfect, whereas Madeline's husband had been a flighty quitter who wasn't committed to her or Chad.

Finally, at four a.m., she got sick of thrashing and turning in bed. She slipped out and dressed in Lady Fit workout gear. Thinking of her daughter-in-law made her smile with temporary relief from the stress she was feeling. She wanted to run the trail that circled the lake bordering the village of Greenville. Maybe she'd still hike with Nolan at six, or maybe she'd wear herself out, take a bath, and go back to sleep. She could even do the spa therapies upstairs by herself.

Madeline wasn't upset with him; she simply needed time to wrap her mind around sharing Nolan's heart. She wanted to be a team, longed to be married to him and nurture and love all of his children. Kiera especially seemed to need and adore her.

Tying her shoes, she walked out of her suite, down the hallway, and down the stairs. Two guards were coming up the stairs. Captain Levi and Lieutenant Mason Henson. These two were her favorites. She found herself wondering if Levi had a crush on darling Faith. Hmm. Matchmaking might be fun. She'd have to chat with Chad and Hope about that.

“Ms. Prescott,” Levi greeted her, dipping his head. “Are you all right?”

“Oh yes. I’m simply going on a quick run before my hike with the king.”

They exchanged a look. “We’ll follow you. Will you give us a moment to change so we can keep up?” Levi asked.

“No, please.” She held up a hand. Nolan had asked if she’d missed her freedom this past month. She truly hadn’t, but she needed some space right now. “I’m going to run the trail around the lake. The sun will be up before long. I’m not in any danger, and I just ... need to be alone.”

Levi grimaced. “But you’re in our care, staying here at the castle.”

“I’m not a royal,” she countered.

Would she ever be? Not if she couldn’t wrap her mind around Nolan’s first love and happy marriage and not give in to jealousy and comparisons.

“I promise I’ll stay on the trail. It’s a six-mile loop. I’ll start on the east side of the lake.” She looked at her watch. Four-thirty. “If I’m not back by five-forty-five, you can drive one of those side-by-sides and come find me.” She begged him with her gaze. She wasn’t in any danger, and she needed to be alone and process and enjoy the beauty of nature while she conferred with heaven above.

Levi looked at the lieutenant, who shrugged. “I don’t like it, but who am I to boss around a member of parliament?”

Madeline smiled. “And that is why you are one of my favorites, Lieutenant Henson.”

The young man grinned at her, his blue eyes sparkling. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“At five-fifteen we will come check on you,” Levi said. “If you’re all right and still want to be alone, we’ll give you some space.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “Do you know how many runs I’ve done by myself throughout the years with

nobody following me or watching me?”

His dark eyes sparkled at her. “Not when you’re in my care. If something happened to you, the king and Major Chad would take turns filleting me.”

Madeline rolled her eyes, but she didn’t want him to get in trouble. “Nothing will happen to me.”

“We’ll see you at five-fifteen.” Levi saluted her.

“You used to be one of my favorites.”

He chuckled. “I’d rather keep you safe than be on a favorites list.”

“Thank you.” She forced a smile and lifted a hand. It would be fine for them to come check on her halfway through the loop. She didn’t want to cause them any trouble.

Madeline rushed down the stairs and out through the garage and side entrance. Two more guards met her. She told them she was going for a run around the lake and that Captain Levi and Lieutenant Mason would come soon to check on her. Thankfully, they let her go.

She jogged down the steep road that circled the castle, wove through the trees, and finally came out at the barricade next to the village. Two more guards questioned her. She repeated her explanation and shifted impatiently while they checked in with Captain Levi. Finally, they cautioned her to be careful and allowed her to leave.

Madeline shook her head as she ran through the village and to the trail that circled the lake. She ran all the time in Traverse, which had a thousand times more people than this quaint village and actually a few criminals. Crime was low in all of Augustine, thanks to Chief Jensen and General Ray. There was nothing to worry about in this picturesque valley.

She understood the guards had to be overprotective of her because she was the king’s guest. What would happen if she agreed to marry Nolan? Would she ever go for a scenic jog by herself again? That made her chest tight. She loved Nolan and she could easily see herself loving his family. She already did.

But was she ready to love all of his past, his responsibilities, and his restrictions?

The sliver of a moon had disappeared, and she left the lights of the village behind. She slowed so she didn't trip on the dark trail, but her thoughts raced.

Nolan asking her to marry him played through her head over and over again. It had been intense and romantic and overwhelming. She had no idea how to wrap her mind around all of it—reconciling herself to him loving her and, of course, him still loving his wife, dumping all her jealousy, and dealing with the responsibilities that would come with being queen.

Her mind wandered as she plodded through step after step. She sensed an obstacle in front of her and dodged to the side. The barrier moved with her, and she screamed.

A man's arms wrapped around her and yanked her into a hard chest. "No screaming, beautiful lady, or I'll cut your tongue out."

Madeline yanked backwards and had to fight not to scream at such a horrific greeting. The man smelled of out of doors and pine needles. Had he been hiding in a tree? With as dark as it was, he wouldn't have needed to hide. He was huge, probably the same height as Nolan or Chad but twice as thick, and none of it was fat.

"What do you want?" she demanded. Why hadn't she brought along one of the many pepper spray canisters Chad had left at her home in Traverse?

It was too dark to see him clearly, but his hands that held her so close dipped lower than she was comfortable with. "What I want ... you see, that's sadly not the issue here. Because I want to see exactly how the future queen kisses, but my boss, you see ... No. What I want is unfortunately not our purpose this early morn."

Madeline's heart was going to burst from her chest. She shoved at him with her fists and fought to squirm free. "Help!" she cried, even as she knew there was no one close enough to help her.

The man grabbed her cheeks and squeezed hard. Pain ripped through her jaw, but she couldn't squeak out a word. He released her and yanked her in, burying her face in his burly chest. "There now. No reason to cry for help. I'm not going to have my way with you, not until we both accomplish our purposes. But maybe someday ..."

"Let me go," she gritted out, getting a mouthful of his cotton shirt.

"Not until you agree to my request. I don't want to hurt you, and my boss says I can't have you ... Yet."

Madeline's stomach turned over. She'd had men hit on her often, and a few had touched her or tried to kiss her without her consent, but nobody had been so foul and held her against her will like this brute.

"Let me go, or I'll ..."

"You'll what?" He chuckled, low and deep. She felt it through her body.

How much longer until Levi and Mason would come? Too long, she was afraid.

"Don't worry, beautiful lady. My request isn't difficult. I simply need you to get the king outside without his bodyguards. I'll take care of the rest. Then maybe you and I will have a chance to be alone."

She squirmed and tried to dig her fingernails into him. He held her so tightly she couldn't budge.

"Do you understand what I need?"

"I understand," she bit out, not that she planned on doing it. As soon as she could escape or Levi and Mason came, she'd run to Nolan and make him promise to increase his security and to stop his morning hikes until this brute was caught.

"I've been waiting at the village for so long, waiting for you. I watch you hike with the king every morning. So fit. So pretty." His voice was full of longing now, and Madeline knew she would vomit if he kept talking like that and didn't release

her. “Maybe I’ll just have a sample of what the king’s woman tastes like.”

He released one of his hands from her back, grasped her chin, and yanked her face up to his. Madeline’s stomach protested as horror raced through her. Vomit gagged her, and she threw up right in his mouth.

The man yelped and shoved her away.

Madeline coughed on the disgusting taste of her own bile, but she didn’t take the time to catch a breath. She whirled and raced back down the trail. It was so dark she could hardly see where she was stepping.

The man cursed and yelled foul, horrible things at her, and then his footsteps thundered behind her.

No! She wanted to scream or cry out, but she couldn’t waste the oxygen. She could hardly breathe with her throat coated with a horrific taste and her heart pounding out of control.

Her foot caught on a root, and she flew forward. With a scream, she splayed out on the trail, scraping her hands, arms, and knees.

The footsteps were still coming from behind, a death knoll pounding toward her. The man would hurt her. She knew it.

Groaning, she forced herself to her feet. Her knees, hands, and arms hurt and she couldn’t catch a breath. But she had to move. Shuffling forward, she tried to move back into the rhythm of a run, but she couldn’t coordinate her legs.

Footsteps.

Closer and closer.

Please help me, she begged heaven above.

His large body slammed into her from behind. Madeline screamed. She imagined she’d hit the rough trail again, this time with an extra two-hundred and fifty pounds on top of her.

“No!” she cried out.

The man wrapped her up and lifted her off her feet.

“That wasn’t the sweet taste I was planning on,” he growled in her ear.

“Try to kiss me again and I’ll do worse,” she screamed back.

He laughed, a scratchy, mean sound. “It’s time I do worse.”

“No!” She kicked her heels back into his legs, dug her fingernails into his arm, and threw her head back into his.

“Calm down, little she-devil. Not sure what the king sees in you besides your beauty.”

Headlights bounced up the trail and through the trees. Madeline had never seen anything so beautiful.

“Guess we need some privacy,” the man said.

He carried her toward the thick trees.

“No!” Madeline fought him with every ounce of strength she had. She kicked, scratched, thrashed, and bit his hand when it got too close to her mouth.

The man cursed and threw her onto the trail. She landed in a heap, more pain radiating through her, this time from her backside.

“Time to stop playing and follow orders.” He heaved out a sigh, as if it were the hardest thing he’d ever done. “Get the king alone, or I’ll be back for you. And next time I won’t be so nice.”

He disappeared into the trees.

The lights were almost upon her. She stood shakily and waved her arms so they didn’t run her over.

Captain Levi and Lieutenant Mason stopped right in front of her. They both leaped from the side-by-side vehicle. “Ms. Prescott,” Levi called out in horror.

“A man.” She pointed shakily. “He attacked me.”

Levi cursed. “Stay with her and call for backup,” he demanded of Mason, then he took off through the trees.

The lieutenant placed a call as he escorted her to the passenger side of the vehicle and helped her sit down. Madeline prayed Levi would catch the man. She answered Mason's questions and tried to control her trembling limbs.

All she wanted was to forget this ever happened and be in Nolan's arms.

CHAPTER

Eleven

NOLAN WOKE before his five-forty alarm. He was anxious to be with Madeline and had dreamed of holding her close and kissing her throughout the night. How to convince her he loved her deeply and the love he felt for Anne wouldn't make him love Madeline less? He understood it was hard for her. He'd probably feel the same way if she'd been in a loving and happy relationship for over thirty years. Instead, it felt as if she'd been waiting. For him.

Their love was unique and beautiful, intense and all-consuming. He prayed she felt the same.

He dressed quickly in workout gear, brushed his teeth, and was tying his shoes when a rap came at his door.

Madeline? He always knocked on her door, not the other way around.

He hurried to the door and flung it open.

“Ray?”

His second-oldest son's blue eyes were stormy. Something was wrong.

“There's been an incident.”

The hair prickled on the back of his neck. “What kind of incident?”

“Madeline was running around the lake loop.”

“By herself?”

