



A Fierce Princess

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: One Princess. Two Lives. And a sinister secret that will change her world forever.

Princesses are supposed to be polite and poised. Princesses are supposed to put duty before self. Princesses are not supposed to live double lives.

Princess Susanna's search to find her mother's cherished crown that went missing the day she was killed is about to lead her on a quest to stop an assassin from killing a man. Only this isn't any man, this man is a prince, a prince that has no idea that he's royalty.

What happens when a princess attempts to save a prince? Can she keep him alive? Can she keep herself from falling for him?

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Prologue

“Though she be but little, she is fierce.” ~William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream

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Chris’s hand is sweaty. I try to pull my hand away from his, but his grip tightens. I look up to tell him to let me go. His glare down at me shuts me up before I even open my mouth. I look back down at the pavement. I feel as though we’ve been walking forever. Auggie and Daddy are to my right. My feet hurt because my shoes are too small. Auntie Lara said I had to wear them because they were Mommy’s favorite.

I look up at the box carrying Mommy. I know she’s inside because the lid was open before we left the palace. Daddy had asked us if we wanted to see her. I had wanted to see her. She looked asleep. Daddy reminded me she was not asleep. She was dead. Dead like my bunny, Chomper. Dead like my fish, Newton. Dead like the flowers on Mommy’s desk. While my daddy spoke to Chris and Auggie, I walked up to the box. I poked Mommy and told her to wake up, but she didn’t move. I stuck a picture I had drawn into the side of the box. I don’t want Mommy to miss me.

My lower lip trembles at the thought of Mommy alone in that box. She didn’t have her crown. Her favorite crown that she always wears. Daddy says it’s missing. Mommy will be so sad without it, without me.

Chris squeezes my hand, and I look up at him. He doesn’t smile but he winks at me. It’s our special wink. It means everything will be alright. Only, Mommy is dead, so

everything is not alright.

I want to whine about my shoes. I want to cry about Mommy. But mostly, I just want to go back to my room, away from all the people. Daddy said we had to let the public pay their respects. We had to go to the church with Mommy in her box, and now we have to walk back to our garden with her. There are so many people on the streets. I don't like it. I don't understand why people keep saying that they are sorry. It's like they did something wrong, only I don't think that they did.

Chris pulls my hand, and I realize we have stopped. We are in front of the gates of the palace. A priest starts talking, and we stand there for a very long time. I tap Chris's shoe with my own. He taps back. Then Daddy takes my hand and leads me up to Mommy's box.

Chris and Auggie are next to us. Daddy picks me up because I'm so short I can't see the top of the box.

"It's time to say goodbye to Mommy," he says. I see a single tear roll down his cheek. His hand comes to rest on top of the box. I place mine next to it.

"Daddy?" I ask.

He turns to me. He's crying, and Daddy never cries. I'm now afraid to say anything out loud for fear I will say the wrong thing. I cup my hands around my mouth and whisper in his ear, "Can I kiss Mommy goodbye?"

His lip trembles and he closes his eyes for a long moment. "You may kiss her box," he whispers back to me. I nod, and he leans me down. I place both hands on the box and press a kiss to it. I hear cameras and see lots of flashes. I close my eyes, blocking all the noise and people from my vision.

“I love you, Mommy. Goodbye,” I whisper. I’m about to raise my head when I look down and see not just Daddy’s hand but also Chris’s and Auggie’s hands too. I leave my hand there, and we all stand huddled around Mommy.

After a minute, Daddy steps back along with my brothers. He keeps me in his arms, his nose pressed against my hair. He holds me so tight that it almost hurts. I want to tell him so. It’s the feel of another tear against my cheek that keeps me from saying anything because I don’t want Daddy to cry anymore.

As the priest finishes talking, I feel my brothers on either side of Daddy and me. I look one last time at Mommy’s box before I turn away and wrap my arms tightly around Daddy’s neck, burying my face into him and closing my eyes.

I’m afraid to open them...afraid to acknowledge what I know in my heart...afraid of what happens now.

Chapter 1

Fourteen years later...

“Are you in?” Sonya asks.

“Just a minute...” I trail off as I focus on decoding encryption. It’s what I live for...the one thing that is mine and truly me.

“One second...” I add as I keep typing. Sonya is silent on the other line. It’s not actually that hard. I’m half-focused on the task at hand, while I continue to monitor another project on my other computer, the one no one knows about.

“And...done,” I finally say.

“Yes! I knew you could do it,” she says, and I hear her clap.

I weave my way through the code until I find what I’m looking for and I make a few minor tweaks before I back out without leaving a trace.

“OK, all done. You owe me one,” I say to my best friend.

I look down at the video chat in time to see her rolling her eyes. “What can you possibly want? You’re a fucking princess for god’s sake!” she says.

I smirk.

“Oh, no,” she says.

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“Oh, come on!” I whine.

“Are you trying to get me killed?” she asks.

I pout and she laughs. “You suck!” she says.

When Sonya learned that Kolvin, the boy she had been coveting for two years, was on a dating app, she may have sort of talked me into rigging the system, so they were a perfect match. And my price may have been her promising to cover for me, so I can go out for one night of fun sometime soon. What are besties for after all?

“Suzy Q, where are you?” I hear Christian’s voice in the hallway and groan.

“I gotta go. Later,” I say to her and end the chat.

A minute later my door bursts open. “Ever try knocking, Lion?” I ask him.

“Ever try locking your door?” he retorts.

“Whatever. What do you want?” I ask him. “I’m sort of busy.”

“Oh?” he asks. Fortunately, I had quickly switched the screen back to a lecture video from my grad program.

“Just finishing re-watching this lecture,” I say with a yawn.

“Nice try. What are you really up to?” he asks.

My brothers both know that I like to hack things for fun, but they don't know my endgame. They have never known my endgame. Even Sonya doesn't know everything. I admit spending most of my free time with the world's demons and outcasts is not a hobby becoming of a princess, but it's my secret world where I can be whoever I want to be. Online, I am Knight2E4. It's an homage to my favorite book and my favorite game.

"Just messing around on a dating site for Sonya," I admit with a shrug.

"You know, you really need to stop fucking around online. One, if you get caught...let's not even go there, and two, you need to start acting like a princess instead of a pirate," he adds.

He gets up and starts to leave my room. "Oh, and by the way, Dad wants to see you," he says.

I groan and toss myself on my bed. I just as quickly get back up, remove the black eyeliner I'm wearing, brush my hair, and change into an acceptable attire. I grumble to myself as I make my way through the palace to my father's office.

If Chris came to tell me, then it's ninety-nine percent likely that he had just been here before me. I take a deep breath and knock on the door. Harriet, my father's receptionist, opens it. She ushers me to the large wooden double doors of my father's office and knocks on them before opening and saying, "Princess Susanna, Your Majesty."

"Enter," my father says. I walk into the room and take a seat across from his desk.

"Susanna," he starts, "what are your plans?"

"My plans?" I ask. I find myself straightening in the chair and crossing my legs.

“This is your last semester of graduate school. What do you plan to do next?” he inquires, looking up at me over a stack of papers on his desk. He’s wearing his reading glasses and has his head tilted down so that his view of me is not obstructed by them.

“Well, I...I’m not sure,” I stammer.

“You do know you are obligated to take over your mother’s charity work full-time if you plan on remaining a paid royal,” he reminds me.

I sigh. My mother had spent her time creating about a half dozen charities. Most of them centered around underprivileged youths and children with terminal illnesses. I have been volunteering with them since I was old enough to carry items. In fact, the few strong memories I have of my mother mostly center around helping her at various charity events. And I’m well aware that there are two types of royals: paid and unpaid.

I majored in international politics with a minor in computer programming because it was acceptable. And my graduate degree is in international business relations with a focus in e-commerce. What my family doesn’t know, is that I am one of the best hackers in the world. I could have taught all my computer classes. The jobs I would love to have, however, would not be suitable for a princess.

