

The

Castles & Courtships
Book 4: Islas del Sargasso

Prodigal
Prince

Carol
Moncado

USA Today Bestselling Author

THE PRODIGAL PRINCE

CAROL MONCADO

CANDID
Publications 

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1



Of all the things Mac thought - or knew - he'd do with his life, stalking wasn't one of them.

Yet he sat in a lounge chair at a San Majorian resort watching a beautiful blonde, a child, and a nanny.

"Are you going to talk to her?" Over the years, Silas had become more than an employee of Mac's sister. Somewhere along the line, he'd become Mac's friend and confidant then more like a brother.

Mac just glared.

"It's been years already. You should have talked to her a long time ago."

With a shake of his head, Mac reached for his colorful drink. "You know why I haven't."

Silas didn't say anything. His thoughts on the matter had been expressed more times than Mac could count. Silas had even threatened to take matters into his own hands, but ultimately never had.

Six years.

Six years since he'd been home.

Six years since he'd talked to his sister.

Six years since his mother's passing.

Six years since his life turned upside down in ways no one, except maybe his mother, could imagine.

Five years since he'd turned into a stalker.

Kind of.

Mac preferred to think of it as being a guardian angel for someone who didn't know they needed one.

Nothing had happened to prove him correct.

Yet.

But the churning in his gut - and in Silas's - never truly went away.

And so he continued to keep his distance, but also keep a watchful eye.

It hadn't always been easy, but he'd managed to remain undetected, to the best of his knowledge anyway.

He still didn't know how he'd managed it, but he thanked God he had. There were reasons, good ones, that thankfully hadn't panned out into anything dangerous.

"You need to talk to her, Mac. It's not healthy for any of you."

The thought had taken root in Mac's mind many years earlier.

With a groan, Mac managed to get out of the lounge chair without falling like he had the day before.

"I'll be back later." He pulled a t-shirt on, one that didn't match his board shorts at all, but he didn't care. His stylist would be scandalized, but he hadn't seen her in six years either.

A glance toward the mother showed him what he'd always known. She was an amazing mother. She had a happy, well-adjusted child.

The glance was all he allowed himself before walking away.

It didn't take long to get back to the luxury suite he shared with Silas.

He slipped off his shoes then flopped onto the bed in his room. Mac groaned as he looked up the ceiling. How had his life turned into such a mess?

Mess wasn't quite the right word.

Complicated.

His life had been complicated since before his birth. He just hadn't known the extent of it until his mother's death.

Even if he opened the sliding door and let the sounds of the ocean in, it would be too quiet. Too alone with his thoughts.

Before he could decide if he wanted to turn the television on to binge one

of the MyBingeFlix Originals, the door to the suite opened, letting Silas in.

“You want to do a *Management on Mars* marathon?” Mac called out the open door before Silas could say a word.

Silas set his drink down on the table in the living area. “Nope.”

Mac rolled to the side and picked up the remote. “I’m going to.” Propping himself up with some pillows, he found the right streaming service. *Mars* was the first thing in his queue. “What do you want for dinner? I’m thinking room service. I don’t want to get back out.”

“You do what you want. I’m going to dinner downstairs.” Silas closed the door to his room behind him. A minute later, Mac could hear the water running in the shower.

All of this was going to come to a head soon. The uneasy feeling that never truly left had become more noticeable in recent months.

Maybe she’d finally see him. She had before, but had never done more than nod politely once or twice when he accidentally let her get too close. The tinted glasses hid his eyes. The beard helped even more. He’d let it grow for over a year, and it still remained longer than the norm - and longer than Mac would prefer, but it obscured his features.

Features she’d known well.

Someday, when this ended, he’d have the barber shave it. Mac could practically feel the hot towel...

Rather than choosing the recently dropped season of *Management on Mars*, Mac went back to the beginning. He’d seen it enough times that he didn’t need to focus on it to understand the story lines, but knew when to pay attention for the laugh.

By the time the second episode began, Silas had left the suite. Halfway through the third episode, Mac ordered room service from his phone. Pausing the show, he took a shower of his own.

Once in a pair of his most comfortable pajama pants - these with the Maryland Heights Crimson Knights logo emblazoned on them - he went onto the balcony and waited for his meal to arrive. Staring over the ocean, he wondered exactly how far away his homeland lay from where he stood. He did know he faced the right direction, but the geography lessons of his childhood were long forgotten.

Mac closed his eyes as his head dropped. He’d lived a privileged childhood very few people could imagine, but it had its challenges. His barely knew his father. Rather, his mother’s husband. He shared no genetic

material with the man.

He'd been relieved when he learned that bit of information.

Until his mother told him the rest of the story.

And who his male biological donor had been before his death.

He wouldn't have thought anyone could be worse than the man he'd grown up believing to be his father.

Until he realized his biological father was the most notorious criminal in the history of a number of royal families.

Mac was a Quatremaine.



One sure fire way to know you're not living a fairy tale?

No happily ever after.

Fiona Westgate gave herself a mental shake.

That wasn't entirely true, though it wasn't the same kind of ever-afters in her movies for Happily Ever After TV - or even as part of her recurring role on *Seating 4 Six*.

This happily ever after was different - and definitely not a typical fairy tale.

"Mom!"

Fiona smiled and held out her arms as a five-year-old bundle of energy slammed into her

"Did you have fun, Munchkin?"

Her revised HEA launched into a story about the turtle sanctuary and how they all had the chance to hold a baby sea turtle.

A baby sea turtle apparently *not* named Crush.

With a laugh, Fiona watched as the small love of her life took off for the play area of the resort pool then turned to her nanny.

"It went well?"

Tinsley laughed. "Of course it did. But how are you feeling?"

"Much better. Between the ice pack on the back of my neck and a couple of hours of good sleep, the headache seems to be gone.

Tinsley set her bag on the next lounge chair over. "I'm glad. You deserve

to enjoy this vacation. You've worked hard this year."

Fiona acknowledged the statement with a nod, though she didn't entirely agree with the sentiment. She remembered her days working in a fast food kitchen.

Working on a fluffy movie for a few weeks and a recurring spot on a sitcom for a streaming service couldn't actually be construed as hard.

Or at least not the same kind of hard most people were familiar with. Just like her title of "single mom" was much easier than it could have been.

Like many things in life, it wouldn't have been her first choice.

But like many such things, it was so much better than she could ever have imagined.

Besides, given the biological father's reaction to her announcement, they were better off without him.

If she'd needed his financial support, it might be different, but if she retired this year, she could live the rest of her life without worrying about how much things cost.

Within reason, of course. Her days of flying in private jets were largely a thing of the past already.

It still surprised her she'd managed to keep her pregnancy and entrance into motherhood a secret, but she wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

"What are your plans for the rest of the day?" Tinsley stretched out on the lounge chair but kept her eyes on the children playing.

Fiona understood the unspoken question. "Nothing really. If you want to go do something on your own, go ahead."

Tinsley grinning as she stood. "Thanks."

Fiona used her best mom glare - the one she still need to perfect. "Be careful. Don't go anywhere alone with anyone."

It wasn't the first time Tinsley had been enamored with someone she met randomly and didn't know anything about.

Fortunately, none of them had gone terribly wrong.

Yet.

Her many hours of listening to true crime podcasts meant Fiona had probably become paranoid.

Tinsley waved to Fiona as she walked toward a man standing near the bar covered by a thatched roof. Fiona watched carefully for a few minutes as they simply sat on stools next to each other. For the moment at least, he seemed to be on his best behavior

Tinsley was a big girl. She could take care of herself, in more ways than one. Fiona made certain her nanny could defend herself if the need ever arose.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. The next one ended up much the same, except it included the dolphin experience. It was everything Fiona could have hoped for.

Tinsley spent the evening having dinner with the man she'd met, but assured Fiona her new friend was just that, a friend and not someone she might be... romantically interested in. They simply had fun hanging out.

When they were down to one full day left in San Majoria, Fiona found herself fighting off another headache. Once alone in her room, she found her ice pack. After drawing the curtains as tightly closed as they would go, she found her sleep mask. Finding a comfortable spot on the bed took more time - and caused more stabbing pain - than she would have preferred, but Fiona managed to do so and placed the ice pack on the back of her neck.

With her eyes closed, she let herself sink into oblivion.

Several hours later, feeling much better, Fiona dressed in her swimsuit with an opaque cover-up on top. After packing her beach bag with snacks, sunscreen, and a couple of bottles of water, she sent Tinsley a message that she'd meet them near the same spot they'd been sitting the last few days.

When she arrived, she didn't see them anywhere, but Tinsley had told her they'd probably be half an hour, given that the day's excursion to a nearby beach for boogie board lessons had run a bit long.

Fiona had looked forward to attending, but decided it was just as well she hadn't. The evening before she'd seen that Prince Kensington of San Majoria would be there. They'd met in passing a couple of times, but she doubted he'd recognize her.

He'd be joined by one of his friends, the Prince Consort of nearby Auverignon. Gabe was an old friend of Fiona's, though she hadn't seen him in years. This wouldn't have been a good time to become reacquainted.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. May I bring you a beverage?"

Fiona looked up from underneath the brim of her floppy hat. The cabana boy had taken care of them every day since they'd arrived. "Thank you, Dennis. That mocktail I had the other day was delicious. The orangey one. Could I get one of those?"

He smiled and bowed slightly at the waist. "Of course, Ms. Westgate. It would be my pleasure."

She made a mental note to add a tip for him to her room bill and not just the bits of cash she'd handed him every time he brought them something. He'd taken good care of all three of them.

Closing her eyes she waited for him to return. When a shadow told her someone had stopped next to her, Fiona opened her eyes again.

But instead of Dennis she saw a young man, likely in his early teens standing awkwardly at the side of the lounge chair.

As he shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, she put on her most reassuring smile.

"Ms. Westgate?" he managed to ask.

"Yes."

"I'm supposed to give you this." He held out a plain white envelope.

As soon as she touched it, he turned and hurried away.

Confused, she lifted the unsealed flap and pulled a note card with some typed words on it.

Fiona could feel the blood drain from her face and her heart stop, then race at an unprecedented pace as she read them.

We have your kid.

2



Something must have happened somewhere on resort property.

Mac could tell that much from his balcony.

Nothing overt, but he'd spent too much time looking at security arrangements over the years. To someone who knew what they were looking for, it was obvious.

Men in clothes that didn't quite fit. Rather, they didn't wear tourist clothes the same way actual tourists did. They didn't *move* the way most tourists moved.

And they didn't look around the same way tourists did.

Instead, their heads were constantly moving, scanning the area for... well, something. Mac couldn't tell what they looked for, but he'd bet his entire inheritance that they were security or law enforcement of some kind.

He heard the door open then close behind him.

"What's going on down there?" Mac knew Silas would know, if there was anything to know.

"I think it's something to do with a child. I'm not sure if one is missing or kidnapped or something else. There wasn't a general announcement looking

for a child, but they might have chosen not to for some reason. There's a number of celebrity or otherwise well-known guests who would prefer to keep things quiet." Silas joined Mac on the balcony, leaning his forearms against the railing.

"Nothing else to go on?"

From the corner of his eye, Mac could see Silas shake his head.

Mac scanned the area below, trying to find who could be in charge or at least where the incident had begun.

His eyes narrowed as he focused on the pool area. There seemed to be a greater concentration of personnel there.

One side of the pool seemed to be unusually empty while the other seemed overly full.

Whatever happened, it happened there.

Movement caught his eye as a couple of people emerged from underneath a canopy.

Mac straightened. The woman's body language screamed that something was amiss.

"It's her." Without consciously making a decision, he moved away from the railing and started for the door.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Silas called after him.

"You've been trying to get me to talk to her for years." Mac went into his room and quickly found a different shirt and shorts to wear.

"But is this the right time? If there's something going on, don't you think it might be better to wait until we know more? Until there's a more reasonable chance you won't be a suspect?"

"Suspect of what?"

"Whatever's going on down there." Silas didn't physically stop Mac, but the tone of his voice almost made Mac stop.

Almost.

Instead, he went into the hallway, took the elevator to the ground floor, and headed out the main doors toward the pool. Would they stop him forcibly?

He didn't think so. Not with how they were trying to keep this quiet.

They'd try to deter him in other ways, but physical force would be a last resort.

Mac almost snorted at the unintentional wordplay.

Instead, he worked his way toward the area he'd seen the woman.

“Excuse me, sir?” A member of resort security moved into Mac’s line of sight.

“Yes?” Mac didn’t stop.

The man moved a bit closer. “This area of the pool is closed for the time being.”

“Why?” He didn’t stop walking, but did his best to appear nonchalant.

“There’s a need for some repairs.” The man managed to get in front of Mac. “You need to stop, sir.”

This time Mac did as he was asked, but he kept scanning the area. “What kind of repairs?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that, sir.” He moved further into Mac’s path.

For another minute, Mac tried to talk his way around the security team member. It wasn’t working.

Then he saw his chance.

He saw her in the distance.

“Fiona!” he called. “That’s a friend of mine,” he told the man. Close enough. “I’d like to say hi to her.”

She’d stopped and turned, but hadn’t actually seen him.

Combined it was enough to make the man falter in his security measures.

Mac managed to skirt around him and make his way toward Fiona.

“Fi!”

This time she turned around the other direction and still didn’t see him.

The churning inside had changed its nature. Instead of being certain something bad was going to happen to Fiona or the child, it had more to do with the reception he’d get when she realized his identity.

But he had to keep going.

“Fiona!” One more time before other security reached him. They would use more force.

This time she saw him.

And he saw her face.

Her eyes were swollen. Her cheeks red and wet from tears. Her hair had been pulled back into a sloppy bun that truly was a sloppy bun and not planned that way.

She blinked as his arms were grabbed by two members of security.

Fiona held up a hand. “Wait.”

Her eyes narrowed as she walked toward him.

Of course she didn’t immediately know who he was. The beard and over

half a decade must have changed his appearance enough she didn't recognize him.

"Do I know you?" She took a step toward him. "You look familiar."

"It's been a few years, Fi." He kept his tone soft.

The security guards released his arms as she waved them off.

A few more steps and she stopped just a meter away from him. "What's your name?"

Now that the moment had arrived, Mac's heart seemed to stop then restart at twice its normal rate. "These days, I most often go by Mac."

"Mac." She repeated his name thoughtfully.

He took his glasses off.

She blinked.

"Mac." This time his name came out as a hiss. "What are you doing here? You said you never want to see me again."

Mac hung his head. "I know."

"Look at me." The hiss increased in volume. "What are you doing here?" The realization about who he was had to be setting in.

"I was nearby and saw you over here." Mac glanced around at the security team members circled around them. "What's going on?"

Before he realized what she was going to do, the slap on his chin caused his head to snap to the side.

Fiona stepped closer. "That's for being a deadbeat dad." One more step until she completely invaded his space. "Do you want another one, Prince Maximilian, or are you going to help me find your son?"



For half a second, Fiona almost felt bad for slapping Maximilian.

Then she remembered how he stared coldly at her before turning and walking away without so much as a glance backward.

Leaving her staring after him, pregnant and alone in the world.

Leaving her to raise their son alone.

Her son.

Her son she needed desperately to find.

And Maximilian was going to help her.

He had connections. Even if he hadn't been seen in years, he still had to have connections.

"He's missing?" It didn't sound as though she'd need to convince him of any of it.

Not that Gray was his son.

That Gray was missing.

"Come with us." One of the hotel's security officers ushered them toward the building, but separated her from Maximilian.

"We'll be checking into this Maximilian guy," he told her quietly.

She shook her head. "He had nothing to do with Gray's disappearance."

"He's your son's father?" the man pressed.

"Yes, but he had nothing to do with this." She hadn't seen him in years, no one had as far as she knew, but Maximilian couldn't have had anything to do with Gray going missing.

He looked at her intently for a moment, then nodded. If he was any good at his job, he'd continue to check both of them out anyway.

They reached the resort's security office with her a few steps in the lead. "I need to talk to Maximilian privately please."

The head of security hesitated then motioned toward an empty conference room.

Fiona didn't look back as she went into the room, staring out the window until she heard the door close.

"I deserved that, Fi." When she couldn't see him, she found his voice easily recognizable.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and hugged herself. "I know you did." Fear for her son coursing through her tempered her anger at him.

For now.

"What are you doing here?"

She could hear him suck in a breath. "Keeping an eye on both of you."

Fiona blinked and turned. "What?"

Without his glasses, his blue eyes were just as striking as they'd been years earlier.

Maximilian motioned to one of the chairs next to the table. Fiona had no doubt he would have held it for her if he'd been closer. Once she had taken the seat, he brought a box of tissues and set it next to her before sitting down across the table.

He took a deep breath and stared at his hands before looking back up at her. "I walked away for a reason, Fiona. It had nothing to do with you or the baby, per se. If it became known that I had a child, especially a son, that child would be in grave danger. Life-threatening danger."

She stared at him. "Could you repeat that?"

Leaning back in his chair, Maximilian let out a sigh. "I've been living outside Trumanville for the last several years. Silas is with me. We've been keeping an eye on both of you as best we can. We've even bumped into each other a couple of times, but you didn't recognize me before I made an exit."

Fiona wanted to know more about these incidents, but there were more pressing issues. "Gray is missing, Maximilian."

He winced, though he tried to cover it up.

She ignored him. "Why would he be in danger? Who would be after you? Or us?"

"It's a long story, Fi. For now, let's just say I knew it would be far better for you if no one knew about the connection."

"Is this why my son is missing?"

Maximilian shook his head. "I don't think so. I haven't seen any evidence of anything and neither has Silas. The threat is there, but only if someone knows who you are and who he is. It's there, but it's not imminent."

"Then who did take my son?" Hot tears streaked down her cheeks. "He was there, then he was gone. They haven't found Tinsley either."

"Your nanny."

It wasn't a question, but Fiona nodded. "She had met a guy. He seemed nice enough, but maybe not? They're looking for him and his friend now." It was her turn to slump over the table. "I should have brought security with me. I thought resort security would be enough, and I'm not made of money. We live very comfortably, and I love how much I'm working now and what I'm doing, but..."

The HEA TV movies and *Seating 4 Six* paid well, very well. But not keep security 24/7 well.

The door opened to let the head of security in. This time, he bowed toward Maximilian. "Your Royal Highness, I do apologize for not recognizing you..."

Maximilian interrupted. "Please, call me Mac. There's no reason for you to have recognized me. Now, what do you know about the disappearance of our son?"

So he went by Mac now. Fiona had a vague recollection of him saying something when they were outside.

Maximilian would have never reacted like that when someone failed to recognize him. Maybe Mac would be different.

“If you would let my assistant in, I can make some phone calls and get you some more help.”

Because he had connections she could only dream about.

She had made one phone call already. Hopefully, it had started a ball rolling.

Commotion in the outer office told her it probably had.

The door to the conference room opened and a man entered. She should probably stand, maybe curtsy, but maybe not. He wasn't married to her queen. Plus she'd known him forever.

They'd even been romantically linked in the press for a while, though it hadn't been true.

Mac didn't stand either, but after a glance, he only stared at his hands.

“Fiona, what can I do?” The man came to her side of the table and reached for her to give her a hug. She stood and let him. “We'll find him,” her old friend told her. “I promise.”

All she could do was sniffle through the fresh round of tears.

She felt him straighten and knew he'd realized someone else was there.

“Do I know you?” he asked, clearly talking to Mac.

Mac finally stood as Gabe released her.

“I am His Royal Highness Prince Maxmilian of Islas del Sargasso.” Mac paused. “Your brother-in-law.”

3



Not exactly how Mac had envisioned a reunion with a member of his family.

He barely knew his brother-in-law. They'd met a couple of times during his mum's short illness, and probably a few times in passing as they grew up, but he wasn't certain he'd have recognized the other prince in a different setting.

Gabriel's face hardened into an impassive mask. "What are you doing here?"

"He's Gray's father." Fiona broke the news for him. "I haven't seen him in years, and they've never met."

Not entirely accurate, but close enough for the moment.

"You're the secret fling?" Gabriel crossed his arms over his chest. "I suppose now I know why Fiona would never tell me. Your sister is going to be both thrilled and furious at the same time. She's been worried about you since you disappeared."

Mac managed a nod, but before he could respond, Gabriel went on.

"All of that can wait. The first thing we need to do is find Gray and get

him home safely.”

“Of course.” Did Gabriel think anything else would be more important? Esme would agree, too.

Should he still call her Esme? After the death of their mother and his sister’s ascension to the throne, could he? That didn’t even take into account the bombshell bit of information he’d learned on the same trip.

Did Esme know?

Mac shook his head. No. Right now, Gray had to be his sole focus.

The rest could come later.

But did that bit of information - the thing that made him walk away from Fiona and his son for so many years - have anything to do with his missing son?

Probably not.

But definitely a possibility.

Mac shook himself internally and tried to focus on the conversation his brother-in-law and Fiona were having with a member of the security team. The resort had been locked down pretty quickly, but had it been fast enough?

Gabriel didn’t seem convinced they had been.

As much as he wanted to be at the forefront of the discussions, Mac hung back. He didn’t know Gray. Not really. He’d observed the little boy with Fiona more times than he could count, and *felt* like he knew him, but he really didn’t.

“Your Royal Highness.”

It took Mac a second to realize one of the security officers spoke to him. It had been years since he’d been referred to that way - except by Silas in a snarky mood. “Yes?”

“I need you to come with me, sir.”

Mac looked at Fiona, who wasn’t looking anywhere near him, and Gabriel, whose glare could melt glaciers. With a nod, he followed the officer to another room in the security offices, taking the seat indicated.

“Sir, we need to go over your whereabouts since you arrived, including anyone who can vouch for you.” The man pulled a tablet out and removed the pencil from its holding spot. After a couple of taps he was ready to write. “When did you arrive?”

There wouldn’t be any point in lying, not that he would have. Mac spent the next hour going through everything he’d done since he arrived a few days earlier. Silas could vouch for him.

Would that count? Or would he need another way to prove where he'd been?

Afterward, he was allowed to go back to the conference room where Fiona and Gabriel waited.

"The queen is on her way," Gabriel told him with a glare.

Mac glared right back. "Which queen? Queen Penelope of San Majoria or my sister?" At least he remembered that, since he'd been gone, King Edward had been widowed then remarried.

The door opened to let two people in. Everyone in the room immediately stood and bowed or curtsied their general direction.

King Edward walked straight to Mac, staring him deep in the eyes for a long moment before reaching out to clasp his shoulder. "You had a good reason for keeping your distance."

The king made a statement. He didn't ask a question.

Mac answered anyway. "Yes. I did."

"I've told your sister as much." The king squeezed Mac's shoulder. "I've never told her the reason, but that she could trust you. If she didn't feel like she could trust you, she should trust me."

A wave of relief washed over Mac. At least someone had stuck up for him.

"She never told me that." The glare on Gabriel's face diminished just a bit. Maybe. It could be Mac's mind playing tricks on him.

Edward let go of Mac's shoulder. "Esme can't tell you everything. You know that. This may have been considered enough of a state secret that she wasn't certain she could. Regardless, I know the authorities need to check your whereabouts, but I believe you had nothing to do with Gray's disappearance." He took a position at the head of the table.

The queen sat next to Fiona, holding her hand. "What do we know?" she asked. "Are there any leads on where Prince Gray and Tinsley have been taken?"

Awkward glances were exchanged then one of the men shook his head. "No."

"Have they left the property?" she pressed.

More glances. "We don't believe so, but if they were well-prepared rather than spotting a target of opportunity, it is possible."

"I presume the authorities in Cabo Juan-Eduardo have been notified, as well as the national authorities?" The new queen knew how to command

attention. She wasn't as new to this sort of life as the marriage certificate might indicate.

"Of course, ma'am."

When they'd all concluded there wasn't any new information and nothing more that could be done for the time being, they were taken to a more comfortable room. Mac took a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs off to one side. No one came to talk to him.

He suspected the king might be chosen to, but he appeared to be deep in conversation with a member of his security team. From the looks Gabriel gave him, Mac knew the prince felt he needed to get his emotions under control before a confrontation took place.

And Fiona...

Mac sighed. He wanted to go sit with her, comfort her, but he knew what her reaction would be.

No one liked rejection, but sometimes you had to shoot your shot, even knowing you'd miss.

With a deep breath, Mac stood and walked toward the mother of his child. Time to take a chance.



Was it possible to be literally cried out?

Fiona wouldn't have thought so, especially not in the relatively short period of time since she'd received the note.

Someone had gone to her suite and brought back one of Gray's stuffed animals. She held it close and shut her eyes to block out the rest of the world.

Where was he? Was he hurt? Hungry? Tired? Missing his mom? Was Tinsley with him, protecting him? They'd asked if Fiona thought her nanny might be involved, but she adamantly refused to believe Tinsley would do such a thing.

Perhaps inadvertently, through someone she met, but never intentionally. Even then, she wouldn't bring Gray around some guy she just met. Never.

Not on purpose.

Staring at the floor in front of her, Fiona felt as alone as she ever had,

even when Maximil... Mac walked away years earlier.

She glanced his direction to find that he'd stood and seemed to be walking toward her, but stopped when King Edward intercepted him.

Someone sat on the other side of her. Before looking up, Fiona knew it had to be Queen Penelope.

"Is it at least more comfortable in here?" she asked kindly.

Fiona nodded. "Those chairs weren't the best, but I've sat in worse."

"I think we all have." The queen motioned for an aide. "I'm going to have a cup of tea. Would you like one?"

She didn't, but Fiona nodded anyway. It would give her something to do.

About the time she finished sipping the tea given to her by the queen's aide, Fiona realized Mac had left the room.

Sitting up straight, she looked around. "Where's Mac?" Despite everything, he should be here.

"He and Edward went to the palace." Queen Penelope had a calming manner that helped Fiona understand why she ended up married to the king. "When you're ready, we'll follow them."

Setting the tea cup down on the side table, Fiona clutched the small animal as she stood. "I don't want to wait here anymore. If he was on the property, they would have found him already." Probably.

She let herself be led to an SUV with dark tinted windows. The queen's security team whisked them to the palace. They were driven through a back entrance and into a garrison before exiting the vehicle.

They walked through the halls filled with ornate artifacts and portraits of monarchs in the distant past, eventually coming to a stop in front of an open door.

The queen gave a gentle nudge. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you."

Fiona did notice the door close behind her, though she had no idea who closed it.

Walking across the room, she went to a window and stared out of it until she heard a noise behind her.

Turning, she saw Mac standing on the other side of the room.

"They told me to wait in here." He shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his shorts. "If I knew where else to go, I'd leave you alone."

"It's okay." With a sigh, she took a seat.

“Do you want to talk about any of it?” Mac sat in a chair across the low table from her. “Or yell at me?”

The desire to take it out on Mac had dissipated in the last couple of hours. Though he didn’t know Gray, he’d been noticeably shaken. That had to mean something.

Fiona shook her head. “I don’t want to yell at you right now. I might later, but not now.”

“How are you coping?”