He nodded shortly. “She convinced Captain Levi and Lieutenant Mason to give her some space, then come check on her halfway through the loop.”

“Is she all right?”

Ray nodded, serious as always. “Banged up, but he didn’t rape her, and she’s acting very tough and trying to unselfishly convince me that none of my men are at fault.” He lifted both of his hands. “She’s Madeline.”

“The man didn’t ...” Nolan’s mouth went slack, and his stomach revolted. He wanted to find whoever ‘he’ was and pummel the man. “Who dared touch her?”

“Jensen has him in custody. Levi pursued and caught him. We’ll have answers soon.”

“Where’s Madeline?”

“In her suite.”

Nolan clasped his son’s arm before rushing past him. He had to get to her, comfort her, make her promise she’d never go running alone again.

“Dad ...” Ray’s voice stopped him.

He pivoted, impatient to go to Madeline.

“From what I gathered, it was about you. The guy was trying to get her to commit to lure you away from your guards. He also said some foul things, like he wanted to see how the future queen tasted.” Ray’s mouth and shoulders were tight.

Nolan froze. “He hurt her to get to me.”

“I believe so.” Ray looked him over. “I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t your fault, son.” It was Nolan’s fault. He had put Madeline at risk because of his role in life. Anne had been killed for the same reason. His vision felt cloudy. What if Madeline had been killed?

“Levi and Mason should never have let her go alone,” Ray said, oblivious to the churning in Nolan’s gut. “Four different guards stopped her and allowed her to leave by herself. Madeline is very convincing and an authority figure, but Mum

knew better. She would've never ...” He broke off and clenched his fists.

Nolan could only stare at Ray. Anne knew better, but she'd snuck out of the castle without guards on that fateful winter night to try to salvage a lifelong friendship, and she'd been killed.

“Apologies. Madeline isn't the queen, and I don't want to compare her to mum, or bring up ...” He studied the windows behind Nolan. Then his gaze swung back to Nolan's face, and his blue eyes were as serious as ever. “But you understand how safety works, especially for you and mum, for T and Jenn. When we don't follow those protocols” He shrugged and thankfully didn't spell it out.

“I understand,” Nolan managed. He knew what happened. Oh, how he knew.

“I know you do.” Ray clenched his fists again, a common thing when he was worried or upset. “It's easy to see how you feel about Madeline. Can you convince her to always keep guards with her?”

Nolan stared at his son. The general of Augustine. Ray took everyone's protection very seriously, and he was fabulous at protecting their family and their country. The Rindlesbachers had thrown them for a loop with their brilliant scheming, but recently it had seemed the kingdom was safe and settled. Nolan had wrongly assumed they could relax a bit.

Why would some man go after Madeline to get to him now? Was it tied to parliament's weird accusations and Naomi Rindlesbacher? They had to get to the bottom of this and keep Madeline safe, but he understood more than most that ditching guards wasn't acceptable. If only he'd woken the night Anne had slipped out of the castle. If only the guards had been more diligent. If only Leslie hadn't been manipulated and brain-washed by the Rindlesbachers. He could list 'if onlys' for hours, or he could help Madeline understand how important her safety was to him. To all of them.

“I'll talk to her,” he assured Ray.

“Thank you.” Ray nodded to him.

“Thank *you*, son.” He wanted to get to Madeline, but there was something he needed to know. “Are you all right with me remarrying someday?” He hadn’t convinced Madeline to marry him, but that wasn’t the issue right now. Right now, he needed his son’s insight. As a rule, Ray was logical and unselfish.

Ray studied him, thoughtful. “I don’t need a mother figure in my life like Kiera, Macey, or some of my siblings or in-laws seem to, but I like and respect Madeline. And the most important thing is ... she makes you happy.” Ray granted him a rare half-smile. “You’ve been strong on your own, and working many hours as you always did, but without Mum...” He clenched his fist. “I could see the toll it was taking on you and that you were lonely. You’ve kept going for our family and for Augustine. But the past month ... you’ve been happy.”

It was a long speech for Ray, and it touched Nolan deeply.

“Thank you.” Nolan couldn’t resist embracing his boy. Ray was thirty-one, married, the general of all their armed forces, as tough and no-nonsense as anyone Nolan knew. Besides special occasions, he didn’t embrace anyone besides his wife and Kiera.

Ray returned the hug for half a second. Then he cleared his throat and stepped back.

“Talk to you soon.” Nolan lifted a hand, spun, and ran down the hall.

He had to get to Madeline.

He pumped down the staircase and was outside her suite and pounding on the door before he could stop himself.

Yanking his hand back, he clenched his fists like Ray would’ve. Madeline had been attacked. It washed over him in a horrible wave of agony. If only he could pound the man who’d hurt her. That was very uncharacteristic of him to even think. He was fit and strong, but he’d never been a brawler. He’d been raised from birth to be a genteel king. His parents had believed in hiring more guards, not learning to protect

themselves. Ray had been the one to teach him to spar and how to protect himself physically.

The door finally swung open. Madeline was in a robe, her hair piled on her head, her face solemn, her green eyes wary.

“Madeline,” he groaned.

She gave a little cry and flung herself against his chest.

Nolan had no problem wrapping her up tight and holding her close. He gently ushered her into the room and closed the door behind him, continuing to hold her. She leaned against him, almost as if she couldn't support her own weight. Some man had attacked her, threatened her. *He didn't rape her.* Those words were somewhat reassuring, but not really. How far had the man gone? What external and internal injuries did she have?

She suddenly pulled back, and her emerald eyes filled with fire. “Nolan! You can't go hiking anymore. That awful man is after you. He wants me to get you alone, away from your guards, and then he said he'll take care of the rest.” She shuddered. “You may not leave the castle. Unless you have a whole platoon of guards. Ray will agree with me.”

Nolan stared at her. “Madeline...” He had to clear his throat to continue. “You were attacked by this man, and you're worried about me? Love ... I'll be fine. Ray taught me how to fight and he never lets me leave without guards. It's *you* we're all worried about.”

Madeline blinked up at him. She was the most perfect mixture of tough, sassy, independence, brains, innocence, and alluring beauty. “Nolan ...” Her eyes were bright, and her lower lip trembled.

She stepped farther away from him. All he wanted to do was reach for her, but she'd been attacked and he didn't know if she would welcome his touch, or if any man's touch would remind her of the assault right now. He knew she was fiercely independent, but he wanted to be there for her. How in the world was he supposed to help her right now?

He waited, but she only stared at him and then tears traced down her smooth cheeks.

“Madeline.” He couldn’t take it. He scooped her off her feet and cradled her against his chest. She was taller than Kiera, but she didn’t weigh much more. She felt perfect in his arms.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, brushing the tears off her face. “I don’t cry. I’m fine.”

“It’s okay to cry, love. You’ve been through something horrific.” He carried her to the couch they’d kissed on last night. Settling down, he held her on his lap. “Are you all right with me holding you? Am I hurting you in any way?”

“How could you hurt me?” she demanded, sounding more like her feisty self.

“I don’t know where your injuries are, and if you’re hurt emotionally, I don’t want to push you too hard.”

Madeline drew in a breath and then jutted out her chin. “It was awful. The man was awful, but I’m all right.”

Nolan wasn’t sure how to proceed, but at least she was letting him hold her. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” She shook her head and then leaned into him, resting her head against his neck. Her silky hair brushed his skin. A minute of quiet peace passed, then she started talking slowly, calmly. “I was out running. I slammed into this monstrous man. He was as big and strong as Ray.” She shuddered. “He said ... lots of awful things. About you, and me, and what he wanted to do to me ...” She broke off and burrowed into him as if she couldn’t get close enough.

Nolan cradled her against him and tried to push away his fury at that man. Minutes ticked by and he simply held her, not sure how else to help. Her hand slid up his chest. He captured her hand and lifted it to his lips, but stopped short when he saw the scrapes on her palm.

“Ah, Madeline. Your hand.”

She finally glanced up at him. "I'm a little scraped up, but I'll be fine."

Was she fine? He'd never foreseen she would cuddle into him like this. She was clearly terrified.

"He's been following us on our morning hikes," she muttered before he could check her injuries. "You can't keep hiking, Nolan. What if he hurts you?"

"They captured him," he said quickly, realizing he should've told her that earlier. "Jensen is interrogating him. He won't come after you again."

"He kept talking about his boss. He carried me into the trees, said he wanted 'privacy,' but then he said he had to stop playing and follow orders." She shuddered. "He wanted to ... do more awful things to me, but his boss must have told him not to. Just to scare me so I'd do what he said and get you away from your guards so they could hurt you. They can't hurt you."

Anger like he'd never experienced surged through him. No one would ever dare do 'awful things' to Madeline. He'd keep her safe. It touched him deeply how protective she felt toward him. "That man will never touch you again."

"What about his boss?"

"Jensen will get him to reveal everything, and we'll find his boss. It'll be all right. You're safe."

Madeline pushed off of him and stood. She paced away from the couch and then whirled back to look at him. He stood, hoping he could say the right things to help her feel secure and to know how deeply he loved her.

"That man and his boss want to use me to get to you."

"We won't let them. Ray and Jensen and all their people will protect you. It will be all right." He didn't know if he should add the next part in, but he had told Ray he would. "You can't go running by yourself, though. Will you promise me to always stay with your guards?"

Her mouth twisted. “Do you know how many runs I’ve gone on by myself? In Traverse, where there are thousands more people and significantly more danger?”

“I know you’re very capable of taking care of yourself, but things are different now. You’re with me, and I’m the king. You could be a target like you were today.”

Like Anne had been.

Madeline folded her arms across her chest. This image of her—independent, beautiful, in only that white robe. He would hold this picture in his mind forever. He loved her. How could he keep her safe without ruining her independence?

“Nolan ... I’m not with you.”

His eyes widened, and his heart seemed to stop. That was a curve ball he hadn’t seen coming. “You’re not?”

Things hadn’t been perfect when he’d left last night, but he’d hoped it was only a matter of reassuring her how deeply he loved her and that Anne’s memory wouldn’t damage their relationship. In fact, experiencing a happy marriage for thirty years had taught him many things. Things that would make him a better husband to Madeline. He wouldn’t make the mistakes he’d made with Anne as a foolish young adult, an overwhelmed young king and father.

“I don’t know that I can handle this.” She gestured around.

Did she mean him, the castle, or his life as the king?

She shook her head and backed up again. “I’m independent and used to being alone. I don’t want guards watching over me wherever I go. I don’t want to be queen. I don’t want to share your heart with a perfect woman who’s immortalized in your mind and will never do anything wrong.”

Every word was a hit to the hope he’d let grow in his heart. If she didn’t want to be queen, did that mean she didn’t want him or simply didn’t want the title? Her emerald gaze said she cared deeply for him. He’d never feel for anyone like he did for Madeline. He would always cherish his slow, steady, deep love for Anne, but for Madeline it was passionate, intense, and carried him away. Their love would grow to epic proportions;

he could feel and envision that. He couldn't lose her. His family couldn't lose her. The thought of Kiera without Madeline in their lives was horrifying.