After my mother’s death, Chris sank into sports to mask his sorrows, and Auggie spent all his time playing video games. I was left to study on my computer most days. And I learned everything I could about that computer, and all the ones I had after it. By the time I was fourteen, I had made my own server, my own computer, and I had my own secured Wi-Fi. I could hack any of my father’s computer files. By the time I was sixteen, I could hack all our government ministries’ websites. And by the time I finally went off to university, I could pretty much hack anything.

But I didn't do it just for fun. At first, I did it to learn more about my mother, her accident, and what really happened. I was young and curious. Then, it became an obsession. And lately, I've been feeling like I'm so close to solving a mystery that I can practically taste victory.

"Susanna?" my father says. My mind snaps back to him. I have no idea what he just said.

He sighs. "Susanna, I've indulged this behavior long enough. You need to step up and take on the responsibilities of your title," he says as he runs a hand through his hair. I look at him, really look at him. He's looking older, there are many gray hairs at his temples. Fine lines run across his forehead like a highway map of anguish. He's still quite handsome, distinguished looking, but he also looks tired and stressed. There are dark circles under his eyes and lines around his mouth from frowning when he thinks no one is paying attention.

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“Dad...” I trail off trying to think of a way to buy more time. I just need a little more time. And then I remember, one of Mom’s charities has its annual gala in six months. That’s enough time. I can do this by then. “How about I finish my classes, and then take some time to decompress? I will announce my role as the head of Mom’s charities at the gala in the fall.”

I hold my breath and watch my father process my idea. I try not to look desperate. I try to remain calm.

“I...suppose,” he says. “But what precisely will you be doing for five months?”

Shit, nothing gets past the king.

I try very hard not to shuffle my feet. “I’d like to travel a little,” I say because that is the truth. I will be needing to travel. “I think that it would be good for me to see a little more of the world. It will be helpful and insightful,” I add quickly.

He purses his lips as he considers this. “Very well. But you will run any travel plans by me first,” he commands.

“Of course,” I say.

“Very well. Will I see you at dinner?” he asks.

“Yes, Daddy,” I say as I turn to leave. I make it to the door before I hear his voice again.

“Susanna?” he says. I stop but don’t turn around.

“I am very proud of you, my love. You have done well at your studies,” he says, he pauses for a moment before adding, “Your mother would have been proud as well.”

I nod and leave his office, I sink against the wall just outside, using it to steady myself. “I hope she would be proud,” I whisper, unsure if that would be the case.

Chapter 2

I find myself in the vault as I meander the palace, contemplating my future. The vault is two stories below the ground. Two of our guards are stationed here twenty-four hours a day. The security to get inside requires a verbal passcode, face recognition, and a thumbprint. Once inside, the door slides shut behind me as the LED lights illuminate the room. Our family’s crowned jewels are displayed in sets behind bulletproof glass that only moves once I provide another set of verbal passcodes, facial recognition, and a thumbprint. So sensitive is the system, that I have to utter the passcode while completely relaxed; if the system senses a change in my voice indicating stress, it will not open.

I take in a breath and unlock the cabinet holding the remaining pieces of my mother’s favorite set. There is still a space for her crown. It sits empty, mocking me.

I’m startled when the door opens. A moment later, Auggie is beside me.

“Jesus, you scared me to death,” I say. And then realize how ridiculous that is. No one but our family and security could get in here.

He wraps an arm around my shoulder as we stand side by side, staring at the negative space that once housed our mother’s crown. Really, it’s more of a tiara, but nonetheless, it was her favorite one. She always wore it for special occasions,

including the gala she had been attending the night of her car accident.

It's still one of our country's greatest mysteries. Some reported she hadn't been wearing it when she got in the car to leave. Others claim she had it on at the accident scene. However, all that can be said for sure, is that it went missing that night and has never been located.

At first, her missing crown bothered me because I was almost seven and fixated on trivial things. But around the age of thirteen, I became completely obsessed with locating it. I don't know why. I don't know what finding it will possibly fix in my broken heart. I just know that I have to find it, and I won't rest until I do.

And so, I used my love of computers as an excuse, a conduit of sorts, to look for the crown. A crown that is worth at least fifty million dollars on the black market. A crown that many wealthy criminals would kill to get into their collections. It's akin to having Amelia Earhart's plane in your living room.

"Stop thinking about it," Auggie says, breaking my thoughts.

I shrug. "I'll always think about it," I admit.

"She's gone. It's gone. Move on," he says.

I look up at my brother. Auggie has my father's dark hair, as do I, but he also has my father's dark eyes, where Chris and I have our mother's piercing blue ones. The one thing I don't have is height. My mother wasn't tall, but she certainly wasn't short. My father and brothers are all over six feet tall. But not me. I am barely five feet three inches on a good day. I look like a fairy that never grew up. I'm a stick, with small curves, small everything. The only good thing I've surmised from it so far is that I blend into crowds. I can throw on a hoodie and some leggings and sneak out of the palace. No one notices me. There are pluses to not being the heir or the spare.

“I can’t,” I finally reply.

“Try,” he says, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Finding it wouldn’t bring her back.”

“I know that,” I say.

“Then let it go,” he says. I know Auggie suspects that I’m looking for it, but I would never let on that his guess is correct.

“I have a little over five months,” I say to him.

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“What?” he asks, stepping back to look down at me.

“I have almost six months to do what I want, and then Dad expects me to take on my duties,” I say dryly.

“Well, beats having to do it now,” he says. Auggie had a brief stint in the military after graduating from university. He works with some wounded warrior projects, but he’s also an assistant to my father’s military advisor. Basically, Auggie gets paid to play. He plays with military aircraft and vehicles and talks to veterans and reports back. In between all of that, he plays video games with his ex-military friends. He did see some action while in the military, but he doesn’t talk about it.

He’s seven years older than me. Chris is a whole decade older than me. I was...a surprise. But a welcomed one, as my dad always says.

“Why did you come in here?” I ask Auggie.

“Looking for you,” he says.

“Why?” I ask.

“I need a copilot,” he says with a smirk.

I roll my eyes because “copilot” is Auggie-speak for an accomplice.

“For?” I prod.

“Care to get out of here tonight?” he asks.

I laugh.

“You know there are about a hundred cameras and microphones in here, right?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Yeah, but no one actually checks them,” he says with a laugh.

He has me on that. I broke into them once, and they hadn’t been viewed in two months.

“Fine,” I mutter.

“Well, damn, don’t be so enthusiastic. You’d think I asked you to help me bury a dead body,” he says.

I raise an eyebrow.

“I just need a normal night, I swear,” he says, throwing his hands up in the air.

“Normal?” I say.

“Normalish,” he adds.

“Well, then, my dear brother, please tell me all about this ‘normalish’ night we are about to have,” I say as I link arms with him after closing the cabinet. We walk back to Auggie’s apartment in the west wing of the palace to plan our escape after dinner. By the time we are summoned for food, we have our escape route planned, a club picked out, and friends notified. Now if we can just keep Chris and Dad in the dark for about six hours.

Chapter 3

There is a secret passage that leads to the outer wall of the palace. It's usually guarded and is also monitored with a camera. However, yours truly hacked the camera and has it playing on a loop. And that guard, his assignment somehow got changed for tonight, thanks again to a little error in the system. Someone will catch it, but I bet they won't catch it for at least four more hours.

I've put on discotheque clothes. When I get to the entrance to the passage, Auggie is leaning against the wall. I admire him for a moment. He really is very handsome. I can see why all the ladies fawn over him. If only they knew, he's a royal pain in the ass.

"Ready?" he asks with a smirk.

"Yes," I answer with my own smirk. Auggie's always been my partner in crime. Our father likes to say he's a bad influence on me. Christian, on the other hand, is the rule follower, the responsible one.