She picked at the fur of her son’s animal. “I’m numb. I’m scared. I’m angry. I’m frustrated that there’s literally nothing I can do. I could put up a reward, a large one even, if that would help, but they don’t want me to yet.”

“No one really knows that you’re a mother,” he pointed out. “You’ve done an excellent job of not just keeping Gray out of the limelight, but keeping his existence out of the tabloids.”

“I’ve had a lot of help. I’ve traded interviews and other exclusives for keeping him out. It won’t last much longer if he’s not found soon.” The tears coming back to her eyes meant she hadn’t cried them dry after all. “We’ll have to go public.”

“I’ll do whatever you want me to.” His voice remained gentle. “If you want me with you, telling the world that we share a child, then I’m there. If you’d rather I stay out of the limelight for the moment, I’ll do my best, and I won’t volunteer anything.”

“Thank you.” Which route did she want to take? A decision didn’t need to be made right that moment, so she’d put it off as long as she could.

“What can I do to help you?”

Rather than looking at Mac, she stood and walked back to the window, aware that he followed her.

“I don’t know,” she finally said as he came to stand beside her. “Short of bringing my baby back to me, I don’t know what anyone can do.”

Before she realized either one had moved, Fiona found herself in Mac’s arms.

They hadn’t had a relationship all those years earlier. They’d had a fling. A series of flings.

But nothing deeper than that.

So the comfort in his arms came as a surprise to her.

“We’ll find him, Fi.” Mac brushed a kiss against her temple. “We’ll find him.”

“Why did you walk away?” She blurted the question out before she could stop herself. She’d always wanted to ask him and who knew when she’d have another chance. “What could have been so bad...” Her voice trailed off, not quite certain how to ask the rest of her question.

“Silas is the only one who knows. It seems that King Edward does as well, but I don’t think my sister does. My mum did. My father probably does. I haven’t talked to him since my mother’s death, though, so I wouldn’t know for sure.”

Fiona waited.

She could feel him suck in a deep breath then blow it out slowly.

“I found out that I’m adopted.”

That couldn’t be the only reason. The information hadn’t been made public. If it had, maybe he would have run off, but not with no one knowing.

“That’s not the issue.” He took another deep breath. “The reason I walked away has to do with who my father is. Who Gray’s grandfather is.”

Fiona’s mind raced as she tried to figure out who it could be.

“Isaiah.” He spoke before she reached a conclusion. “My father is Prince Isaiah of Eyjania.”

4



Before Fiona had a chance to react to the news that her son’s grandfather was the most notorious criminal in the Quad Countries in over a century, the door opened letting the king, queen, and Gabriel into the sitting room.

Mac waited for a signal from her before moving, but she leaned further against him rather than pulling away.

He tightened his hold.

Since he realized Mac’s identity, Gabe had something between a glare and a scowl etched on his face. It deepened when he realized how close she was to Mac.

“Is there any news?” Mac asked the king, not purposely ignoring his brother-in-law, but not including him either.

“Nothing new.” The king shook his head. “Hopefully soon. One of the investigators should be here shortly.” He motioned toward the sitting area. “There are a few things we need to discuss.”

Mac kept his arm around Fiona’s shoulders as they walked toward the seats. She took the same spot she had earlier.

As Mac moved toward the next chair over, the king stopped Gabe before

he could sit down. “This doesn’t concern you at the moment. If you’d like to wait in your guest quarters, you are welcome to, or I can have someone show you to another waiting area.”

Gabriel shot one last glare toward Mac before walking away. He stopped next to Fiona and whispered something. She nodded, and he left.

When the four of them were seated around the low table, the king looked directly at Mac.

“Mac, it’s time to let Fiona know why you kept your distance.”

Mac leaned back in his seat. “I told her right before you came in.”

The king turned his attention to Fiona.

She shifted in her seat. “I feel like I should know who Prince Isaiah is, but I don’t.”

That explained her lack of reaction. “He’s the younger brother of the late King Alfred II of the Quatremaire dynasty in Eyjania,” the king told her. “Uncle of the current king, Benjamin. He was a criminal mastermind and responsible for untold numbers of crimes.”

“Was?” Fiona looked between them. “Is he in prison?”

Mac shook his head. “He’s believed to be dead. The last time anyone saw him, he was bleeding profusely and slipped overboard into shark infested waters.”

The king continued. “No remains were ever found, and I wouldn’t put it past him to have some sort of secret submarine that wouldn’t show up on most of our sensors. It’s been long enough most of us believe he’s really dead or he would have resurfaced by now.”

Hiding his smirk at the king’s unintentional pun, Mac looked at Fiona. “I found out he was my biological father about the time my mother died. It had only been a few weeks since he disappeared. You came to talk to me about six months later. His survival was still a very real possibility. I couldn’t risk your safety or that of our baby. You left. Silas and I followed not long afterward. This is the first time I’ve been in contact with anyone else since then.”

Fiona nodded slowly. “I don’t know that I’ve ever heard of him. I’ve vacationed in the Quad Countries, and even Øyanord, but I’ve not followed the royal news. I’ve worked with Pete Barker, and he’s my friend, but we’ve never discussed his in-laws in any detail.”

Sir Peter Barker of Eyjania had married one of the Quatremaire princesses a few years earlier. They had a home in Southwest Missouri. Mac

had never run into them while he lived there.

The king started to say something, but Fiona held up a hand.

“So what you’re telling me is that the grandfather of my son may or may not have been eaten by sharks, but either way he’s pure evil?” She picked up the stuffed animal that belonged to her son and held it to her chest. “Did he ever know he had a son?”

Mac looked at the king.

“Isaiah fathered a number of children. Some he knew about. Others he may not have. I don’t believe he knew, or it’s likely he would have tried something a long time ago.” He sighed as he leaned back in his seat. “We know of several younger children, under the age of ten or so. It’s very possible there are other older children as well, but none have ever come to my attention.” He tilted his head toward Mac. “You’re the only one I’m aware of, and only because your mother told me.”

The circumstances surrounding his birth had been a puzzle to Mac. His parents’ marriage had been toxic at best, but he couldn’t imagine his mother in an affair. Despite everything he knew about Isaiah Quatremaine, Mac couldn’t believe he would have forced himself on a crown princess either, though.

“What else did your mother tell you?” The kind look in King Edward’s eyes made Mac feel safe discussing the little he knew.

“Not much.” Mac leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees with his hands clasped. “She made mention of some paperwork left for me and that my father wasn’t my father.” His vision clouded with tears as he remembered his last moments with his mother. “By then she’d become very weak. She said something about Isaiah Quatremaine, but that’s all I could understand.”

“What did the paperwork tell you?”

Mac shook his head. “I never got it. I left pretty quickly after she died. I haven’t been home since. Not really.”

Fiona and Gray had taken a trip there once, but only Silas had followed them.

“Then what I’m about to tell you will come as news to you. Yes, Isaiah Quatremaine was your biological father, but Carlotta wasn’t your biological mother. You were adopted.”

Of all the things King Edward could have said to him, those were not what Mac expected to hear.

“Could you repeat that?” he asked.

“I’m not aware of the entirety of the situation, but I do know that your biological mother was a young woman employed by the palace. I have no knowledge of her relationship with Isaiah, except that it resulted in a child. Carlotta found out about what happened very early on and quietly removed herself from public life until after you were born. She reemerged with a newborn. No one questioned any of it.”

Mac’s mind swam as he held up a hand. “Wait. You’re telling me that my mother isn’t my mother? My biological father likely forced himself on a staff member who eventually gave me up for adoption to the future queen? So my status as the spare wasn’t reality? I never could have inherited the throne anyway?”

The king nodded. “Precisely.”



Confusion swirled around Fiona. She couldn’t quite follow the nuances of the conversation about Mac’s parentage, but she didn’t think Mac could either.

From what she could comprehend, neither of his parents were his biological parents, not just his father.

“What would have happened if something happened to Esme before she had kids, then? I’m not eligible. I have no idea who would be next. I don’t have any cousins. Mum’s sister died without any children.”

King Edward shook his head. “I’m not certain. It’s beside the point now, but I believe your mother had a plan of some sort in place.”

It all overwhelmed Fiona, but she needed to get back to the most important part. “How does any of this help us find Gray?”

“I don’t know that it does, not for certain, but it’s very possible that Isaiah or one of his minions who remain on the loose learned the truth. If so, they could have decided that Gray needed to be in their custody. It’s just as likely that he was a target of opportunity - either because someone realized who his mother is or because they assumed his parents had the kind of cash to make it worth taking a child for ransom.” The king checked his phone then stood. “Please come with me.”

Fiona continued to clutch Gray's small bear. She didn't know who'd sent it. It arrived about the same time as a number of other gifts from the few friends who knew she'd been expecting, but there hadn't been a card. At the time, she'd shrugged it off, but maybe she shouldn't have. Could it have a camera or recording device embedded?

She shook her head. She'd been watching too many news magazines.

Mac walked at her side as they followed the king and queen to another conference room. Gabe was nowhere to be seen.

"We have some news," the security member said as they took their seats. "Tinsley has been found. She's being taken to the hospital as a precaution. You'll be able to see her soon."

It only took a second for what he didn't say to sink in. "Gray wasn't with her?"

He shook his head. "No. Just Tinsley. We haven't had a chance to talk to her yet, but officers have been dispatched and will meet her at the hospital to find out what she knows."

"Bring her here." King Edward's voice rang with authority. "Bring her to the hospital suite here. Unless she's severely injured, they should be able to monitor her in the palace."

An aide left the room, already placing a call on his phone.

Fear constricted her heart again. She hadn't forgotten Gray's kidnapping, but had been slightly distracted by everything with Mac. With her focus squarely back on Gray, the fear returned.

Only worse.

Now she *knew* Gray didn't have his beloved nanny with him to comfort and protect him.

Would this nightmare ever end?

Or would it continue for eternity?

The aide returned. "She's on her way here."

Fiona played with the ear of the bear. "When can I see her?"

"After my physician has looked her over," King Edward said. "It won't be long."

Another aide walked into the room. "The press has caught wind of the story. There's never been any confirmation that Ms. Westgate has a child, but the photos someone leaked a little while ago, along with the speculation about the kidnapping will be hitting the internet and airwaves shortly."

"Then what do we do?" Earlier, they'd said she wouldn't be asked to give

a statement to the public unless word leaked out. Now that it had, would she be expected to stand in front of a bank of cameras and plead for her son's life?

"A press conference is being called in an hour," the aide told her. "Queen Esmeralda is unable to attend personally, but she would like to make a statement claiming the child as her nephew and promising that the full force of two countries will be brought to bear until he's found."

Nodding took all of her effort. It made sense. Fiona had never met the queen before. Just Mac.

She glanced his direction to see him sitting with his head bowed. His eyes were closed. Could he be praying? Or simply trying to bolster himself before his inevitable reunion with his sister?

Conversation continued to swirl around her, but Fiona couldn't concentrate. She'd say what they told her to, do what they asked of her, but she might do it all on autopilot.

Before long, they were taken to an area outside of the room where the king typically held his press conferences.

She could hear the din of voices talking over one another from where she stood. Would Mac see his sister prior to this? Or would their reunion be public? If so, would they be able to keep their emotions from getting the best of them?

The king's press officer came to stand next to Fiona. In quiet tones, he told her what she'd need to do and say.

She wouldn't let go of the stuffed bear. She also wouldn't lean on Mac like she might have if they were a conventional couple rather than a parent and the one who walked away.

Except she found herself wanting to. Wanting to have him as her partner rather than her adversary.

Earlier, alone as they waited, he'd simply wrapped his arms around her and held her to him. Comforted her without blame or questions he knew she couldn't answer.

He hadn't approached her this time. Rather, he hung back as though he didn't know where he should be.

Alternately looking awkward and sad, he didn't exude the confidence and charm she remembered from the scattered weeks they'd spent together. The last years had tempered him, it seemed.

"Do you have any questions, ma'am?" The aide brought Fiona's attention

back where it needed to be.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.” Except... “Where will Prince Maximilian be?” Using his full name and title seemed appropriate for the moment.

“He will be at the far side of the entourage. Prince Gabriel will lead the Sargassian side of the delegation. He’ll be on the other side of him. You’ll be next to King Edward as he makes his statement.”

“Did he suggest this?” she asked the man.

“I don’t believe so.”

“Did he approve it?” she pressed.

“I’m not certain if he actually approved or if he has chosen to accept it without making a scene.”

Fiona shook her head. “No. He needs to be by me. He’s the father of my son. We need to look united.”

Even if she felt certain it would be no more than a facade.

Another man moved into her field of vision. “Ma’am, it’s time.”

5



Mac hadn't expected to stand next to Fiona as King Edward prepared to address the assembled press.

He had known there would be whispers wondering who he was, why he was there, and why he looked so familiar.

The king stepped up to the bank of microphones. "Earlier today, a child went missing from one of our resorts. Grayson Westgate, son of Ms. Fiona Westgate and Prince Maximilian of Islas del Sargasso, was last seen in the company of his nanny, who was also missing. She has since been recovered. To this point, she has been unable to provide us with many details."

From the wide eyes and whispers coming from the seats, Mac couldn't be certain which piece of information caused the biggest stir - that Fiona had a child, that he was the child's father - and present, or that the child had been kidnapped.

The king said a few more words then the questions began - shouted over one another.

"Where has the prince been?"

"How old is Gray?"

“Why didn’t you tell anyone about him? Are you ashamed?”

None of them were dignified with a response.

A photo of Gray appeared on the screens nearby. “These are recent photos of Gray,” the king went on, ignoring the rest. “Anyone with information should contact local authorities.”

Mac knew the phone number would appear on the bottom of the screens and in text wherever the photos were posted.

A video of Esme played on a screen off to the side. Mac hadn’t talked to her yet. She made a statement very similar to the king’s.

Fiona moved to the microphones. Mac stayed with her but slightly behind.

She continued to hold onto the teddy bear, the one Mac had sent years earlier. After opening and closing her mouth a couple of times, she closed her eyes. Mac could see tears sliding down her cheeks. He stepped closer and rested a hand on her back.

She tried again. “Please bring him back. I…” Her voice cracked, and she turned away, right into Mac’s chest.

He kept his arm around her, holding her to his side as he urged her out of the room. She’d done what she needed to do. They were quickly taken to another room where she turned toward him.

Mac wrapped both of his arms around her and pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “He’s going to be okay, Fi.”

“How do you know that?” The pain inherent in the whisper tore at Mac.

“I just do.” He had to keep believing that.

Eventually, Fiona moved away from him. “Can I see Tinsley?”

One of the members of security walked with her toward a side entrance to the room.

Mac ran a hand through his hair then looked at his phone to see a video call from his sister. When she appeared, the tears in her eyes tugged at Mac’s heartstrings.

“I’ve missed you, Maxey.” She hadn’t used his childhood nickname in a very long time.

“I’ve missed you, too, Esme.” It felt right, calling her by her nickname, even though he’d been gone far too long.

“Why didn’t you tell me where you’d gone? I still don’t know the details, though Edward says there’s a good reason for it.” She sniffled.

“There was. There still is, but finding Gray is more important.”

“Will you tell me?”

“Someday. Maybe when this is all over.”

A throat cleared behind them, and Mac ended the call with his older sister.

A member of the staff let them know they were needed in the medical suite. Gabriel’s expression hadn’t changed when he looked at Mac, but when Gabe looked at his wife his face changed.

Clearly the playboy prince had grown to love Esme in a way the last queen of Islas del Sargasso had never loved or been loved by her husband.

In the medical suite, Tinsley rested in a hospital bed. Fiona sat next to her, holding her hand. The nanny didn’t look too bad, but had definitely seen better days.

“I think it was the guy I was talking to the other day,” Tinsley told Fiona. “I didn’t tell them I was a nanny. I certainly didn’t tell them I worked for you. I hadn’t seen them while I was with Gray, but I guess it’s possible they’d seen me with him. They could have put two and two together.”

“What else did they say?”

Tinsley glanced at the rest of those gathered in the room, clearly weighing what she wanted to say.

“You can say anything in front of them,” Fiona reassured her. “They’re all friends.”

Tinsley nodded, but didn’t continue for what seemed like an eternity. “They weren’t mean or cruel, except for the part where they took us against our will. I don’t know how they got to Gray. I never actually saw him, but could hear the men talking about having him in their custody as well. They weren’t rough, but did make sure we did what they wanted. We were put into a van with dark windows and driven off the property almost immediately. The first stop wasn’t very far away, but I’m not sure I could get you back there. They made me lay down in the back and turned a lot. Probably doubled back and went far out of the way before coming to a stop inside a building of some kind.”

“You didn’t see where you were?” Fiona asked.

Tinsley shook her head. “No. It was a warehouse of some sort, the kind you see near a wharf or something. Like the ones we saw on the drive to the resort, but nothing to determine which one it might have been.” She stared at her hand. “I could hear them arguing but couldn’t make it all out. I don’t think they had a real plan, but one of their brothers worked at the warehouse

or something.”

Mac knew where she meant. There were dozens if not hundreds of warehouses in that area.

“We were moved to another vehicle, another van. At least I think it was both of us. I still didn’t hear Gray. I think the van was owned by whoever ran the warehouse. It was used to haul stuff, but also had a couple of seats in the back. I couldn’t tell what kinds of things they hauled in it. This one didn’t have any windows. As far as I know, they treated Gray well. Once I was seated with my seatbelt on, I had my hands tied, and they put a blindfold on me.” She held up her wrists for them to see. “The rope wasn’t overly tight, but I tried so hard to get loose that it left marks. It wasn’t long before they pushed me out of the van. I landed hard but not too hard, you know? I managed to get the blindfold off. I was on the back side of a park of some kind. I headed toward children’s laughter. A kind woman found me and called the authorities. Now here I am, but I don’t think I can help much.”

“You’ve done great.” Fiona squeezed Tinsley’s hand. “Get some rest.”

An aide stayed in Tinsley’s room with her, but the rest of them went to yet another sitting area.

Fire shot from Fiona’s eyes as she turned to the security personnel. “What’s being done to find my son?”



There had to be more going on than they were being told.

Mac knew - or thought he knew - that the family rarely knew everything the authorities were doing.

Even a royal family.

King Edward might know more than he let on, but the rest of the group wouldn’t.

Fiona hadn’t received the answers she wanted, but had been told they were doing all in their power to find Gray.

They stayed in the other waiting room for an extended period.

Mac wanted to sit with Fiona, to talk to her, maybe try to comfort her, but he kept his distance. She’d prefer it that way.

He'd never been overly close to his sister. The age gap, when combined with the differing expectations for the heir and the spare, meant their social circles rarely crossed.

So he kept his distance from her as well.

Eventually, Silas joined them. He sat in the next chair over, but didn't speak. Mac simply observed everyone as they milled about and talked in hushed tones.

The sun had begun to set when someone entered the room and spoke quietly with King Edward. The king straightened then motioned to Fiona to follow him.

Mac stood, but didn't move until the king beckoned him as well.

A moment later, they were led into yet another room to wait.

He'd grown up in a palace. There were rooms upon rooms upon rooms, but why didn't they go to one of the same rooms they'd already been in? He supposed there was a reason, but had no idea what it could be.

It only took a moment for him to realize he and Fiona had been left alone.

"How are you holding up?"

She shrugged. "As well as I can, I guess. It's been a long day, and I don't think I'll be able to sleep until I know Gray is okay."

"Is there anything I can get for you? Some tea? Coffee? A soda? Water?"

Fiona shook her head. "I'm good."

Mac walked to a table along one wall. It held several trays with snacks on them. He picked up a small plate and added a couple of pastries to it before pouring a glass of water and taking it to Fiona despite her earlier statement.

"I don't think I can eat."

Mac set the plate on the table next to her. "Try to take a few bites, but you really do need something to drink." He crouched in front of her and held out the glass. "At least take a few sips."

She hesitated then handed him the small bear as she took the glass of water. Holding it in both hands, Fiona took one sip then several more.

But Mac barely noticed. He'd held this bear before. Years earlier when it still had tags on it and hadn't been nearly as loved yet. He brushed his thumb over the fur. The stuffing wasn't evenly distributed like it had once been and the fur had been nearly rubbed off in some spots.

"It's his favorite," Fiona told him. "I'm not sure why. Someone sent it when he was born, but I never did find out who. He always loved it, even as a newborn."

Mac took the glass of water back from her, exchanging it for the bear again. “I sent it. I didn’t think you’d accept something from me. I understood why, but still wanted to send him something. I had to try.”

Fiona grew contemplative. “Is it weird that it’s always been his favorite when we didn’t know it came from his father?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“I suppose so.”

Mac set the water on a cloth napkin next to the plate of pastries. He wasn’t about to get water rings on an heirloom and inadvertently start a war. Sliding into the chair on the other side of the table, he tried to relax. “Tell me about him. What’s his favorite food? Favorite game? Favorite way to avoid bedtime?”

A small smile crossed Fiona’s face. Not as much as he’d hoped for, but something at least. “He always asks for a glass of water, then another story, then another song. By then he has to go to the bathroom again.”

Mac couldn’t help but grin. “Sounds a lot like me when I was little. I always wanted one more so I didn’t have to go to sleep.”

“I never had that problem. I always slept really well.” She picked at the ear. “His favorite food is pizza. His favorite game is Candyland, but he won’t admit it. He thinks it’s a baby game. He loves *Blue’s Clues*, but thinks it’s too baby for him so he insists on *Phineas and Ferb* instead. Both are good shows so I’m not complaining too much. He wants to be a big kid so badly, and he’s much closer to it than I want to admit.”

A door Mac could see but Fiona couldn’t opened letting in King Edward and...

Mac smiled and tilted his head toward them so Fiona would turn.

She gasped and jumped from her chair. “Gray!”

He ran to her as she moved toward him. “Mama!”

She picked him up and swung him into her arms, holding him tight. “Oh, sweet boy. I’m so glad they found you.”

“I missed you, Mama.” He leaned back and fiddled with her necklace. “The nice men got me ice cream for dinner.”

Nice men?

At least they’d treated him well. He looked fine.

Fiona took him back to the chair she’d been in and sat down. He snuggled close to her.

“I went to the pool and we had ice cream for lunch. Then I played in the

other pool with another boy and girl. A nice man brought me more ice cream. He said he'd take me to you, Mama. We went to a park and played hide and seek. It was my turn to find them, but they were gone." He shrugged. "I did what you told me to. I found another mom and told her I was lost."

Mac looked toward the king who nodded. The mum would be rewarded well.

"Then the police came and brought me here."

"I'm so glad you're here, kiddo." Tears continued down her cheeks, but these had to be happy tears.

"Mama," Gray whispered loudly.

"Yes, bud?"

"Who's that?" He pointed at Mac.

Mac let Fiona take the lead. He wouldn't tell Gray anything she didn't want him to.

"That's Mac," she told him, then sucked in a deep breath. "Your daddy."

6



Of all the ways Fiona imagined introducing Gray to his father, this one had never been on the list.

She'd never envisioned a scenario where Gray had been kidnapped either.

"My daddy?" Gray whispered.

"Yes," she confirmed. "Mac is your daddy."

Mac leaned forward but didn't reach for Gray. "Hi."

Gray snuggled a bit closer to Fiona. "Hi."

The look Mac sent her way seemed to be full of uncertainty. "It's nice to meet you, Gray."

She could tell Mac wanted to reach for Gray, but she respected him for not insisting.

"Your Royal Highness, ma'am, we need to leave." One of the security team members motioned to them.

Mac quickly hid the look of disappointment that crossed his face as Fiona stood, situating Gray on her hip, though he'd been too big to do so comfortably for some time. She wasn't about to let him go.

They followed the security officer through a hallway and into a reception

room of some sort. King Antonio and Queen Penelope waited for them, as did Gabe.

“We’re going to send you to Sargasso with Gabriel while the investigation continues,” the king told them. “Gabriel was slated to leave this afternoon anyway. It’s been arranged so that no one will know you’re with him. The media will be told you and your son have been taken to a secure location. They’ll assume you’re here at the palace. We’ll let them think that until you’re ready to reappear somewhere else.”

Fiona nodded. Normally, she didn’t like hiding from the media, but this wasn’t a normal time. She’d do anything that needed to be done to keep Gray safe. She had no doubt Mac would as well.

“I’m going home,” Mac said. “There’s no need for rumors to start flying because we go somewhere together. Silas and I will pack and get the house ready to sell.”

What could she say to that? Fiona hadn’t even begun to delve into the implications of his residence, much less realize whether she wanted him to move.

“I’m afraid not.” Gabe took care of it for her. “Now that we know where you are, your sister... no, your queen wants you back in Sargasso.”

Mac managed to keep the scowl from remaining on his face any longer than the disappointment had a few minutes earlier, but he didn’t protest. Instead, he quietly stayed near the back of the group as they headed toward the garrison.

Until the last few hours, Fiona would have thought it quite unusual for the prince, but found herself believing she’d need to reevaluate a lot of things about him.

They were seated in another dark tinted SUV. Gabe and the driver would be the only ones visible through the windshield, especially after sunset with no extra lights in the vehicle. Mac didn’t say a word, not even to complain about being in the far back row rather than further forward like his place in a hierarchy could allow.

They left out of a side gate with no media watching. Fiona breathed a small sigh of relief. Gray clung tightly to her hand across the gap between the second row captain’s chairs. In his other hand, he clung to the bear Mac had sent.

The drive didn’t take long, and they were soon aboard a private plane taxiing toward the runway.

“Tinsley and your luggage will follow soon,” Gabe told her from his seat near hers.

“What about Silas? Mac’s luggage?”

Gabe shrugged. “I’m sure arrangements have been made or will be shortly.”

Fiona didn’t care for Gabe’s dismissive attitude, but kept her mouth shut. She hadn’t seen him in quite some time and didn’t feel comfortable telling him. Not anymore. Not yet.

They’d be in Ancora in an hour or less. From there she had no idea where they’d be taken.

Exhausted from his eventful day, Gray had curled up in the seat next to her and quickly fallen asleep with his head resting on her shoulder.

Gabe didn’t look open to conversation, which suited Fiona just fine. He would want to have a conversation about Mac or something else she didn’t want to discuss at the moment.

Mac had taken a seat near the back of the plane, as close as he could get to the flight staff seats without actually taking one from the stewards.

The arrogant young man she’d met several years earlier would never have considered such a thing. Something had changed in him between the time they’d met at a private resort on an island in Sargasso and the time she’d told him about Gray several months later. Then he had been cold, distant, but not self-confident to the point of pretension.

Being a father, even though he chose not to be actively involved, hadn’t been the catalyst for the change. There had to be something else, but Fiona had no idea what it could have been.

Twenty-four hours earlier, she would have thought he’d relish a return to the privileges that came with his rank.

She noticed a change in the engine sounds. They’d already started descending.

Gabe continued to do something on his tablet. Work of some sort, if she went by his muttering.

A glance back at Mac showed that he stared out the window. Was he looking forward to seeing his sister again? What could be running through his mind?