“Please. Don't push me away or give up on us. I know it's not easy being a monarch—believe me, I know—but you have to recognize how incredible things are between the two of us.” He humbled himself and put it out there, despite the realization that she might reject him. “I love you, Madeline. *You*. Every bit of you. What we have is special and only between us. I won't compare you to Anne. I would never hurt you or disparage you. I don't want to take away your independence, but I want to love you completely and never stop. Please give me that chance.”

Madeline studied him. Her lip quivered and her eyes brightened. She was going to cry again. He felt he had to lay it all out there, but now he realized he was pushing too hard, and after she'd gone through something horrific.

“Madeline, I'm sorry.” He held up his hands. “You've had a horrific experience, and I don't want to push you and make things even harder.”

Madeline took a slow breath, then pushed it out. “You are incredible, Nolan. If it was just us ...” She shook her head, and it hurt because he knew it wasn't just them—they each had a past and he had a huge responsibility that he couldn't shirk, both with his family and his kingdom. “I'm sorry about all my reservations. I wish we could just be us, but ...”

“It's a lot. I know.” He held up his hands in a gesture of peace. “Please. We'll take it slow. We'll figure things out together, as a team. Just don't give up on me. On us. Please.” He'd never felt so humble and almost desperate, but a life without Madeline was no life. Not for him. Not anymore.

What could he do if she didn't want to be queen? Could he step down? It was an insane and desperate thought. No king of Augustine had ever stepped down, even when their beloved wives had been killed over the years. He could petition parliament to turn everything over to Tristan. He'd ruled at a much younger age and as a newlywed with twins on the way,

honeymoon babies Tristan and Ray. But he didn't want to do that to his son or to Jennifer. It had been extremely hard on Anne, on both of them.

He'd envisioned a different relationship with Madeline than he'd ever had with Anne. Anne had been a wonderful wife and mother and a sweet queen that everyone loved, but she'd mostly been a figurehead, focused on raising their family and loving and supporting Nolan. He could see Madeline being a part of everything, not just helping and discussing issues with him and T after a meeting, but being a third member of the monarch representation, leading or taking on meetings on her own. She was brilliant, strong, and independent. The people of Augustine would love and respect her just as he did. He was shocked to learn she didn't want to be queen. She'd be an ideal queen.

It hurt even more that she didn't want to be *his* queen.

His thoughts spun as he studied Madeline, awaiting her answer. After what felt like a year but was less than ten seconds, she dipped her head. "I won't give up on us."

"Thank you."

"But I do need some time to wrap my mind around everything." She paused, then gave him a forced smile that negated her next words. "I do love you, Nolan. I've simply been alone and independent for so long. This is all a huge adjustment for me. I'm sorry I can't rush to marry you like you asked last night."

"No." He held up a hand. "That was wrong of me. I rushed too fast. Impulsive and dumb." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "You wouldn't believe it, but I usually behave like an accomplished king of a flourishing nation."

Her smile turned genuine. "I do believe it and honestly ... I love that you feel so passionately about me."

"I do. More than I can even share without scaring you away."

She laughed at that. Nolan smiled, and the tension lifted slightly.

“Thank you.” She backed toward her bathroom. “I’d better get ready for the day.”

Nolan wondered if pushing her too hard was tied into her being such a part of every aspect of his demanding life over the past month. Maybe that was why she didn’t want to be queen. Just because he’d envisioned her being a part of so much more than Anne ever had didn’t mean that was what Madeline wanted. If he showed her there was another option, would it open her eyes?

“You’ve got to be tired of sitting through endless meetings with Tristan and me. Why don’t you swim, enjoy the spa therapy rooms, read a book in the solarium, whatever you want to do with your day?”

“That sounds lovely, actually. Thank you.”

“Will you still eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with me?” he asked. Lovely. Madeline would usually joke or tease with him. She did need a break. Was she sick of the endless meetings, frustrated that she was rarely alone, or was it tied into being attacked this morning?

“Of course.”

“Thank you.” He backed toward the door. She needed space. He’d hate being away from her, but he’d give her whatever she needed. “I suppose I’ll lift weights this morning. Since you demanded I not hike, and your wish is my command.”

He thought she’d smile, but her lips pulled down in a frown. “Thank you. Until Jensen finds whoever that man’s boss is, I’d feel a lot better if you didn’t hike or leave the castle. Unless Ray and an entire platoon go with you.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “I will be careful. Will you as well?”

“Yes.”

It sounded like a tough concession for her. He wanted her to be independent. Could she do that with guards trailing respectfully behind her? He was very used to that life and those restrictions. This was asking a lot of her—giving up her independence, heaping on the responsibilities of being queen,

taking on seven children as well as their spouses and grandchildren, sharing his heart with her and Anne. If only he could explain better that he would always love Anne, but Madeline was front and center and all he could see right now.

The real question was ... was being with him worth all she had to sacrifice? Could she separate him as a man from him as king and all his heavy responsibilities?

Nolan would have to somehow prove that he, and everything he brought to the table, was worth the sacrifice.

CHAPTER

Twelve

MADELINE SHARED a subdued breakfast with Nolan, and then she did as he'd suggested. She went to the top level of the castle and swam in the open air pool area for over an hour. Afterward, she took her time enjoying all the different features in the spa—the eucalyptus-scented steam room, the cold plunge that brought her temperature back down after sweating in the steam, and then the fabulous heated jet pool with the various massaging spouts that targeted the major muscle groups. She laid on the surprisingly comfortable heated tile beds until she dried off and then she used one of the massage chairs. She'd had many live person massages that weren't that relaxing and thorough.

It was an ideal morning, but she missed Nolan. What meetings was she missing? Was there any insight she could've given that would help Nolan, Tristan, the prime minister, and Augustine?

She shook her head. She'd been attacked this morning, and she and Nolan were at a hard crossroads. It was all right to take a break and not think and worry for a minute.

If only she could truly do that.

Madeline returned to her suite, showered, and got ready for the day. Then she met Nolan, Tristan, Jennifer, Ray, and Macey for lunch. It was a relief to have the family with them, and everyone kept the conversation light and fun. She refrained from asking about the meetings she'd missed. It was silly that she felt like the king and crown prince couldn't

subsist without her input. They'd been doing a fabulous job for years, and Augustine was one of the most flourishing countries in the world. They didn't need her, but she needed them.

At lunch, the talk was centered on the baby names Tristan kept trying out on Jennifer, obviously hoping for a reaction.

His top pics—Jaquavian and Frodo. His reasoning—their son would be an athlete or the hero of Middle-earth.

They all laughed at Tristan's silliness and Jennifer's jabs back at him. "Oh my, Big Bad Wolf," she teased him. "What horrific logic you have."

"All the better to make you smile with, my dear." He took her hand and kissed it.

Madeline laughed along with the rest of them, but she caught Nolan's concerned blue gaze on her and the laughter stuck in her throat. He was worried about her, and about them. She couldn't blame him. She was worried about him, and about them.

After lunch, Nolan walked her back to her suite. "What are you going to do all afternoon?"

Madeline wanted him to beg her to come back to his side, sit through the meetings and give input after. Even more ideal ... What if as his fiancée and then his wife, she could participate fully in the meetings, not hide as a spectator and give input after the fact?

She mentally shook her head. The meetings were the least of their concerns at the moment. "I thought I'd take your advice and read a book up in the solarium."

"I wish I could sit by your side and read with you."

Madeline smiled. His life was insanely busy, meeting after meeting after meeting. Everyone wanted the king's attention and his opinion. If they did marry, could she take a bigger role in his meetings, or would she be relegated to some queen-consort role of meeting ladies for lunch and organizing banquets? That wasn't her at all. If she wasn't part of the meetings, what would she do with her time? Could she still be in parliament? Probably not. Definitely a conflict of interest.

It was interesting that the accomplished and organized king could so impulsively ask her to marry him last night, and she was the one who had to be logical and think through all the obstacles. Was that part of her appeal for him? That he wasn't logical about her?

He was passionate, consumed, and made her entire body full of warmth.

Marry me. Soon.

She'd never forget the way he'd uttered those words, the depth and yearning in his blue gaze.

"What would you read?" she asked to get her mind off those feelings lest she act on them. Soon.

"You know ..." He paused, as if considering. Since he never had free time, it probably was a stretch to think about sitting in the solarium and reading. "I'm a fan of *The Lord of the Rings*."

Madeline burst out laughing. "You are not. You're only saying that because of T's teasing about baby names."

"I am too." He looked to be hiding a grin. "What would you suppose I like to read, if I ever had free time?"

The only free time he did have he spent exercising each morning and having dinner with and interacting with his children each evening. He was one of the best men she knew. Unselfish and full of purpose. Confident yet somehow approachable and unassuming.

"I think our serious and illustrious king only reads nonfiction—*King Charles' Autobiography* or *How to Run a Kingdom for Dummies*."

"You know, I have both on my nightstand."

They both laughed.

His phone buzzed.

"Pardon me." He pulled it out and grimaced. "Late for another meeting."

She met his gaze, wondering if he could see she wanted to be invited back. When he only studied her, but didn't say anything, she said, "I'll see you at dinner."

Nolan nodded, gave her one more searching look, and then strode down the hallway. She watched him go. His confident walk appealed to her on every level. He was strong, yet she'd seen him humble himself for her, his family, and for the kingdom.

Incredible was the only word that could describe that man. Why couldn't she be like a fanciful girl, swoon in the king's arms after his enticing kiss, and when he said in that beautiful, lyrical, husky voice, 'Marry me ... Soon,' she could scream, "Yes!"

Madeline eased into her suite, found a historical suspense novel she probably wouldn't be able to focus on, and plodded up the many stairs to the solarium. The gorgeous views, delicious scents of roses, alyssum, and gardenia, and the soothing sound of water fountains calmed her. She read for a few minutes but then found she couldn't sit still, which was odd as she sat through hours of meetings with parliament and recently with Nolan and Tristan.

Madeline set her book on an outdoor couch and wandered over to a balcony, staring out at the picturesque valley below, dotted with lakes, and the towering green mountains beyond. She wanted to get caught up in the mystical and magical feel of the castle, the valley, the royal family, and especially the enticing King Nolan.

Glancing over at the picturesque village of Greenville and the lake beyond, fear rushed through her. She'd been attacked on that lake trail. Queen Anne had drowned in that lake. Apprehension pressed at the back of her mind, and then all the horror of this morning rushed over her. That huge man, restraining her, no escape, the awful things he had said and intoned.

Tears ran down to her chin and then dropped onto the balcony railing. Her shoulders shook with sobs. She rarely

cried and here she was crying for the second time in one day. If only Nolan was here to hold and comfort and strengthen her.

Yet she had been attacked because of her relationship with Nolan. Maybe she wasn't cut out to be queen. She'd have to agree to dump her independence and freedom, have guards trailing her at all times while she literally did nothing, sat sweetly around the castle and quietly supported her kingly husband. That wasn't her path, her life.