I use the flashlight on my phone as we meander the lesser-traveled passages beneath the palace. There are literally dozens of them. They run between walls, underground, between rooms, and then there's my secret one, the only one no one living knows exists. The one that I will visit later tonight when the palace is quiet and everyone is asleep.

We reach the exit, and Auggie looks at me.

"You sure your plan worked?" he asks.

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I wink at him. “Yes, ye of little faith,” I say as I slowly open the door, which doesn’t sound an alarm because...I hacked it too.

“How long do we have?” he asks as we look both ways and make a break for it.

“About four hours until shift change,” I whisper to him as we make our way from the palace grounds.

We are about two blocks from the palace when a car rolls up. The window goes down.

“You two gonna catch a taxi?” I hear Sonya’s voice. I laugh and open the door to get in the back of the car. Auggie piles in after me. Hugo is driving. Hugo is Sonya’s cousin and the way I met her. He was university friends with Auggie, and Auggie dragged me to a party one night when I was visiting. Sonya was there, and we became fast friends.

“Christoff and Kayla are waiting at the club,” Hugo says as he steers us through the city. He pulls up to a back alley, and a door opens. Christoff waves at us. We scamper out of the car, which Hugo parks illegally. Hugo probably doesn’t give two shits about his car getting towed. Hell, his father would probably just buy him a new one. His father controls one of the largest gas and oil exploration companies in the world. He inherited it from Sonya and Hugo’s grandfather.

We walk through a dark back hallway, and then up a set of steps. There’s room there and it’s private. We shut the door and look down at the dance floor beneath us through a double-sided mirror. Everyone has on face paint. Sonya opens her bag and

lays out a variety of face paints.

“Go at it,” she adds as she begins smearing shimmery gold paint on her face. She also produces wigs for each of us. By the time we finish, we look hilarious, but no one in their right mind would think we are royalty.

“Let’s party,” Hugo says, as he opens the door, and we proceed down the stairs to join the crowd on the dance floor.

The beat of the music penetrates my bones, and after three glasses of whatever Christoff keeps bringing me, I’m not feeling a thing. I lose myself to the bass and the dancing. We dance and dance and dance some more until my watch tells me it’s time to get back to the palace.

I pull Auggie down, so I can whisper in his ear. “The clock strikes midnight,” I say to him. He nods, knowing that our time is nearly up, and we have to return.

The others nod to us. Everyone has been drinking, so I call a cab and have it drop us off about three blocks from the palace at an apartment complex which we always use as our “home base” for such trips. We get to the wall and make sure the coast is clear. Fortunately, this passage opens by a row of high bushes on a side of the palace grounds that abut a dead-end lane, so there’s usually not many people milling around here.

We open the secret door and scurry inside past the cameras, and straight into Chris. We both pause and look up at our big brother. His face tells me that we are in majorly big trouble.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?” he says.

Auggie glares at Chris. “None of your fucking business is what we are doing,” he

snarls as he pushes past Chris.

“The fuck it’s not. Get your ass back here,” Chris growls before his gaze comes to rest on me. I shiver under the anger I see behind his eyes.

“Explain yourself,” he snarls to me.

“Leave her the fuck alone, Christian. It wasn’t even her idea. She’s twenty-one years old. She’s supposed to be having fun, enjoying life, not caged up in here like some exotic bird,” Auggie says as he stops halfway down the dimly lit corridor.

“Aug,” Chris starts with a sigh as he runs a hand through his hair, “you can’t just go out. You aren’t normal people.”

Auggie rolls his eyes. “No fucking shit,” he groans. “What the hell do you care? It’s not like we got caught.”

Chris gives him a hard stare. “I caught you,” he confirms.

“So? You gonna run and tell Dad?” Auggie asks.

“Aug, don’t be an arse. I’m not going to tell Dad because he would go ballistic,” Chris says.

“Well, then, shut the hell up, and let us get to bed,” Auggie says as he starts walking again toward the exit.

Chris turns back to me. “I expect better from you,” he says, shaking his head. He turns and follows Auggie out into the palace’s east wing.

I head to my apartment, shower, and change into my favorite t-shirt and sweatpants.

Then, I silently head up to the tower. The tower in the west wing of the palace has two of my favorite rooms. The first one that I enter on the top floor is a two-story circular library. It's not our largest library, the main library on the ground level is enormous and is part of the palace that is open to the public for special occasions. This library is our family library. It is filled with giant leather chairs and ornate mahogany writing tables. The walls are completely covered in bookshelves. A ladder that moves lets you climb the shelves to the second story. On the second story, there's a narrow walkway, and at the end of it, it appears as though the shelves end to reveal a few feet of wall on which a portrait of my mother hangs. Only the end of the bookshelf holds a secret passage that can only be opened by pulling down what looks to be a first edition of Gulliver's Travels while pressing in on a fleur-de-lis that's carved on the shelf. The end of the bookshelf pops open and allows just enough space for a person to slide inside. A narrow set of stairs leads up in a circle behind the shelves. At the top of the stairs, is a small room. It has no real windows, although it has a few faux stones that can be moved to allow sun into the room. My mother had somehow run a power strip in from the library behind the shelves. It's the only source of power in the room, which still has wall sconces for candles every few feet. The floors are stone, the walls are stone, and there is only an old chair, a desk, and a shelf. I also brought up some bean bag chairs, so I could be comfortable. One single lamp is lit by the power strip, and my secret computer sits on the desk. This room has been held as a secret for the women of the family for six generations. It's believed to have been built for my great-great-great-great-grandmother by her father as a place to hide from her annoying little brothers. There are always rumors of the secret room. My brothers had told me about it as a young girl. But it wasn't until my mother brought me here, just a few weeks before her death, that I became privy to one of the closest-guarded palace secrets.

It's lonely having it to myself now, but it also allows me a place to go that is all mine. And that is priceless.

I look at my computer, the one I painstakingly built. It's perfect. It's powerful. And

it's my secret. I pull up the program I had running all day. I curse as I see no hits. My secret obsession has become a bit of a problem. When my mother first died, I remember worrying about my mother's crown. It was a slim crown, a tiara with diamonds and sapphires, and a fleur-de-lis. It is made of silver. My mother inherited it from her mother-in-law who inherited it from her mother-in-law, who was gifted it by her husband, the king. I was to be the fourth generation to have that crown someday. My mother wasn't much for pomp and circumstance, but she did wear that crown as much as possible. The night of her death, she stayed later than my father who was called back to the palace to attend to a political issue in parliament. She had presented an award at the gala for her most favorite charity, a charity that still exists and helps children survivors of war who need medical assistance.

I obsessed over the missing crown until it merged with my love of hacking. Now, I scan the dark web daily to see if I can locate it. I know it has to be somewhere out there, hidden in a private collection of some underworld billionaire. I know I won't rest until I find it.

I sigh as I look over the findings of my search today. Sometimes, I come across something that I may anonymously bring to the attention of the authorities. Call it my inverse Robin Hood secret. I steal from the evil rich and return to the rightful rich.

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I scan and scan. I sip the tea that is now cold. Helga makes the best tea. I contemplate it as I read code on my screen. And then I see something, something very strange. It's a bounty on a man. This is not unusual to see, but it's the details that have me stopping.

Call me crazy, but I love a good mystery. The bounty is for a man named Logan Edvard Hansen, age twenty-six. My mind wraps around the names "Edvard" and "Hansen." They are not uncommon names, but together they strike too close to home. I close the window on my search and begin a separate one.

It takes me the better part of an hour to piece together the story, but at three in the morning, I freeze as my mind sees the pieces begin to form a picture. It's the stuff of legend, of lore.

I sit down and scan the information that I have found.