Would he visit some favorite hang outs? A favorite restaurant?

An old girlfriend?

Why should it matter to Fiona if he did see an old girlfriend? They

weren't in a relationship any more than they had been years earlier.

The lights of the runaway grew larger as the whine of the engine increased.

Gray woke when the wheels hit the runaway.

"Where are we, Mama?" She loved that he still called her that in his sleep-filled voice.

"Ancora. It's a city in Islas del Sargasso. This is where your father grew up." Would he remember that he'd met his father?

She'd never shied away from telling him about his father, though she'd never been overly specific.

He didn't say anything else, but moved to the window and stared at the lights. "It's so pretty, Mama."

"Wait until you see the ocean and beaches. They're some of the prettiest in the world." She reached out and brushed Gray's hair off his head. "We'll visit one soon." With a full security detail. She suspected the queen had already assigned one.

The plane taxied into a hanger. Once the doors closed behind them, they exited the plane, and entered another SUV.

Except this time, Mac didn't go with them.



Could he manage to sneak off? Mac wasn't sure he'd ever be ready to see the queen again, not knowing she wasn't his sister.

Did she know? Silas and now Fiona were the only ones he'd ever told, but had Queen Carlotta left information behind that would tell Queen Esmeralda the truth?

Until he landed on Sargassian soil, it had been relatively easy to continue thinking of the queen as his sister, as Esme.

But now...

Wouldn't Prince Gabriel have treated him differently if he'd known the truth? Maybe the queen didn't know.

Before he could try to slip away, Mac found himself in a dark SUV.

"Good evening, sir. It's good to have you home. I'm certain the queen

will be quite excited.”

Mac couldn't see the driver's profile well enough to make out features. The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

Not a member of his security team. Maybe a member of the queen's?

Whoever he was, he didn't say anything else as he drove through the nearly empty streets of Ancora.

Despite the wishes Mac made upon the stars as they flew, his destination appeared to be the palace. A sense of foreboding swept over him as they drove through the gates and to the garrison where another member of the security team opened his door.

Judy, the queen's long-time chief assistant, waited for him. “It's a pleasure to see you again, sir.”

She fell in half a step behind him. “The queen is waiting for you in her quarters.”

It surprised Mac that she didn't plan to meet him somewhere less personal. Her office. A reception room.

The dungeon.

They didn't have a dungeon anymore. Not really.

But the point remained.

He didn't say anything, but hoped he remembered the way to her apartment.

When reached a point where two hallways met, he hesitated. Hadn't he read somewhere that she'd moved into the former queen's quarters, where all the monarchs lived?

“The kitchen in the monarch's quarters has some food if you're hungry, sir.”

Mac gave a single nod of thanks to Judy for giving an answer to a question he hadn't asked.

He paused again when he reached the door leading to the apartment.

The door opened giving Mac his first look at his sister in years.

The queen stared at him. “You're really here?” When he nodded, she gave a small cry, and launched himself at him. “Maximilian!”

Mac caught her, wrapping his arms around her, holding her tighter than he'd ever held anyone.

“I've missed you, brother,” she whispered.

The lump in his throat meant Mac couldn't reply. When he closed his eyes, hot tears leaked down his cheeks.

Before he could gather his wits enough to speak, she let go of him and moved away, her hands framing his face.

“I am so glad you’re here, brother.” She grasped his hand and led him into the sitting room. Prince Gabriel sat in one of the chairs, his face impassive. “Of course, you’ve already had a chance to talk to Gabe.”

Mac nodded in the general direction of the other man. “Briefly.”

The queen let go of his hand. “Are you hungry?” She turned toward the kitchen. “I can get you something to eat.”

“I’m fine.”

She turned back toward him, and for the first time, Mac bowed to the woman he’d always believed to be his older sister.

“It is good to see you again.” Mac couldn’t quite bring himself to use her title or an honorific like ma’am. He took the seat she motioned to. “I’ve missed you.” They’d never been overly close, but he had loved her as his older sister for his entire life, and he *had* missed her.

“Tomorrow, we’ll talk more about where you’ve been and why you left, but for now, it’s enough that you’re here.” Queen Esmeralda smiled at him from her spot next to her husband.

A door on the other side of the room opened quietly. Fiona exited and pulled the door almost all the way shut. “He’s asleep,” she whispered. “Thank you for...”

Mac knew the second she realized he was also in the room.

Fiona recovered quickly. “Thank you for allowing us to stay here, but guest quarters would have been more than enough.”

The queen waved a hand. “Oh, please. Gray is my nephew.” She glared at Mac. “I have lost time to make up for since no one knew...”

“I had my reasons,” he interrupted. “Good ones.”

Fiona seemed to understand his unspoken statement. His sister didn’t seem to know anything about his reasons for leaving. If she did, she wouldn’t have greeted him - or his son - the same way.

“Yes, you did.”

It surprised Mac that Fiona took up for him, but it probably shouldn’t have.

“He hasn’t elaborated on them to any of us.” Prince Gabriel it shifted slightly. “We have no idea if they were good reasons or not.”

Straightening in her seat, Fiona glared at him. “He told me. I understand why he did what he did, and I’m really the only one who matters. His leaving

had nothing to do with either of you or his responsibilities as your younger brother. That's all you need to know. Now, can we move on to other matters? Is there any word on what happened to my son?"

The prince consort shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. There won't be a full briefing until morning, but if there's anything urgent, we'll be contacted."

"Thank you." Fiona tried to stifle a yawn, but covered it with one hand instead. "I do hate to be rude, but I'm exhausted. Do you mind if I turn in?"

Mac stood as the rest of them did.

"Please, go right ahead." His sister motioned to the room Fiona had left. "You are welcome to stay with your son if you'd like, of course. I understand how hard it would be to leave him alone after the day you've had. You are also welcome to stay in the room attached to it if you'd prefer." She turned to Mac. "Your quarters have been made ready for you, unless you'd rather stay here for the night."

He tipped his head her direction. "Thank you. If it's all right, I think I'd rather stay here, closer to Gray tonight."

"Understandable." His sister lifted onto her toes to kiss his cheek. "Welcome home, little brother. I love you."

Mac couldn't bring himself to stay it back. "Thank you."

Prince Gabriel glared his direction as he followed his wife out of the sitting area.

"I'm going to bed."

Mac turned to see Fiona standing next to the room where their son slept.

"I'm staying with my son. If you'd like to sleep in the next room, that's fine with me, just stay there." She also glared at him before going through the door.

Mac simply nodded as she disappeared.

He stared at the door as it closed.

He'd stay in his own room, but this could get interesting.



The ceiling in the bedroom Mac occupied looked like every other ceiling in that it looked like no other ceiling ever.

It had been a very long time since he'd been impressed by the ornate ceilings found in almost every room. In that, this room was no different.

He stared up at it, his mind wandering as he didn't even try to sleep.

When he woke up nearly twenty-four hours earlier, he never could have imagined he'd be sleeping in the Sargassian palace with Fiona and his son in the next room and his sister across the apartment.

Life could be so surreal.

A whisper of a sound caught his attention, but Mac couldn't place where it came from. He lay still, allowing his senses to absorb any changes - a sound, the feel of the air moving from a door opening or closing, the smell of a change in scent, a movement caught in the corner of his eye.

"Mac?"

Or maybe the loud whisper from Fiona.

"Are you asleep?"

Giving her a hard time crossed his mind briefly, but Mac instinctively

knew it wouldn't be a good idea.

"No." He sat up and turned toward her. "You can't sleep either?"

In the dim light, he could see her shake her head, blonde hair more visible in the low light than his dark hair would be.

"My brain won't turn off," she admitted as she walked toward the window.

"Still?"

She stopped in her tracks. "You remember that?"

Mac swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I remember you sitting on the balcony watching the waves in the moonlight."

Fiona gave a half-smile. "Probably with a cup of tea."

A chuckle escaped. "You loved that cup of tea."

"How do you know?" There wasn't any accusation about the brevity of the time they spent together. Rather, her tone hinted at pure curiosity.

"The way you closed your eyes and inhaled the scent, smiled, and sighed. You were clearly quite smitten with your beverage of choice."

She gave him a glance she couldn't quite interpret, but continued toward the window. "Yes. I love tea. And yes, I've always had a hard time getting my mind to shut down, especially after a big day like this one has been."

"Does the tea help?"

Fiona shrugged. "It might have. I haven't had a cup in a long time. I'm not sure why, just sort of drifted away from it."

Mac stood and followed her toward the window. She pushed the curtain back enough that she could see out, but it was unlikely anyone could see in, if anyone was looking.

They stood there for several minutes before she broke the silence. "Does your sister know?"

"About...?"

"Why you left?"

Right. "No. I don't think anyone does."

"King Edward does. He might not know the details, but he knows you had a good reason."

"I only know what he said earlier. I don't know if he knows what the reason was." Didn't the king know just about everything? He knew about Mac's moth... Queen Carlotta's illness before anyone.

He stood close to Fiona but with his hands clasped behind his back to make sure he didn't accidentally initiate contact with her and make her

uncomfortable.

But she leaned back a bit, eliminating the space between them and her soft shirt resting against his chest.

“Thank you for coming forward today. You didn’t have to. You had to know you’d immediately be a suspect so you could have stayed hidden.” She let her head fall back against his shoulder.

“I could have been,” he said slowly, letting himself wrap his arms around her to steady her if needed. “But even though you didn’t know I knew much of anything about him, I feel like I know him. I had to do whatever I could to help, though it wasn’t much in the end.”

They stood there, looking through the gap in the curtains. From this room, they could see down into the gardens and out to the city beyond. It would start to wake up soon, but for the moment it remained more dark than not.

Fiona rested her arms on his. “Not all men would have acted like you did. Then or now. I still don’t know who this guy is - the one you say is your biological father. For now, I’ll take your word for it that his identity meant it would be best for you to stay away from us. They might have walked away, but not for those reasons. Many of them wouldn’t have kept an eye on us to make sure we stayed safe. And most of them wouldn’t have come forward knowing they’d be accused.”

He hadn’t thought about it in those terms. Instead, he’d only thought about how he was failing both of them while trying to protect them at the same time.

Fiona reached out and pulled the curtains shut, darkening the room again.

Mac let his arms fall to his sides. He’d enjoyed the feeling of Fiona in his arms. It had been a very, very long time since he’d held a woman at all, but he didn’t think anyone else would be quite the same.

She turned to face him. The cracks of light in the slight gap that remained showed him tear tracks on her cheeks.

Reaching for her, Mac pulled her back into his arms, this time to his chest as her arms wrapped around him. He could feel the dampness from her tears against his skin.

He half expected her to begin crying in earnest, but instead she blew out a deep sigh.

“I know it shouldn’t be at the forefront of my mind right now, but this is nice.” Her hold on him tightened. “It’s been a long time since I’ve stood like this with someone when I wasn’t on set.”

Mac rubbed his hand up and down her back. “I hope you believe me when I say it’s probably been almost as long for me, except I don’t have a set to be on.” His cheek rested against her hair. “I’ve seen everything you’ve done, though.”

“You have?” Shock filled her voice.

“Of course.”

Fiona didn’t let go of him but did lean back so she could look up at him. “That might be one of the sweetest things I’ve ever heard.”

Of all the difficult things Mac had done in his life, not kissing her in that moment had to be right up there in the top two.

He took a deep breath and then stepped back. “Why don’t you lay back down and get some rest? We can leave the door open between the rooms if you’d rather stay in here. I’ll take the couch.”

Once she’d settled onto the bed, Mac took a seat on the couch a few feet away. “Good night, Fiona. Get some rest.”

He could hear her yawn. “Same to you, Prince.”

There wasn’t the note of derision there had been when he’d walked away years earlier.

Instead it almost sounded like affection.

Interesting.



When Fiona blinked awake, the bright shaft of light peeking through the crack in the curtains told her she’d slept far later than she meant.

Where was Mac? They’d talked for a few minutes before she dozed off. She’d asked questions about him. He’d deflected and asked about Gray.

She sat straight up.

Where was Gray? Surely he hadn’t slept nearly this long.

Scrambling out of the bed and heading for the door to the other bedroom, she called his name.

He didn’t reply.

It took everything in her to keep the panic pressed down. He had to be safe somewhere. No one could get into the palace to hurt him - or any of

them.

But she needed to see him before she could know for sure.

Still wearing her pajamas, she hurried out into the main portion of the queen's apartment.

Relief washed over her as she saw Gray sitting at a table with a plate of fruit in front of him. It took her a second to realize he sat next to Mac.

The two of them were huddled together, looking intently at one of the pieces of fruit on the table in front of Gray.

Mac pointed at one part of it, then another - the seeds? - and presumably told him something about the fruit. She couldn't tell what kind of fruit, but likely something they didn't have in Southwest Missouri.

She leaned against the door opening to her room with her arms crossed in front of her as she watched the thing she'd wanted for so long.

It shocked her that Mac was the one with Gray. She'd figured she would meet a nice guy, they'd start dating, then he'd choose to take on the role of father to Gray.

"He's good with Gray."

Fiona turned to see the queen holding out a coffee mug for her. "Thank you."

"I've missed my brother," the queen went on. "I don't pretend to entirely understand why he disappeared. I hope he'll trust me enough to tell me someday. But I did hear enough to know that he kept an eye on both of you." She sipped her coffee. "That sounds more like my brother. To do what he had to in order to protect his family."

Taking a sip of the steaming liquid in her own cup, Fiona considered that. "I'm not his family. Only in the sense that Gray is his family, and I'm Gray's mother."

Queen Esmeralda shook her head. "No. You're Mac's family, too. Not just because you're his son's mother, but because you just are."

It hit Fiona that she hadn't addressed the queen properly. "Your Majesty..."

"Please call me Esme in private, Fiona. As I said, you're family."

Despite her celebrity status, Fiona never expected to be on a first name basis with royalty - outside of Mac - much less be considered family.

Mac glanced over, an uncertain look crossing his face. Fiona smiled and nodded, hoping he understood that she wasn't going to interrupt his time with Gray.

“Mac is good with him.” The queen took another drink of her coffee. She tilted her head toward them. “I’m not surprised.”

“We’ll get out of your hair as soon as I can arrange a flight home.” Fiona didn’t want them to overstay their welcome and irritating the queen wasn’t high on her list of things to do.

“Nonsense. I want to get to know my nephew. My children would like to get to know their cousin - or they would if they were old enough to understand. I’m sure Gabe does as well.” Esme smiled at Fiona. “Please stay for a few days.”

Fiona nodded slowly. “We were supposed to be in San Majoria a little while longer. Tinsley will be here, unless you’d rather she go home instead of here.”

The queen stifled a smile. “We have plenty of room. Tinsley and Silas will be here this evening.”

Silas? Fiona searched the recesses of her mind. The queen expected her to know who he was.

“Silas has been one of Mac’s protection officers for many years. He disappeared with Mac and hadn’t been seen since until the other day. Silas stayed with his protectee regardless.”

A face appeared from the shadows of Fiona’s mind, and she nodded. She remembered Silas, but didn’t think they’d ever been officially introduced.

“He’ll be rewarded in some way. I’m not certain what just yet, but a high honor.”

Good. He’d surely helped keep Mac safe and protected her and Gray at the same time.

“Come on.” The queen used one hand to direct Fiona away from the area where Mac and Gray ate.

Back in the bedroom where Gray had slept the night before, Esme led Fiona to a door on the other side. “Through here is a lovely bathroom and a closet with a variety of clothes that should fit you. Take your time to get ready. My assistant will make certain you know where you need to be when.”

She held up a hand as Fiona started to protest. “There won’t be anything official on the schedule today. No trips beyond the walls, but dinner and perhaps a movie in the screening room.”

Relief washed over Fiona. “That sounds lovely.”

The queen left and Fiona looked around the beautifully appointed bathroom. She’d stayed in some nice places. She’d *lived* in some nice places.

None of them compared to this.

As much as she wanted to take a long soak in the tub, Fiona decided against it. She needed to be ready for her son if he needed her and to keep an eye on him with Mac. After a quick shower, she found a pair of leggings and a tunic style shirt to wear. Similar to something she'd wear for a day around the house, she didn't know if comfortable clothes would be the best option for a day in a palace, but if they'd left them in her closet, it must be okay.

Right?

This time when she left the bedroom, Mac and Gray were sitting on the couch reading a book.

"Mama!" Gray saw her this time and jumped down to run to her.

Fiona laughed and swung him into her arms, trying not to groan. He really had grown too big to do it, but she didn't care.

He leaned in and whispered. "Mama, this is a *castle*."

"Yes, it is, buddy."

"That man grew up here."

"He did," she confirmed.

"He's my daddy?" Where was Gray going with this?

She nodded again.

"He's a prince?"

Another nod.

Gray wrapped his arms around her neck. "Does that mean I'm a prince?"

8



It had been years since Mac wandered the palace, running up and down the wide hallways as a child or sulking through them as a teen, but he still knew many of the corridors by heart.

Most of them anyway.

The palace was far too large to remember all of it after such a long time. The areas he'd frequented were still familiar, though some of the tapestries and items on display had changed.

As he walked, he tried to smile and nod in acknowledgment to anyone who passed him. Most of the staff glanced his way, wide-eyed, but refused to look straight at him. A few of them looked familiar, but most didn't.

Because they hadn't worked there before he moved for university? Or because he hadn't taken the time to know them well enough to remember them by sight, even if he'd never known them by name?

The second option disturbed Mac.

He could feel a difference in himself.

He'd become Prince Maximilian again.

The hand-crafted Italian leather shoes.

The bespoke suit.

The haircut and clean-shaven face, thanks to the staff barber and his hot towel.

All of it combined to make him feel like the person he used to be and not the person he'd become.

Mac nodded toward a member of the staff who stopped long enough to give a slight bow his direction.

Before he could fully prepare himself, he found his way into the executive wing. The queen had summoned him. He couldn't refuse.

"Good morning, sir. The queen is waiting for you." The assistant wasn't one Mac knew. He'd known all of his mother's assistants. Esme only had one when Mac left, but she'd likely kept all of the late queen's on her staff at least for a time.

Mac entered the office to find it the same as he remembered, but different at the same time.

Some of the furnishings were the same. Some were different, though Mac couldn't put his finger on all of what had changed.

Esme waved him toward a seat as she held the phone to her ear. "Thank you, Edward. I appreciate the update."

Mac wouldn't take the seat indicated until after she replaced the handset. "Good morning, Your Majesty." He bowed at the waist. He'd seen her talking to Fiona earlier in the day, but he hadn't actually *seen* her to give the respect she was due as the queen of his country.

She rolled her eyes. "Good morning, Mac. Sit down."

He took the seat across the desk from her.

"They've made progress in San Majoria. They think they know who the men were, but haven't found them yet." The queen rested her forearms on her desk. "There's nothing we can do about that for now. There's something else I want to talk to you about."

Here it came. "Why I left. Where I've been."

"Among other things. I know where you've been. You and Silas have been in the States. I'm not sure how you've avoided being seen by paparazzi or anyone else you know."

Mac shrugged. "I got good at looking the other way when I needed to. The longer hair and beard helped a lot."

"I'm not sure I would have recognized you if you walked past me in a place I didn't expect you to be," she admitted. "I do like this look better,

though.”

“Me, too.” Despite - or maybe because of - its necessity, he’d spent the better part of six years wanting to shave it off.

Rather than continuing, she stared at her folded hands for a moment. “I don’t know the details of why you left. Edward told me you had very good reasons, but he’s never told me what they were.” She held up a hand to stop his protest. “And I’m not asking you to tell me now. I might require you to at some point, but we’re not to that point yet.”

“Good. Because I won’t tell you. Not unless there’s a reason it becomes vital, and even then I probably won’t tell you everything.” He shook his head. “There are some things you don’t need to know.” Like who his biological father was. Telling her he’d been adopted was one thing.

Telling her the man who’d held her and everyone else hostage was his father? That was a whole different matter.

“We’ll discuss that another time. For now, we need to discuss your future.”

Mac closed his eyes and sighed. “Do we have to? Do I have to have a future here? Can’t I go back to Trumanville and live a quiet life there? With Fiona and Gray in some capacity?”

The look she gave Mac told him she’d nearly perfected that mom glare that turned even more potent when the mom also wore the crown. “It is possible we can work something out where you’re not a full time working member of the family, but you do have responsibilities here that you’ve neglected for far too long.”

That stung, like she meant it to. “I know I have, but I was still in university when I left. I didn’t have very many responsibilities to start with.”

“Not at the time, but you should have by now. You’ve been well aware of that for many years.”

Mac shook his head. “I’ve always been your spare, Esme. You and I both know our parents didn’t treat us the same way.”

“Father didn’t treat any of us well, least of all Mum.” The tinge of anger in her voice surprised Mac.

Was there more to it than he knew? “Did he…” He couldn’t even say the words.

Esme shook her head. “He was never physical with her, if that’s what you’re getting at. Not as far as I’ve ever heard, anyway. There’s no love lost between the staff and security and the former prince consort. If there had

been anything like that, I would know by now. For as long as I remember, they simply ignored each other as much as possible.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “I’ve always believed there’s a reason for our age gap, you know.”

He didn’t reply, but now he knew she didn’t know he was adopted. Given her limited knowledge, he understood why she came to that conclusion.

“Best not to dwell on him. He’s presumably happy, living on a boat somewhere in the Mediterranean with whoever he’s married to now. If they’re still married. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s moved on several times since Mum’s passing.”

Mac nodded his agreement.

Esme picked up a folder and held it out. “But that’s a discussion for another time - or not at all. This is what I called you here to talk about.”

Cautiously, Mac took the folder from her and opened it.

As he’d suspected, his life was about to change.

A lot.



Dinner would be a fancy affair, at least compared to what they usually did at home.

Fiona would be fine, but she hoped Gray would behave appropriately. He’d been to nice restaurants on several occasions and done just fine, but this took things to a different level.

One of the queen’s assistants had shown them to another suite of rooms. They weren’t as nice as the queen’s apartment, but still worthy of a palace. She did notice that very few breakable things were present and those were out of reach of little hands.

Clothes waited for both of them. A third bedroom waited for Tinsley to arrive later in the day. She hadn’t tried the other door in her room. It had been closed when they arrived. The others had all been opened. Something inside told her it would be as well if she were meant to use it.

“Mama, is it time?” Gray wiggled in his chair.

“Almost.” She stood and held out her hand. “Come here.”

With her little boy’s hand snug in hers, she walked to the window. “Let’s

see what we can find.” She helped him onto a chair. “I spy...” Fiona scanned the city outside the glass. “I spy something green.”

Gray looked intently out the window. “The tree?”

“Which one? There are many trees outside.”

He pointed to a large tree in the middle of the garden below. “That one.”

A grin crossed Fiona’s face. “That’s right. Do you want a turn?”

“You find somethin’, Mama.”

She looked around again. “I spy something blue.”

“The ocean?! Is it the ocean, Mama?” He looked up at her, a wide smile on his face. “It’s the ocean!”

“It is.” Fiona wrapped her arms around him as they looked out the window.

“Is that the same ocean where we played?”

She rested her cheek on the side of his head. “It is. Just the other side of it.”

They stood silently for a moment, watching the world outside.

“Mama, am I a prince? Tinsley said if her daddy was a prince, then she’d be a princess. My daddy is a prince.”

Sometimes his leaps of logic astounded Fiona. They’d been interrupted when he asked earlier in the day.

Fiona didn’t know how to answer him.

Yes, his father held the title, but Fiona knew the reality of Mac’s heritage. Would he retain the title once the queen knew about it?

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “I don’t know how the rules work in Islas del Sargasso.”

Or Eyjania. Wasn’t that where Mac’s biological father hailed from?

The door from the outer hallway opened. “Who’s ready for dinner?”

Fiona turned to see Mac walking in. She blinked. He looked... good. Really good. She knew the clothes had something to do with it, as did the lack of beard, but he also held himself differently than he had the day before.

He exuded a different kind of confidence than she’d seen from anyone since the next to last time she’d seen him. When she’d told him about Gray, there had clearly been something going on, but before that...

Prince Maximilian had a kind of swagger.

But now it also seemed tempered somehow.

“Me!” Gray jumped down from the chair and ran toward him. “I’m hungry!”

Mac laughed and swung the little boy into his arms much more easily than Fiona had in a long time. “Me, too.”

Laughing, Fiona followed them into the hallway, closing the door to their suite behind her.

For a building this large, the walk really didn’t take that long.

They didn’t go to the queen’s quarters like they had the evening before. Instead, they went to a more formal dining room.

The queen, Gabe, and their eldest daughter were there along with a couple of other adults Fiona found familiar, but couldn’t place.

Gabe handled the introductions. “Mac, Fiona, this is my brother, David, and his wife, Jasmine.”

Gabe’s brother? Wasn’t he the king of Auverignon? *Another* king and queen?

Before Fiona could acknowledge the introduction, Gabe turned to Gray and his daughter. “Would you like to go have dinner with Tinsley and our nanny or would you rather stay here? We’ll be talking about all kinds of boring things. They’ll have much better food and a movie afterward.”

The young crown princess didn’t hesitate to make her wishes known. Gray looked more conflicted, holding more tightly to Mac’s hand.

Mac looked down at him. “It’s all right if you want to go with them. We’ll come find you when we’re done.”

Gray nodded then went with his cousin as she skipped toward the door.

A moment later, they were seated at the table. Queen Esmeralda sat on one end. King David sat on the other. Fiona and Mac were on one side, while Gabe and Jasmine sat next to their respective spouses.

As Jasmine turned her head, Fiona noticed the green and blue streaks threaded through her hair and remembered who she was.

“You’re from Serenity Landing, aren’t you?” Fiona asked before she could convince herself to wait.

The queen consort nodded. “I lived there my entire life until I met David. You moved there a few years ago, I believe. Not long before I left. I love watching your movies every Christmas, but I think I’m a season or two behind on *Seating 4 Six*.”

A bit of warmth flooded through Fiona. “I’m glad you enjoy them. I enjoy making them.” They didn’t take much time and paid well for how long it took.

The doors opened at that moment, letting several staff members in.

For the rest of the meal, conversation revolved around light-hearted topics. Movies. Favorite vacation spots.

By the time dessert rolled around, the conversation had turned to the Games of the Sargasso Sea. The brothers bantered over the last winter games, held in Auverignon earlier in the year. In a year, more or less, the next summer games would be held in San Majoria as would the next one two years after that.

Esme turned to Mac as they took seats in a sitting area near a large window looking out over the ocean. “That’s what I was talking about earlier, Mac, before we were interrupted. It’s time for you to come home and take over planning the Games.”

Fiona blinked. Mac was supposed to be in charge of the Games? She had no idea.

From the look on his face, Mac didn’t either.



The Games of the Sargasso Sea? They hadn’t finished their earlier conversation, but... “They won’t be here again for years,” Mac pointed out. “What is there to plan?”

His sister arched her eyebrow the same way their mother had, and he knew he would have little choice in the matter.