Yet Nolan ...

A tremble of sweetness trickled down her spine. To be with Nolan. To love him. Be loved by him. Nurture and love all their children together. The morning hikes, meals together, and time spent with their children might be worth the hours of empty unfulfillment and the constant guards. Especially time spent with Kiera. She adored that impetuous girl trapped in a tween body.

She thought through what days and nights might look like as queen, but more importantly as Nolan's wife. Could she ask to be a full participant in his and Tristan's responsibilities? They did so much, so many meetings. She'd love to be by his side or even take over some responsibilities so they all had more time to enjoy together.

There would be another huge bonus if she married him. Something that she hadn't experienced yet. Late evenings and nighttime ... alone with Nolan. Warmth filled her.

Voices and footsteps approached the solarium. Madeline wasn't one to hide, but she was certain her face was splotchy and her eyes red. She needed a moment to compose herself. Sliding to the side, she was quickly hidden by thick trees, bushes, and flowers.

The voices came closer, and she could tell instantly—Macey and Kiera. What was Kiera doing out of school early? Since the Rindlesbachers had died or gone into hiding, Kiera had returned to the public school. Of course two guards shadowed her, but Nolan had explained how they attempted to let her have a normal school experience as his boys had done.

Kiera loved school and had a myriad of friends she talked about.

Today, her voice was choked with tears. Madeline could hear the tremor and the sniffles. Her heart lurched. Kiera. The fun-loving teenager was her favorite.

Madeline almost hurried out of her hiding spot to comfort Kiera. She could admit she'd been crying as well and commiserate. Kiera would love that. They related to each other so well, and Kiera was the daughter she'd always dreamed of having.

"It's not that I don't love Chad's mum. I do," Kiera said, sniffing again. "I love Chad's mum with my whole heart."

Madeline froze. Kiera and Macey were talking about her?

"And I know those girls are only jealous because I'm a princess," she said fiercely. "But I'm tired of always being the one they have to talk about and make fun of. Why must I always be the kind one and not tell them off?"

"Where much is given, much is required," Macey's voice responded. "You've got a loving family and you are the princess. I bet those girls are lacking something that makes them lash out." She paused and then said more quietly, "I didn't have a loving family, but I withdrew instead of lashing out. My brother Gage picked fights. I'm sure other boys thought he was a jerk when truly he was hurting. He needed someone to understand and give him a chance."

There was a pause.

"I know," Kiera said. "You're right. It's just hard."

"I understand, love. It is hard, and they shouldn't pick on you, no matter their reasons. I am very proud of you for not lashing out and for choosing to be kind."

"Thank you."

Madeline's heart ached as she silently listened. Macey was counseling Kiera, helping her to see another view and commending her on her kindness. Madeline wanted to hug her and be there for her as well.

“I don’t know how they even found out that I’m getting a new mum. Do you know how they knew, Macey?”

A new mum? Nolan had only proposed last night. She hadn’t said yes, and they hadn’t made it official. There hadn’t been any publicity about their ‘dating’ arrangement, either.

“Well, sweetie, it must’ve leaked to the media today. It’s all over the internet. Those girls probably checked their phones at lunchtime and then they had something to taunt you about.” Macey was as logical and sweet as always. “Why would that matter, though? Does the idea of Madeline being your mum bother you? You said you love her.”

“I do love her.” Kiera’s voice sounded so depressed Madeline didn’t feel very loved. “I love being with Madeline but I don’t want a new mum. I don’t want to just replace my mum as if she never existed. I don’t want to forget her. What kind of brat could do that?” Kiera’s voice escalated, and then she was sobbing.

Madeline felt her words and her cries deep, a hot poker into her chest. Of course Kiera didn’t want to replace her mum. It wasn’t right and nobody would expect it of her. The poor girl had lost her mum at a young and impressionable age. She acted so well adjusted and happy it was easy to forget she was young, in pain, and dealing with deep heartache.

“You think my dad will marry Chad’s mum and forget my mum? I can’t believe he’d do that. I thought he loved Mum.” The teenager began crying in earnest. Macey must’ve been hugging her and murmuring soothing words.

Madeline had gradually taken over the role of nurturing Kiera and all the family this past month. It stung to realize she wasn’t needed in that role and Kiera didn’t want her there. All of Nolan’s children besides Kiera were adults and more than capable of helping and loving Kiera, just as they’d done before Madeline came here.

The hot poker in her chest twisted. It hurt worse than the scrapes on her hands, elbows, and knees.

Their footsteps retreated and their conversation was lost to her.

Madeline didn't move. She was numb. In pain. Out of place.

She needed to leave.

Slowly, she made her way back to her suite and shut herself inside. It was early afternoon. She could not sit here alone waiting until dinner. Too much ache and too many questions swirled in her head. She picked up her phone off the side table where she'd left it earlier today. She'd missed a lot of calls. If the media story had broken, that would make sense.

She scanned the names—Chad, Hope, half a dozen friends from parliament, Chief Jensen, the prime minister, and several numbers she didn't recognize. Most likely media wanting a statement.

Who should she respond to first?

Madeline hit the call back on Chief Jensen. She wanted to know what he'd learned about that man and his boss. She needed to hear that Nolan was safe.

“Ms. Prescott.” The chief's voice was warm.

She sank wearily into the couch. “Madeline, please.”

“Of course, Madeline. How are you?”

“I've been better.” She scowled, hating that response. “How are you? How is that beautiful Livvy?”

“Exceptional. We're very blessed to have found each other.”

“I'm thrilled for you.” His words made emotion fill her throat. She and Nolan had found each other, but their happiness seemed further away than ever. Added to the list of issues they already had—sweet Kiera didn't want to betray her mum's memory. Madeline couldn't come between him and Kiera.

“Thank you, and thank you for returning my call. We have your attacker, a Johann Hendry, in custody. He confessed who

his ‘boss’ was and we have that man in custody as well. A Harold Tempest.”

“Oh, what a relief.” She relaxed a fraction. She’d never heard either name.

“It is. We’re still riddling out Harold’s motivation for the attack and threats, but I thought you’d feel better knowing they won’t be coming after you or King Nolan.”

“Thank you, Jensen. I feel much better.”

“I’m glad we could help. Give my regards to the king.”

“I will. Goodbye.”

He hung up, and she gripped the phone. What a relief. Now she needed to think about what to do with the media leak. That seemed easier than knowing what to do about Nolan and their relationship. She couldn’t in good conscience pursue him if Kiera wasn’t ready. Maybe when the girl was older ...

A heavy weight pushed down on her shoulders. Being without Nolan would be excruciating.

Her phone rang. She glanced at it and then cleared her throat. “Prime Minister Carrera.”

“Ms. Prescott.” His voice was warm, happy even. “I suppose you’ve heard the good news?”

“Good news?” Madeline was at a loss. Had he been informed of the attack this morning and the capture of the man and his boss?

“Albert Gustaff and George Monaco have been persuaded that your emissary mission has been a success and the king is not in league with Naomi Rindlesbacher.”

“Oh.” She wanted to say ‘finally,’ but that meant ... “I guess I’ll leave the castle and come back to my seat in parliament, then.”

“Yes, that’s what we’re all hoping for. Unless ... is there any truth to these media rumors? Did you and King Nolan fall in love this past month?”

The breath rushed out of her. She tried for an airy tone. “You sound like a matchmaker, Prime Minister.”

He laughed. “Ah. Forgive me. I would love to see you and the king happy.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.” If he was surprised by her lack of answer, he didn’t reveal that.

“What do you feel the queen’s role is?”

“From my understanding, to support the king.” His voice was more interested now, as if she was telling him that Nolan had proposed.

“What would that look like on a daily basis?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not certain what you’re asking.”

“Would the queen attend meetings with parliament or you, possibly hold her own meetings as well, or would she take a more behind-the-scenes approach?”

“Oh. I see.” He paused. “I know Queen Anne was more behind-the-scenes and everyone appreciated her quiet support, organizing parties and banquets, being there for her children and the king, being a face of benevolence and love. Queen Anne, and anyone who married King Nolan would be a Queen Consort, no constitutional power, you see?”

“I appreciate your insight,” she said quickly before he continued. Queen Anne had been perfect in everything and especially as a Queen Consort. Madeline’s dreams of being an active part of running the country were just dreams. “Please have our connections with the media broadcast that the king and I are no longer dating.”

She knew if it was spread around that they weren’t dating, Kiera wouldn’t deal with taunts about it any longer, and any other opportunist who might try to hurt or threaten Madeline to get to Nolan would realize it was pointless. She’d have her freedom back.

Freedom had never looked so lonely.

“Oh. If that’s what you’d like, of course I can do that for you.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, sir.”

“If that’s what you’d like,” he repeated. His voice was cautious. Madeline could sense he wanted to say more.

“Yes. Thank you. Good day.”

Madeline disconnected the call before he could even return the farewell. Madeline felt a letdown like she’d never felt in her life. Her visions of supporting Nolan in her unique way were just that—visions. She and Nolan were no longer dating. It had started out fake, but nothing could be more real to her than the love she felt for Nolan and his family. His analogy of a parent’s love expanding and growing with each child made sense now. She loved Kiera, Hope, Faith, Tristan, Jennifer, Macey, and all of his family and hers. Loving them didn’t take away the depth of her love for Chad. Her love had only expanded.

Sadly, the epiphany didn’t help. She and Nolan couldn’t be together if it hurt Kiera. She loved the girl far too much to cause her anguish.

It was done. She should go home. Live her life. Be independent and happy.

No. She couldn’t lie to herself. She would be miserable without Nolan.

Madeline blinked, realizing how dramatic she was acting. She and Nolan could date. This wasn’t the end of the world. It was simply a new step forward. She squared her shoulders and before she could second guess herself, she called Chad.

“Mum! I’ve been trying to reach you all day. T assures me you’re safe and all right. Jensen would not let me participate in the questioning of your attacker.”

“That’s probably for the best, love.”

“That’s a matter of opinion, Mum.” His voice was rough, but then he smoothed it out. “How are you? Truly?”

“Fabulous. As always.”

“My beautiful mum. You are incredibly brave—”

“Only because I have you around. Chad, how busy are you?”

“Never too busy for you.”

She smiled. Chad was an ideal son and always there for her.

“Can you come take me home? My mission at the castle is finished.”

There was a pause. “What did the king say about you leaving?”

She couldn’t lie to her son. “We’re figuring that out. How soon can you be here?”

“Is an hour all right?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Mum. I thought you and the king ... Is everything well between the two of you?”

“Oh yes, it’s fine, but we knew this situation was temporary. We’ll figure everything out. I don’t want you to worry. Now, get your important tasks done and I’ll see you soon.”

“All right. We’ll chat more while I drive you home.”

“Thank you, my love.” Madeline hung up the phone before the tears hit.

She was leaving.

Nolan. Kiera. Jennifer. Macey. All of these people that she loved and had thought needed her.

Nolan would say he needed her.