In researching, Logan Edvard Hansen, I came across something interesting about his mother. King Edvard paid for all the funeral expenses of a woman who was killed in a fiery car crash on a small island in the Bahamas. This was almost a decade ago. King Edvard has never married. Some say he had a mistress, but due to rules in the country, they could not be married. So he chose to rule alone. His brother, Sten, is next in line for the throne. Sten spends most of his time womanizing in the Mediterranean. Sten is younger than his brother. He's close in age to my aunt Lara. I've met them both a number of times, but Edvard to me is my godfather, my Uncle Eddie, my father's very closest friend. He also is the ruling king of a small country nestled in northern Europe called Montelandia, which happens to border my own country, Norddale. Both countries are classified as principalities by today's standards,

although our citizens are fiercely proud and love to argue about that classification.

I keep scanning. I find pictures of the woman killed in the crash. Leah Winters was a journalist. She was gorgeous. She spent five years living in Europe before she abruptly moved back to the United States and then later to the Bahamas. Her parents are still alive and live in Pittsburgh. She was an only child. Funeral services were held at a church near their home. I re-read the last few lines five times.

“Leah is survived by her parents, Ned and Joy Winters, and her son, Logan Winters, along with aunts, uncles, and cousins. Donations may be made to ‘Hansen Foundation’ in lieu of flowers.”

The Hansen Foundation is a famous foundation set up by King Edvard Anders Leopold of the House of Hansen. I find this to be a very curious coincidence.

My next stop is breaking into the birth records of Montelandia. This, I have to say, is much easier than one would have guessed it to be. One hour later, I find what I have been searching for: the birth certificate for one, Logan Edvard Winters Hansen, born twenty-six years ago to a Leah Winters and a father, Edvard Hansen. It gives no other information about the father. The birth was at a hospital in the capital of Montelandia, a very posh hospital.

It’s almost five in the morning, but my adrenaline is pumping now. There will be no sleep for me tonight. I head toward the kitchens to get a full pot of tea. Helga is already there, prepping for the day with the few kitchen staff that come in early and a few that handle the night shift.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” she says cheerfully. I walk over and give her a hug. Helga has been here since my father was young. She and her husband, Clause, live in a small cottage on our property. Clause tends our horses. They have sons, Pete and Lucas, who are ironically, my personal security. They had been assigned to general

duties, but I talked my father into assigning them to me. One, because I trust them since we grew up playing together, and two, I may take advantage of their brotherly affections to...uh, circumvent the system at times. Daddy just sees two strapping young lads who would die for their good friend, so it works.

“Can I get a pot of tea, please?” I ask her as I sit and pull a cookie out of the cookie jar she keeps just for me on the giant kitchen island.

“Anna, you’ll ruin your breakfast!” she exclaims. I giggle because she says this every time, I steal a cookie. Her use of my mother’s nickname for me still warms my heart. Where my brothers adopted Suzy Q after we all spent several summers at a camp in the States, only she, my father, and a few others still use the nickname Anna for me. I have taken to using it when I don’t want to draw attention to myself.

She carries on with her duties while getting me a pot of tea. She tells me that a horse is pregnant, and we chat about possible names for it. It’s a descendant of my mother’s favorite horse. She asks if she can have the tea sent to my room. I shake my head and ask for a tray. I take the pot of tea up to my secret room. I have three hours left before I’ll be due at breakfast. I know that won’t be enough time to figure this out. I also know that a man’s life now hangs in the balance. The bounty is high, and it will be picked up by an assassin by breakfast time. I wonder who...I also wonder when...but mostly, I wonder why.

Chapter 4

My brothers and Sonya have always said my love of hacking would get me in big trouble someday. I highly doubt that they would have predicted that the trouble would be trying to stop a bounty on the head of who I think may be a secret heir to the throne of our neighboring country.

I pour my tea into my favorite mug. Chris bought it for me for my sixteenth birthday.

It says, “Though she be but little, she is fierce.” It is my favorite quote from my favorite William Shakespeare play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. My brothers have always said this about me. Mostly, I think it’s because I was raised by a household of men, much to my aunt Lara’s dismay. My auntie is my father’s younger sister. Rumor has it she was once betrothed to King Edvard, but no one speaks of that. Of course, she is now happily married to my uncle, Hans Jacobs, a wealthy entrepreneur. They sadly were unable to have children, which probably explains her extra interest in the upbringing of my brothers and me.

My mind spins around the factoids and memories. My brothers let me tag along to their karate classes, their archery practices, the shooting range, and a dozen other activities fit for princes but not princesses by royalty standards. My father, whom I had wrapped around my finger since birth, allowed me to be with my brothers. He said it made me stronger, and I would need to be stronger to survive in our world. I once heard Auntie Lara arguing with him that I should be learning ladylike things. After that, I was forced to learn art history, English literature, and even a class on fashion. I hated it all. But Auggie and Chris still let me train with them. Auggie even taught me stunts in his car. In retrospect, it was reckless of him to teach a fifteen-year-old kid maneuvering skills meant for a stunt driver, but that’s Auggie, always pushing the boundaries.

Dad always says he wishes I had more of a female presence in my life, but I have loved being one of the boys. My brothers never treated me any different because I was a girl or because I was small. In fact, they proudly bragged to their friends that their little sister could punch like a dude, throw a ball farther than any of their friends, and climb a tree higher than even they could. Meanwhile, I let Auntie Lara think she was helping to raise a lady. And now, I am like two different people in one body. I can play the part of the prim and proper princess, or I can be me, the hacking, ass-kicking, rulebreaker.

I break off from my stream of conscious thoughts and focus back on the matter at

hand. As I continue to piece the puzzle together, I start wishing that someone, anyone knew my secret. What became an obsession all those years ago, now feels like an albatross around my neck.

I'm distracted when I find an interesting document in the police file on Leah Winters's death. It looks like a marriage certificate, but the names are smudged, as is the date. I can make out an "ea" in the first name of one person and an "rd" in the other person's name. I gasp, could Edvard and Leah have been secretly married?

By 8:00 a.m., I look at the giant chalkboard that I'm guessing belonged to my grandmother. At the top of it is "Logan Winters Hansen" and then everything else I have figured out over the past four hours.

I make three columns: "Truths," "Maybe," and "Questions." I stare at it for a long moment and then add a fourth column, "Lies."

Under Truths, I write:

Logan is twenty-six.

Logan was born in Montelandia.

Logan's mother is Leah Winters.

Logan's grandparents, Vera and Ned, live in Pittsburgh.

Logan currently runs charters on a sailboat that he owns.

Logan is...I stop myself from writing hot. Because that was the first thing that came to mind when I found a picture of him on the Internet. Instead, I write "Logan is in trouble."

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Under Maybe, I write:

King Edvard is likely Logan's father.

Edvard and Leah secretly married?

His mother, Leah, somehow met Edvard while living in Europe, although how and when is unclear.

Under Questions, I write:

Why did she go to the Bahamas?

Why is there a bounty on Logan?

Who put the bounty on Logan?

Why does Edvard not look for him, if Logan is his son?

Does Edvard know he has a son?

And under Lies, I write:

Logan's real name is not Winters.

I look at my program that is scanning still. I see some answering of the bounty on Logan and my heart sinks. These are professionals. These are assassins bidding on a

chance at fifty million dollars. Now, that number is high, but it's also low. It's quite frankly a curious amount. I have seen some bounties online before. I typically get them in front of a guy at Interpol, codename Beavis (yeah, it's what you think), and he handles it. Beavis is also a hacker, but I found out through my hacking skills who he actually works for. We have never met, but I trust him after he warned me about a possible attempt on my father's life three years ago. An eye for an eye as they say, so I have thrown him bits and pieces when I see something suspect. However, something is stopping me from doing that this time. Is it boredom? Is it because this guy could be a prince and the next heir to the throne of Montelandia?