She wouldn’t *force* him but that didn’t mean one could *really* say no when your sister the queen asked you to do something.

“The facilities need maintaining and updating. Someone needs to be in charge of that. Gabe won’t have time since he’ll be doing more and more for me again.” Her eyes twinkled. “I’m going to be a bit busy growing another person.”

Fiona and Jasmine squealed. Gabe grinned. David punched his brother on the shoulder.

Mac just smiled. It made sense that Esme would want him to stick around to help take on more as she found herself able to do less for a bit in the near future and even less when she got closer to delivery. He hadn’t been around, but he’d kept an eye on things - with help from Silas. She’d been sick, but not

too sick with her previous pregnancies. They seemed to take enough of a toll on her so that she cut back fairly early on.

In the off years, the countries often did update their facilities in between the other events they were used for. Someone would need to be in charge.

The brother of the queen seemed a logic choice.

He'd also noticed that since their meeting earlier, it had become much harder to remember his parentage and easier to continue thinking of Esme as his sister.

"Are you going to come back here to live then?" The look on Fiona's face told him there was a lot riding on this answer.

Mac nodded slowly. "It appears I will be at least for a while. I can travel back to the States regularly, or you and Gray can come here - move here even, if you wanted."

Fiona appeared to have second thoughts about having the discussion at that particular moment. "We'll talk about that later." The addition of "in private" remained unspoken.

"Of course, you both are always welcome here." Esme took over the conversation again. "All three of you, and Tinsley is always welcome to come with you. You're family. The information is public after yesterday, so there's no need to conceal your presence. We will, of course, provide protection services for you, at least for the time being. While you're here, obviously, but if you return to the States, we'll have a member of our team coordinate with Jonathan Langley-Cranston. He handles quite a bit of security for us and others we know in the area."

"I've worked with him before," Fiona confirmed. "He knows what he's doing."

Out of the corner of his eye, Mac noticed someone walk in and give a signal to Esme.

Gabe stood and held out a hand to Mac's sister. "That's our cue. We have a video conference with Ezekiel in a few minutes. Since time zones are a thing, we had to choose a time when neither one of us would be sleeping."

Esme stifled a yawn. "Yet."

It took Mac a minute to place Ezekiel. When he realized, Ezekiel was the relatively new king of New Sargasso, he understood Gabe's statement. There had to be almost twelve hours time difference between their locations.

With that, the other two couples went their separate ways, leaving Mac alone with Fiona. They headed down one of the hallways, but Fiona didn't

seem to be in any hurry, so Mac didn't rush.

"Do we need to get Gray? Or is he all right where he is?" Fiona glanced at him, clearly uncertain about what she was going to say. "I adore him. You know that. Normally, I'd enjoy a bit of child free time with adults, but with everything yesterday, I'm not sure how I feel. On one level, I want to be so close to him I can feel him at all times, but on another, I know he's safe. He doesn't appear to be overly traumatized by the situation, and I think I'm okay with leaving him be for the moment. Then I worry that even thinking that makes me a bad mom."

Mac reached out and took her hand as they walked. Squeezing it gently, he tried to reassure her. "You are a wonderful mum. It's normal, probably even healthy, to want to spend time with adults. That's okay. Even after yesterday. He doesn't seem to be overly bothered by it, and if you felt he wouldn't be okay going somewhere without you, we'd be having an entirely different conversation."

Without meaning to, he'd walked them toward the door to his apartment and let them inside.

"Where are we?" She sounded curious, and possibly a bit cautious.

"My quarters." Mac winced as he looked at her. "I can show you how to get back to yours or we could have a drink and you can have some more time talking to another grown-up."

He could tell from the look on her face that Fiona was sizing him up, trying to determine if he had any ulterior motives.

He didn't.

"All right. I'd like some ice water if that's the kind of drink you mean."

Mac motioned toward the living area. "Have a seat. I had no particular beverage in mind." He headed for the kitchenette. "I'll be right back."

A moment later, they were seated in the big chair, looking out the open doors toward the sun as it set into the ocean.

"It's beautiful. I can see why you'd want to live here." She leaned her head against his shoulder.

The decision to rest his cheek against the top of her head also wasn't a conscious one. "That's not the only reason, though it is beautiful. So are the Ozarks, in a different way. Here, I also have my sister, Gabe, their kids. Other people I've known my entire life. I've missed it here. Not just since the move to Missouri, but even before that, while at university."

"Did you ever finish your degree? You disappeared before you finished,

didn't you?" The lack of censure in her voice surprised him.

"I did. I was almost done. I did the rest via email and video chats." He'd been fortunate in that sense.

"What did you miss most about Islas del Sargasso? Something here in Ancora or something somewhere else?"

Mac turned the question over in his head before answering. "Both. I've missed the people the most. Not the adulation that tends to come with my titles, but when I have a chance to get to genuinely know some of them. Maybe at a sporting event or charity dinner. That's what I've missed most. The people."

Fiona shifted until he could look down into her eyes. "That's not what I would have expected you to say."

He reached out with his free hand and brushed a bit of hair back off her face. "It's the truth."

Her face was so close to his. All he'd have to do was move a couple of inches, and he could kiss her.

And how he wanted to kiss her.

But he wouldn't unless it seemed obvious she wanted him to.

Then he realized he didn't need to worry about it.

She kissed him.

9



For the rest of her life, Fiona wouldn't know what possessed her to kiss Mac.

For the rest of her life, Fiona knew she wouldn't regret it.

It had been a very long time since she really kissed someone. She'd almost forgotten what it could be like when there weren't cameras recording your every move.

It had also been a very long time since she let herself get carried away by a kiss.

Fiona wasn't going to start now.

Before the thought could fully form in her kiss-addled head, Mac had already started to slow the kiss down until it came to a stop, and he rested his forehead against hers.

Fiona struggled to think clearly. "I don't know what came over me," she whispered. "That wasn't part of my plan." A wry chuckle escaped before she could stop it. "I didn't have a plan."

"I suspected as much."

Mac wrapped his arm around her shoulders and tucked her into his side.

Was that a kiss against her hair?

“I don’t know if I want to move here, Mac. My whole life is in Serenity Landing. My friends, my job, my home. Everything Gray has ever known is there. I don’t know that I want to uproot all of that.” She closed her eyes and rested her head against his shoulder. “And I don’t know that I’d want to split time, with school and everything. Kindergarten is coming up.”

“I can understand that. I haven’t thought it all through yet, either. I didn’t think Esme would have anything of this magnitude for me to do. I’m not sure she’ll still want me to once I tell her the truth.”

She felt him suck in a breath.

“My biological father held her at gunpoint. Literally, from what I understand. Not just his men, but him. Will she want me around? I’m not her sibling, not even her half-sibling. Even if she accepts me as her brother, since I’m not related biologically, would she want me to stay involved with the Games?”

“You have to talk to her,” Fiona told him gently. “She deserves to know the truth before this goes any further. I’m sure she can understand why you disappeared, but now that you’re back in her life, if you don’t tell her, she’ll likely feel betrayed.”

“I know. I have to find the right moment, though. I can’t just spring it on her out of nowhere.”

They stayed there, quietly, for several more minutes.

Mac finally broke the silence. “There’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while.”

“What’s that?”

“Would you have dinner with me?”

Was that hesitation and even a bit of fear in his voice? Could he be afraid she’d turn him down?

Given their history, it wouldn’t be overly surprising.

Given the kiss they’d just shared and the chemistry that clearly still existed between them, there could only be one answer.

“I would like that.”

“Tomorrow night? We can go out or stay in, whichever you prefer. And if we stay in, we can sit on one of the balconies and look out over the water rather than some stuffy banquet hall somewhere.” His thumb rubbed her upper arm. “I think I’d rather enjoy that, but it’s up to you.”

She nodded against him. “That sounds lovely.”

His chuckle reverberated under her cheek. “Just don’t expect me to actually make dinner. I’ll pass that on to someone else. I can make enough to get by, but don’t expect it to have much actual flavor.”

Fiona laughed. “That’s fine. Let me know when to expect you, and I’ll be ready.” She moved away from him and sat on the edge of the seat. “But right now, I think I’m ready to find Gray and make sure he’s okay.”

Mac stood then held out a hand to help her, pulling her into his arms as she did.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her cheek against his chest.

A week earlier, if you’d told her she’d feel safe and warm in his arms, Fiona would have said you were certifiably crazy.

But now, she couldn’t imagine anywhere else she’d rather be.

Another time.

“Come on,” he told her, letting her go, but taking her hand. “I’ll show you how to get to your quarters from here.”

He led her down a hallway and into a spacious bedroom that seemed to mirror her own. For a second, she wondered about his intentions, but he went straight to the counterpart of the unknown door in her room.

After flipping the lock, he stepped back. “It has to be unlocked from both sides. Your side already is, but I would never go through without you knowing about it. Only in the case of a dire emergency.”

It surprised Fiona that she believed him completely.

“Thank you.” She brushed a kiss against his cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With the door closed behind her, Fiona walked to one of the windows adorning the outside wall. Peeking out at the city and the water beyond, she took a deep breath.

“Well that wasn’t how I expected this to go,” she whispered to herself. “But I think I’m glad it did.”

A different door opened behind her.

She turned to see a streak headed toward her. “Mama!”

Laughing, Fiona swung him up into her arms. “Did you have fun, kiddo?”

“Yes, Mama!” He started chattering away about the girls and how they were nice, but didn’t seem to want to include him at first. Later, they did.

He continued to tell his stories as she walked to his room and set him on the bed.

“It’s time to get ready for sleep. Mama is tired, too.” A yawn punctuated her words.

“I don’t wanna, Mama!” His bottom lip stuck out. “I wanna stay up.”

Fiona remained firm and before he realized what was happening, a very tired Gray was sound asleep, once again holding his favorite bear.

Pulling the covers around him a bit more, Fiona leaned down to kiss the top of his head. “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. Good night, fair prince.” She said the blessing softly rather than risk waking him, but she’d done it virtually every night since he’d been born.

With the monitor in hand, Fiona went back to her own room. A text from Tinsley said the nanny had arrived, but went to her own room once she realized Fiona was with Gray.

Back in her room, Fiona found herself staring at the door leading to Mac’s apartment. This day - no, this trip - had been full of surprises, not the least of which might be the potential relationship with her son’s father.

She took a quick shower then settled under the warm covers, pulling them up to her chin. The warmth cocooned her, and in moments, she slept, dreaming of the next day and the date that could change the course of her life.



Had so much ever ridden on a single meal?

Mac didn’t think so. Not in his lifetime anyway.

Taking a deep breath, he tugged on the cuffs of the sleeves under his suit coat then knocked on the door.

The thirty seconds before Fiona opened it were some of the longest of Mac’s life. What if she didn’t answer? What if she’d changed her mind?

Before he could give up and walk away, the knob turned, the door opened, and Fiona stood there with a cautious look on her face.

“I wondered if you’d stand me up,” she admitted.

“Why would you think that?” He extended his elbow for her to slip her hand inside.

“Because I hadn’t heard from you all day.”

They started down the wide hall. “I spent most of my day in meetings. Another thing I’m happy I was able to avoid the last few years.”

“Working on the Games things?”

Mac guided them around a corner and started down a small, nearly-hidden, staircase. “Some of them. Other things took up most of the day.” So many things needed to be updated after he’d been gone so long.

“Did you have a chance to talk to your sister?”

He shook his head. “I did, but not for long, and not about anything overly important.”

Holding open the door that led to the terrace, they left the building. Outside a table had been set in an alcove that gave them the best of both worlds - protection from wind and sun but clear visibility to the city and the ocean beyond. He held her chair as she took a seat.

As soon as they were both seated, staff members appeared and set their first course in front of them.

They ate in near silence for a few minutes, only exclaiming about how delicious the food was.

For the rest of the meal, Mac was careful to keep things light-hearted. No deep questions. No discussion of the events of the last few days - or the last few years. He regaled her with a few stories about growing up in a palace.

It wasn’t until the main course had been taken away and Mac motioned to the server their intention to wait on dessert for a while.

The look on Fiona’s face told him she liked the idea. She’d eaten way too much of the main course, too.

“We have some things to talk about.” Mac stood and walked to the balustrade before turning to rest against it backward.

Her acknowledgment came in the form of a single nod.

“Are you interested in trying to find out if there’s something more between us?”

He didn’t press, but stood there, simply watching her.

She didn’t speak right away, but he could see her turn the idea over and over in her head. She’d surely spent years loathing him so finding out there had been a very good reason for all of it had to make her reconsider some things.

“If you didn’t know the truth about your heritage...” She paused. “About your biology, what would you have done when I told you I was pregnant?”

He rested his elbows behind him on the top of the balustrade, his turn to

think it over. “I don’t know. Not what I’d do now. I was young, self-involved, and really not a terribly nice person most of the time. I could turn on the charm.”

Fiona’s face flushed a bit as a slow grin crossed his face, the one that had attracted more than one woman.

“I still can,” he went on. “But that was outwardly. Inside, I wasn’t charming. I was a mess.” Thankfully not as much now as he’d been back then. “I probably wouldn’t have wanted a relationship, but might have tried it anyway. I would have paid an appropriate amount of child support and want to be involved in my son’s life.” He shook his head, all traces of the smile gone. “But it wouldn’t have been idyllic like we’d both have wanted.” He stared at the ground. “We’d probably hate each other by now.”

He knew he made some good points. What kind of place had she been in back then? “You’re probably right,” she agreed. “It probably wouldn’t have been good for either one of us.”

“And now?” His future, in many ways, hinged on this answer.

“I don’t know.” She stared at her hands where they rested on the table, playing with the corner of the cloth napkin that had been in her lap. “Last night we proved we still have chemistry, so that’s clearly not a problem. We both know there’s a lot more to a relationship than chemistry.”

It was Mac’s turn to nod. “There is.”

“As for wanting to try a relationship...” She took a deep breath. “I think that depends in part on what your plans are. Are you staying here, full-time or close to it, permanently? Or are you going back to Serenity Landing?”

He’d known that would probably be the biggest sticking point to trying a relationship. “I don’t know yet. But if I do, can we make that work?”

“How? How would it work?” She pushed back from the table and walked toward him. She stopped a few feet away staring toward the rest of the world beyond. “I have a good life, one I love. I love my work, I adore the people I work with. I don’t *need* the money, but I don’t want to quit either.”

Mac twisted until he faced the same way she did leaving them close enough their shoulders almost touched. “I don’t know. The movies wouldn’t be a huge deal. You do two or three of them a year. They only take a couple of weeks, right?”

“About three, give or take. They’ve got it down to an art form.” She blew out a breath. “But what about *Seating 4 Six*? That takes a lot longer than three weeks at a time.”

“How long is it?” He should know these things, but clearly didn’t.

“It takes about a week per episode. We work on the episode for five days and shoot the evening of the fifth day in front of an audience. Sometimes scenes are shot on location during the rest of the week. Occasionally, we go to an actual event and it’s filmed there.”

“Like when they took all of the kids to that minor league baseball game?”

Fiona looked at him in surprise. “You watch the show?”

A chuckle escaped before he could stop it. “Yes. I watch the show, but I was at that game, too, as part of my security mission.”

A look flitted across her face but disappeared before he could identify it.

“So?” He didn’t want to push too hard, but would like to come up with some sort of plan, even if it was just to take it day by day. “Would you be my girlfriend?”

10



It had been years since Fiona had thought about calling herself someone's girlfriend.

She certainly hadn't expected to hear the question from Mac.

"I don't know." She gave the only honest answer she could. Turning toward the palace, she leaned backwards next to Mac, her elbows resting on the balustrade. "I'm not ready to take that step, but another date? Spending time together? I think that is something I would like."

"That's a good start. Maybe a date outside of the palace?"

Fiona turned that thought over in her mind. "Not yet. I'd prefer not to go public with our potential relationship until we have a better idea of what it's going to look like and how we feel."

He nodded. "So until we figure this out, we don't define our relationship except as one of exploration."

"I think that's the best plan for now." None of it seemed real to Fiona yet. Even the insanity in San Majoria seemed far away, like a dream. Being in the palace, not hating Mac like she had for years, considering a relationship... it was overwhelming. She couldn't take it a few steps further to figure out what

their living arrangements might be if they decided they had a future together. Not yet.

They both turned back around, looking out over the city to the water beyond. This time they stood close enough together that the sleeve of his shirt brushed against her forearm. With a sigh, Fiona leaned her head against his shoulders.

“It’s gorgeous here, Mac. I don’t see how you would ever want to leave.”

Mac tipped his head until his cheek rested against hers. “Southwest Missouri has its own kind of beauty. It’s different, but still has some amazing views. Sunsets through storm clouds? Don’t get those here, not like those.”

“You mean back lit tornados?” She’d seen a couple of those.

Mac laughed. “Occasionally. We don’t have those here.”

“You do have hurricanes from time to time, though.”

He reached over and grasped her hand lightly. “Every once in a while. It’s been a long time since we’ve really been hit by one. The outer bands come through but rarely full force.”

They stood there as the sun lowered toward the water. As it neared the horizon, Mac spoke again. “Are you about ready for dessert?”

Fiona straightened. “That sounds lovely. What are we having?”

Mac rested his hand on her lower back as they moved back toward the table. As soon as they were seated a member of the palace staff brought plates of dessert and set them down. The decadent chocolate cake with some sort of red filling called to Fiona. The first bite told her it was every bit as delicious as it looked.

A chuckle from Mac made her look over. “I’ll make sure the chef knows how much you like it. He’ll either keep some on hand or at least make it regularly while you’re here.”

“That would be very nice of him, but absolutely not necessary.” She took another bite. “But if he wants to, I won’t stop him.”

As much as she loved the taste, Fiona wasn’t able to finish the whole piece of cake. She’d eaten too much and it was too rich to eat the whole thing.

Once they ate as much as they were able to, Mac helped Fiona to her feet. They watched the sunset as they leaned against the balustrade. They talked about a little bit of everything, and nothing, all at the same time.

He rested his hand on her lower back as they went through the open doors into one of the many sitting rooms. “I think it’s probably time for me to walk

you back to your quarters. I have a feeling there's a young man waiting for you to tuck him in."

She laughed as he took her hand, linking their fingers together. "I always prefer to tuck him in myself, but it's not always possible. Tinsley does a great job taking care of him when I can't be there. The other day was a fluke. He got away from her once, at the theme parks in Spring Meadow. It lasted less than three minutes, but she was distraught. She offered to quit, to file her own police report. She meant it, too."

He nodded like he remembered.

He probably did.

Fiona gasped. "It was you! You were the man who helped him find Tinsley at the park that day!"

Mac shrugged. "I just made sure he didn't wander off too far and that he found Tinsley when she turned around."

"Thank you." Her voice caught in her throat before she cleared it. "Well, tonight, you're close enough you can do the honors yourself."

They turned a corner and started down another long hall, one Fiona didn't recognize. "Did we come this way earlier?"

"No. I thought we'd go back another direction, so you can at least see a bit more of the building."

She looked around. "Is there a map of this place? An app that will tell me exactly where I need to turn to get where I'm going?"

Mac stopped when they reached an intersection of hallways. He looked one way then the other. "Um... there wasn't a few years ago, but I hope there is now."

Fiona's eyes narrowed. "You don't know where we are, do you?"

He let go of her hand and spun in a circle. "No?"

"Are you sure? You don't sound very certain of yourself."

"Well, not *exactly*." He stood straighter, a confident look on his face. "This way."

Stifling a smirk, Fiona followed him as he strode down the hall. She tried to look at all of the paintings and portraits and other things lining the sides of the hall, but she couldn't take it all in as she hurried to follow Mac. Hopefully, she'd have a chance to take her time, maybe with a historian. Someone who could tell her all about the different artifacts.

They took several more turns before Mac stopped, a triumphant look on his face. "Your quarters are right up the stairs. Told you I knew where I was

going.”

“You got lucky.” She smacked his arm as she walked past and started up the stairs.

His laughter followed her, and she could hear his footsteps behind her.

A minute later, they stood in front of the door to the apartment where she, Gray, and Tinsley were staying.

Mac stood in front of her, taking her hands in his. “Thank you for having dinner with me. I quite enjoyed myself.”

“I did, too.” Fiona looked up at him, his gorgeous blue eyes staring straight into hers.

Her eyes fluttered closed as he leaned toward her.

But instead of feeling his lips on hers, he brushed a kiss against her cheek.

“Sleep well, Fi,” he whispered. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Before she could say anything, he’d walked away.

Opening her eyes, she watched as Mac walked toward his own quarters. She’d had several dates with Mac before, but this time he hadn’t kissed her.

And somehow, that made this the best date they’d ever had.



If he didn’t think staff members would look oddly at him - and possibly discussed it amongst themselves for the foreseeable future - Mac might have whistled his way to his sister’s office.

She’d sent a text asking him to come at his earliest convenience. He’d taken his time getting ready for the day, debating far longer than he should have about what kind of dress code he should have. Finally, he settled on a pair of slacks and a long-sleeved button-up shirt, loose at the collar.

With his tablet in one hand, he tapped it against the outside of his leg as he walked.

“Good morning, Your Royal Highness.” His sister’s assistant didn’t stand, but did nod her head his direction. “You can go in. The queen is waiting for you.”

“Thank you.” He opened the door to find his sister pacing on the far side

of the room, speaking into her phone.

But not English. Was that Italian? Or Greek?

Mac's language skills were pretty rusty, but he also couldn't hear her well enough to make out the words.

She jabbed at the screen with her finger and let out a frustrated growl. "Have you seen anything this morning?"

English. He was good with English.

Mac shook his head. "No. I got up, saw your text, got ready, and here I am. What's going on?"

"The man who spent his first marriage flaunting his vows put himself in the news again. This time because his new *wife*..." She spite the word out. "...is pregnant. He thinks that makes this new child a member of the Sargassian royal family. Sorry, Pops, that's not how it works."

He winced at the sarcastic tone in his sister's voice. Strong emotions began coursing through him as well.

"Something about this child being our half-sibling, so surely we'll want to welcome our dear, beloved father back along with his new progeny, and make them part of our family." Esme flopped into a chair in a very un-queen-like motion.

"That's an interesting proposition, given how seldom he considered himself part of our family." Mac should probably choose his words more carefully, but for the moment, he didn't care. "I know I missed Mum's service, and I shouldn't have, but I really did have a very good reason. He didn't. None at all, except to get out of Sargasso as fast as he could with his new girlfriend."

"She wasn't his *new* girlfriend. She'd been around for a while." Esme pinched the bridge of her nose. "I have no idea what makes him think we'll accept this child as our sibling, with all the rights and privileges of a full member of the family. He does remember that Mum was the queen, right? He's not royalty at all."

Mac took a seat nearby. "Well, it's not the baby's fault who his or her parents are. And genetically speaking, there is a biological relationship."

"That doesn't mean the child is part of our family the way he's trying to imply." She blew out a breath. "I haven't talked to any of the PR people yet, but I suspect he's trying to force my hand by making the announcement of my long-awaited younger sibling so public."

A snort escaped before Mac could stop it. "That sounds like something

he'd do. He's not had any attention recently, but I'm back in the public eye, and he absolutely can't stand that." Did he know that Mac wasn't his biological child? He had to, didn't he?

Mac had puzzled over that many nights, while staring at the ceiling, but had never come to a real conclusion.

"Taking the attention of what appears to be a new relationship between you and Fiona. That makes sense. He never could stand attention on you." She shifted until she sat properly in her seat.

"Fiona and I would be happier without the attention. He's welcome to take the spotlight as much as he wants. He can have it." He flipped open the magnetic cover on his tablet, waking it up as he did so. All he had to do was open his browser to see the first story about this new child.

"He knows how to work the media to his advantage. I wish they'd ignore him, but they don't ask me. They were livid when he left Sargassian waters so quickly after Mum passed. I wish they still were." Esme blew out a breath. "I wanted to make sure you heard from someone who loves you and not randomly."

"Is that the only thing you wanted to talk about?" Mac flipped the cover closed again.

A gleam entered his sister's eye. "No. I want to know how your date went."

He shook his head. "That's between me and Fiona."

"When's the next one?"

"We didn't decide."

She squealed and clasped her hands together in another very un-queen-like motion. "I knew it. There's going to be another date. It's just a matter of when."

"You can't be surprised by that. We have a child together." Had there been anything about the date in the news? Or had it been overshadowed by the announcement?

"I'm not, but it's nice to have confirmation." Esme stood and stretched. "I need a nap."

Mac laughed. "It's not even mid-morning."

"I still need a nap." She took a seat in her desk chair. "Unfortunately, I have a morning of meetings and an afternoon of video conference calls. Gabe and I would love for all of you to join us for dinner this evening."

"I'll ask Fiona, but I don't see why not. Gray seems to enjoy playing with

his cousins.” Mac stood. He didn’t want to take any more of his sister’s time.

“They seem to love playing with him as well.” Esme groaned as her phone buzzed. “I have five minutes to be exactly on time for my first meeting. Not early, not late.” She pushed back from her desk. “Sometimes, I wish my time wasn’t so regimented, but I suppose it is what it is.”

Mac went out one of the side doors as his sister went toward another one. He needed to make sure she knew.

He wasn’t her biological sibling. Even less so than the child coming half a world away.

She’d look at him differently when she knew. Not only because they weren’t siblings, but because of who his father was.

With a sigh, Mac headed for his quarters, a much heavier weight resting on his shoulders than there had been mere moments earlier.

He needed to tell her. Soon.

But, like a coward, he decided to put it off until another time.

With any luck, that time would never come.



When Fiona didn't hear from Mac until nearly noon, she wondered if she'd misread something in their interactions the night before. She and Gray spent the morning exploring the gardens inside the outer walls of the palace. They returned to the suite and looked at the menu that someone had left for them.

Gray hadn't made up his mind when Fiona's phone buzzed. Mac would be there momentarily and needed to talk to her about something important.

"Keep looking." She left Gray with the portion of the menu clearly designed for the younger inhabitants and guests at the palace. She doubted Queen Esmeralda or Prince Gabriel ate grilled cheese sandwiches or macaroni and cheese very often.

When she opened the main door to the suite, Mac stood with his hand raised, poised to knock.

"Good timing." The joviality she would have expected wasn't in his voice.

"Come in." Fiona stood to the side to let him pass her.

Gray pointed at the menu. "I wanna have a grilled cheese."

Fiona smiled. "Of course you do." She looked at Mac. "They're his favorite."

Mac sat near Gray. "They're my favorite, too." He leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially. "I can ask the chef to make my super secret super special cheese toastie for us. How does that sound?"

Gray nodded enthusiastically. "Yes!"

"Yes,...?" Fiona prompted.

"Yes, please!" Gray said even louder.

She smiled at him. "That's better."

Mac chuckled as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Let me order for us." He tapped a few times then set it down. "Someone will bring it to us as soon as it's ready."

"Yay!"

"Now, I do need to talk to your mum about something important. We're going to go to the other room for a few minutes, okay?"