She’d told him she needed to take things slow. Kiera’s tears confirmed that. Her need for independence confirmed that. Not knowing what role she’d take as the queen confirmed that. Being attacked by a man intent on hurting Nolan this morning confirmed that.

Her leaving wasn't saying they were done. Her emissary mission was accomplished, and they'd figure the rest out. They only needed time.

Why, then, did it hurt so horribly?

CHAPTER

Thirteen

NOLAN TRIED to pay attention to the material Tristan was presenting to the parks and recreation department, but his mind was with Madeline. Was she all right? Did she need him to hold her? When she said they should go slow ... how slow did that mean? He'd wait for her. He knew he would. But he'd get married tomorrow if she was on board.

The door creaked slightly open. Tristan didn't notice as he was presenting, but Nolan perked up. Especially as he glimpsed through the crack the most beloved face, emerald eyes, full lips, and the silky blonde hair.

He motioned for her to come in, but she shook her head.

Nolan gently nudged the computer until only Tristan's face showed on the screen. Then he slid away from the desk and walked on soft feet to the door. He slipped out, closed it behind him, and he was right in her space. She blinked up at him, her emerald eyes beguiling and full of longing for him. He wrapped her up tight. Holding Madeline in his arms, nothing had ever felt so perfect. They'd only been apart since lunch, but he missed her.

She shifted, easing back and glancing up at him. Where a moment ago he'd seen longing, now her gaze seemed closed off.

"How has your afternoon been?" he asked before she could pull away. "The meetings just aren't the same without you."

She smiled, but her chin quivered.

“Madeline?”

She stepped back out of his arms and rushed out, “You heard Jensen caught the attacker’s boss?”

“I did hear that. Wonderful news. I can hike with you again.”

Her eyes brightened. “I also got a call from Prime Minister Carrera. My emissary mission is complete. No associations with Naomi Rindlesbacher and no evidence of other irregularities for our illustrious king.”

He couldn’t smile. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Nolan.” Her voice softened. “Chad’s waiting outside with my things. I need to go home.”

“Why?” Before she could tell him all the reasons, he held up a hand. “Stay with me. I could have guards drive you to parliament on the days you need to meet. It won’t be the same without you here.”

“Thank you, but I think we both need some space.”

She might need space from him and his responsibilities, but he definitely didn’t need it from her.

“I need to take our relationship slow.”

He was beginning to hate that word. He’d taken his dating of Anne very slow. Why, with Madeline, did he want to speed ahead? He could claim he was older and knew his own mind better but he also was desperately in love with her.

“Me leaving will help with that,” she continued. “We can date. Quietly. Tell Ray I’m sorry about the platoon of soldiers he’ll have to send for each date.”

“Madeline...” His voice was low and painful. “I’ll happily date you for a year, ten years, whatever it takes, but—”

“That’s good,” she interrupted quietly. “Because Kiera isn’t ready for us to be serious.”

“Excuse me? How do you know that? Kiera adores you. All my children do. Ray told me he approves of us getting married. He’s seen that you make me happy. And you do.”

Tears brightened her emerald eyes. “Kiera’s not ready. She was made fun of at school today.” She shook her head. “The media got ahold of us dating.”

“A lot slower than I thought they would.” But the more important issue... “Kiera was a target?”

“I don’t have all the details, but let’s not push her. She’s an incredible teenager and obviously still mourning her mum. We need to take this slow for us and for her and to resolve ... a lot of things for me.”

It was a gut punch. Kiera had been taunted. Madeline didn’t need him like he needed her.

Time. He’d have to give her time.

She shook her head, and her blonde hair teased her shoulders. He wanted to touch her hair. He wanted to touch her, love her, never have her leave.

“The prime minister is going to have our media people spread the word that you and I are no longer dating. That will ensure nobody comes after me to get to you.”

“That’s good.” He never wanted her hurt or scared.

“Yes. Very good.” Her smile was full of pain. It ripped at his heart. “I’d better let you get back to your meetings.”

“I wish you could be in each meeting with us,” he said. “T and I both miss your insight and experience. I miss every bit of you.”

Her smile became more genuine, but then she frowned. Had he said something wrong?

“I’ll see you soon.” She turned and rushed down the hall without a kiss, a hug, even a handshake.

Nolan leaned against the nearby wall.

She was upset, and she needed space. What about her safety? Chad was taking her home, so he’d make certain her house was safe. With those men arrested, she should be fine, but he selfishly wanted to claim she was only safe here. By his side.

He reluctantly went back into the meeting. He hadn't lied that it wasn't the same without Madeline. The afternoon dragged on and finally it was time for dinner.

Walking into the small dining room, he was plowed into by Kiera before he could take two steps into the room. He hugged his daughter tight. He hated that she'd been taunted, but that happened with thirteen-year-olds, especially a thirteen-year-old princess. He'd have to talk to her about keeping her chin up and the fact that you can only control yourself and your reactions, but he'd also talk to the teacher and request the girls knew their words were hurtful and to please not repeat them.

If only Madeline was here with him to talk things out with Kiera. Had Kiera really said she didn't want Madeline as her mum, or was his girl only trying to figure out how to love Madeline while not betraying her mum's memory? Madeline was incredible with Kiera, and love shone from his daughter when they were together.

He met Macey's glance over Kiera's head. Tristan and Jennifer were here, but not Ray.

"Where's Chad's mum?" Kiera asked, pulling back to look up at him.

"Well, love, she needed to return home."

Kiera's eyes widened. "But I want her here. With us."

"Me too, love. Me too." Before he broke down and begged Kiera to want Madeline as her mum, taking away at least one barrier, he looked to Macey again. "Where's Ray?"

"He just left for Traverse and the prison. Jensen and his people are still questioning the ..." she looked to Kiera, "man from this morning, and Jensen asked him to come."

Something tingled at the back of Nolan's mind, something he didn't like. Had Jensen found more information from the attacker or his 'boss' that was concerning?

Before he could excuse himself to call Ray and find out, Kiera tugged at his hand. "Pops?"

“Yes, sweetie?” He glanced down. Had Kiera gotten taller? She was as tall as some petite women now. He didn’t like her growing up too fast.

“Macey and I had a good talk today.” She glanced back at Macey, who nodded encouragingly. “I wanted to tell Chad’s mum all about it tonight, but now she’s gone. Can we get her back?”

“I hope so.” He had to clear his throat. “Madeline and I are going to keep dating, but she needs to take things slow.” Did his daughter understand what that meant? Kiera had better not be ready to date for a long while. If only Madeline was here to tease him about that thought and remind him he’d taught Kiera well and she’d be safe and smart when she did date.

“That stinks. I want her here.” Kiera looked petulant, which was very unlike her.

“I’m going to ask her on a date for Saturday. Maybe after our date, she will come visit you and we can swim together.”

“Saturday? That’s three days away.” Kiera folded her arms across her chest. “Can you tell her for me now that I love her and I want her to be my mum?”

Nolan’s eyes widened, and he heard Jennifer and Tristan both exclaim, “Kiera?”

Macey smiled. She knew what was happening.

“I thought you didn’t want a new mum,” Nolan said.

“I’m sorry, Pops.” Kiera’s blue eyes brightened. “I’m not trying to replace Mum and I won’t forget her, but is it wrong that I love Chad’s mum with my whole heart and I want to be with her?”

He felt a stirring in his chest. “No, love. That’s exactly how I feel.”

Now to convince Madeline of that.

“Macey and I talked for a long time, and it’s hard to wrap your mind around, but Mum would want us to be happy. She loved us with her whole heart. Chad’s mum makes you and me

and Macey and all of us happy. Do you think Chad's mum would marry us if you asked?"

He had asked, and it hadn't gone over well, but his heart thumped faster. Madeline thought Kiera would be another obstacle between them, but she wasn't. Somehow Madeline had only gotten part of the story.

Why had he let her walk away without a goodbye kiss? Without plans? He knew it was the opposite of her 'take things slow' approach, but he felt it building within him—he needed to chase after her, make certain she knew how deeply he loved her, how committed he was to figuring out their relationship and their path and their roles, that Kiera and his children loved her and wanted both of them to be happy.

"I don't know, love," he said to Kiera. "It might take some time."

Kiera gave a heavy sigh, but then she pushed at him. "She said she wanted to date. Go date. Go take her to dinner and kiss her and all that stuff. Tell her we can take it slow, but we all love her and want her with us." She gestured to Tristan, Jennifer, and Macey.

Nolan looked over at his oldest son and two of his daughters-in-law. "All of you?"

"Yes," Jennifer confirmed. "At Kiera's insistence, we've called everyone else. They all love Madeline and want you to propose."

Nolan's heart rate kept increasing.

"And we've all seen how happy you've been with her here," Tristan added. "Especially me. She makes our meetings interesting and fun. I don't know about you, but I missed her today. Could we bring her on as an advisor to the king until you convince her to marry you?"

Nolan let out a short laugh, but then he almost jumped in the air in celebration. "That is a fabulous idea, T. I'm going to go see what she thinks."

"And tell her you love her, and we love her," Kiera prompted.

“I will do that.”

“And take her somewhere nice for dinner and kiss her.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Though they might have to order takeout. He wasn’t ready to have Ray send a platoon. With Naomi still out there somewhere and the man’s threats from this morning, he couldn’t simply waltz into a restaurant.

“Well, go then.” Kiera pushed at him again, so Nolan picked her up and kissed her cheek. She squeezed him around the neck. “I love you, Pops.”

“I love you.” He set her down and then hurried to hug Macey, Jennifer, and even Tristan.

“Go then,” Jennifer teased.

He grinned and then sprinted from the dining room. His Lamborghini Veneno would get him there fast.

He reached the garage before he ran into two guards.

“King Nolan?” Sergeant Braxton asked, the man’s large frame towering over him.

“I’ve got an errand to run in Traverse,” he rushed out. “Please follow me.”

He was in his Lamborghini before they could respond. He pushed the start button, sped out of the garage, out of the main gates, and down the hill. Thankfully, the gates at the lower barricade saw him coming and raised the gate. He lifted a hand as he sailed through. He kept his speed reasonable through the village, but as soon as he hit the valley road, he was shifting through gears and pressing the accelerator to the floor. The Veneno had never flown so beautifully.

Madeline. She might still need to take things slow, but he would share Kiera’s words, Tristan’s idea, his children’s approval, and more importantly, everything in his heart.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

MADLINE THOUGHT she'd feel comfortable and her mind would clear when she got home, but she felt more confused than ever and completely unlike herself. She'd had to keep Chad's questions at bay the entire drive and redirect over and over again to keep the attention off herself. When he finally cleared her house, armed the security system, and told her he and Hope would be by later to check on her, she had almost sagged in relief. Yet she knew when they came back later, she would be in for a grilling. The look in his eyes when he left said he knew she was a mess and planned to help her through it.

Their roles were officially reversed. Heaven help her.