It's when I see the messages go offline to a new chat that my heart sinks farther. The winning bid is from Martin Mayhem, or that's his online name, M for short. I've seen him bid on a lot of bounties for taking out bad guys, cartel thugs, coup leaders, and the like, but this is unlike his norm and that concerns me even more.

I'm so sucked into everything that I almost miss my text from my secretary, Shannon.

Shannon: Breakfast and then we have a meeting with the head of Fostering Love for Foster Children.

I groan. I want to stay and see what happens next, but I also know I can't do anything out of the ordinary, or I'll get caught.

I head downstairs after resetting my search. Everyone is already seated at the breakfast table, which means, I'm in trouble.

I sit, and my father clears his throat. "Susanna," he begins. I lose focus after that because he drones on about my duties and being on time and my head is always in the clouds. At some point, I notice Mia Edgewater, Chris's secretary, enter the room, curtsy toward my dad, and then discreetly whisper something in Chris's ear.

“Father, if you’ll excuse me, I’m afraid my next appointment arrived early,” he says, nodding toward our father and placing his napkin on the table.

My father tosses his hand toward him, essentially excusing him from the table.

I watch Chris leave right behind Mia. I have suspected for some time now that those two are having an affair. Chris refuses to let on, but as he places his hand on her lower back as they exit, I notice his hand slides down toward her ass. I fight every natural urge to roll my eyes and instead focus back on my dad, who is now asking me what I have left to do for my degree. I sigh. I swear we just chatted about this.

“I have two papers left to turn in, and I’m done,” I say to him. I’m actually done, I just need to hit send, but the longer I wait, the more time I buy myself to keep being a student with no responsibilities.

“Very good. Will there be a graduation ceremony? You’ll need Shannon to work with Marcus to coordinate the logistics,” my father reminds me. I nod. My graduation is scheduled for a month from now. That means security concerns, pomp and circumstance issues, and the like because the king will be there. I hold out hope that something will come up so that I don’t have to attend it. Although I’m not overly worried because Shannon and Marcus have been coordinating this since I started the damned degree.

Marcus enters the dining room and clears his throat. My dad nods toward him. He gives the most imperceptible bow and walks back out.

“I have a meeting with the prime minister. Auggie, please make sure you don’t get in trouble on your trip. Remember, you are there in an official capacity,” he says to my brother with a raised eyebrow.

My brother looks a little sheepish and nods. Auggie’s last official visit was to Spain.

He ended up making the tabloids when he was spotted partying all night in Ibiza with some tourists. Needless to say, Dad was not pleased.

I turn to Auggie, trying desperately to remember what trip he is going on. My brothers are much more in the public eye than I am, especially since I've been at school.

"Where are you going?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "Bahamas, some sort of charity thing. Chris was supposed to go, but he apparently has something more important to do." Auggie trails off and looks toward the door.

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I nod. Auggie and I both know that Mia is likely more than Chris's secretary. Then it dawns on me like a lightning bolt strike.

"Can I come with you?" I ask him.

Auggie's mouth opens and closes a few times because I have never once asked to go anywhere with him on any sort of official business.

"W-why?" he finally manages to stammer out.

"Because...I...need the practice," I say, trying to sound resolute.

He gives me "the look," the one that says I can't fool him.

"Fine, I really want to get away for a few days before I have to start thinking about the real world," I say, which isn't exactly a lie. I do, in fact, want to get away for a few days; it's just these few days are more about potentially rescuing a maybe prince from certain death. I need to get back online pronto and figure out the specs on the bounty job that M has accepted.

"So, you seriously want to come with me?" Auggie asks again, as though finally processing that I do indeed want to go with him.

I punch him in the arm. "Ow!" he says, shaking out his arm.

"Don't be a pansy. Yes, I'm coming, end of," I say to him as I walk out of the dining room.

I make it halfway up the stairs when I hear my name.

“Shit,” I mutter turning to face Shannon.

“Where in the bloody hell do you think you are going?” she asks.

“I...uh...upstairs?” I ask. Shannon is ten years older than me and acts like both my secretary, older sister, and nanny. She can be downright intimidating at times.

“Oh no, you’re not. You have that meeting, or did you already forget?” she asks, eyeing my wardrobe. “I can see you forgot. Go change, meet me in the library in thirty minutes.” Normally, I would be pissed if my staff talked to me this way, but Shannon gets a pass, mostly because she has to put up with me all the time.

I salute her, and she rolls her eyes. I sprint up the stairs, but instead of going to my room, I continue running up to the tower until I reach my secret room. I pull up my scan and read through as fast as I can. M is officially commissioned as the assassin of Logan Hansen. The contract, which takes thirteen of my thirty minutes to find, gives him two weeks to complete the job. It appears M will need to get to the Bahamas first, so that gives me hope that I can stop this from happening. How, I don’t know. I seriously start to question my sanity as I run down to my room and throw on a dress and heels before beelining it downstairs.

By the time I finish my meetings and excuse myself to my room to study, it’s nearly three in the afternoon. I get a text from my dad as I plop down on my bed.

King Daddy: My office-now

Me: coming

I walk begrudgingly down the hall to my father’s office. I knock on the door and am

led into the inner chamber.

“Yes, Daddy?” I ask in my sweetest voice.

He looks up at me, just looking for a long minute or two. “Why do you want to accompany your brother?” he finally asks.

I swallow. “Please, Dad! I just need a few days away. Plus, it’s a good time to start shadowing Auggie and Chris to see how it’s done,” I say.

He raises his eyebrows. “Seriously?” he asks.

I grin. “Seriously,” I state.

He sighs. “I know you are up to something, but against my better judgment, I will allow it,” he says. He presses a button on his desk, and Marcus walks in from a side room.

“Marcus, work with Paolo and Shannon. The princess is apparently accompanying her brother to the Bahamas,” he says.

Marcus grimaces. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he mutters and walks out of the room.

“Dad—”

My father holds up a hand. “I don’t want to know. Just please, for the love of god, don’t get in trouble over there. Auggie needs to work on his image. Keep that in mind,” he says in a warning tone.

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“Yes, Daddy. Thank you,” I say as I come around his desk and throw my arms around his neck. He pulls me against him and stands so he can lift me off the ground. He kisses my forehead and releases me.

“I love you, Anna,” he whispers as he looks down at me.

“I love you too, Daddy,” I say to him as I smile up at the one person that I know will love me no matter what I do, I hope.

“Off you go then,” he says as he swats me on my butt and ushers me out of his office. Once in a while, he lets down his “king guard” and is just my dad. It’s not often enough these days, but I’ll take it when I can get it.

Chapter 5

After dealing with Shannon and my duties, I meander out to the garden. I find Chris with a bow and arrow. I casually walk up and pick up an arrow as a ground staff member brings me a bow.

Chris ignores me as he pulls the string back taut on the bow before firing the arrow straight at the bull’s-eye. He steps back and motions for me to go.

I position myself and take a deep breath, letting the arrow fly on the exhale. I watch as it hits dead center, pushing Chris’s bow down in the process. I grin and look over at him.

He shakes his head.

“How you best me at everything, I’ll never know,” he mutters.

“Now, now, don’t be sullen. We can’t all be the best,” I say cheerfully.

“And why are ‘we’ in such a good mood?” he asks.

“‘We’ are going to the Bahamas,” I say to him as I set my bow down.

He raises an eyebrow. “Really?” he asks.

I nod. He sits down on a bench and pats the seat next to him. I sit and look up at my big brother, my lion, with his shaggy blondish hair. I can’t help it, I reach out and ruffle it. He slaps my hand away.

“Seriously, Susanna, you need to start acting more...royal,” he grumbles.

“Right, sleeping with the help is a much more royal way to go,” I quip and then immediately regret it.

He gives me a hard look. “She. Is. Not. The. Help,” he grits out while clenching his jaw.