Gray nodded. "Can I go outside?"

"That's a great idea, bud. Stay on the ground. Don't climb on the chairs, okay?" The last thing they needed was her son climbing on a chair so he could get a better look below.

"Yes, Mama!" He ran toward the French doors leading to the balcony.

Fiona didn't let her smile dim until he'd made it outside. "What's going on, Mac?"

The look on his face had turned much more serious as well. He leaned forward in his seat, resting his forearms on his knees, and staring at his clasped hands. "My father has been in the news this morning."

"Prince Isaiah? Isn't he dead?" She sat where Gray had been a moment earlier.

Mac shook his head. "They still don't know for certain, but probably. I mean my... I guess he's my adoptive father, but if he knew about my biology, he would have said something a long time ago. I think. The more I've looked at a few things since we arrived, the more I think he believes he's my biological father. I think. On one level, I don't think Mum would want him anywhere near her for any reason. On the other, I wonder if she would have so she would give him the illusion that he was my father."

That made sense, in a weird sort of way. "So what's he in the news for?"

He handed her his tablet, already open to one of the Sargassian news sites. "He left the country before my mother's memorial service. He and his

much younger mistress went to the Mediterranean. They married a while later. She's pregnant. He's making a big deal about how this child is Esme's and my sibling, ignoring the fact that our titles and everything came through Mum and not him. This child has no more rights to a title or financial support than any other child."

"He has to know that, doesn't he?" She used her finger to scroll down the web page as she skimmed the article.

"Of course he does. He's trying to force his way back into our lives. I suspect he needs money and figures a sibling of the queen would have access to family financial support that he could use to finance his lavish lifestyle." He continued looking at his hands rather than her. "If we don't respond favorably, then we look petty and selfish, because it's a fact that the child is our half-sibling." He shrugged. "At least Esme's."

"What are you going to do?" Conflicting emotions ran through Fiona, as the sight of Mac walking away from her and their son swam in her mind.

Mac shook his head. "I don't know. He won't get unlimited access to any funds. I haven't talked to Esme in a couple of hours, but I'm thinking about a fund for the child. Make certain the public knows how much it is. A substantial amount so they could live very comfortably, but not quite to the extent my father has enjoyed for the last few decades. If he came back and tried to claim they were living in squalor or didn't have enough to eat, no one would believe him. It would backfire. When the child is old enough, they'll be given access to funds for their education or other purposes, but not *carte blanche*."

It seemed like a sensible plan.

"I'm sure my sister's attorneys will have better insight into the best plan. She's probably meeting with them now." He reached for the tablet and opened a different window, clearly looking for something. "No. She has a meeting with some local school children in a few minutes. She wouldn't miss that except for a true emergency. Anything else can wait when the children are involved."

"This is a big deal. I'm not trying to undermine that, but what does it have to do with me and Gray?" Or had she misunderstood his implications?

"It won't take long for the two stories to become conflated. Anyone with two brain cells will know it's a coincidence, regardless of whatever line the tabloids try to draw between our relationship and this child. The only way they might be related is if my father made the announcement now because he

couldn't stand the spotlight on us." He leaned back and blew out a breath. "He's petty enough to do that."

"How much of a story are we? The fact that we have a child together seemed to blow over pretty quickly, even here in Sargasso." She'd seen a couple of small stories, but not the kind of publicity she would have expected. "We didn't have dinner out. We stayed on palace grounds. That balcony isn't visible from the outside, is it?"

Mac shook his head. "Not really. The story would be about my son and why no one knew about it before now. It probably won't be long before it comes out why I did what I did. Some people will understand. More won't. Many will call on Esme to disown me since I'm not biologically our mother's child. It could cause a national crisis of sorts." He shrugged. "Probably not since she has children, but it's possible."

"Can you simply renounce any claim you might have? Just tell them you have no intention of taking the throne if, God forbid, it ever reached you?" All of the potential implications were enough to make Fiona's head swim.

"I don't know."

She thought it was going to say something else, but a knock on the door interrupted whatever it might have been.

A couple of minutes later, the three of them sat at the small table on the balcony.

Gray devoured his sandwich. Fiona managed to keep from laughing as she tried hers.

"This is so good," she told Mac around her first bite.

"It's a sweet bread with garlic and Parmesan in the melted butter. Silas always bought the Hawaiian bread in the States. This isn't quite the same, but similar." He reached for his spoon to start on the macaroni and cheese. "This is chef's own recipe. He wouldn't share it with us."

Gray and Fiona took their first bites at the same time. Gray declared it the best ever. She had to agree.

They chatted amiably as they ate. As they finished the last of the chocolate cake that had also been sent along, Mac checked his phone.

His face fell as did his shoulders before straightening. "My sister wants to talk to us."



Walking into a monarch's office would always be surreal to Mac.

His mother had used the office for many years, and his sister since their mum's passing, but he didn't think it would ever change.

Mac held the door for Fiona to enter before him. Though she wasn't technically required to, she gave a little curtsy when the queen stood to welcome them inside.

The queen addressed her first. "It's good to see you, Fiona. I trust your quarters continue be acceptable. The staff is taking care of you?"

Fiona took the seat the queen motioned to as Mac took the one next to it.

"Yes," she confirmed. "They are taking very good care of us. Your chef even fixed all of us his famous grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch."

The queen grinned. "Mac does love his cheese toasties."

Fiona laughed. "These were the best cheese toasties ever. Gray loved them, too."

The look on the queen's face turned serious. "Unfortunately, we have some other matters to discuss."

"We talked about the news released this morning," Mac told his sister.

"This child will be Gray's aunt or uncle. Same with your children." Fiona went straight to the heart of the matter. "Everyone knows how your father treated both of you. You will be judged on how you treat this child, despite that."

Esme nodded. "Agreed. We're working on a way to do that while ensuring our father doesn't have unlimited access. That's not entirely why I asked you here, though. I understand why you'd like to keep your new relationship under the radar for a while."

"But you'd like us to do something to make a splash," Mac finished for her. "To keep the attention off of the other story, but it can't look like a set up. It has to look natural." Some things he'd never quite forgotten.

"You are free to decline," Esme clarified. "But it would be appreciated."

Mac leaned back in his chair as he turned the thought over in his mind. "Like what?"

"Princess Angelina of Eyjania and her husband, Beau, have extended an

open invitation for the three of you to come visit them. Perhaps a trip for the three of you somewhere then on to Angelina's home."

He stared at his hands, two sides of him warred with each other deep inside. "There's something I need to tell you, Esme."

This wasn't going to be easy.

Maybe he could ease into it.

"Do you remember Isaiah of Eyjania?"

A look of controlled anger crossed Esme's face. "Very well. You were at university when he took quite a few of us hostage. That's when I started to believe there might be more to Gabe than what the tabloids said. He stood between me and the business end of more than one rifle during that time."

Mac nodded. "That's him. I heard a little bit about what happened. I'd been rushed to a secure location, but hadn't ever been told why. The next time I came home, I heard more about it." He stared back down at his hands. "That was when I found out Mum was sick."

"I came home to see Mum several times over the next few weeks," he started.

"I remember." Her brow furrowed. "You spent quite a bit of time with her on the weekends when you returned home. She told me some of what you spoke about, but not everything. She told me you might tell me more someday, when the time was right."

And that time had come.

"That's now." He blew out a breath. "You're several years older than I am. I knew what our parents were like, how much they detested spending time together. For the most part, Mum avoided him because she knew what he was really like. He avoided her because of what he was really like. The girlfriends, mistresses, whoever, whatever."

"That's right," Esme confirmed.

"But they were still expected to have an heir." He nodded toward his sister. "And a spare." Mac leaned back in his chair but still couldn't look at her. "Me."

His sister took advantage of his inability to go on. "Once I was old enough to understand those sorts of things, I decided our age difference was due to their differences. I thought it must have taken that long for her to stand to be that close to him, and prayed she'd get pregnant quickly."

"I always believed the same thing." He had to go for it. "Until not long after Mum took sick, then she told me truth."

Maybe Esme already knew.

Maybe he wouldn't actually have to say it.

But she didn't volunteer any information.

"We don't have the same father."

Mac finally glanced up to see Esme looking at him, a carefully neutral expression on her face.

It still didn't seem like his pronouncement took her by surprise.

"She did tell me who my father is," he went on.

Maybe she'd take the reins for him.

But she still said nothing.

A hand slipped into the crook of his elbow.

Mac glanced to the side to see Fiona extending her hand to support him.

"What Mum told me on that last visit is what sent me running before her service, and why I stayed in the shadows for so long to protect Fiona and Gray." He sucked in a deep breath.

Could he really do this? Really tell Esme, the queen, that his father was a notorious criminal mastermind and playboy. That his biological father was the one who held her and the others hostage several years earlier.

Why hadn't Mum left it in her paperwork for Esme to find later?

But she hadn't so it all fell to Mac now.

"My biological father came to visit Sargasso several times a year. During one of those trips, while he stayed here in the palace, I was conceived."

Esme was extremely smart, but if she'd started putting the connections together, she gave no indication of it.

"I'm not the child of Queen Carlotta. Isaiah Quatremaine decided he wanted a member of Mum's staff. To the best of my knowledge, he never knew he'd impregnated her."

Another glance at Esme told him nothing.

"From the moment she found out about what happened, Mum knew she would adopt me. She'd have a spare, but wouldn't be required to get anywhere near her husband again. I'm not certain what her plan was if something were to have happened to you."

There. It was all out in the open.

At least with his sister.

Should he still think of her that way?

Finally, Esme spoke. "I've known some of that story since not long after Mum's passing. I made it to that set of paperwork right after you

disappeared.”

Mac tried to think of the appropriate response, but couldn't come up with one.

“I didn't know who your biological father was, but I did discover who your birth mother is.” Esme shook her head. “I won't reveal that information right now, except to say she passed some years ago, but I do know Mum's plan if something had happened to me.”

Mac looked at her. “What's that?”

Esme stared straight at him. “You would have been king.”

12



The news that he would have been king clearly surprised Mac. Fiona watched him closely. The only evidence she could see was the rapid blinking of his eyes.

How long had he worked on being able to maintain an impassive facade even in the face of the most shocking news?

She waited for him to reply, but the door opened, letting Gabe into the room.

With the addition of another person, the topic of conversation moved on. Mac was the one who changed the subject, and his sister let him. Presumably, she knew he needed time to absorb it before asking for more details.

After a moment or two of pleasantries, the main office door opened, letting the queen's assistant in.

Fiona could sense Mac's uneasiness. Did he want to ask his sister more about her pronouncement? Or did he want to find a way to escape for a little while? To assimilate that bit of information before asking for more?

The queen's assistant took the decision away from them. "Ma'am, your meeting with King Ezekiel of New Sargasso will begin in five minutes."

Queen Esmeralda nodded. "Thank you." She turned to Mac as her assistant left. "We'll have to discuss this more later. Unfortunately, this meeting cannot be postponed."

Fiona stood as Mac did.

"Of course." Mac kissed his sister on the cheek. "We'll talk later."

He held Fiona's hand as they exited the office and walked back to the family's quarters, but he didn't say anything. It surprised her when they ended up in his apartment rather than the suite she shared with Gray and Tinsley.

Mac looked around and blinked. "I didn't mean to come here. If I'd been thinking straight, I would have gone to your suite."

Fiona rested her temple against his shoulder. "It's okay. My suite isn't far. We can go there or stay here, whichever you prefer. Tinsley and Gray will be fine for a bit."

She let him lead her to the doors on the other side of the room and then onto the balcony.

They sat in the chairs for several minutes before he spoke again.

"What do you think she meant? How could I still have been king?" Mac propped a foot up against the railing. "I don't understand how that could even be possible."

Pulling out her phone, Fiona tried to figure out the best way to word her search query. She settled on one then started looking through the informational articles. It took a few minutes, but eventually she found what she was looking for.

"Your mother wasn't an only child, but her sister died without any heirs, right?" Fiona kept scrolling.

"Yes. My aunt was supposed to marry my father, but after she passed he married my mother instead." The perplexed tone in his voice turned to curious. "Why?"

"So for the purposes of succession, she was an only child of an only child, right?"

"I think so."

"Was the generation before also an only child?" Fiona looked at the family tree she'd found, but couldn't be certain.

"I'm not sure. The royal historian would know, but I'd rather not involve her at this point." Mac pulled out his own phone and opened the browser.

"What if one of your mother's male ancestors had an illegitimate child?"

And that child was your birth mother's parent or grandparent? There's been enough only children in your family recently, that it could be possible. It would make you the next in line regardless. Your mother doesn't have any cousins who could claim a spot." Fiona didn't know enough about the family to be any more specific than that. Even the family tree didn't make quite enough sense to her.

"It's possible," Mac answered slowly. "I forget how many greats ago, but one of my great grandfathers had an illegitimate son who he placed over what is now New Sargasso. That son created his own government, so Ezekiel and the others are related a few generations back."

She hadn't known that.

"There's serious consequences for an heir having a child out of wedlock in New Sargasso," he went on. "A few were put into place here because of the whole situation. It's very possible that grandfather or one of his male descendants had a child that no one knew about. It would explain why my mother would believe I could be king. She wouldn't say that if I didn't have a legitimate claim. That's one thing that's always bothered Esme about some of those HEA TV movies. She ranted about one a few years ago where the king basically wrote a letter to the council or Parliament or whoever saying 'hey my adopted son is cool - let him be my successor.' If I remember right, there's a lot of other things wrong with the movie, but that one irritated her the most."

"You can ask her later, but at least there's a potentially legitimate reason that wouldn't require too many mental gymnastics." She set her phone upside down on her leg. "What do you think about getting out of here for a couple of days? We could go stay with... um, whoever your sister mentioned. Beau?"

Mac nodded. "Princess Angelina of Eyjania and her husband, Beau." He turned to look at Fiona. "She's my cousin."

"What?"

"My biological father and her father were brothers. I doubt she realizes that. We met a number of times when we were younger and always got on quite well." He nodded, a decision made. "Let's do it. Let's just go. I'll have Silas pack for me and bring it over later. Let's take Gray and go do whatever public thing they want us to do then go to Angie and Beau's."

Fiona picked her phone up as she stood. "That sounds like a great idea. Get out of this fishbowl for a while. Be seen then disappear. Maybe it will bump your father off the front page of the tabloids."

“That’s the plan.”

Together, they went to get Gray. Tinsley would handle packing for Fiona and her son then travel with Silas to meet them at the other house.

Mac decided he wanted to drive them himself, so in just a few minutes, they were on their way... somewhere - somewhere public enough for it to be news but not so public it looked forced.

As soon as they left the gates of the palace, cameras were on them. They followed at a fairly safe distance. Legally, they weren’t allowed to be much closer.

They pulled into a parking lot near a food truck. From the angle, Fiona couldn’t quite tell what sort of cuisine it served. Maybe dessert of some kind? Mac looked at her and sighed.

“Here goes nothing.”



The food cart had been Mac’s favorite snack shop when he lived in Ancora full time. They served a traditional Sargassian chocolate dessert he’d loved as long as he could remember.

“What do you recommend?” Fiona stood on the other side of Gray who held onto both of their hands.

“I always get the Queen Carlotta Confection.” He pointed to the item on the menu board. “Not because it’s named for Mum, but it was her favorite which is why it’s named after her. Esme and I both inherited her love of it.”

“I’ll take one of those then.” She leaned down and discussed a couple of the options with Gray. He chose something a little less adventurous.

Mac could hear the whispers coming from the other patrons. He did his best to ignore them, but he knew Fiona also noticed the surreptitious use of phones to take photos and videos. In a few minutes, the crowd would begin to grow as the word was disseminated on social media.

For now, they’d enjoy relative quiet.

Once they had their desserts in hand, they walked to a small play area nearby. Mac and Fiona took sat on a bench while Gray decided he’d rather play than eat.

“Go ahead.” Mac nodded his head toward her bowl. “Try it.”

Fiona worked her spoon around until she had a little bit of everything on it. She let it roll around in her mouth then nodded. “That’s pretty incredible.” She took another bite. “I think it’s a good thing I didn’t know these existed until now. I’d have a much harder time staying in shape.”

Mac chuckled as he took his own first bite. “I understand that. I knew I’d need to add a bit more time to my work outs when I had one. They’re amazing, but not exactly low calorie.”

Gray spent the next ten minutes running back for a couple of bites then returning to play with the growing crowd of children. By the time the three of them were finished, the number of people in the general vicinity had nearly quadrupled.

“I think it’s about time for us to go,” Fiona said quietly. “I understand all of it, but there’s a reason why I’ve kept Gray out of the public eye.”

“Agreed.” Mac stood as Gray ran toward him.

A few minutes later, they were back in Mac’s car and headed toward his cousin’s house.

It took a concerted effort to think of the Quatremaines as family, but they were. Did any of them know?

If any of them did, King Benjamin seemed like the obvious choice, but would he have told anyone else?

This time the vehicle in front of them contained security, in part because Mac wasn’t entirely certain where he was going.

“Do you think that accomplished what they wanted it to?” Fiona asked quietly enough that little ears in the back seat wouldn’t pick up on it.

“I hope so. That kind of thing isn’t my favorite. If I’m going to a function or event, that’s one thing, but when I’m out for a snack with my family, I’d rather keep it a bit more private. I understand why they wanted us to do it, but...” He let out a sigh. “I wish it wasn’t necessary.”

Fiona stared out the window at the passing scenery. At certain points, the water was visible. Gray exclaimed every time he could see it, and every time, it made Mac smile.

“Do you know the princess very well?” Fiona didn’t look at him as she spoke.

Mac pulled to a stop behind the security vehicle as a light stopped them. “Not well. We’ve met a few times over the years. I think I’ve met the whole family, but I’m not certain. There’s ten kids in the family. Ten cousins.”

Once they all knew he was part of the family, would they embrace him? Would they be invited for Christmas? Or would they remain distant but polite to the son of the black sheep of their family?

Did you call a criminal mastermind the black sheep? Or was that too mild?

It always seemed Mac had more questions than answers. Would it ever be the other way around?

The irony of the thought wasn't lost on him.

It didn't take overly long to get to the estate on the shore of the island. The lead car drove through the gate then pulled to the side to allow Mac access to the drive near the main entrance.

A member of the staff appeared to open Fiona's door for her. Before they could make it to the stairs, Beau and Angie had come out to greet them as well.

Mac made the introductions, including introducing himself to Beau.

Angie looked Gray in the eye. "There's a couple of other kids in the garden if you want to go play for a little while. If it's okay with your mum, of course."

Unless he was mistaken, Fiona looked a bit relieved. "Go on," she encouraged him. "You'll have fun."

Mac's cousin pointed toward a gate on the other side of the house and told Gray to go through it and follow the path.

"Could he get lost?" Fiona's voice was filled with the kind of parental concern Mac still found himself getting used to.

"Unlikely," Angie told her as they started up the steps. "There's not many other places to go from there. The path goes straight to the back area where the other children are."

Taking Fiona's hand in his, Mac squeezed it gently, trying to convey that he understood her concern, but that she didn't need to be too worried.

"I don't think I realized you had children," Fiona continued. The main door closed behind them.

Angie laughed. "We don't. Some of my family showed up to surprise us. They brought their children with them. That's one reason why I reached out to Esme. I thought Gray might like to have someone closer to his own age to run around with. We also thought the two of you could use some time outside of the public eye, but also not in the palace."

"We're grateful," Mac answered for both of them. "The palace can be a

different kind of fish bowl.”

“It definitely is.” Another male voice entered the conversation.

Mac turned to see who it was and blinked as recognition settled in.

His eldest cousin.

The king.



Talking with two monarchs in one day had never been on Fiona’s bucket list, especially not the same week she’d already talked to another one - or two when you counted both King Edward and King David. She decided to mentally check it off anyway.

After a few uncomfortable minutes, she’d been rescued by her friend and sometimes co-star, Sir Peter Barker. How could she have forgotten that Pete was married to Princess Evangeline? Fiona had met her a few times, though she’d been introduced as Evie with no reference to her genealogy.

The conversation with King Benjamin continued, but Fiona didn’t feel so unnerved.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Mac as he interacted with others in the family. He didn’t seem fully at ease, but not overly uncomfortable either.

She also kept an eye on Gray out the window overlooking the gardens. He and other children about his own age ran around playing some version of freeze tag. The way he laughed made Fiona smile.

An hour later, the adults and very young children, found their way into a dining hall of some kind. A buffet had been set up along one wall. A wide variety of foods meant everyone could find something they liked.

Fiona made certain she wasn’t the first one to fill her plate. With her luck, she’d commit some sort of faux pas and take the king’s spot or something equally mortifying.

There didn’t seem to be a pecking order to the seating, outside of the king and queen at one end of the table and Beau and Angie at the other. Fiona found herself seated between Pete and Levi, who had married Genevieve. Genevieve was the second oldest sibling and twin sister to Pete’s wife.

At least, Fiona thought she had everyone right.

She knew who the king and queen were. The twin sisters were different enough that someone else could likely tell them apart fairly easily, but not Fiona. She knew who Beau and Angie were. There was another couple she suspected might be the parents, but she hadn't been introduced to the elegant, early middle-aged woman or the bald man with her.

For the most part, Fiona chose to listen to the conversations going on around her and only join in when spoken to directly. She typically found that easier in a large group of people already comfortable with each other than jumping into the middle of everything.

She enjoyed not being the center of attention all the time.

Over the course of the meal, there were questions about her movie roles and the direct-to-streaming show she'd been on for several seasons. Pete had guest starred a couple of times, but was the mostly unseen love interest for Fiona's character.

Everyone seemed to carefully avoid questions about Gray and the situation a few days earlier. She did learn that the kids were eating in another area of the building and that Gray seemed to be enjoying himself.

Once the meal ended, they broke off into several groups, though Fiona wasn't quite certain how they decided who went into which group - or where each group went.

She and Mac ended up with Mr. and Mrs. Batten, the couple who had taken care of the property since before Beau and Angie arrived. They were shown to their quarters. The three-bedroom suite had an incredible view of the ocean at the edge of the property.

"How are you?" Mac asked once they were alone.

Fiona blew out a breath as she nodded. "I'm all right. Not at all what I expected when we decided to come here."

"Me either," he admitted. "I've met all of those people any number of times throughout my life, though I've never been close to any of them. Most of the time, it's been at official functions, not family gatherings."

"They all seem lovely and down-to-earth." Fiona looked down into the gardens between the house and the beach. Gray and the others were back outside running around. "I've known Pete a long time. We've done several movies together. We've worked on *Seating 4 Six* together a few times, though he's mostly off-screen."

"Today's the first time I've met him, but he seems like a good guy." Mac

stood next to her, also watching their son as he played with his... second cousins? First cousins once removed?

Did it matter?

“I almost feel like they’d welcome me into the family if they knew,” Mac told her quietly. “Regardless of what my biological father has done. I don’t think they’d hold it against me.”

Fiona nodded slowly. “From what I saw today, I think they would accept you. Pete would, but he’s not the one you’d need to worry about in the first place.”

“So do I tell them?” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “How do you decide whether or not to tell the king of another country that his evil mastermind uncle, who tried to usurp his throne, is your father?”

“I think you wait until the time is right. You’ll know when it is, I think. It’s possible one or more of them already know. King Edward did, though he never told anyone.” Fiona leaned to the side until her shoulder rested against his forearm then tilted her head against his shoulder. “You’ll know when it’s time.”

He took her hand as they continued to watch their son play.

They hadn’t said anything else when a knock on the door surprised them both.

Mac squeezed her hand then let it go so he could answer the door.

As the couple Fiona hadn’t met walked in, Mac greeted the woman with a nod then a kiss on the cheek. He shook hands with the gentleman. He turned to Fiona.

“Fi, this is Her Majesty, the Queen Mother, Queen Eliana and her husband, Thor...” Mac winced. “I’m pretty sure he’s duke of something or other, but I don’t remember.”

The other couple laughed. “No one calls him duke outside of very formal settings,” the queen told them.

“I told Benjamin I didn’t need a title, but he insisted.” The man shrugged. “Something about marrying the Queen Mother and being the king’s stepfather meant I needed a title despite my protests.”

At least she had an idea who they were now. She’d heard about the former queen who married her son’s head of security, but couldn’t recall ever seeing photos of them. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Fiona curtsied in their general direction. Wasn’t that the correct greeting?

“We’re so glad you’re here,” the queen went on, almost as though she

hadn't noticed Fiona's action, though she had to have seen it. "I spoke with Esme a few weeks ago. I know she's missed you terribly. When we heard about the incident in San Majoria, our hearts went out to both of you. We're so glad everything was resolved quickly and safely."

"That's part of why we're here." The duke motioned toward the seating area. "I spoke with Edward earlier. They have apprehended those involved. It appears that Gray wandered off and they took the opportunity that presented itself by taking Tinsley and trying to get Gray. They sent the note before they actually had him in their custody. He made it to the next resort. That's where he played in a pool and had ice cream. They released Tinsley but kept looking for Gray. One of them found him about the same time as the press conference. Once he realized Gray was also the son of a prince, he took him to the park and let him go near the playground."

That story both relieved Fiona and not at the same time. It wasn't good that Gray had been able to wander off or that Tinsley had been held for any period of time. They hadn't been the victims of a well-thought-out plot, but rather random happenstance. She didn't know which was worse, but outside of being surrounded by security literally all of the time, there was no way to prevent it. She hated the idea of living her life in that kind of fear.

"Thank you for letting us know." Mac held up their end of the conversation.

"It's our pleasure." The duke leaned forward and looked straight at Mac. "There is one other thing we need to discuss."

"What's that?"

Did Fiona detect a hint of apprehension in his voice?

The duke glanced at the queen before he spoke again. "Your claim to the Eyjanian throne."



The surreal feeling of hearing the words stunned Mac into silence for a few seconds. But did Thor really know? “What about my claim to the Eyjanian throne?”

“You have a significantly greater chance of reaching the throne here in Sargasso, but you have a claim to both of them. No one wants it to get to that point in either country, but it does need to be addressed.” Thor leaned back.

“How do you know?” Mac asked, needing to know how far the story had reached.

Thor chuckled. “I didn’t know anything, officially, until recently. However, if a man in my position didn’t know things like that unofficially... well, I wouldn’t have become a man in that position in the first place.”

That made sense in a weird sort of way.

“I presume you learned around the time your mother passed?”

Mac nodded. “Not most of the details, I still don’t know those, but I was adopted by my mum - and I know who my biological father is. It’s why I disappeared, why I haven’t been a part of my son’s life. I needed to keep him safe.”

“Isaiah is probably dead,” the queen told him gently. “He can’t hurt you or your son.”

“But we didn’t know that at the time. It had only been a few months when Fiona told me she was pregnant. Now it’s been years. It seems like a fairly safe bet that he’s really gone, but at the time, we couldn’t know.” He needed them to understand why he’d made the decisions he had. Not because he was a coward or a deadbeat dad, but to protect his son and Fiona in the first place.