Madeline put away her clothes, wiped the dust off everything, and opened all the windows to air everything out. Chad wouldn't like that, but she was already feeling cooped up. She loved her little home with the backyard close to the river, but she missed the openness and large windows of the castle—and especially Nolan and Kiera and all the family. She used to think she enjoyed peace and quiet, but she'd been lying to herself. She wanted a castle full of people to love.

Dinner time approached, and she thought morosely about all the meals with Nolan and his family at the castle. Would they all be laughing and teasing? Would they go swimming after dinner or go on a hike? Would Kiera be sad without 'Chad's mum' there?

Then she remembered Kiera loved her but didn't want her for her mum. She couldn't stomach dinner. When would Chad and Hope come by? He'd said they had plans for dinner, so probably not for at least a couple hours.

Madeline went out on her back patio, listened to the river, and picked dead blooms off her potted plants. Bless her neighbor, who'd watered them for her for a month. She'd have to do something really nice for Janessa.

Wandering back inside, she looked for a book on her Kindle, but nothing caught her attention.

She couldn't sit here any longer. She laced up her runners and headed for the front door. Chad wouldn't like her going on the river trail alone, but she'd be fine. She'd jogged the trail most mornings and walked it most evenings when the weather permitted. It was a gorgeous August evening, and being inside was making her insane.

Grabbing a small canister of pepper spray, she slipped it into her pocket. Chad would feel better if she did that. After her attack this morning, she'd feel better too.

Would the pepper spray have helped ward off that brute?

Turning off her alarm, she opened her door, blinking at the bright sunshine. The roar of a motor penetrated her peaceful neighborhood. She shrank back against the doorframe, alarmed, but then a smile touched her lips.

The gorgeous black Lamborghini driven by the one and only king of Augustine purred up to her curb. She couldn't see Nolan through the glare of the windshield, but she knew it was him.

He'd come for her.

She wanted to run down her porch steps and throw herself into his arms, but her legs were weak with a mixture of relief and longing. This incredible man was the king of their country, but to her he was Nolan, the love of her life.

The door swung open and Nolan eased out dressed in a perfectly-cut tan suit—long legs first, then his lean torso, then his handsome and perfect face. He studied her for a brief

moment, longing so evident in his blue gaze that her heart raced out of control.

Then he swept around the luxury car and stormed up the walk. The determination in his eyes grew, and she had to lean heavily against the doorframe.

Nolan pumped up the stairs, strode into her space, picked her up off her feet, and cradled her against his chest.

“Nolan?” she squeaked out, stunned by his bold move. He was the only person who cradled her in his arms like this. She felt protected, cared for, and loved in his arms.

“We have to get a lot of things straight, Madeline.”

“Oh really?” She tried to infuse some sass into her tone, but it was sadly lacking. He’d come for her. She had no idea how to resolve all of their concerns, but Nolan was here and he was holding her and the rest could wait.

“Get *this* straight,” she said.

Then she arched up and kissed him.

Nolan kissed her back, the love and yearning he felt for her lighting her up and infusing her with energy, purpose, and love.

He carried her into the house and kicked the door shut with his foot. It felt like she was a new bride being carried over the threshold. She wanted that with this strong man, but there were a lot of things to get straight.

Nolan lowered her to her feet and pulled back, catching a breath. “Maybe things are more straight than I think they are.” He gave her a crooked grin that she absolutely loved.

She pulled his head down and whispered against his lips, “I’ll straighten you out. After we kiss for a good, long time.”

“I love that plan.” His mouth came down hard on hers, the perfect mixture of coaxing, determination, strength, and humility. He’d do anything for her. She could taste it in his kiss.

The door next to them swung open so hard it knocked over a vase on the nearby entry table. Two large men stood on the porch, pointing handguns at them.

Nolan yanked Madeline behind him.

“Get inside,” a female voice said from behind the men. “Clock is ticking.”

Madeline’s stomach turned over at the sound of that voice.

“Naomi?” Nolan stepped cautiously backward, easing Madeline away from the men and Naomi.

The men both pointed their pistols at Nolan’s head, and Naomi stepped in from the porch. Madeline’s heart raced out of control. There was no way those men wouldn’t kill Nolan instantly with both of their pistols pointed at his head and at short range.

“Greetings, King Nolan.” Naomi smiled wickedly, then checked over her shoulder. “We’ve only got a minute. You left your men in the dust, but they’ll catch up. You’ll be dead and we’ll be gone before they can interfere. Then I’ll pick off all your children one by one. You took everything from me. You need to know before you die that I will return the favor.”

Two vehicles raced into the neighborhood, both moving much too quickly to be one of her neighbors. Naomi turned to look and cursed. Her men’s gazes swung out the open door as well.

“Get down,” Madeline begged Nolan, pulling on his shoulder.

He ducked and pushed her back out of the way. Car doors opened and slammed.

Madeline aimed the pepper spray she’d worked out of her pocket over Nolan’s shoulder and pressed the button.

“Get inside,” Naomi barked at her men, shoving them from behind. The men coughed and sputtered as the spray hit them.

Naomi ducked away from the stream, hiding behind the two large men.

Madeline closed her eyes and held her breath, holding the button down. She had to distract these people from hurting Nolan.

Nolan wrapped his arms around her and dropped to the floor, covering her with his body. The pepper spray flew from her hand. Nolan coughed and wheezed, and Madeline's eyes watered as the mist from the spray enveloped them.

Shots rang out, and she screamed. Nolan flattened on top of her as several loud thuds echoed around them.

Was Nolan hit? No! He'd come for her, and now he'd been killed because of her. She'd done exactly what that monster demanded this morning and gotten him alone, away from his protection. What had she done? She couldn't live without him. If she'd had any reservations about loving him and his family with all of her heart, they disappeared in the reality that she may have just lost him.

Footsteps pounded up the sidewalk.

"Nolan!" Madeline screamed. She blinked open watery eyes and tried to determine if he'd been killed.

He rolled off her with a groan and a cough.

Her heart skipped a beat. He was alive!

"Nolan?"

"I'll kill him!" a female voice shrieked before dissolving into a coughing fit.

Naomi Rindlesbacher pointed a gun at Nolan. Moisture streamed from her red eyes, and she blinked furiously. Her men were both on the floor, blood oozing from wounds, not moving.

Nolan scrambled to his knees, tugging Madeline behind him. "Put the gun down, Naomi. It's finished."

"No!" she screamed.

Madeline could see men outside the open door, lining the sidewalk and creeping up to the porch. Was that Jensen and Ray? Could they stop this crazy woman from killing Nolan?

“If you shoot me, they’ll kill you,” Nolan said, his voice level and reasonable, as if talking to a toddler. “Put the gun down and you’ll live.”

“I have nothing left to live for,” she shrieked, coughing again. “You threw William off a cliff.” The gun shook her in hand. “Chief Jensen shot Treven in cold blood.” More coughs wracked her body. “And *your* son, Chad,” she gasped out, glaring at Madeline, “he murdered Roger and Ramone, my last hope to rule on the throne with me. I’m alone. I’ve been hiding, miserable, for eighteen months. All I have left is revenge. I might not be able to kill your children like you’ve killed my son, but I’ll kill you.”

Her mouth hardened into a determined line, and the gun in her hand steadied.

Madeline prayed desperately for a miracle.

“I killed your son,” a male voice hollered from outside. The man was unafraid, unrepentant, and brave—Chief Jensen. “I shot Treven multiple times, and I have no regrets. It’s me you want to kill.”

“Jensen,” Nolan breathed.

Naomi whipped around.

Multiple guns fired, and Naomi slammed onto Madeline’s hardwood floor. Nolan covered Madeline with his body again. She shuddered and clung to him, coughing to clear her lungs and blinking quickly to clear her vision. The aftereffects of the pepper spray were settling, but the aftereffects of the violence she’d been a part of this morning and tonight had her shaking.

Footsteps pounded into the house. The gun in Naomi’s hand was kicked away, even though she had to be dead.

“Come here,” Nolan murmured. He stood and easily lifted her to her feet, ushering her away from the bodies and the men and the smell of gunpowder, pepper spray, blood, and death. “Ray? I’m taking Madeline out back by the river.”

“Go.” Ray waved a hand at them. “We’ll clean this up, but four of my men will follow you.” He gestured to the men to run around to the back.

Madeline almost smiled at that. She'd been uncertain if she wanted guards trailing her, but her not taking guards this morning and Nolan out-driving his guard this evening had almost been disastrous. She couldn't lie any longer and claim she needed time to process everything that loving Nolan entailed. Those moments of thinking he was dead as he'd flattened on top of her had been the longest of her life.

She loved him. She couldn't live without him.

Ray's blue gaze zeroed in on Madeline. Blue eyes so like his dad's. She loved those eyes. "Madeline. Are you all right?"

"Yes." She shook her head. "No."

Ray nodded as if he understood. How could this tough, brave general who had seen death, inflicted death, and protected so many, understand?

"Thank you for coming for me." She looked at Chief Jensen and Ray. Their men lined up behind them awaiting instructions, except for the four that had already vaulted her fence to secure the backyard.

"Of course," Ray said.

Jensen nodded.

"How did you know to come?" Nolan asked. "You beat my guards here."

"We were interrogating the suspect together, and he burst out that Naomi was coming," Jensen said. He exchanged a look with Ray.

"It was a gut instinct to come this direction," Ray said, his blue gaze steady on Madeline. "But Chad told me earlier he was bringing you home and I had a feeling." He shrugged. "So we rushed here."

"Thank you," Madeline said. "Both of you."

"Thank you, Ray, Jensen," Nolan held her close and nodded to each of them, then the men behind them. "All of you." He gently ushered her away from the bodies. "Do you want to go out back?"

“No.”

“No?” Nolan glanced down at her. “Where do you want to go, love?”

“Home,” she said, turning in his arms to face him.

“Home?” he repeated, obviously confused. “Madeline, sweetheart, you are home.”

“Your home,” she whispered, staring into his blue, blue eyes.

Nolan’s eyes widened, and then his face split into a grin. He bowed his head and kissed her. He kissed her so thoroughly she was lifted into a haze of happiness.

Together. A team. Madeline was no longer alone. She hadn’t realized what she’d been missing, but Nolan had already shown her love and happiness the likes of which she’d never known existed. She could hardly wait for the next step.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

NOLAN SAVORED each moment of the intense kiss with Madeline. Every kiss with her made his brain cloudy and made him feel far removed from the accomplished and with-it king of Augustine. He felt like a twenty-year-old, heady with love and longing to kiss her and never stop.

He finally forced himself to pull back for oxygen and noticed their audience. Well, none of the men were looking at them, but it was obvious they were trying not to. Jensen had a smirky-smile on his lips. Ray appeared far too serious. All their men moved with efficiency, cataloguing the crime scene and trying not to watch their king kiss the future queen.

Future queen? Did he dare hope? She had said she wanted to go home. His home. He wanted to make it hers officially.

“Madeline,” he whispered, gazing down into her emerald eyes. He wrapped an arm around her and ushered her out onto the patio. Four guards had taken up stations to watch over them as the river trail was on the other side of a thick layer of bushes.