I put up my hands. “OK, whoa, tiger! Guess I hit a nerve,” I say. Then I give him a sheepish look. “Sorry, that was harsh of me.”

He leans back against the bench back and runs a hand through his hair. “Lord help me,” he says looking up at the sky. He stands and holds out a hand. “Walk with me,” he demands.

I accept his offered hand and link my arm through his as we stroll the grounds. He’s silent for a long while, and so am I, until I know where it is he is leading me.

My mother's grave comes in view around the corner of the rose garden. It was her favorite spot. Dad had the garden built for her. It is fitting that it's where she'll spend eternity.

We sit on the small bench across from her grave, neither one of us saying anything. Chris squeezes my hand.

"She'd be so very proud of you," he says quietly.

"You think?" I ask him, looking up to study his profile.

"I know," he replies.

I lean my head on his shoulder, and we sit in silence. I want so badly to tell him, to tell anyone what I know, but then my secret will be out in the open. There's no way Chris would let me go. I'm being foolish and careless, but the excitement of it all, the chance to be me...the magnetism is too strong, especially if I will have to become the proper princess in a few months. I need this one last adventure. One last secret mission. I've outsmarted criminals before, from afar, so how much harder could it be. All I have to do is track M, get Logan off the island before he arrives, and voila—assassination attempt foiled, well, at least that's how it should go, I hope.

Chapter 6

The one problem with having a secret computer is that it's a secret. I designed it to look like a normal laptop, which is no easy feat. But I can't just use it anywhere. I have to log in to servers and pass through firewalls and, well, it means the entire time we are in the air, I am without knowing what is happening. I only use my own Wi-Fi, and I'm not about to use it on the plane in front of my brother. We are staying at a property owned by my Uncle Hans, so I know when we arrive that I will be able to rig up some sort of system to get what I need.

“What’s eating you?” Auggie asks as he drinks a second scotch.

“Nothing,” I mutter.

He pokes me in the arm. “Seriously? You’ve been acting weird; I mean weirder than normal,” he adds.

I internally groan.

“I’m just anxious about school ending,” I say to him. It’s not a lie, but it’s also not the reason I’m anxious right now.

“Well, it’ll be fine,” he says. He laughs. “Remember when you were dead set on being a spy?”

I grimace. When I was about eight, I became obsessed with James Bond. This was partly because I was determined that I could find our mother’s missing crown and take down all the bad guys in the world. My brothers made fun of me, saying I could never be a spy and a princess. If only Auggie knew what I was up to.

I close my eyes and pretend to sleep. My mind whirls around everything. I want so badly to share my secret with Auggie. I trust my brothers more than anyone in the world. They would never let anything bad happen to me, only that’s the problem. They would never let anything bad happen to me. I have no rational explanation of why I’m doing this on my own. I’d lain awake all last night pondering this. What possesses a princess to become a hacker? What possesses her to find an assassination plot on the dark web and try to stop it? What possesses her not to tell anyone? Stupidity? Bravery? A need to prove herself?

I know I'm no match for M. I can't take down an assassin, no matter how many guns or arrows I've fired. I can hold my own against much larger people thanks to all that martial arts training I had as a kid, but an assassin is a whole other ball of wax.

I must be exhausted, because the next thing I know, Auggie is shaking me awake.

"We're here," he says.

I groan and grab my bag as we make our way to customs. One good thing about being a royal is that you don't wait in those long lines at the airport. You are essentially ushered through as fast as possible. So, it's only a mere hour later that we are at our uncle's villa.

I toss my bag on the bed and fall against it as I gaze out at the turquoise water that beckons me. I decide one quick swim in the water won't derail my plans too badly.

"No," I tell myself. I need to figure out where he is.

I look around the room, eyeing the closet. It's a walk-in. I go inside and breathe a sigh of relief when I find an outlet. Only my uncle would have an outlet in the closet. I shake my head and plug in my computer. I log in to my secured Wi-Fi and my server. Once I feel that I'm secured, I log on and start searching for Logan. We are on Nassau and his last known address is Cable Beach. I'm hoping that's still correct. We aren't far from there, well, it's an island so nothing is far.

I look at his social media accounts. I pull up his business webpage which details the charter trips he offers on his sailboat. His last picture is...well, he's handsome and ripped. He's shirtless on board what I presume is his sailboat. He's tan, his shaggy, light brown hair has highlights in it, and he's wearing sunglasses. He looks like he just walked out of a magazine advertisement for a popular men's cologne. I can see similarities to his dad in his face, the jawline, the nose.

I check on M's status, but he's gone dark. I know the clock is ticking. I just don't know how I'm going to talk a stranger into leaving the island.

I decide surveillance is next. We have two bodyguards each, and the house has another four or five milling around it. I find Pete and Lucas in the kitchen going over security stuff with Shannon.

They all stop and look up at me. "I'd like to go out," I say to them.

They look at each other. I think they are a bit surprised.

"Uh, where?" Shannon asks.

"I just want to see some of the island. I hear Cable Beach is pretty cool," I say nonchalantly as I grab a piece of fruit out of a bowl on the counter.

They continue watching me. "What? You want to check it for poison?" I ask Pete, holding out the apple.

He glares at me. "Your Highness, we haven't finished shoring up your security plan. I'd advise you to stay put until tomorrow," he says. He only uses "Your Highness" when he means business. It's Pete's version of using my full name.

"And, I'm telling you that I am going out," I huff.

Lucas and Pete exchange glances.

Shannon clears her throat. "Well, you do have a free day," she says. "I was assuming you would be going with Auggie tomorrow," she says as she starts to run through Auggie's schedule.

I hold up a hand. “No. I am not here in an official capacity. I will attend one thing with him, but otherwise, this is a vacation,” I tell her.

She looks at me. “That’s not what your father thinks,” she says.

I roll my eyes. “The king can think whatever the king wants. Anyhow, I’m leaving,” I say as I walk toward the front door.

“Oh no, you’re not,” Pete says, getting in front of me. “Not unless we are with you.”

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“Well, then you’d better go get the car,” I tell him.

After an exchange of words with Lucas, Pete goes and pulls the car around for me. I climb in the back seat before we pull out of the private drive. The drive to Cable Beach is lovely. I roll down my window a little so I can smell the salty sea breeze.

“What do you have in mind?” Pete asks. I’m wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat that I found in the closet, and sunglasses, and a sundress with flip-flops. I look like every other tourist on the beach. My hair is pulled back into a ponytail. Pete is more dressed down. He has on shorts and a polo shirt, while Lucas still looks the part of a security guard.

“Pete, you can walk with me along the beach while Lucas stays back,” I say. Lucas glares at me. “What? You look like security. You’ll draw attention.”

Pete nods. “She’s right,” he says. I can tell he says it begrudgingly. I know they would figure this out without my input, but the one thing I do like about these two, they always ask for my input.

Pete was Special Ops and has a keen eye for detail. I will use that to help me.

From my phone, I can tell we are across the street from the apartment complex where Logan’s address was last reported.

“Let’s get out here,” I suggest. They nod, park, and look around before letting me get out. I take my time as we walk toward the public beach access next to the apartment complex. It appears that there is a front lobby with a guard desk. I see someone swipe

a card to get into the lobby. As we walk around the back of the property, I can see a gated area with a pool and some tables and chairs. It's at the far end of Cable Beach, so it's a bit quieter here than at the busy end.

Pete leads me to the beach, and we walk for a while. There are some other apartment buildings, and farther down I can see hotels and restaurants. We stop before we get to those. It's actually nice just walking around without anywhere to be or anything to do.

We head back toward the car after walking for a bit, and when we get to the apartment complex I pretend to need a bathroom.

"Can't you just wait till we get back?" Lucas asks.

"Look, can I just go ask that guard if I can use the bathroom here. I'm sure they have one for public use. I mean, they have a pool out back, odds are there's one out by it," I point out. Lucas and Pete exchange glances.