“I can understand that.” The queen spoke quietly. “I understand what it means to want to protect your child from someone who doesn’t have their best interests at heart.”

Mac could tell she spoke from experience. Could she also mean Isaiah Quatremaïne? Did he try to unduly influence her children?

“My sister-in-law, Princess Louise, was Benjamin’s regent after my husband passed,” the former queen went on. “She and I have seldom seen eye-to-eye on many things, but I never suspected she had anything but Benjamin’s best interests at heart - and therefore the interests of our country and her people.” She sighed as she glanced at her current husband. “When Benjamin turned eighteen and could rule in his own right, she stepped down and let him be king. At eighteen, Ben still felt like he needed a trusted advisor who could guide him. Louise didn’t feel like it was her place any longer.” The queen looked to be struggling to keep her composure.

When she didn’t say anything, her husband took over. “Isaiah, King Alfred’s youngest sibling, stepped in. He began to advise the young king. Over the next several years, his influence was considerable. Ask him about it sometime. The choices Benjamin made during those years still bother him significantly. He’s done his best to undo any lasting damage, but he can’t forget. He’s considerably more cautious with who he listens to now.”

Mac instinctively knew his cousin’s step-father would be among those who counseled the king.

A small smile crossed the queen’s face. “If you ever have the chance to hear the story of how Benjamin and Katrìn met, you’ll understand the depth of Isaiah’s influence. Once he finally stood up to Isaiah and threw him out of the palace, things slowly began to improve. He and Katrìn married shortly thereafter. She’s been a good influence on him since the very beginning.” The queen smiled at them, her serene expression fixed into place. Her hand rested on her husband’s. “Thor played a role in that. He found a way to tell my son he was being an idiot without actually coming right out and saying

it.”

Thor chuckled. “I never called him an idiot. I did call him a moron once. He deserved it.”

Queen Eliana grinned. “Yes, he did.”

Neither one elaborated on that story, but it had to be a dilly if the king’s head of security called him a moron and stayed on staff.

“The point is that we both understand why you would disappear to protect your son and his mother. We also understand why the prodigal would come home again, especially now that the danger is past.” The queen’s understanding smile relieved Mac.

When he looked at Fiona, he could see understanding on her face as well. That relieved him even more.

“How long have you known who my father was?” Mac asked them.

“I’ve known your whole life,” Thor told him gently. “There was no reason to interfere, not with Queen Carlotta as your mum. King Edward has suspected that you were adopted from the beginning. I don’t believe he knew for certain who your father was until several years later.”

The queen squeezed her husband’s hand. “He’s always done his best to look out for you in that sense, just like he did for my children. He and Alfred were best friends. It was his influence that first began to crack the hold Isaiah had on Benjamin. I didn’t know about your paternity until much more recently, but it does make you my nephew, and I am exceedingly glad to have the chance to get to know you.” Tears had filled the queen’s eyes, but she blinked them back in that way women seemed to have mastered.

Thor sighed. “King Edward and I have discussed it a couple of times during your prodigal years. If we’d known you were about to leave, we would have intervened, tried to help you in some way. Instead, we knew as little as anyone, despite spending a fair amount of time in the same area where you live.”

“I appreciate the thought.” If Mac had known he could go to men like Thor, maybe the last few years would have played out much differently. “I was usually able to tell when some of the families would be in town. I would be extra careful then.”

“And with his hair, beard, and glasses, he was barely recognizable,” Fiona interjected. “If you’d seen him in a time and place you didn’t expect to, you may not have realized it either.”

Thor nodded. “It’s my job to notice those things, but you’re correct.” He

checked his phone. “If you’ll excuse us, we do have somewhere we need to be.”

They all stood and walked to the door.

The queen placed her hand on his cheek. “I don’t believe any of my children are aware of your relationship, but please know this. You are always welcome as a member of this family.”

The words touched Mac in a way he didn’t expect.

Maybe it would all be okay.



The moment between Mac and his aunt, the former queen, was a touching one Fiona didn’t want to interrupt.

It ended soon enough as the queen and her husband left the room.

Mac blew out a breath. “I don’t know what I expected, but that wasn’t it.”

Fiona waited for him to go on.

“It does confirm to me that I did the right thing. If I’d known about Edward or Thor, things could have been different, but given the information I had at the time, I did the only thing I could have done.”

Fiona knew she’d had it much easier than most single moms, but at times, it had been hard - so hard. But given what she knew now, she agreed and told him so.

“I’m glad you understand. I always prayed you would when the time came to tell you.” He took her hand as they walked back into the sitting area. “I’m not happy about what happened with Gray in San Majoria, not at all, but I am glad I was there, and it pushed me to find you.”

Though Mac seemed to have something on his mind, they only made small talk. Fiona took out her ereader and opened a new book - this one, from November 2023, was a young adult, space romance/adventure story by E A Hendryx. Fiona had read several of the authors books in other genres and had been looking forward to finding time to starting this series.

As expected, she was immediately drawn into the story and before she realized it, enough time had passed that the sun was setting, and Mac was answering the door to a staff member pushing a cart with a snack on it.

Gray came running in a few seconds later. “Mummy!”

Fiona laughed at his affectionate title. “What did you call me?”

“Mummy?” He sounded less certain and more apprehensive.

She pulled him in for a hug. “Where did you hear that?”

“The kids here all call their mamas mummy.” His defensive tone came out.

Pressing a kiss to his head, Fiona tried to reassure him. “I don’t mind if you call me Mummy. I just didn’t know you knew the word.”

“I always knew the word, Mummy.” Even though she couldn’t see his face, Fiona could almost hear his eye roll. “Mummies are wrapped in paper and walk like this.” He wiggled away from her and took a few stiff steps with his arms stretched out in front of him.

Fiona laughed again. “Of course. How could I forget?”

“What’s to eat, Mummy?” Gray Wasn’t going to miss a chance to use his new favorite word. He dropped his mummy act and hurried to Mac’s side.

Mac lifted one of the domes. “It looks like we have some fruit and bagels and maybe a dessert of some kind. Did you already eat?”

Gray shrugged. “We ate after we played. Then we played more in the garden. They wouldn’t let me go in the maze.” He turned back to Fiona. “Can we go in the maze, Mummy?”

“What kind of maze is it?” She picked up one of the empty plates to put a bit of food on for herself.

“I dunno, but they said I’d get lost. I won’t get lost.” He reached for a grape and ate it. “Pwease, mumm?”

The request made with his mouth full was met with a stern look from Fiona.

Her son swallowed then repeated his statement. “Please, Mummy?”

“We’ll see. I’ll talk to someone and make sure it’s okay. If it is, we’ll go tomorrow.”

He grabbed another grape. “The kids aren’t gonna be here tomorrow. They’re leaving.”

Good to know. “As long as we don’t have other things to do, I would imagine we’ll be able to. I’ll check with someone in the morning.”

Gray nodded his agreement then picked three or four grapes off the stem and went to explore the suite.

“I don’t know about you,” Mac said, standing up. “But I think I’m ready to turn in. It’s been a very long day - starting with the news about my

forthcoming half-sibling and ending here.” He nodded toward one of the doors. “Unless you object, I’ll take that room.”

“That’s fine with me.” Fiona would take one of the others. Gray would likely join her, though he’d probably want a pallet on the floor. These days, he only crawled in bed with her when he was sick or scared.

When she woke the next morning, she found her son and his bear sprawled across the other half of the large mattress. Had he been scared in the middle of the night? She didn’t remember waking up, but it wouldn’t be the first time he’d joined her without her noticing.

Light mist for most of the morning kept them from going outside to check out the maze. Gray hadn’t been entirely correct about everyone else’s plans for the day. They wouldn’t be leaving until much later. The children all played games in the ball room then settled in to watch a movie until lunch.

When lunch came, they dispersed to their own quarters. Fiona, Mac, and Gray had a light lunch then Gray laid down for a bit of rest time. Fiona dove back into her book while Mac did work of some kind.

A few hours later, after they ate an early dinner, they ventured outside and into the maze.

Mac had been in similar ones before and led the way to the center of the maze, showing Gray what to look for and how to navigate using the clues placed there to help people - if they knew what to look for.

Gray was determined to lead them out of the maze.

He spent long minutes studying each twist and turn before deciding which way to go.

And quickly led them into two dead ends.

Then they came to a third, this one along the wall of the house.

Gray blew out a puff of air. “I can do it, Mummy.”

“I know you can, Buddy.” She smiled at him and hugged him to her leg as they stood with their backs to the house and looked out at the maze. “We have plenty of time. You’ll get it. We’ll follow you out.” Fiona needed to distract him. “Why don’t we take a few pictures before we try again?”

The three of them took several pictures and selfies together before turning back the way they became.

A noise behind her caught Fiona off-guard and before she realized what was happening, they were through a door and into a dark corridor beyond.

Fear gripped her as she realized Gray was no longer at her side.

Where had he gone?



If she dared to breathe, Fiona wasn't certain she'd be able to take a full breath.

But given the look on the man's face as he held Gray, she didn't want to give him any reason to act out.

"Leave him alone." Mac looked like he was trying to take a non-threatening posture within the confines of the dimly lit corridor, but Fiona wasn't certain it worked. "Let him go. Take me and let them go."

The man, who'd just become the villain in this particular story, shook his head. "No. You're all coming with me."

The second man, now known as Lefty in Fiona's mind, held a weapon on her and Mac.

"I suggest you come with us," Mr. Villain ordered with a sneer.

When she glanced at Mac, he gave a slight nod. For now, they should do whatever the men asked them to. They'd look for a chance to escape later.

The passage they'd been taken to darkened as the flashlight held by Mr. Villain pointed down the hall. He kept a firm hold on Gray's arm and pulled Fiona's son through the stone walkway.

They arrived at their destination surprisingly fast. The small room off an open area had to be on the property. They might have gone far enough to be outside the footprint of the house itself, but they couldn't have left the estate's property.

Did anyone else know about these secret passageways? Didn't most palaces and estates like this have them? Surely, Beau and Angie had to know they existed, even if they might not know the extent.

"Sit." Mr. Villain shoved Gray toward the corner.

Fiona kept an eye on Lefty but hurried to her son's side, pulling him close as he started to cry.

Mac moved between them and the two men. "What is it you want? Money?"

Mr. Villain chuckled. Had she ever heard a truly evil chuckle? "No. Not money."

"Then what is it? We can help you get whatever it is."

Fiona couldn't help but notice how Mac continually kept himself between the two men and the spot where Fiona huddled with their son.

"There's nothing you can get for me."

"Not a significant sum of money? Jewels? A helicopter to the airport then a jet to the location of your choice?" Mac didn't stand still. Instead, he seemed to be forcing the two men toward the door.

Could he be trying to get them out of the room?

As they moved further away and their voices lowered, Fiona couldn't hear the words exchanged, but the next thing she knew, they were alone in the room as a lock clicked on the other side of the door.

Mac turned around and ran a hand through his hair. "Not exactly what I expected to happen tonight."

He began pacing the room, looking the whole thing over.

Fiona sat on the cold stone floor with Gray snuggled into her side.

The silence extended into an eternity.

By some sort of unspoken agreement, they decided not to talk about it until Gray eventually fell asleep.

Fiona shifted until she could lay her son down using her balled up cardigan as a pillow. "Do you know who they are?"

Mac shook his head. "No idea. No idea what they want either. BossMan never said anything except there wasn't anything we could get him."

"That doesn't make any sense, does it? What other reason would he have

for abducting us?” Though Gray slept, Fiona kept her voice down. She wouldn’t want it to seep into his subconscious, to give him more nightmares than he might already have. Being abducted or missing twice in such a short period of time would have to traumatize him even if he hadn’t really understood what happened the first time.

“I have no idea. Personal vendetta? Maybe he hates HEA TV movies?” Mac finally stopped his pacing and turned to face her, leaning his back against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Or has some deep seated resentment against *2 Cool 4 School* and it’s sequel?” She rested her back against the opposite wall. “That makes as much sense as anything so far. Lefty didn’t say anything that might indicate why they wanted us.”

“Lefty?”

Fiona shrugged. “He seemed to use his left hand more than his right. I couldn’t call him Righty.”

Mac gave a small grin as he shook his head. “What about the other guy?”

“Mr. Villain, though he probably doesn’t deserve the honorific. He should just be...” Fiona stopped herself from saying something more vulgar than she normally would, even if it could probably be excused under the present circumstances.

“Something along those lines would probably be more appropriate.” Mac looked at the door. “Wonder if they’re sitting on the other side. If we could break that door down, we could get out of here.”

“We could try picking the lock first.”

He raised a brow. “Do you know how to do that? I don’t.”

Fiona reached up and took two bobby pins out of her hair. “I learned for a part in a movie a few years ago.”

“You had to pick a lock?” His tone sounded more incredulous with each word. “They didn’t use movie magic to just... leave it unlocked?”

She managed a laugh. “I didn’t *have* to, but I learned anyway. Making it look real was important to me. It took far less time in the movie than it did in real life, but I could do it.”

One of the bobby pins was bent into the rake that would move the pins. She bent the looped end of the other one to make a tensioner. After situating the tensioner in the key hole, she looked at Mac. “Do we want to try this? Or should we wait a while longer? If they’re outside, we’ll be caught, and they’ll take away any chance we might have later.”

Mac blew out a breath. “You’re right. For now, we should wait and watch.”

Pulling the bobby pins out of the keyhole, Fiona tried to decide what to do with them. “Hopefully, someone has realized we’re missing already and be looking for us.”

“Unlikely.” He sighed. “I think everyone had already left except a few of the staff members. They wouldn’t expect to see us until morning. It could be a while before anyone realizes we’re gone.”

For the first time, Fiona began to feel helpless. She quickly lost the fight to keep the tears in her eyes. One hot tear after another streaked down her cheeks.

Maybe they wouldn’t get out of this as quickly as she hoped.

Maybe they wouldn’t get out of this at all.



It took everything in Mac to keep his anxiety under control. Once Fiona settled down on the floor next to Gray, Mac returned to pacing from one side of the small room to the other and back again.

He still wasn’t quite certain how these two men were able to get them out of the main part of the gardens and into a secret passage.

“Main part” of the house wasn’t quite the right term. Even though they’d been next to the house, they’d been exploring the far reaches of the maze.

They’d started to turn around for the third time when Mr. Villain grabbed Gray and Lefty managed to herd them into the hidden door before Mac could react. Once inside the darkened passage, it seemed better to bide his time than act given the unknowns. When they almost immediately started down a staircase, he knew he’d made the right decision. He wouldn’t lose any sleep over either of the two men falling down it, but he’d never forgive himself if Fiona or Gray were hurt.

He stopped next to the door and put his ear up to it. A noise of some kind came through, but he couldn’t quite make out what it was. It could be the two men talking, or it could be some sort of audio transmission - a radio or podcast perhaps.

Whatever it was, Fiona had been right when she decided they should probably wait to pick the lock. An opportunity would come. They just needed to be patient.

And pray that someone learned they were missing and started looking. Mr. and Mrs. Batten should notice in the morning. A lot could happen in the hours before then.

The best option would be for the two men to leave them alone until sunrise - as long as they showed up eventually with food and water.

At least the room had a light. There wasn't a light switch or a way to the light socket so he couldn't use any of those components as part of some defense.

"Think, Mac," he muttered. "There's nothing in here you can use. They took your phones. Your son and his mother, the woman you're falling in love with, are both with you. You have to protect them at all costs. Maybe Silas or Tinsley will try to get a hold of one of us soon. They could sound the alarm."

The noises on the other side of the door became more clear.

"You said there wasn't any risk." The first voice sounded like Lefty. *"You said we'd be gone before anyone knew they were missing. Staying holed up inside the property doesn't exactly seem like the best way to do that."*

"We will be gone before they're found. Only one of them matters, anyway." Mr. Villain's voice contained barely controlled frustration. *"My father..."*

"Your father is dead."

"You don't know that." That sentence came through loud enough to make Fiona stir. *"My father is a great man. He's been dealt poor hands his entire life, but he made something of himself anyway. If he is dead, he was murdered by the same people who did everything they could to keep him from becoming who he was meant to be."*

Poor dad. Mac knew what it was like to have people against you, preventing you from being your real self, from following your dreams.

That still didn't excuse raising your son to think that abduction was a solid part of his life plan.

The voices moved away again as Mac turned what they said over in his head.

What did he mean - only one of them mattered? Which one?

Mac ran through what each of the possibilities could mean.

Fiona could mean that they really did have an issue with her work - or, more likely, were infatuated with her the way so many teenage boys were when she starred in one of those Friday night sitcoms whole families could watch. It could mean they'd seen her movies. It could mean lots of things, though something told Mac that wasn't the answer.

He had a hard time even trying to think about why Gray would be the person that mattered. It could mean they wanted to hold him for ransom, but that didn't make any sense. The three of them would be more logical. The more people they kidnapped and held, the more they could ask for.

Unless there could be some other reason, but no matter how hard Mac wracked his brain, he couldn't come up with anything that made sense.

The things he came up with that didn't make sense were implausible at best, though downright ridiculous would likely be a better way to describe them.

A prince and the pauper kind of thing.

Being used as a "collectible" for a rabid, psychologically unbalanced fan of Fiona's - or his.

Someone who had a grudge against Esme - or their parents.

That left Mac.

Why would he be the important one?

Because his sister was queen? Because his mother had been? Because of his father's new child?

Thoughts of his past swirled around.

Could it be because of someone he'd had a one-night-stand with years earlier? Could these men be the brothers of a woman who thought he led her on?

It had been years since he'd spent that kind of time with a woman, but he'd also carefully been out of the public eye. This would be the first time in a long time that he was accessible to someone like that.

After hours of contemplation, he found himself no closer to a conclusion.

He did find himself running out of adrenaline.

"What time is it?" Fiona's sleepy voice cut through the fog.

"I don't know. My watch is dead. So much for a smart watch being a better option." And it didn't have its own service anyway, so they couldn't have used it to contact the outside world if it had been charged.

"How long do you think I've been asleep?" She struggled to stand until Mac held out a hand to help her to her feet.

“Several hours. It’s alternately crawled by and flown. Judging by my stomach, it’s got to be close to breakfast.”

As though to emphasize his point, his stomach let out a low rumble.

Mac pulled Fiona to him and wrapped his arms around her waist as she rested her head against his chest. “We’ll figure this out. I won’t let them hurt either of you.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple and prayed he could keep that promise.



For being in such a precarious situation, Fiona was surprised at how safe she felt in Mac’s arms.

She was hungry. Gray would wake any minute. He’d be hungry, and need to go to the bathroom, and only be as scared as she and Mac seemed to be.

They needed to remain calm.

And right here, Fiona felt much calmer than she could have imagined.

“We’re going to be all right,” Mac reassured her. “Whoever this is, we’ll find a way to stay safe. We’ll cooperate and bide our time. We’ll have a chance. When we do, we’ll take it.”

Fiona wasn’t sure she believed him, but the thought made her feel better anyway. “Thank you for trying to make me feel better. I want to believe that.”

“The good news is that the Battens should have noticed we were missing by now if no one did earlier.” He tightened his hold on her for a moment then released her as Gray started to stir. “Go to him.”

Fiona did just that, settling in next to Gray again as he sat up.

“Mama, where are we?” His sleep-filled voice held more fear than Fiona

had hoped.

“We’re together. That’s the most important part.” She pulled him closer as he rested his head against her.

“I’m hungry.”

“I know, buddy. We’ll get something to eat soon.” As long as their abductors remembered to bring them food.

Mac finally let himself slide down the wall to sit in one of the corners where he could see the door. Fiona watched as he leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

“I’m just going to rest for a minute,” he muttered, but Fiona knew he’d be asleep in seconds. With all of the stresses he’d been under, he had to hit the end of his adrenaline at some point.

After a few more minutes, she could tell her son had fully woken up. “I’m hungry, Mama. Can we eat?”

“Soon.” If Mac hadn’t desperately needed some sleep, she likely would have started pounding on the door already. “Why don’t you tell me about the games you played with the other children yesterday?”

As she’d suspected he would, Gray launched into an elaborate story about the game of tag and some other game he didn’t know the name of, but one of the girls told him how to play. From what she could gather, “one of the girls” was probably the next queen of Eyjania.

Her life kept becoming more and more surreal.

Even more so when you considered she’d been involved in multiple abductions in a very short period of time. Most people were never part of even one, and here she was part of two.

A scratching noise at the door made Gray freeze as Fiona’s head snapped around and Mac startled awake. Before the door could open, Mac had placed himself between her and whoever was about to enter.

“Here.” Lefty’s gruff voice was accompanied by a metallic bang. Peeking around Mac, Fiona could tell it was a food tray, but she couldn’t tell what kind of breakfast it held.

“Wait!” Mac moved closer to the door. “What do you want with us? Keep me, but let them go. They don’t mean as much as I do. My sister is the queen of Islas del Sargasso.”

She could see Lefty shake his head. “We only need one of you, but you’re not that one. We’ll decide what happens to the other two later.”

Mac took another half step forward. “We? You’ll both decide? You have

equal say in what happens? Or are you the one in control?”

“We make decisions together.” The defensive tone in Lefty’s voice told Fiona all she needed to know.

Mr. Villain made all the decisions and didn’t listen to anything Lefty had to say, but Lefty would never admit it to Mac.

Maybe they could find a way to exploit that.

Lefty turned to leave.

“You could let one of us go,” Mac went on before the door closed. “As a sign of good faith. Let Fiona go. She can carry your demands to the outside world.”

Lefty hesitated.

“Send Gray with her. No one likes it when a kid has been abducted. That leaves me with you. My sister is the literal queen. She’d do anything to get me back, give you whatever you want.”

That couldn’t be true, but maybe it would help.

“No. All of you will stay here.” The door slammed shut.

Mac’s shoulders slumped before he picked up the tray and turned around with a smile on his face.

A forced smile, likely only for Gray’s benefit.

“Are you hungry, bud?” Mac set the tray in front of Gray. “I don’t think I could eat right now, so why don’t you two eat.”

“I don’t want anything right now,” Fiona chimed in. Let Gray eat as much as he wanted, then she might. She suspected Mac planned the same thing - only he’d wait until after she also ate.

Gray picked up one of the muffins and sniffed at it. “What is this, Mama?”

“A muffin.” She didn’t elaborate further. He’d never liked blueberries, but maybe if he didn’t realize that’s what they were, he’d eat it. “You like muffins.”

The dubious look didn’t leave his face as he pulled a little bit off. He ate it then took a bigger piece.

She breathed a sigh of relief and gave Mac a look she hoped he could interpret - one that tried to tell him not to spill the beans on the kind of muffin.

And why did they have muffins? That seemed like an odd meal for abductors to give them, but she suspected they didn’t have access to a well-stocked kitchen or delivery from a market.

Gray ate the whole muffin and drank some of the water. She didn't encourage him to drink more, not when they didn't know what facilities they'd have access to.

As he started a second muffin, Fiona stood to stretch her legs.

"Any thoughts?" she asked Mac softly enough Gray couldn't hear.

He shook his head. "He seemed to be thinking about letting you go, but as soon as I went on, his face changed. It seems like they want Gray for some reason.

Even though Fiona had already come to the same conclusion, a stabbing pain cut through her to hear Mac say it.

Mac wrapped his arm around her shoulder as tears threatened to fall. "Don't worry, Fi. I won't let anything happen to either one of you." She could hear the conviction in his voice.

She nodded against him. "I know you'll do everything in your power to keep us safe."

He kissed the side of her head.

Fiona voiced her second biggest concern. "But who's going to keep you safe?"



Several more hours went by with no word from their captors. Mac could feel himself growing more tense and restless with every minute that ticked by.

Gray ate two of the blueberry muffins.

He didn't understand the whys behind the look Fiona had given him, but he knew enough not to say anything she hadn't already said. Maybe Gray didn't like blueberries?

What an odd, trivial thing to be fixated on when he'd been stuck in a small windowless room for what had to be close to a full day.

He'd forced himself to stop pacing and try to listen to the stories Gray told Fiona about his days or his favorite thing at school or any other topic she could come up with to keep their son's mind off the predicament they were in.

As much as he wanted to fall asleep again, Mac couldn't let himself.

Lefty had the jump on him when he came in earlier. He'd never forgive himself if it happened again.

Next time, Lefty might not be bringing food.

It might be Mr. Villain coming for Gray.

The only conclusion Mac could reach from his interaction with Lefty was that Gray had to be the valuable member of their little family.

But why?

What could they want with Gray?

It didn't matter. All that mattered was protecting Gray and Fiona.

That's why he couldn't be asleep when one of them came back into the room.

Lefty returned later, this time bringing food and giving them the opportunity to use something that sort of resembled a bathroom.

Fiona came up with games that would get all of them moving - Mother May I; Red Light, Green Light; Simon Says; Animal Poses - and a few others Mac had never heard of like Up/Down/Stop/Go.

The point, according to Fiona, was to get Gray to use some of his excess energy since they'd be cooped up in the room the whole day.

It helped Mac and probably helped Fiona as well.

He'd prefer to go a few rounds with Mr. Villain, but he hadn't been given the chance.

Eventually, Gray settled down for a nap.

"How are you?" he asked Fiona. "You seem to be doing okay."

She shrugged. "I'm angry. I'm tired. I'm hungry. I'm frustrated. It's possible I'm homicidal, but I doubt we'll have a chance to find out." Blowing out a breath, she looked over at Gray. "I have to make sure he's not scared. That's why I seem like I'm a lot more okay than I really am."

Mac chose to sit on the floor next to her. Fiona immediately leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I feel so helpless," she told him, choking back tears. "I felt helpless in San Majoria, but this is a whole different kind of helplessness."

He didn't know what to say, so he slid his arm around her shoulders. His thumb brushed up and down across her shoulder. "There's got to be people out there looking for us. I'd imagine there's security cameras covering at least part of the maze. If nothing else they'd be able to see that we went into the maze but didn't exit. When they don't find us in the maze itself, they'll have to start thinking of improbable options. Secret passage has to be one of

them, whether abduction is or not.”

She nodded but didn't say anything else for several minutes. “Tell me about growing up in a palace?”

The abrupt change of subject startled Mac, but he could understand why she'd want to take the conversation in a different direction.

“I always knew it wasn't normal, but at the same time, it was normal for me. I didn't know any other life. Kind of like I always had a security team with me until I left. Even then Silas, who filled that role to the best of his ability was with me, despite my protests.” He tried to think of other things that made it unusual. “Photos of me and Esme were released several times a year. Once or twice a year, we did ones with Mum. Never with our father. It wasn't until my teen years that I realized how strange and strained their relationship really was. I'd heard whispers of rumors about their lives being unusual, but nothing I understood.”

“What finally made you realize it?”

Mac turned that question over in his head. “It wasn't any one thing. I'd see my friends' parents, even if one of them was a step-parent, and how they interacted with each other. Without trying, I'd see articles online about my father's alleged affairs. The worst ones said horrible things about my mother for putting up with him. There were a few accusations against her, but I'm fairly certain my father planted those rumors to make himself look less bad.”