“I know you want to go home, but can we talk first? I’m not certain I could drive with all I have to tell you and all I want to hear from you. It’s bursting out of me.”

“The best driver in the kingdom, the mighty king, is worried about his ability to drive?” She pursed her lips and looked him over. “I don’t believe it.”

“Well, love...” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “If you knew what you do to me, you wouldn’t want

me driving at all.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Are you saying I was in mortal danger when you hot-rodged through the country?”

He chuckled. “I’d never put you in danger.” His mouth tightened immediately as he realized the inaccuracy of what he’d just said. “Madeline. Because of me, you were attacked this morning and this evening.”

“Stop.” She put a finger to his lips, and he immediately stilled. Her fingertip was warm.

Heat swirled through him. “Why do I need to stop?”

“I can’t think straight when you do that.” She pulled her hand back.

He arched an eyebrow. “See why I shouldn’t drive?”

She smiled. “Well, let’s get this talking out of the way so you can either drive me home or kiss me for a very long time.”

The heat turned into a bonfire. He cradled her close. “Both, please.”

She cuddled into him, and though they weren’t kissing, it was perfect to have her in his arms.

Suddenly, she stiffened and looked up at him with a wary gaze. “Sweet Kiera. I can’t come home with you. We’ve got to give Kiera time to come around. Even if it takes years.” She jutted out her chin, so appealing in her defense of his daughter.

Nolan directed her to the patio set, and they sat side by side. He held on to her hand, and their knees touched as he turned slightly so he could study her beautiful face. “Kiera and Macey had a lot of time to talk this afternoon.”

“I overheard their conversation.” She worried her lip.

“I don’t think you heard all of it. As I walked into the dining room, all Kiera wanted to know was ‘where’s Chad’s mum?’” He smiled softly, and she returned it. “Macey helped her to understand that Anne would want her, and all of us, to be happy. She believes that truth now, and she wants you to be her mum.”

“She does?”

He nodded. “She shoved me out of the room and told me to tell you that she loves you. That all of us love you.” He cocked his head and studied her bright gaze. “She also wanted to know if you would marry us.”

Her eyes widened. “She did?”

“Yes. But she understands if you need to take it slow.”

“She does?” Her hand quivered in his.

“She does. We all do.” He looked over her beautiful face. “But Madeline, you need to know ... I love you completely, desperately, passionately. I love you today, and I’m going to love you forever. Yes, your kiss transports me to a different world, but this is not just physical or a quick burn. I’m in love with you—mind, body, and soul. I love to debate with, tease with, and learn from you. I love your insights and ideas. I love the way you nurture all our children, especially Kiera, Jenn, and Macey. I love hiking with you, swimming with you, eating every meal with you, and being in meetings with you. You actually make meetings fun and interesting. As each of my children has told me today, you make me happy. I want to spend the rest of my days making you happy.”

“You seem to like a whole lot about me.” Her voice was teasing, but her emerald eyes were tender and warm.

“Oh, I do. The list goes on and on.” He paused. “I know the thought of being queen is overwhelming, and I hate the thought of you being in danger because of me—”

“Nolan. We were both in danger today because we didn’t wait for our guards.”

“Yes, but I thought you were averse to having guards.”

“It isn’t the most convenient thing, but to be with you, to love you and be loved by you, to be part of your family that I adore, to know that you’re safe ... I’ll take a little inconvenience.”

His heart thumped harder. “Are you saying...?”

“I valued my independence, but I value every moment I have with you more. And I realized today that your analogy about love expanding is true. I love each of our children and in-laws with my whole heart, and my love keeps growing.”

He could only smile at her.

“Would you mind very much if I wasn’t a typical queen consort, though?”

“All I care about is that you’re *my* queen,” he promised her. “What did you have in mind?”

“I want to be part of yours and Tristan’s meetings and take some responsibilities off your plates and run meetings on my own. I don’t want to simply organize banquets, go to women’s lunches, and support you from the sidelines. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but I feel like I could do more to help you and our country with my background and experience.”

For a moment, he simply stared at her.

“You don’t like that idea?” she asked, her voice wary.

“Oh, Madeline. I love that idea. Do you realize how much you’ve helped and inspired T and me? Given us a different perspective, fresh eyes, hope? Both of us would be honored to have you working with us every day, and T actually suggested something similar. We want you to be on our team.”

“I want to be on your team, Nolan.” She smiled softly. “I never aspired to be queen, but I will do my best to be *your* queen. Because all that truly matters to me is that I love the king more than I ever imagined I could love a man.”

Nolan let out a very un-kingly whoop that probably startled the guards and the ducks in the river. Then he swooped her off the cushion and onto his lap and proceeded to kiss her.

They were lost in each other until they were finished with their kissing session. The sun went down, and they were both embarrassed to learn that a platoon of guards had been stationed to watch over them. Nolan apologized to the guards, but they all were as gracious as ever, even if Captain Levi did have a rare twinkle in his eyes.

As they walked out front, Chad and Hope met them.

Chad hugged his mum tight. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” She beamed up at Nolan. “My king came for me.”

Chad rolled his eyes and looked at Nolan.

“He’s taking me home, Chad,” Madeline said.

Chad looked confused.

“Major Chad Prescott,” Nolan said very seriously. “May I have permission to marry your mum?”

Chad glanced back and forth between them.

Hope nudged him. “Yes,” she whispered. “He makes your mum very happy. She’s sparkling, and you can’t say no to the king.”

Madeline laughed at that. “I tell him that all the time.”

Nolan lifted his hands and quirked an eyebrow. “I try not to abuse the power, but don’t tempt me.”

Everyone but Chad laughed. He looked Nolan over and then a grin quirked on his lips. “You do make my mum happy, and you’ve always treated me like one of your own. I’d be honored to have you marry my mum.” He stuck out his hand, and they shook on it.

Then there were rounds of hugs and tears with Hope and Madeline. Nolan watched with a smile, pondering how soon he could buy Madeline the perfect ring. Jennifer wore the queen’s ring, and he felt that was right. Madeline deserved a unique, special, and breathtaking ring to match what she was to him.

Nolan escorted Madeline to the Lamborghini and, for the first time in his life, he drove slowly. He didn’t want to ditch his guards, and he wanted to savor each moment of their time together.

When they hit his valley and glimpsed the castle glowing across the way, she murmured, “Home.”

“Home,” Nolan repeated.

“I’ve loved this languid drive and time together, but I can hardly wait to hug Kiera. Then you and I are going to hug and kiss for a very long time.”

His stomach heated. “Are you saying you want me to go fast?”

“Yes, love. Let’s feel the power of this Lambo.”

Nolan laughed. Then he pressed down on the gas and they shot down the highway. Madeline’s laughter was the most beautiful thing he’d ever heard.

Thank you for reading about the royals of Augustine. I hope you loved the series! The fun continues in the three-book Christmas series, *Christmas in Augustine*.

Hugs and thanks,

Cami

Christmas in Augustine

The Royal Captain and the Designer

The Royal Guard and the Royal Stylist

The Impulsive Princess and the Soldier

Sweet Royal Romance Suspense

The General Prince and the Nerd

The Brave Prince and the Teacher

The Doctor Prince and the Outsider

The Ninja Prince and the Investigator

The Charming Prince and the Single Mum

The Crown Prince and the Traitor

The Police Chief and the Musician

The Royal Major and the Executive

The Grieving King and the Emissary

The Royal Captain and the Designer

Chapter One

Faith Radisson peeked around the corner of the solid mahogany wood doorframe and her heart took off at a gallop.

“He’s coming,” she whispered to her co-conspirator Princess Kiera August.

They hid in the elaborate ballroom, quiet on this early December morning. Outside the towering Augustine castle the world was picture perfect—high mountains covered with green pine trees and bare-limbed deciduous trees heaped with white snow. Inside the ornate and spacious castle, decorated like a fantasy for Christmas, Faith’s world was going to be perfect—as soon as they waylaid Captain Levi Favor and talked him into a snowball fight. Faith had it on good authority that he was finished with his shift and headed home.

She would love to see his home and meet his parents, rumor had it he lived on one of the farms out in the valley. First she had to convince him to date her. She’d met Levi over a year ago on her first visit to the royal family’s palace in Augustine. The delightful Kiera had talked Levi and Lieutenant Mason Henson into guarding them on a hike through the forest to the waterfall.

Faith had been half in love with the captain since that first meeting, but regrettably something was holding him back. He would initially respond to her flirtations or meet her gaze with a smolder in his dark-brown eyes, but then he’d always school his reaction and keep his distance. The only gossip she’d

gotten out of anybody was he'd buried a sweet fiancée years ago. What a heartbreak, but Faith knew loss and she knew her Savior's healing grace. Her sister Grace was in heaven and Faith knew she was watching over her. Her Savior and her Grace would help her heal her wounded hero.

She was determined that this Christmas, invited to stay in Augustine for the entire month to celebrate with everyone the marriage of her brother-in-law Chad's loving mum Madeline to the incredibly kind and welcoming King Nolan, she would get Levi to fall for her. Maybe an impossible quest, but Faith focused on the positive. Despite being deserted by her parents at twelve, having her oldest sister brutally murdered two years ago, and almost being shot and killed by the foul Ramone Pitcher last year, she'd seen miracles and would never stop believing.

Levi's strong, determined footfalls approached. Her palms were clammy and she wiped them on the black dri-fit Lady Fit running pants she wore. Pants she'd designed. She also wore a pale blue fitted t-shirt under a white running jacket. Her long blond hair was loose and her makeup carefully understated. It would be obvious to any female she wasn't headed to or from the gym but she wanted to look pretty, fit, and casual. Hopefully she achieved the objective in Levi's mind.

She prayed today was the day she and Kiera convinced him to spend time with her. The snowball fight was only an excuse, but she figured nobody could say no to the adorable thirteen-year old Kiera. If Levi was that hardened maybe there was no chance.

She edged to the center of the doorframe and Kiera moved with her, giggling quietly at their ploy. She adored the young princess. She'd overheard Hope telling Madeline that Faith enjoyed Kiera so much because she was still youthful and a child at heart. While that was partially true, Hope spent so much time with Kiera because she'd also lost her mum at a young age and she knew how it felt to live in a world of grownups. Though her sisters were only two and four years older than her respectively they'd all been forced to grow up quick when their parents left. Faith had delved deep into her

creative mind and mostly shut the real world out. She liked her make-believe world but she loved people as well. Especially Kiera and all the royals. Being here was a dream come true. The royal fantasy dream was fabulous, but it was the complete, loving, and faith-filled family dream turned reality that she couldn't get enough of.

As she stepped forward to intercept Levi, she got a hard shove to her upper back from behind. Stumbling, she slammed into Levi's side.

He jolted and turned. Thankfully his reaction was to wrap his arms around her to steady her, rather than let her fall in a heap to the hardwood floor.

"Faith?" he whispered. It was a husky, beautiful whisper, tinted with that fabulous Augustine accent that created more yearning inside to never leave this spot.