"Fine, I'll go with you," Pete says.

We head up to the door, and Pete presses the buzzer. A man who doesn't look like he could fend off a stick of gum, let alone an armed criminal, buzzes us inside.

"Just sign in here," he says, pointing to a guest log that requires us to write which apartment we are here to visit.

"Uh, listen, my girlfriend was just hoping to use your bathroom," Pete says. Pete and Lucas are only about ten years older than me. So, at times, we use the whole "girlfriend" thing to be more undercover.

"Listen, man. I'm sorry, but I can't let you in to use the bathroom," the guy says.

I take off my sunglasses and give him my dazzling one-thousand-watt smile. “I know it’s a big inconvenience and all. But I’d really appreciate it if I could use your restroom. I’ll just be a minute, I promise,” I say in a sweet voice.

It works, and a minute later I’m on my way to the ladies’ room, which Pete clears first. Now, to figure out how to find Logan’s apartment and ditch Pete for five minutes. I pretend to use the bathroom, and then it hits me. I’ll just bring Pete with me. He’s never going to let me out of his sight.

“Hey, Pete,” I say sweetly. He gives me the look that tells me that he knows I’m up to no good.

“What?” he says gruffly.

“Could we...maybe...pretty please check out the building? I just want to see...something normal,” I say.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. We don’t know who is in here. It’s bad protocol just coming in here without checking things first,” he says as he looks around. Pete is always looking around. I wonder how someone can be on high alert twenty-four seven.

“Please, Pete. I’ll keep my hat and glasses on. It’s the middle of the day on a weekday, I can’t imagine there’s anyone dangerous here,” I say, and then my stomach clenches as I ponder if M has arrived on the island yet.

He cracks his neck and looks around. “Fine, but let’s make it fast,” he says as he talks into his earpiece to Lucas.

I clap and give him a hug. He rolls his eyes. “What exactly do you want to see? The pool?” he asks. I shrug.

“Let’s go to the top floor, maybe there are windows up there,” I say as I walk toward the elevator. One minute later, we walk out into a hallway. There is indeed a window at the end of it. I walk past 601, 602, 603, and then get to 604, Logan’s last known address. There’s nothing to indicate he lives there. It’s just a plain door with a peephole. I walk toward the window and look down.

“It’s a pretty view from up here,” I say to Pete.

“Are we done here, Anna?” he asks. I turn and see a door at the far end with a window.

“Not yet,” I say as I walk toward it. Pete opens it for me, and we find ourselves on a rooftop deck. It’s beautiful. I can see the private balconies of the four units on this floor. I look at what I think is Logan’s and see he has a small table and two chairs. He faces the ocean. I ponder if his lifestyle is paid for by the king. His penthouse apartment, his yacht, and from the looks of his social media he has two nice cars.

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“Anna? We should go,” Pete says.

I nod and follow him back to the elevator and out to the car. I look around as we start to drive back to the house. There aren’t any buildings right next to Logan’s apartment complex. And the nearest buildings don’t have good angles for a sniper to aim into his apartment. Then it hits me, I bet I can find the blueprints to his apartment. I laugh to myself as I feel stupid for not having thought of that earlier.

“Everything OK back there?” Lucas asks. I can see him raise an eyebrow in the rearview mirror.

“Yep, all is good,” I say to him. I have a night of more research ahead of me.

Chapter 7

When I enter the house, I look out the floor-to-ceiling glass sliding doors to find that Auggie is floating on a raft. A cocktail of some type is in a cup holder that is floating next to him.

I walk out and look down at him.

“You’re blocking the sun,” he says.

“Oh, if only the paps could see you now,” I say to him.

“What? I’m not nude. I’m not fucking a woman. And I’m not snorting cocaine off the side of the raft,” he says. I can’t see his eyes through his mirrored sunglasses, but I

know they are closed.

“Wow, way to set that bar high,” I respond to him as I toss off my sandals and sit down on the edge of the infinity pool. I look out past Auggie at the edge of the pool that is indistinguishable from the ocean beyond. There are only a few puffy clouds in the sky. Palm trees flank either side of the yard which is fenced in by a tall white wall. The top of the wall has plants growing out of it.

“Where’d you go?” he asks, breaking my thoughts.

“Cable Beach,” I answer.

“Mingling with the riffraff,” he says.

“Augs, shut up. You’re one to talk. I believe the last trip you took you were quoted in three different tabloids as saying you ‘like to sample the commoners,’” I say, as I give him a pointed look. He pops up to look at me, and he grins.

“Yeah, wasn’t one of my better drunk moments,” he says sheepishly.

I roll my eyes. “Trust me, you’ve done worse,” I point out.

“Touché, princess, touché,” he says.

I stare out again at the sea beyond the pool. I’m contemplating what to do next when my phone buzzes alerting me that there’s something on my computer that I need to see.

“Secret boyfriend?” Auggie asks as I stand.

“Yes, you know me. I’ll just bang anything with a dick,” I say sarcastically. It doesn’t

help that both my brothers know that I'm a virgin but, of course, that's not rocket science since I've never had a real boyfriend. The closest I came was a guy I met at camp years ago—Eddie—but we were kids, and he never came back to camp. We emailed a few times but then lost touch.

“Guess I'm doing a good job of protecting your virtue!” Auggie calls out as I walk inside. I raise a single finger at him but don't look back. I can hear him laughing as I walk toward my room.

When I reach my computer, I shut the closet door and grimace with what I see. One of M's fake names has come up in my search for movement at airports. He's boarded a flight from Dubai. I close my eyes and try to figure out my next move.

I sit and meditate on it for a few minutes before the easy answer slaps me in the face. I quickly search for Logan's charter business. Finally, lady luck smiles upon me, because I see that he has availability for a charter trip starting tomorrow. I know Auggie has to be at something in the morning, but if he skips one minor thing, we could go on a little sibling trip. I text a link to Auggie and suggest we take a few days to see some of the other islands.

I walk back out to the pool, not bothering to wait for his response.

“Hey, did you get my text?” I ask him.

“Damn, impatient much, Suzy Q?” he asks with a smirk.

“Well?” I ask him.

I put my hands on my hips and pout. “Come on, Augs, it'll be so fun! We can have a little brother-sister adventure. We haven't had one in years!” I whine.

“A brother-sister adventure?” I hear a voice behind me say.

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I whip around in total shock as my eyes lock on Chris's. My mouth falls open, and I'm speechless.

"Cat got your tongue, little sister?" Chris asks as he smirks at me.

I turn around and notice Auggie isn't the least bit surprised. I raise an eyebrow and turn back to Chris. He shrugs and grins at me.

"A few hours after you all left, I decided it would be fun to join you," he says.

"And you didn't want to share that with me because?" I ask.

"Because I knew you'd want to do something fun, and so I already set up a little island-hopping tour for us. I had it cleared by security already, and we are set to leave in three days after Auggie does his little horse and pony show," Chris says triumphantly. I peek around him and notice Mia is sitting on the sofa with her phone. I look back up at Chris, and he at least has the audacity to blush a little. So, he really just wants a booty trip with Mia.

"Well, I found a charter a minute ago that looks perfect. So, cancel what you had set up," I say. "I thought we could go tomorrow. Auggie only really needs to be there tomorrow morning. He can skip the media meet and greet or reschedule it," I say.

Chris gives me a pointed look because of the whole "duty before self" philosophy that I'm supposed to live by.

"Oh, come on, Chris," I plead. I pull out my phone and show him the website.

He laughs.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“We booked the same charter, just different days,” he says. “I had booked the whole week yesterday, but changed it thinking Auggie had more commitments.” Well, that explains why there was a last-minute opening in Logan’s schedule.

“So, let’s do the whole week then!” I say excitedly, trying to figure out a way to buy myself more time to convince Logan to leave the island.