“That sounds awful. It's one thing to ignore stories about myself that I know aren't true. It has to be a whole different kind of difficult when it's about your parents, and you aren't really certain if they're true or not.” She shifted on the stone floor, likely trying to get a bit more comfortable. “I worry about that sometimes with Gray. Now that his existence is public, there's bound to be rumors about who his father is, despite the fact that we've publicly stated you are.”

His brows pulled together. “I've told the world he's my son. What other rumor could there be?”

She sighed. “I was seen with Gabe about the same time you and I were together. If anything had happened between us, he *could* be the father, but nothing did. We were at an event together last and decided to share a ride back to the hotel we were both staying at. He walked me to my door and left. Someone out there is doing the math, and his name is bound to come up.”

“We'll tell the truth however many times we need to and ignore the rest.”

“That's all we can do.”

His turn to change the subject. “What’s your favorite movie? Your movie.”

She lifted her head off his shoulder to stare at the ceiling. “Oh goodness. I don’t know. Maybe... No. I don’t know. It’s impossible to choose. There were some co-stars I liked better than others, but none of them have been bad. I really enjoy working with Pete Barker from Eyjania.” Fiona leaned forward and turned to look at him. “Your cousin-in-law.”

Before Mac could respond, the door opened. He started to move, but the weapon pointed at him caused Mac to bide his time.

“You.” Mr. Villain pointed it at Fiona. “You’re coming with me.”

Mac wanted to get in the way, to stop them from leaving with her, but when Lefty grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the room, Mac was left staring at the door.

“Mama?”

Gray’s voice reminded Mac that he needed to make certain his son was protected.

That had to be his priority.



With a blindfold wrapped around her head, Fiona feared tripping and hurting herself.

Mr. Villain kept a tight grip on her upper arm as he forced her through passages she couldn't see. Around twists and turns. Up and down stairs. She tried to keep a mental map so she could retrace her steps later, but even as she did, Fiona knew it wouldn't work.

He hadn't said where he was taking her or why. Or if she'd ever see her son and Mac again.

She couldn't think about that. Walking took too much focus to think about anything else at the moment.

It seemed like forever before he shoved her away from him.

Fiona hit a wall with her shoulder and slid to the ground when he ordered her to sit.

She wanted to protest, to insist on knowing where she was, where she was going.

But something told her it would be better to bide her time and wait.

Angry muffled voices told her that Mr. Villain and Lefty didn't quite see

eye-to-eye on their game plan - whatever it might be.

At least they hadn't tied her hands together. She couldn't really fight back when she couldn't see but it made her feel a little better to know the possibility existed that she *could*. It would even be possible for her to take off her blindfold, but she'd already contemplated that and Mr. Villain had let her know in no uncertain terms what he thought of that idea. The risk seemed too great.

"A couple of hours." Lefty's voice drifted to her. "Why so long? Get rid of her now."

Intellectually, Fiona knew that "get rid of her" could mean a variety of things and didn't necessarily indicate a permanent solution of any kind.

Mr. Villain didn't answer immediately. "Maybe you're right." The words spoke of a concession, but his tone made Fiona wonder if it hadn't been his plan all along, and he just wanted Lefty to think he had some impact on the decisions.

Footsteps approached, but before Fiona could prepare for it, she was pulled roughly to her feet. She stumbled a bit further down the passage for a couple of minutes.

Then her fears came to pass.

One of them tied her hands.

The other tied her feet.

Lefty picked up her shoulders. Mr. Villain picked up her legs.

After a slight whispering sound, Fiona felt a breeze flow over her.

She couldn't help but breathe deeply as the fresh air flowed into her lungs. With it came the tang of salt. They had to still be near the ocean. Nowhere in Sargasso was far, but this seemed like they were still on the estate grounds.

If she listened carefully, she might even be able to hear the waves.

"Be quiet," Mr. Villain hissed at her. "Don't make us hurt you or go hurt your kid."

Fiona nodded. She wouldn't do anything to risk herself much less her son.

They didn't set her down gently, but they weren't overly rough either. She found herself laying on her side with stone underneath.

Could she manage to sit up? She'd be able to take the blindfold off easily enough, but she didn't want to do it while Mr. Villain and Lefty were still around.

Whatever door they'd exited hadn't made any noise when it opened. It probably wouldn't when it closed.

She needed to wait until she felt certain they were gone.

The time stretched into eternity. Every time she'd convinced herself it would be safe, she decided to wait another minute or two.

But she also had no real concept of the passage of time.

When the realization sunk in that her arm felt dead, Fiona thought it might have been long enough.

"I found her!" A voice preceded the sound of footfalls headed toward her.

Gentle hands helped Fiona into a seated position as she could hear more people arrive at her side.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Fiona recognized the voice, but couldn't remember who it belonged to.

She nodded as tears began to fall from beneath the blindfold.

"Will you be all right if I take a few pictures?"

Fiona nodded again. If the photos of her as she was left would be helpful, she could endure another minute or two.

It didn't take long before three people worked in unison to remove the blindfold and other ties.

"Thank you." She cleared her throat to get rid of the scratchy voice as she blinked against the sudden brightness. "What about Mac and Gray?"

Thor crouched in front of her. "We haven't found them yet. Do you know how long you've been out here?"

Her arm began to tingle painfully. With her other hand, she rubbed it up and down. A staff member held an open bottle of water and helped her take a sip before answering. "No. It's been a while, but I'm not sure how long. I don't think it was light yet, but I honestly have no idea what time it is."

"We have people reviewing the surveillance videos right now, sir." One of the men Fiona didn't know, but who appeared to be a member of someone's security team, shared the piece of information with Thor.

He looked around. "I don't think cameras cover this particular spot. That's likely why it was chosen."

Before she could share what she did know, someone else picked her up and set her on a gurney.

"I'm fine," she protested weakly. "I can walk."

"They're going to look you over." Thor's voice carried a ring of authority Fiona knew not to argue with. "We'll ask you some questions as we go."

“I think there’s a hidden passage around here.” She looked around to see how close she was to a building then pointed to a shed of some kind, the only building nearby. “In there maybe? We were only outside a minute before they set me down on the ground. I don’t see how it could be any where else.”

Medical personnel took her vital signs as Thor asked questions about where they’d been held, who had done it, and anything else she could remember.

“We’ve suspected there’s secret tunnels, but we’ve never found any.” Beau crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “We didn’t see a reason to make finding them a priority, but we’re pretty sure they exist.”

“I know we were taken through one immediately. It’s a blur, but we were in the gardens then inside a narrow passage.” She looked directly at Thor then Beau. “Now, tell me what you’re going to do to find Mac and our son.”



Screaming, yelling, pounding on the door - none of it would do any good.

And it would scare Gray.

Mac had been keenly aware of how Fiona acted while Gray was awake. He needed to do the same - remain calm and collected.

“Is Mama coming back?” The crack in his son’s voice brought Mac back to the small room.

“I don’t know.” He suspected she wouldn’t be, but Mac wasn’t going to tell his son that. “Why don’t we play some of the games your mum showed us before?” Anything to keep Gray busy and his mind occupied.

Gray shrugged, but stood up. “Which one first?”

“Which one is your favorite?” As Gray’s father, he should know these things.

Gray thought for a minute. “I dunno. Not with two. You can’t do Mama Says with two.”

Mac nodded. “That’s a good point. What’s something we can do with just two blokes?”

His son’s face screwed into a thoughtful expression. “A hopping contest?” He gave a serious nod. “Yes. A hopping contest.”

“You’ll have to tell me the rules. Do we hop on one foot? Which one? Can we switch feet in the middle? How do we know when someone wins?” Mac felt like he should know these answers, but Gray could play by different rules, probably ones that would benefit himself. Wasn’t that how most six-year-olds thought?

“Gotta stay on the same foot until someone says switch. If your other foot touches the ground, you’re out.”

“Okay.” He stood ready. “Why don’t you start us?”

Gray nodded, taking his duties quite seriously. “On your mark. Get set. Go.”

Mac hadn’t hopped on one foot in quite some time, and it seemed fairly obvious Gray could go on to be a professional hopper. Mac would be surprised if he made it a whole minute, much less through the first...

“Switch!” Gray grinned as he changed feet.

Mac managed to do so seamlessly. This time.

And immediately realized it was possible for a person to hop significantly better on one foot than the other.

He wouldn’t make it to the next change.

Unless...

“Switch!”

He called for the change himself.

Gray changed feet more easily than Mac did, but Mac managed not to touch the ground with both feet at the same time.

For three more hops.

Then he stumbled into the wall.

“I won!” Gray turned his hops into jumps with both feet.

“Aw, man!” Mac slumped dramatically against the wall. “You beat me.”

And he hadn’t even lost on purpose.

“I beat you!” In his exuberance, Gray grabbed Mac around the waist. “I beat you, Daddy!”

Mac’s breath caught in his throat as the word registered in his mind. “You did beat me, buddy.”

A sound at the door made Mac turn around and shove Gray behind him. Gray didn’t protest but huddled against him.

“Here’s food.” Lefty set the tray down and walked out before Mac could say anything to him.

Mac could feel Gray peek out from behind him. “What kind of food did

he bring?”

“It looks like sandwiches and potato chips.”

Gray sat on the ground on top of Fiona’s sweater. Mac sat next to him and put the tray in front of them both.

“Looks like there’s a couple of different kinds. Which one do you want?” It didn’t matter to Mac.

“Doesn’t matter.” Gray picked one up. “It won’t be as good as the toasted cheese at the castle.”

“Probably not.” He ripped one of the jelly sandwiches in half. “Not many things are.”

They ate the sandwiches in silence.

When they finished, they both stretched their legs out. Mac didn’t think Gray even realized they did so the exact same way.

“Mama said you’re my daddy, but you stayed away to keep me safe.” He didn’t look at Mac as he spoke.

“That’s right. I’m sorry I couldn’t keep you and your mama safe yesterday. I swore I’d do my best to keep both of you safe, and that’s never going to change.” Should he tell Gray about the theme park? He decided to wait for another time.

Gray leaned his head against Mac’s shoulder. “You couldn’t come see me sometimes?” The little boy’s voice sounded small and scared.

Mac wrapped his arm around Gray’s shoulders. “I wanted to. In fact, I live not very far from you and your mama so I can watch out for you. But it wasn’t safe for anyone to know I’m your papa.”

Gray didn’t say anything for a long moment. “You watch me?”

Mac winced at the way it sounded. “I did, to make sure the other bad guys didn’t know where to find you. I never saw any of them watching you.”

“That’s good, right?”

“It is.”

Another silence filled the room as Gray thought some more. “Are these the same bad guys?”

Mac tightened his hold on his son, just a little bit. “I don’t know. I don’t know who these guys are.”

A scraping sound in the lock caused Mac to leap to his feet. “Stay behind me,” he told Gray with a growl.

“I will, Daddy.” The absolute trust in Gray’s voice sobered Mac. He needed to live up to that trust.

Lefty appeared in the doorway. “Both of you, come with me.”

“Why?” He wasn’t just going to do anything just because Lefty told him to.

“I said to. We’re moving.” Lefty tried to move around Mac to get to Gray, but Mac wasn’t going to let that happen.

After a few seconds of dancing around, Lefty managed to shove Mac into the wall and grab Gray by the arm. “Let’s go.”

Mac hurried after them, staying as close as he could. “Let him go. We’ll go with you, but let him go.”

Lefty shook his head as they crossed a large empty area. “No. I can’t trust you. He stays with me.”

As they reached the other side of the open area, Lefty shoved Mac and carried Gray back to the room they’d just vacated. Lefty shoved Gray into the room, but the door closed before Mac could follow him.

Mac started to go after Lefty, to get to the door.

“Stop right there.” Mr Villain’s voice sounded behind Mac. “If you cooperate, Gray won’t be harmed. If you fight at all, I make no promises.”

Mac kept a straight face, but gave a slight nod. He’d cooperate until the chance to get Gray and escape came.

Mr. Villain motioned toward a chair on the other side of the table. “Sit.”

With a wary eye on Mr. Villain, Mac sat where he’d pointed.

“There’s something we need to discuss.” Mr. Villain sat across from Mac and tried to project a confidence and calmness Mac felt certain was only an act.

The two men entered a stare down, one Mac had no intention of losing.

Finally, Mr. Villain looked away, but motioned to Lefty as he did.

Lefty took a position directly in front of the door to the room that held Gray.

“Why are we here?” Mac spoke first. “What could you possibly want if you don’t want money from my sister?”

Mr. Villain stared at him again. “Because you’re my brother.”



The room where Fiona sat couldn't be far from where Mac and their son were being held, but there wasn't any way to get to them.

She'd been taken to the suite she'd shared with Mac and Gray.

After sharing everything she knew, which wasn't much, Thor and Silas told her to rest. They'd let her know if they found anything.

With the Dowager Queen's assistance, Fiona had managed to clean herself up and put fresh clothes on. Queen Eliana sat in a chair at the side of the bed as Fiona tried to rest.

Sleep didn't come. Every time her eyes closed, she found herself transported back to the room nearby.

But it didn't look as it had when she last saw it.

Instead, each time, some catastrophe had taken place.

One or both of them lying motionless. Sometimes covered in blood. Sometimes not.

Always severely injured - or worse.

The obvious solution would be to never close her eyes again.

"They're going to be just fine." The queen stood and went to the a side

table. She poured steaming water out of a teapot and added a tea bag to the cup, dipping it up and down a few times as she walked back over to Fiona's side. "Here." She held out the cup as Fiona resituated herself so she could lean against the headboard.

It had been a long time, but as she inhaled the scent, Fiona was reminded of how much she loved it and wondered why she'd stopped.

"I know they will be." Fiona had to keep believing that. "But I don't think I'll be able to sleep until they are."

"That's understandable." Queen Eliana fixed herself a cup of tea and took her seat again. "Have you been able to get any rest?"

"Not really." Fiona took another sip of her tea. "The nightmares start as soon as I close my eyes. I can only imagine what they'd be like if I actually fell asleep."

A quiet knock on the door made both of them turn to look.

"Enter," the queen called.

Thor and Silas walked into the room. Neither looked like they had good news but neither looked overly serious either.

Fiona decided she didn't want to have this conversation, whatever it would be, in bed. She swung her legs over the side and stood. "Let's go to the living room."

The two men led the way out of the room, but stood to the side to allow her to decide where to conduct the meeting. Rather than the sofa, she chose the table in the breakfast nook.

Silas set a file folder in front of her. "We haven't found the passages yet, but we do have a lead on former employees who might be able to help."

The door to the suite opened, letting in Queen Esmeralda and Gabe. The queen had clearly been crying as she rushed toward them.

Fiona stood so she could curtsy, but before she could, the queen was hugging her

"I'm so pleased you're all right." Esme squeezed her a little tighter.

"I hope Mac is, too," Fiona told her.

The queen released her and took a step back. "He will be, and so will Gray. I am sorry I wasn't here when you were found. We're trying to keep this quiet for the time being, and I had an engagement I couldn't miss without raising questions we didn't want to answer."

"I understand. Mac will, too." Those around the table moved to provide a space for the queen and Gabe.

“We’ve sent a team to find the lead caretaker who retired about twenty years ago. The house manager from the same time frame is reportedly still in Ancora, so we’re looking for him as well.” Thor checked his phone. “No word on either one yet.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us about where you were? I saw the preliminary reports, but if you could walk me through it, I would greatly appreciate it.”

Beau and Angie came into the room as Fiona began to walk through the events again. She tried to remember the most minute details, knowing that any of them could be the trigger for someone else to remember something they knew.

“I wonder if it’s the guy,” Angie said, looking at her husband. “The one who sabotaged our first event here.”

“What guy?” Fiona asked. “What event?”

Beau told the story. “When we moved in, virtually the entire staff had been dismissed and the estate left to fall into disrepair. A few weeks later, we had an event the night before Christmas Eve. The power to the building was severed, but only part of it. The video of the perpetrator wasn’t very good due to the lighting and other factors, but the men you’ve described match the general description. They were seen on video near the building you likely exited, so that’s an additional connection.”

“It would make sense if there’s a hidden door of some kind in that building.” Thor leaned back in his chair, crossing one foot over the other knee. His pen tapped against his leg as he thought. “How hard did your team look?” he asked Beau.

“They conducted a search, but they didn’t tear the place apart. If there’s a secret entrance, it’s well-hidden.”

“Then how would these guys know about it?” Fiona asked. “If your team wasn’t able to find it, how could two others know?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Batten know of rumors. After the three of you disappeared, they began looking through their old records again to see if they could find anything.” Beau rested his forearms on the table. “This time, they found a piece of paper they missed last time. They think it was stuck to the page in front of it. A couple of sentences in it hinted at the existence of the passages. It was typed and unsigned, so there’s no way to know who wrote it. The date is about thirty years ago. The caretaker and house manager were both here for another decade or so after that. That’s who we’re looking for.”

They spent another fifteen minutes trying to come up with some answers, but none were forthcoming.

Thor looked at his phone. “It seems they’ve found the caretaker. He’s on his way here.”

Fiona’s heart leapt into her throat. Maybe he’d know how to find Mac and her son.

Then she’d be able to breathe again.



His brother?

Mac tried to wrap his mind around the idea that this man was his brother. Probably half-brother, with Isaiah as their common parent.

Which also meant this guy was Gray’s uncle.

And Mac had felt sorry for the other man’s father - a man who didn’t deserve many kind thoughts.

“You don’t look surprised.” Mr. Villain’s eyes narrowed. “Why doesn’t that surprise you?”

Mac shrugged. “I know who my father is. I know he has a number of other children, even if I don’t know how many or who they are or how old they are. He was a notorious criminal. Why should it surprise me that his son is one as well?”

“You’re his son, too.”

“Everyone is capable of doing things that are illegal, but I don’t believe I’m capable of the kinds of things Isaiah did. It still doesn’t surprise me that one of his other children is.” He needed this guy to slip up. To tell him something useful.

Anger crossed Mr. Villain’s face. “He was a great man, a misunderstood man, who had his birthright stolen from him.”

Mac snorted. “If you say so. That’s not the story I’ve heard from multiple reliable sources.” What birthright could he be talking about? Isaiah would never have been king. Only if both of his older siblings died without having children of their own.

“Did you ever meet him?”

“Not that I recall.” Mac couldn’t stop himself from poking the bear. “If I did, it was in passing, and he didn’t make much of an impression.”

The anger on Mr. Villain’s face had started to dissipate a little bit, but that made it increase again.

“I don’t see what that has to do with you,” Mac went on. “I have no idea who you are or what the big deal is. I have the best mum in the world, and an incredible sister. Both of whom make far better queens than Isaiah ever would have been as king. Even if he had become king of Eyjania somehow, what makes you think you would have been his successor? Are you certain you’re his oldest child? Or that he’d make an illegitimate child his heir?”

Isaiah had never been married and never officially or unofficially claimed any of his children.

“He would have.” Traces of a sullen child came out of Mr. Villain.

Mac didn’t even try to stifle his laugh. “What makes you think that? He told you?”

“He did.” Now Mr. Villain went on the defensive.

With a sad shake of his head, Mac prodded further. “And you believed him? He was a notorious liar and a crime lord. He knew he’d never be king and would never need an heir. He told you what you wanted to hear so you’d do what he wanted you to do.”

The potential realization crossed his brother’s face. “I don’t believe you. Why should I listen to anything you have to say?”

Forcing himself to appear much more relaxed than he really felt, Mac leaned back in his seat, legs stretched out in front of him. “You don’t have to, but you have to know you won’t get out of here safely. Someone is going to come in looking for me, for...” He almost mentioned Gray but decided not to at the last second. “For us. They’re not going to let you get away with any of this. You’ll never be half the criminal mastermind Isaiah allegedly was.”

“Allegedly?”

“You said he was misunderstood and not given a fair chance in life. That means everything I’ve heard about his activities could be a lie then, rather than the story he fed to you.” Keep this guy talking. That thought ran through Mac’s head on a never-ending loop. If he kept Mr. Villain talking long enough, maybe someone would find them.

Maybe the Walruses would come for them. The WLRs - Water-Land Rescue - team could be called on to help in this situation. Despite his actual genetics, Mac was the son of one queen and brother of another. WLRs would

be able to do things others wouldn't.

He'd always admired the WLRs teams, had even met a few from time to time, but this would be different if they were the ones to come after Mac and his son.

Many of them would have already received commendations from both his mum and his sister. Some of those would never see the light of day. They'd never be able to discuss the missions with anyone outside of a very small circle of people. The time his biological father and his men held two royal families hostage - plus Esme and Gabe - was one of those.

Mac hadn't been there, but the story had made its way back to him. The press and public had been told it was a WLRs exercise, but the reality had been far different.

During one of their few conversations while their mother lay dying, Esme told him that how Gabe reacted during that encounter helped her realize he wasn't the same playboy he'd been portrayed as in the media. He'd stepped in between her and Isaiah's men more than once. Mac would like to think Fiona would feel the same about him over the last couple of days.

Though his focus remained on Mr. Villain and protecting his son, Mac found himself missing Fiona in ways he hadn't expected.

"You're not going to convince me he's the evil man the press - and even his family - portrayed him to be. He and my mother both told me the press was wrong about him." Something sounded off in the man's voice, but Mac couldn't quite put his finger on what it could be.

"So Isaiah raised you?" *Keep him talking.*

"After I turned twelve I saw him regularly. My mum died when I was fifteen. Then he took care of me permanently." Bitter undercurrents made Mac wonder what his half-brother could be hiding.

"But did he actually spend time with you? Was he a present father? Mac pressed. "Or did he simply make certain you had food to eat, a roof over your head, and other necessities?"

"I saw him all the time." The bitterness turned defensive. "He raised me."

Another thought occurred to Mac. "How did your mother die?"

"Car accident on a dangerous road between Akushla and Lake Akushla. People die there every year, so don't try to convince me my father was behind it." Mr. Villain stood and started to pace.

Mac didn't respond, but also knew that people with the kind of power and influence Isaiah once had could make things look like accidents when they

really weren't. From what Mac knew, it wouldn't be outside the realm of possibility for Isaiah to have done so.

"He was going to give me this place." Mr. Villain waved a hand at the walls visible. "It was given to him by his father. He had the paperwork that said so. We came down here and he put me in charge, made me the house manager. I took care of things. Saved money. Cut unnecessary staff. Made sure it was running the way it should. I was able to travel while the estate ran itself. When I came back, our *cousin* had made herself and her husband comfortable, claiming her grandfather had left it to her. I couldn't find the paperwork from my father, so I let it go until I can prove it."

"And you don't think it's possible Isaiah forged those documents? Tried to steal this place from our cousin?"

Mr. Villain rushed toward Mac. Mac stood, but let himself be pushed back against the rough hewn stone wall. With his half-brother's arm across his chest, Mac looked down slightly into the crazed eyes of his captor.

"I'm sick of your insinuations. If you try to claim that again, I'll make sure your son never sees the light of day again."



Would this nightmare ever end?

Fiona had managed to choke down a small meal and unintentionally rested for a while. Fortunately, when exhaustion hit to the point she could no longer keep her eyes open, the nightmarish scenarios didn't immediately appear.

She made her way to the conference-room-turned-command-center, a cup of coffee in her hand this time.

"We can go in here." A man she didn't recognize pointed to a spot on a map. Did he wear a military uniform?

"If that's where the tunnel is," Thor replied with a sigh. "We still don't have confirmation."

"Where?" Fiona moved toward the table. "I might not remember exactly what happened, but I might be able to help narrow it down."

The man glanced at Thor who nodded. "Ma'am, what can you tell me about where you were taken from?"

Fiona stood next to him and studied the map, trying to get her bearings. She pointed to a spot next to the house. "That's the last place I know for

certain we were. I know we went this direction..." She dragged her finger to the right. "...but I'm not certain how far we made it before they were upon us." She pointed to another spot a bit farther down. "I'm almost certain we didn't make it that far."

The man made light marks where she'd indicated. "That means it had to happen somewhere in here."

"The cameras don't cover that area adequately," Thor told them. "But that seems to track with what the recordings did show." He straightened and crossed his arms over his chest, seemingly deep in thought. "You know, most of the palaces I know of have secret passages of some kind or another. Most of them are marked in some way. Nothing obvious or out of place, but definitely marked. I wonder what they might have used here. Beau, do you have a photo of that area of the wall?"

Fiona straightened. "I took one. On my phone."

Thor and the other man looked hopeful. "Where's your phone?"

She shook her head. "I don't have it. They took it from me and turned it off..."

Both men slumped.

"...but my photos are supposed to automatically save to the cloud. If it did like it was supposed to, it would be there." A glimmer of hope began to ignite deep inside.

Thor slid a laptop toward her. "This computer is secure. You can use it to log in."

Fiona's nose wrinkled. "It would if I could remember my password. I have it saved on my devices. I can go get my computer," she offered. "It's in my room."

Beau nodded toward another staff member who hurried out of the room. "It will be here momentarily."

The military man took out a notepad. "I know you've already been over the story several times, but could you please tell me? I might have different questions or need different information than they did."

She started to tell her story, but was stopped after just a couple of sentences.

"How wide was this corridor?" The man made a note.

"Not very wide."

"Can you be more specific? Could two people walk next to each other? Were your shoulders brushing the sides or close to them?"

“Closer to the second one. You definitely couldn’t have two people walking next to each other. My shoulders weren’t touching the walls. I had several inches of clearance on either side, I think.”

He made another notation. “Go on.”

A few sentences later, he asked another question, then the scenario repeated itself several more times.

His questions seemed to be of a more... tactical nature? She wasn’t certain that was the right term, but they focused on things like how far ahead she could see without a flashlight or if the corridor was the same width all the way down. Did the width fluctuate and by how much?

Could he be the commander of some kind of rescue team? Were they going to send troops in or possibly a hostage rescue team or a similar group to try to get to Mac and Gray?

The thought both comforted and scared Fiona. Knowing others were doing their best to get to two of her loved ones relieved her, but at the same time, it might not take much for Mr. Villain and Lefty to decide to take their fears of capture out on Mac and Gray.

They talked more about the room where they’d been held, about the facilities they’d been given access to, what kind of food and how it was served. No detail seemed to be too small.

After a while talk turned to her release. What were those corridors like. What did she see or hear or smell - or even taste - as she was taken from the building?

“I honestly don’t know if I went through that building or not. I don’t remember hearing any doors, much less two. I only remember going from the same stale environment to outside immediately.”

“Were there stairs?” The man scratched another note onto the fourth or fifth piece of paper he’d used in his notepad.

Fiona thought about it. “I don’t think so. There might have been an incline of some kind, but it didn’t seem like there was a staircase.”

Another note as her laptop finally arrived. She logged into her account, but at Thor’s request didn’t look at the photos. They didn’t want her memory tainted.

“Could you tell how wide the door was? How tall? Did the men seem to stoop?”