She wrapped her arms tightly around his firm lower back and blinked up at him. "Forgive me. I had a little devious shove from behind." She smiled to show that no harm was done. Bless Kiera. Faith hadn't known it was coming, but it had been timed perfectly and Faith could not complain about the results.

Levi released her, deftly unwrapped her arms from around him, ushered her behind him, and said, "Stay here while I search for the perpetrator."

"Levi!" She spit out in exasperation, forcing herself not to get distracted by his lyrical voice. Faith loved America, but this man with his Augustinian accent could easily convince her to trade nationalities.

"It was Kiera," she explained. "She was only trying ..."

Levi whipped around to face her. His dark eyes pierced through her, sharp and probing. "Trying?" He prompted.

Faith bit at her lip. How to explain without sounding as desperate as she was to get his attention? She looked over his tall, manly frame, the dark eyes framed by thick lashes and brows, the shadow of a beard on his jaw. He was entralling, and he looked at her as if concerned for her sanity or maybe he

thought of her as a child. She wasn't certain, but either way, it could explain why he kept his distance.

Glancing down, she lost her bravery and realized she needed a different scheme than a snowball fight to entice a soldier this manly and perfect. She could only imagine how many distinguished and proper Augustinian women pursued Captain Levi.

"Faith?" He questioned and then he gently tilted her chin up with just the edge of his forefinger. It was a simple touch. Nothing to faint about. The warmth of his finger and the depth of his gaze made her lightheaded.

They studied each other. A long, beautiful moment where hearts connected, birds flew back north during the winter to sing for them alone, and heaven smiled down on their future union.

He cleared his throat, yanked his hand back, and clasped his hands behind his back. Even through his black uniform she could see the muscles outlined in his chest, shoulders, and arms. She designed feminine workout gear not male. Looking over Levi she created in her mind the ideal pattern and fabric blend to showcase his irresistible frame and well-developed muscles.

"Come on, Captain Levi!" Kiera performed a front flip through the double doors of the ballroom and launched into their space in the hallway. The child could rarely walk into or out of a room. "We want you to have a snowball fight with us." Her blue eyes lit up and Faith was grateful the princess was firmly on her side. Nobody could resist Kiera.

Levi bowed, military stiff, to the princess and then glanced from Kiera to Faith and back. "A snowball fight?" he repeated, as if he'd never heard of such a thing.

"Yes. You make balls of snow and you hurl them at each other. Faith and I made a fort in the gardens yesterday. With all the trellises, benches, and fountains everywhere there are lots of spots to hide. We're all on our own team. It'll be epic! Though *you* might have bruises. I have impeccable aim." Kiera's blue eyes twinkled.

For just a moment, Faith could see the raw longing in Levi's dark eyes as he focused on her. He wanted to be with her; he wanted to do something carefree and fun. Then he put that familiar shutter over his emotions and gave an insincere smile. "It does sound epic, Princess Kiera, but with apologies I have a meeting at the military training center."

"Ah, darn it!" Kiera wrinkled her nose. "You adults are only fun in the two hours after dinner. All day long its work, work, work. Except for Faith." She beamed at her. "Faith is my best friend and always has time for me."

"Ah, right back at you." Faith grinned. Little did Kiera know that Faith worked until late in the night and any hour that Kiera was in school or otherwise occupied so she could be fun when Kiera was home.

She focused back on Levi and the look in his eyes was interesting. He thought she was whimsical, cute, carefree, and definitely too young for him. Faith prayed she was reading that wrong, but she felt she knew him so well.

"I hope your snowball fight is epic." He nodded to Faith and bowed to Kiera. "Pardon me."

Even with the dismissal, Faith's stomach swirled with warmth simply from him looking at her and using the power of his accented voice on her.

He turned to go. Kiera gave Faith a look of desperation that Faith felt all through her soul.

"We'll walk you to the garage," Kiera declared.

He swallowed, obviously not wanting to agree but he bowed slightly, an obedient royal guard for certain. "Thank you, Princess Kiera."

Kiera rushed to Levi's right and linked her arm through his. She was almost five feet tall and he had to be at least six-three. The height discrepancy and the muscular soldier overshadowing the young teenager was adorable.

"You come on his other side," Kiera instructed Faith. "Captain Levi will lo-ove escorting two beautiful ladies."

Her brother-in-law Chad would've said something charming about how beautiful they were. Captain Levi only studied her as she sidled in and slid her hand through the crook of his arm. She didn't know if he loved it, but she savored every moment. Her hand grasping his arm, the bump of his bicep pronounced, the sandalwood and cedar scent. He smelled like autumn in these incredible mountains. She didn't need charming lines. She only needed him.

Their gazes locked. So close to him she could see the pulse point in his neck. Was it racing for her? She swallowed and prayed she wasn't the only one affected by this simple touch.

He focused forward and escorted them down the hall. His bicep tightened under her hand and he kept himself military straight as they walked. Faith feared this entire idea had backfired. What if he held himself aloof from her because he relegated her to Kiera's age in his mind?

"Are you excited for Christmas?" Kiera asked, breaking the silence that only their footsteps filled.

There was a pause as he seemed to search for an answer. "I like the Christmas market on the Traverse River Walk," he said carefully, as if choosing his words. "What about you, little princess? Are you excited for Christmas?"

"Of course I am!" She cried out.

They reached the stairs and descended slowly, with arms linked. Faith wasn't about to pull away.

"My dad is going to marry Chad's mum, my mum now too," she sang out. "And the Rindlesbachers are finally dead so we can have parties without worrying they'll try and explode us."

"Kiera," Faith whispered, stunned by her words.

"Sorry." Kiera shrugged, unrepentant. "I've heard lots of people say that."

"She's not wrong." Levi smiled down at Faith.

"And the best news of all is Faith is going to stay with me for one entire month!"

“All month?” Levi’s brow squiggled.

“Yes, sir,” Kiera sang out. “By the end of the month I’ll teach her to climb up the side of the castle better than Spiderman and race me down the poles.”

Faith refused to slide down the brass pipes that ran the length of the exterior walls of the twelve-story castle. Kiera refused to give up on trying to coerce her into it.

“I’m not in favor of that plan,” Levi said to Kiera, a stern note in his deliciously-accented voice.

“Favor?” Kiera giggled. “Because your Captain Favor?”

They reached the lowest level and walked toward the garages.

“Wait.” Kiera protested. “You’re not in favor of Faith staying with us all month? Why not? Faith’s the best.”

Faith’s heart raced. He didn’t want her here? Her hopes were more far-fetched than she’d believed.

“I’m not in favor of Faith risking her life climbing the castle or sliding down those ‘tubes of death’.” Levi skirted the question of wanting her here.

“I would never kill my favorite friend,” Kiera insisted.

“I’m in the business of protecting all of you,” Levi said. “I am telling you it’s a no on climbing up or sliding down the exterior of the castle. Especially when everything is covered in ice.”

“Ah, you’re no fun,” Kiera moaned.

“Thank you,” Faith whispered to Levi. “You’ve saved my life.”

He grinned down at her. She’d never seen his full grin before. The effect was beautifully inspiring and devastating to her peace of mind. She was going to sketch that smile as soon as possible.

They reached the door that led to the massive garage. Levi gently disentangled his arms from each of their grasp and backed toward the door. “Thank you for escorting me.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” Kiera waved, turned, and sprinted off down the hall. “I’ll be in the kitchen!” Then she ran up the side of the wall and did a twisting flip off of it. She laughed happily and dodged into one of the kitchen doors.

“That girl.” Levi shook his head, pushing a hand through his short hair. “It’s hard enough keeping her safe from external influences, then she has to risk her life every other minute doing her crazy stunts.”

Faith tilted her head and studied him. “You aren’t a big risk taker, are you?”

“Me?” His brows lifted.

She nodded.

“I rock climb, ride dirt bikes, paraglide, and cliff dive. Why?”

“Wait a minute. You’re a crazy maniac and that’s okay, but Kiera can’t take a risk?”

“It’s quite different a lowly soldier taking a risk than the favorite princess.” His gaze traveled over her. “And I definitely don’t want you taking any risks.”

His gaze had made her warm all over but his words made her want to defy him.

“Why not?” She jutted her chin out and planted her hands on her hips.

“You are young, innocent, and a bright light, Faith. You have your whole life in front of you. Don’t ruin it by following Kiera down a tube of death and killing yourself.”

The concern in his dark gaze was touching as if he cared deeply for her. There was a depth of darkness there that scared her. Why wouldn’t anyone tell her how his fiancée died? She also didn’t like the way he acted as if she were some young, innocent child.

“How old do you think I am?” she demanded.

He looked her over, his dark eyes unreadable. Finally he shrugged. “Far be it from me to hazard a guess at a woman’s

age or weight.”

Even his romantic accent couldn't distract her from being annoyed. She stalked toward him. He was probably eight inches taller than her and double her weight, but he straightened and backed into the wall at her approach.

Faith reached him and poked her finger in his chest. His well-muscled, lovely chest.

“I am not a child,” she said, drawing herself up to look taller. “I am twenty-seven years old and I am a highly-successful millionaire, head designer, and part-owner of Lady Fit.” She could add she'd basically raised herself as her parents had been pathetic and her sisters busy trying to keep her fed and clothed and start their business.

His eyebrows rose. “You should be very proud of your success.”

“I am, thank you very much.” She studied him but he gave her nothing else. “How old are you?” she demanded.

“Twenty-nine,” he admitted quietly.

“Two years,” she spluttered, pushing a clenched fist at his chest, she found she rather liked touching it. “Two years apart and you treat me like I'm Kiera's age, like I'm some little girl.”

His gaze traveled over her, it was smoky hot and her knees went weak. Levi wrapped his hand around her fist. His eyes dropped to their hands. He very slowly, very gently opened her clenched fist one finger at a time. Lining up their palms, he stared at her paler, much smaller fingers lying against his roughened, brown palm.

Faith didn't move, didn't hardly breathe. The simple touch grounded and lifted her. A tremble went through Levi. “So small,” he murmured.

A few beats passed and then he focused on her and said, “Faith, I realize you aren't a child.” Pulling his hand from hers he pushed it through his hair and then dropped it to his side. “Believe me, I'd have to be a blind fool to not notice that.”

Hope blossomed in her chest. She gave him a tentative smile. He'd noticed her. He didn't think of her as a child.

“But you are whimsical, creative, beautiful, and innocent.”

Those were all good things. Right? She wasn't nearly as innocent as everyone believed. She'd seen death and devastation. She'd been scarred by those who should've loved her.

Levi let out a frustrated grunt. His dark eyes were tortured as he looked at her as if it were the last time he'd get the opportunity to.

“Good day, Miss Radisson.” He nodded to her, pushed the garage door open, and stormed through it.

The door banged closed like Faith's hopes. Miss Radisson? Ugh! Despite some beautiful moments, her dreams of Levi wanting to date her seemed to have taken a hit.

How would she ever get Levi to return her feelings?

Find *The Royal Captain and the Designer* on [Amazon](#).

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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