That wasn’t a thing that would have occurred to Fiona to think about. She searched her memory. “Maybe a little? I heard one of them mutter something

about height, but I don't know what it was. He could have been complaining about the size of a Christmas tree for all I know."

"How far did they carry you once you left the building?"

"More than a few steps, but not far. They didn't carry me for more than a couple of minutes, total."

"What could you ascertain at the last stop before they restrained you?"
More notes made it onto the page.

"Not much of anything. Just walls and a corner to the hallway. I know they carried me around it." She closed her eyes and tried to picture it. "It went to the right from where we were, but it wasn't a 90 degree angle. It was less than that. Probably more than 45 degrees, but definitely less than 90."

They worked their way backwards again, back to the room where they'd been held and the area outside it.

Fiona told him everything she could think of. Just as they decided to take a break, an aide of some sort came in and whispered something to Thor.

Thor nodded then stood. "We have something."



The confrontation ended when Lefty hollered at Mr. Villain.

Mac couldn't tell what he said, but he found himself left alone.

Unfortunately, they stood right in front of the door to the room that still held Gray.

He watched them as they whispered together.

Then, almost like they forgot about him, they moved toward the corridor on the far side of the open area.

As they moved further away, Mac moved slowly to the door. Carefully, he turned the handle and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized it wasn't locked.

Mac spoke softly and hoped it was loud enough for his son to hear. "It's me, Gray. Be quiet, okay?"

"Okay." The reply was even quieter.

He reached his hand through the slightly open door. "Come here and take my hand. We're going to run, okay?"

His son squeezed his hand in acknowledgment.

Mac watched Mr. Villain and Lefty as they moved even further away.

And changed his mind. "Change of plans. We're not going to run yet. I want you to sneak. Stay as low as you can. Go to the right until you get to the hallway, okay? Keep going, and I'll catch up with you."

"Okay, Daddy."

Praying this would work, Mac opened the door a little farther, just enough for his son to squeeze out then closed it again as Gray moved away.

Mac started back the other direction, toward the place where he'd been sitting a few minutes earlier. If Mr. Villain and Lefty looked toward him, hopefully they wouldn't notice Gray as he moved toward the passage closest to the door he'd come out of.

There were multiple passages coming off the open area.

He had no idea which corridor was the right one, but that one made the most sense for Gray to go to. Surely they'd eventually find an exit of some kind no matter which one they took. If only there was some sort of map lying around for him to look at. He held out no hope that there would be one on the wall around the corner showing them which way to go.

Once Gray made the turn down the corridor, Mac worked his way back to the table and moved in front of the object he wanted to pick up.

The small torch found its way into his pocket before he went back the other direction.

Both of the men had their backs to him so Mac moved faster. As soon as he knew he was out of sight, Mac turned his attention to moving down the corridor.

"Gray," he whispered.

"Here, Daddy." The whisper came back from just a little ways ahead.

The further away they got from the open area, the darker the corridor became. He took Gray's hand as they moved more slowly than Mac would have liked.

But it would be better to move slowly and not make any noise than move more quickly and alert the two men when they fell or bumped into something.

Mac could barely make out a turn in the corridor and breathed a sigh of relief. Once they were a short ways down the next arm, he'd feel more comfortable turning on the torch.

"Are we almost there?" Gray whispered.

“I don’t know how far we have to go.” He glanced back to see only a slight glow from around the corner. He pulled the torch out of his pocket and clicked it on.

The corridor looked just like the other ones they’d been in with no way Mac could tell to distinguish it from any other corridor.

He didn’t know how he felt about the torch. The light was far brighter than he felt comfortable with, but he knew they needed something. Mac looked at Gray to see how he was holding up and realized that, at some point, he’d put Fiona’s sweater on and gave Mac a flash of brilliance.

“Can I get your mum’s sweater?”

Gray looked confused, but took it off and handed it over. Mac wrapped it around the torch to diffuse the light. It gave them enough to see but wouldn’t be as noticeable if someone was looking for them.

“That’s smart.” The admiration in Gray’s voice warmed Mac’s heart. “They won’t see it, but we can see.”

“Exactly.” A minute later, they came to a junction and had to make a choice.

“Which way do we go?” Gray whispered.

Mac looked down one side then the other. “I don’t know which way we should go.” He threw up a prayer for wisdom. Before he could decide, he heard a shout behind them.

Their escape had been noticed.

Right.

Right had to be the right way, right?

“Let’s go.” He held Gray’s hand and moved faster. The voices behind them started to get closer and closer.

As they reached another turn, Mac picked up the pace, but as soon as they rounded that corner, they jolted to a stop.

The thing Mac feared the most about their escape.

A dead end.

With a deep breath, Mac used the torch to search the seams for anything that looked like a way to open a door. “Hold this for me?” He handed the sweater-covered torch to Gray. “Point it where my hands are.”

“Okay.” Gray took his duties very seriously as Mac began feeling along the seams and the wall itself for anything that might be a lever or switch.

The men were getting closer and closer. It would only be a few minutes at most before they found Mac and his son.

He glanced back to see a bit of light coming from further down the corridor.

Shouting and other noises came from behind. He didn't know who else might be there, but it didn't matter. He needed to get his son to safety.

Just as he was about to give up hope, something gave way beneath his fingers and the wall silently swung inward toward Mac.

Grabbing Gray's hand, he pulled them both through before the door was completely open.

He turned and tried to find a way to close the door behind them. Fortunately, it started to close on its own.

Turning around, he picked Gray up and looked around the darkened area where they'd ended up.

Time to get to safety.



What exactly had they discovered? Fiona prayed they'd actually found the two missing members of her family.

Thor, Silas, the military man, and several others whispered together on the other side of the conference room. She couldn't hear what they were saying. That worried her.

Finally, they returned to their seats at the table.

"The WLRs team found the entrance in the area of your photo," Thor told her. "They found two men..." He glanced at the other men before continuing. "But Mac and Gray weren't there."

She blew out a breath. "They must have found a way out. That's why they aren't there."

"That's one possibility." The military man tapped on his tablet then turned it around.

Two men were pictured.

Fiona's visceral reaction must have confirmed what they already suspected.

"Those are the two men who abducted you?" Thor asked for confirmation.

She nodded as tears began to streak down her cheeks, making no effort to stop them. “Those are the men.”

“Thank you.” The military man nodded at one of the other men standing near the door.

“What about Gray?” Her voice cracked. “And Mac?” The two most important men in her life were still missing.

“We’re not sure yet. It’s possible they escaped, or they were handed off to someone else. They’re not saying anything.” Thor looked at his phone, but didn’t say anything about what he read.

Queen Eliana walked in and glared at the men gathered. “Fiona hasn’t eaten in a while. I’m taking her to get some food.”

Thor gave a single nod. Fiona suspected anything but acquiescence wouldn’t have gone over well with his wife.

She also knew his wife wouldn’t ask for something he’d feel the need to decline.

With the queen’s arm linked through hers, she led Fiona through a portion of the house Fiona hadn’t been in before. A minute later, they walked into the kitchen.

“Let’s find you something to eat.” The queen motioned for Fiona to have a seat at the table then opened the refrigerator. “How do you feel about tropical fruits?”

“I like fruit.” Usually. She wasn’t sure anything would sit well. “Is there something plain and simple? I’m not sure I can manage something like tropical fruit.”

The queen nodded. “I’m sure there is.” She dug through the cabinets until she found some bagels then held up a jar. “How about some hazelnut spread on it?”

Fiona nodded. “I think I can handle that.”

The queen didn’t let Fiona prepare it herself. She handed a bagel covered in spread to Fiona and then poured her another cup of hot tea.

“How are you?” Queen Eliana asked her gently. “I know it’s not easy to have family members missing.”

“To be honest, I’m kind of surprised I’m not totally falling apart,” Fiona admitted. “Gray is my life. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to him. And Mac...” She sighed. “Mac is someone I thought I’d left in my past. I felt a certain way about him until recently then discovered why he’d done what he did, and it changed everything.”

Breaking a bit of the bagel off, Fiona stared at it. “I think I was half in love with him years ago, despite our short flings. I think we spent a total of less than a month together over the course of a couple of years. Seeing him with Gray the last few days, the way he tried to protect us despite everything, I’m falling for him. There’s definitely chemistry between us. There always has been. Right now, I don’t know what I feel about him, not for certain.”

“It can be very difficult to change how you see someone you already know. It’s not nearly the same, of course, but when I realized I no longer saw Thor as *just* the head of security for both my late husband and my son, it was a difficult transition.”

As Fiona started to answer, she heard something she couldn’t quite make out. She tilted her head to try to hear better.

“Hello?!”

Before she realized what she was doing, Fiona had bolted out of her chair and across the room toward a door she’d never been through.

As she neared it, the door opened revealing the most beautiful sight she’d ever seen - her son and Mac - dusty and disheveled but alive.

With a cry she launched herself toward Mac and their son.

Gray reached for her, wrapping his arms around her neck and burying his face against her. Mac wrapped his arms around both of them.

“Are you okay?” She pulled back to look at Gray. “Are you hurt?”

“No, Mama.”

Fiona looked up at Mac. “You?”

“We’re fine. We took a chance to get way out then found a door that opened into a basement area. It took us a while to find our way out of the maze down there.” He pulled her back closer to him.

She heard footsteps pounding behind her as the word reached others in the building.

One thing she wouldn’t do was let go of her son.

And it turned out Mac refused to let go of either one of them. They would go together or not at all.

Medical personnel quickly appeared and looked both of them over, deciding that while they might be a bit dehydrated, there wasn’t anything to be concerned about. That let Fiona breathe a sigh of relief.

Then they were taken back to the conference room. Fiona wanted to escape to their suite - or even back to the palace - but first the authorities needed to hear their story.

It seemed like it took an eternity for Mac to tell what happened to them since she'd been taken away, but eventually they made it back to their home away from home for the night.

Fiona helped her son get cleaned up and into fresh pajamas. They both tucked him in.

“Mama, will you stay here?” His small voice broke her heart. The first thing she needed to do was find someone who could help him work through any emotional trauma from the last few weeks.

“I’ll be right outside talking to Mac. I’ll come back in here to sleep. Is that okay?”

He nodded. “Can Daddy stay, too?”

Hearing him call Mac his daddy... it filled her with a warmth she never would have expected. “He might need to be somewhere else, buddy.”

“No.” Mac jumped in. “You’re my family. There’s nowhere else I need to be.”



The next day brought a return to the palace, this time driven by members of the security team.

Gray sat between Mac and Fiona, holding both of their hands as they drove through the streets of Ancora.

He and Fiona had talked for a few minutes, mostly to determine that they were both physically fine. Their son calling for both of them sent them back into his room. Fiona slept next to Gray while Mac dozed in a comfortable chair.

Esme had called but hadn't come over to the estate. There was another event she and Gabe both couldn't miss without raising suspicions.

The two of them were waiting just inside the entrance to the palace. As soon as the doors closed behind them, Esme ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

"I was so worried. I already lost you once. A second time would have been too much." He could hear the tears in her voice.

"I'm not going anywhere, Esme." They both knew that couldn't be strictly accurate, but understood that he wouldn't simply disappear again.

He looked over to see Gabe giving Fiona a big hug then picking up Gray for a hug as well.

When his sister let go, Mac and Gabe did one of those manly handshake hug things as Esme embraced Fiona.

Gray reclaimed his hand before grabbing Fiona's as they walked through the hallways Esme's office.

Most of their things had been brought back from the estate. Fiona set Gray up with his tablet, bear, and headphones then started *Blue's Big City Adventure* for him. He settled into one of the chairs as the rest of those gathered around a conference table on the other side of the room.

"What can you tell us?" Despite the other VIPs in attendance, including two kings, Esme took control of the meeting. "Do we know who the two men are?"

Justin, King Benjamin's head of security, answered. "We believe Bradley is the son of Isaiah Quatremaine and one of the staff members at the Lake Akushla residence. We're waiting on test results to be certain, but everything points to that. We don't know who James is yet, but suspect he's a henchman of some sort."

"They're the ones behind the sabotage at the estate during the Christmas event?" Gabe asked.

"We believe so." Justin looked at his notes. "Based on what Prince Maximilian told us, Isaiah forged documents to take over the estate years ago. He set up Bradley as his surrogate then left, presumably died, and Bradley continued running it into the ground. When Princess Angelina and Beau arrived, he'd been spending most of his time traveling. We think another one of his associates sent out the invitations in an effort to embarrass them and drive them off so they could take back over. When Beau and Angelina rose to that challenge, they decided to try to sabotage the event itself. That didn't work out as planned either."

"So they've just been waiting around for another chance?" Mac didn't understand that.

"Not as far as we can tell. They reentered the country a few days ago. We suspect they saw the reports about Mac having a son and decided to take look for an opportunity to take custody of Gray."

"Why would they want Gray?" Gabe asked the question.

So he didn't know about Mac. "Because of who my father is." Mac sighed.

A puzzled look crossed his brother-in-law's face. "What are you talking about?"

Esme looked at Mac and waited for him to nod before explaining. "His biological father is Isaiah Quatremaine. His biological mother worked here in the palace. There was coercion of some kind, though we don't have the details. Mum found out about it and adopted Mac when he was born. From the information Mum left behind, his birth mother is deceased, but a distant relative of hers. It seems that this other woman was technically the next in line after Mum, at least until I was born."

Mac stared at his sister. "What are you talking about?"

"Mum had no living siblings. Neither did either one of our grandparents or great-grandparents. She and Mum shared grandparents, though her father was the result of an affair and never publicly claimed as a member of the family. However, the way the rules of succession are written, it doesn't matter as long there's proof of paternity. If, God forbid, something had happened to me before I had children, Mac would have been the legal heir to the throne regardless."

The news stunned Mac. Is that why she adopted him? Because he was family? Or was there more to it than that and being so repulsed by her husband that having a second child that a tangentially related child was the best option?

"She knew your mother was related," Esme told him, reaching over to grasp his hand. "She'd done her best to look out for this cousin, but it wasn't always possible. When your mum told Mum about the baby, they both knew they needed to keep your existence a secret from Isaiah as long as possible. The paperwork she left didn't say when he found out but that he had at one point. By then you were thoroughly enmeshed as her son in everyone's eyes. He couldn't have tried anything with you."

"But he could with my son." Mac closed his eyes. "I wasn't worried for nothing. He would have come after Gray if he'd known."

"Most likely," King Edward confirmed. "Your mother and I discussed your biological parents a number of times. Once you reached six or seven, she started to relax a little bit about the potential for interference by Isaiah."

Thor leaned forward. "When we found paperwork left by Isaiah, it indicated he had a number of children we were previously unaware of. However, we didn't have enough information to find any of them. It seems plausible that he wanted to raise a son to be his successor. He didn't appear to

know about Bradley until later in his life. If he'd known about you sooner, he may have tried to raise you himself. There's no way to know."

"So if he was still alive, it's likely he would have tried to get his hands on his grandson?" Mac's stomach churned at the thought.

Thor nodded. "Most likely."

The virtual confirmation was too much for Mac. He found a nearby trashcan and lost the little bit of food he'd eaten.

If his father was a narcissistic, homicidal, megalomaniacal, crime lord and his half-brother attempted to follow in Isaiah's footsteps, what hope did Mac have of breaking the family cycle?

What made him think he could be a good father?



The look on Mac's face as he returned to the table surprised Fiona. She couldn't quite figure out what it was, but it wasn't what she expected.

Not that she could put her finger on what she expected.

Mac remained quiet throughout the last forty-five minutes of the meeting. He carried Gray throughout the silent walk back to the quarters next to his apartment.

"Tinsley should be here soon," Mac told her as he set Gray on his feet. "I have some work to do, but I'll check in with you later."

The subdued tone of his voice tore at Fiona. If she knew what was bothering him, maybe she'd be able to help, but she had no idea.

"We'll be here." She sat next to Gray on the sofa.

Mac nodded but didn't say anything else as he left.

For the rest of the day, she and Gray snuggled together and watched movies. In between, they ordered food from the kitchen, including cheese toasties and macaroni and cheese, played a game or two - though neither one of them could concentrate for long. Tinsley spent a little bit of the day with them, but the rest of the time she was in her room.

When dinner time rolled around, she still hadn't heard from Mac. Gray asked to sleep in her room. Fiona wasn't going to say no. He fell into a sound sleep and Fiona decided it was time for her to get ready for bed, exhaustion

sending her far earlier than normal.

As she sat on the edge of the bed applying lotion to her hands when a light knock on the door leading to Mac's quarters caught her attention.

The door wasn't locked so she called for him to come in.

When the door swung open, she saw Mac leaning against the door frame with his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Fiona moved to stand in front of him. "Are you all right?"

Mac gave a half-shrug with the shoulder that wasn't pressed against the door frame. "I'm not sure."

She rested a hand on his arm. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I'm not sure." Mac walked into the room and headed straight for the doors on the other side then went onto the balcony.

Fiona followed and waited for him to lead the discussion. The slight chill in the air felt good after the warm interior of the palace. He leaned against the balustrade and stared out over the vista in front of them.

"I don't know how to be a father." Pain in his voice nearly brought tears to her eyes. "My biological father was a homicidal maniac. He tried to raise my half-brother the same way. My adoptive father - who never technically adopted me but was married to my adoptive mum - was absent at best. He's now using his pregnant wife and my new half-sibling to try to force Esme to accept them all as part of the family. Yesterday, the press said she should give the baby a title with an estate and let her father run it until the child comes of age."

Fiona hadn't heard that part, but simply waited for him to go on.

"With examples like that, how can I even hope to be a mediocre father, much less a good one?"

She slipped her hand inside his elbow and leaned her head against his shoulder. "You're nothing like either one of them."

"I'd like to think I've changed in the last six years, but before that... You were part of my life. You know what I was like. How can I hope to raise my son any better than I was? Especially when he already has an amazing mum. He doesn't need a papa who doesn't have a clue, who could ruin him for life."

"The fact that you're concerned means you're already a better father than either one of them. On top of that, you've put your life on hold for years to protect us, and in the last few days, you've put yourself in front of both of us to protect us from whatever those two men were going to do. You'll make

mistakes. You'll get things right. You'll say things you don't really mean. You'll have the best conversations and best hugs and snuggles that can't compare to anything you've ever experienced."

Mac stood and pulled her into his side as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"You really think so?" He kissed the side of her head. "You really think I could be a good papa?"

"I do."

His laugh surprised her. "I think we're getting a few steps ahead of ourselves."

Fiona blinked as she tried to process his comment. When it clicked, she laughed with him. "You're right. We're not nearly at a point in our relationship to discuss marriage. Technically, I don't know that we're in a relationship. Not officially." Her stomach churned as she mentioned the one thing that been on her mind since they were reunited. What if he didn't feel the same way.

Mac turned until they were face-to-face.

Her eyes fluttered closed as he reached up and brushed the hair out of her face. "We haven't defined anything. We have things to figure out. If this is going to work, we'll have to figure out where to live. With my work on the Games and your filming schedules, it won't be easy."

"Probably not."

With her eyes still closed, the kiss to her forehead surprised her a bit. "I suspect it will be worth it. Gray will think so."

"I hope so. As long as his mum thinks it is. I'll be his father in whatever capacity you'll let me until we decide to make things permanent."

Until?

He was already thinking permanence? Fiona decided that was a good thing, especially since she was already headed the same direction.

Mac's finger hooked under her chin and encouraged her to look at him. His brilliant blue eyes were soft as they looked straight into hers. "I'm falling in love with you, Fi."

"I'm falling in love with you, Mac." Her hands wound their way around the back of his neck, her fingers playing with the hair at the base of his head. "We'll figure it out."

He leaned in and brushed a kiss against her lips before coming back for a longer one.

When it ended, Fiona's hands were clasped at the middle of his lower back. She rested the side of her head on his chest.

"We'll figure out how to be a family," he promised.

They would.

Creating a new family wouldn't be easy, but it would definitely be worth it.



Thank you for joining Mac, Fiona, & Gray!

What's up next?

Lydia has discovered the secret her parents, older brother Ezekiel and sister-in-law Nikki have

been keeping from her for her entire life.

[Click here](#) for the next book in the

Castles & Courtships series!

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Thank you so much for joining Mac, Fiona, & Gray!

I've known since [The \(Elusive\) Princess](#) (released July 2019) that Mac was the father of Fiona's son.

I didn't know his name.

And I didn't know *why* he walked away when Fiona told him she was pregnant.

Not until about the time I started working on *The Prodigal Prince*.

I have to admit, it was a huge relief to know Mac had a legit reason for staying out of their lives.

I also had a great time visiting, however briefly, with some old friends! I hope you did, too!

As I'm sure most of you noticed, this book was pushed back twice. No one was - is - more frustrated than me.

October was one of the most difficult months I've experienced in a very long time, for my whole family. It's nothing I'm prepared to discuss but thank you for your prayers as we made it through.

And... the brain fog... :-)

It's still here, though a smidge better this last weekend before release than it has been. I thought I was going to have to make this book shorter than I wanted, much like I did Summer 2022, but it ended up being right at my target length! I wrote more this weekend than any other four work days combined - or than the 32 smallest days combined. It took 50 working days to write this story, which is much more than usual - as is the expanse of time since the first day, nearly 5 months.

That means it's also been over six months since the last release. I hate that as much or more than any of you. I'm praying the next one comes easier...

My new position at work is going well, and I'm finally starting to settle into a rhythm with it. And fortunately, the two people I work the most closely with are absolutely incredible and made me take a few days off to get this book finished.

Lydia is up next! The youngest child of former king and queen of New Sargasso has discovered that she's been lied to her entire life - and is about to make drastic decisions that will affect where her life goes, and doesn't want it to include anything resembling a royal family.

You can find out more here: www.carolmoncado.com/castles5-kindle

Other stuff

I would *love* to have you join us in Serenity Landing Book Club on Facebook! There's discussions, regular updates on books and other things in my life, and opportunities to help come up with character names or series or book titles!

Hop over to Facebook and join us! I love reading the answers to the admission questions to see how they line up with my own experiences ;-). www.carolmoncado.com/slbc

I would greatly appreciate it if you would leave a review - even a short one! They are so crucial to authors and how the algorithms work and other stuff (usually involving words I know but in a context where they make absolutely no sense!) - so if you'd hop over to leave one, that would be amazing!

Thank you for joining me and my imaginary friends! I've always said I became a writer to give the voices in my head something productive to do - otherwise they just drive me crazy!

But without y'all... I'd still just be talking to myself! ;-)

*Until next time,
Carol*

*For a complete listing of other works by Carol Moncado - and the timeline in
which they all occur - please visit
www.carolmoncado.com/timeline*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Ginger L. and Ester B.: They've picked up a lot of slack the last couple of months - as the life challenges hit hard and then as this book needed to be finished. They were the inspiration for the Serenity Landing Second Chances "yarn books" and have been good friends for almost longer than I can remember. (It is fun when I tell new team members that I've known our owner longer than his wife, Ginger, has ;-).)

You both are amazing. I love you and appreciate you more than you'll ever know.

Tory, Emily N, Julie, & Vickie: for their continual encouragement and support as this endeavor took much longer than expected. They read and brainstormed and reassured me that I was on the right track. Thank you for everything. You guys are the best!

Dan A.: who continues to be a good friend, encourager, and supporter - even if he refuses to admit when I'm right.

He's the one who first encouraged Kid #1 to pick up a clarinet and become a band kid. Last month, he picked up a saxophone and joined two of her other major musical influences to form a quartet at Kid #1's senior recital.

I know it meant the world to her and did to me and Matt as well.

And - as always - Dan also helped with random questions on topics outside of my purview.

One of these days, I might actually be able to call him Dan to his face. Probably not any day soon, but some day...

Dan U. and Dr. B: the other two members of that quartet with Dan A. and Kid #1. This Dan goes with Tory, my first reader and dear friend. He taught Kid #1's saxophone lessons from the end of sixth grade through graduation. Dr. B has only been at the university for a little over a year, but he and Kid #1 clicked from the beginning when she was part of his interview process. He worked with her when the university was between saxophone instructors and helped her get ready for the recital.

Thank you for your support of my kid. You are greatly appreciated.

Cap'n Jack: the band kid who's come closer than any other to cracking my top 4 band kids of all time. (Everyone knows there's about 70 kids in my top 10... top 4 is much harder... but Jack's come close a few times! If he ever married one of my kids, he almost definitely would slide into one of the top 4 spots on a pretty regular basis!) Thank you for being you, kiddo. You're the best, and I'm so proud of you for so many reasons - including going from the shy freshman who had to work up the nerve to say hi to your mom's friend (aka me) to a confident young man and talented in so many areas. Thank you for everything. I'm proud of you.

Debi H.: for letting me hang out in her sun room when I need a place to work. I love you!

In the Serenity Landing Book Club, my reader group on Facebook, we've been drawing monthly winners! Three helped name characters in this book!

Brittni - Silas

Margaret - Tinsley

Becky - Bradley

Gail - James

Sara - Gray (even if she doesn't know it ;-))

Thank you for hanging out in my little corner of social media!

My kids as we wrap up another year: I am so incredibly proud of all of you and all of your hard work.

Kid #1 is about to start student teaching and taking another major step

toward her dream of having the same kind of impact on others that Dan A, Dan U, and Dr. B had on her. Her senior recital was nothing short of incredible and I'm so proud.

Kid #2 spent 8 weeks in Germany with our church's college group and is heading back next summer. She's received another promotion at work and moved into her own place with a friend. I'm so proud of her.

Kid #3 is almost through with her first semester of college and is killing it. She's stepping out of her comfort zone to make new friends and have new experiences.

Kid #4 continually makes me proud as he faces life - and continues to learn new instruments and take on new challenges.

I love all of you more than you'll ever know.

Matt: who continues to believe in me through absolutely everything; who encourages me to keep talking to the voices in my head but to pursue other things as well - if I want to; who accepts my band mom life and knows that sometimes it makes our life a little crazy - but also knows I wouldn't have it any other way, and supports me in that endeavor. He's taken care of so many things as I've been down with an injury, understood my palpable disappointment when I had to miss 2.5 marching festivals, then helped get the house ready for new flooring.

I don't know what my life would be like without him and am eternally grateful I don't have to find out.

And the Giver of Dreams: who knew all along what challenges I'd face in the last six months - and the last six weeks; who continues to place some absolutely amazing people in my life; who loves me with an unfailing love; and who never, ever lets me down.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When she's not writing about her imaginary friends, USA Today Bestselling Author Carol Moncado prefers binge watching pretty much anything to working out. She believes peanut butter M&Ms are the perfect food and Dr. Pepper should come in an IV. When not hanging out with her hubby, four kids, and two dogs who weigh less than most hard cover books, she's probably reading in her Southwest Missouri home.

These days she does the band mom thing year round - and loves (almost) every minute of it! She's already a little sad she's only got a couple of years left. But she'll carry the memories and kids in her heart forever.

She's a founding member and former President of MozArks ACFW and is represented by Tamela Hancock Murray of the Steve Laube Agency.

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