Auggie and Chris exchanges glances, and then I hear Mia say, “All set.”

We all turn and stare at her. She grins. “You guys need a sibling adventure, and honestly, you could all use a break. Auggie can finish his duties, and I will have him chartered to the next island to meet up with us, and everyone else can leave tomorrow.”

“Well, then, looks like we’re packing up and heading out,” Auggie says with a giant grin.

“I’m going to go change,” Chris says as he heads back into the house. I sink down onto a chair and try to wrap my head around what just occurred.

Auggie laughs. “You look completely befuddled,” he says as he sips his drink.

“You knew?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “Maaaaybeee,” he says with a laugh.

I toss a pool noodle at him, and in all his maturity he fills it with water and sprays me.

I stick out my tongue. It's so typical. We're all close, but Auggie and Chris are even more close. They still treat me like a little kid rather than an adult or an equal. Typically, I'm much better at spying on them but I've been a little preoccupied with my recent discovery.

My phone pings and I look down to see a text from Sonya.

Sonya: Date was AMAZING!

I smile. I need a little levity.

Me: Do tell.

Sonya: No tell. Video chat!

I don't have time to respond because her video chat request comes through.

I pick up and am greeted by her disheveled hair.

"You slept with him!" I yell.

"Shhh!" she hushes as I see her moving out onto her balcony.

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“He’s still there!” I exclaim. For all the men that I haven’t slept with, Sonya is the complete opposite. Her list of one-night stands is impressive and scary all at the same time. How she keeps it under wraps, I’ll never know.

“He’s still here,” she says quietly while grinning.

I walk off, so Auggie can’t hear us. “Soooo?” I ask.

“OMG! He was amazing! Like a solid nine out of ten!” she exclaims and then clamps a hand over her mouth.

I giggle and realize just how bad I needed a lighthearted conversation with my best friend.

“Nine, huh?” I say with a laugh.

“Jesus, you are kinky for a virgin, you know that?” she says with a giggle.

I roll my eyes. “I swear, I think the whole universe knows about my nonexistent sex life,” I huff. “So, please tell me about yours, so I can live vicariously through you.”

“Well, nine isn’t too far off. Plus, that boy knows how to use his tongue, if you know what I mean,” she says with a wink. I really don’t, I mean sort of, but not really. I must make a face because she laughs. “We do need to get you laid. You know what, just find some man candy on your holiday and get the deed done. Seriously, you’re twenty-one freaking years old, for god’s sake!”

I groan. “I’ll get to it, eventually,” I mutter. My mind immediately goes to the shirtless photo I found of Logan as Sonya begins to tell me about her date with Kolvin.

I hear her pause. “Are you even listening?” she pouts.

I shrug. “Sorry, I’m just tired. It’s been a long day,” I say. Noting the sun has now set, and it’s getting chilly outside. “He sounds wonderful though. I’m glad my hacking skills paid off for you.”

She grins again. “They soooo did! I owe you one!” she says. I see her look at something. “I gotta go. Talk later.” She winks at me and hangs up, and I’m left staring at my blank screen, contemplating my nonexistent sex life.

Chapter 8

The good thing about getting out on the yacht is that Logan is away from the island before M arrives. The bad thing is I’m limited in my tracking abilities while we are on the boat.

Our entourage arrives at the marina at 1:00 p.m. on the dot. Because the boat doesn’t have enough cabins for everyone, we are each bringing one bodyguard for the trip. I choose Pete, while Lucas stays behind with Chris’s bodyguard, Vince; his other bodyguard, Cain, joins us. Apparently, Auggie will be bringing Nico. Our security guys get one cabin with two bunk beds in it. They will work on shifts. Shannon and Paolo stay behind to manage things from shore, but Chris somehow manages to finagle Mia on board. I smirk when I realize there are not enough cabins, meaning they have to share one.

We arrive at the docked sailboat, which is quite impressive. A young woman named Vicky greets us and offers us a tour. She explains that she is the chef, cleaning crew,

and also the second mate. She introduces us to the first mate, Thomas. The sailboat has six cabins. The captain has one, his two crew members share the other, and the remaining four are split by us. The cabins are small but comfortable. Each has an extremely small attached bathroom that is essentially a shower stall with a toilet and small sink. There are a galley and small salon as well. It's tight quarters, but Vicky explains that we'll mostly be up top or out on the islands.

I'm beginning to get antsy as I notice Thomas prepping for our departure.

"Oh, and here's our captain, Logan," Vicky says with a smile. Chris and I turn and I'm glad my brother is in front of me because my eyes widen as the hottest man I've ever seen in person walks toward me. And that is saying a lot because I've been in the presence of movie stars and male models.

How does one describe perfection? Well, Logan Winters is a good place to start. He's tall, taller than my brothers, so he must be about six feet five inches. And the man clearly works out. The muscles in his legs and arms ripple as he saunters toward us. He has a jawline that makes me want to lick it. His lips are full and look perfectly kissable. His eyes are, in fact, bluish green. He's tan, like the type of tan that tells you he works outdoors. He's muscled in a lean but not too lean way. There is not one physical feature visible on his body that is not perfect in every way possible. If a man was carved from stone just for me, it would be this man now standing right in front of me.

He holds out his hand as he approaches us. I take the offered hand only because I'm pre-programmed to do such things.

He looks at me, and I notice the slightest hint of a blush cross his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Your Highnesses, should I have curtsied or bowed or something? I don't really know the protocol," he says as he grips my much smaller hand in his. It's rough and calloused and for a fleeting second a million thoughts of how those hands would feel

on every part of my body flit across my mind, and now I'm pretty sure I'm blushing.

"Oh, no. No formalities are necessary. This week, we are just Chris, Anna, and Auggie and some friends going on a charter," my brother says with a laugh as he extends his hand.

Logan releases mine and shakes hands with Chris before Chris introduces the rest of our party.

"Did Vicky give you guys the safety drill?" Logan asks.

We nod.

"Well, then, let's head down to the salon and we'll go over the route for this week. I want to make sure you all see everything I had in mind," he adds as he starts down into the cabin. We follow him. I notice Chris has Mia go first down the narrow steps that lead into the main salon area of the boat. He has a hand on her shoulder as he follows her down the stairs.

I internally grin. I love Mia. She's perfect for Chris. I don't know why they are keeping their relationship a secret. I pause and wonder if they have a relationship yet? They have to, there's no way they aren't more than they present to the outside world.

I watch Logan roll a waterproof map out on the large dining table.

"Have a seat," he offers to my brother and me.

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We sit, and he begins to point out various little islands and atolls, suggesting the best ones for various activities. Vicky lays down a menu for us.

“This was prepared based on the food suggestions you made upon booking the trip,” she says. “I can change anything you like now, or with twenty-four notice.”

We glance at it.

“The catch of the day will vary as we fish at each location,” she adds.

“Looks great, thank you, Vicky,” my brother says. She blushes and nods at him. I notice she glances quickly at Logan, and I somehow get the sneaking suspicion that Logan didn’t relay our “royal” status to his crew. They all seem super down-to-earth, and yet very good at what they do. I’m wondering if this wasn’t the vibe my brother had in mind when he went hunting for the perfect charter. It’s not a megayacht or some other ridiculous vessel that you’d expect royalty to be aboard. And quite frankly, that makes it so much more appealing.

Logan is patient with us as we confirm that the menu looks great and his suggested island stops are perfect. He explains where we’ll pick up Auggie and his bodyguard. Vicky brings us drinks, and we all cheers to a great voyage.

“Well, settle in and enjoy. It’s time to head out,” Logan says with a smile as he makes his way back up to the deck.

I stay for a moment with my brother and Mia who chat excitedly about the trip.

“I’m going to go watch the scenery,” I say to them. Pulling my phone out, so that it appears I’m going to take photos.

“We’ll be up in a minute. I just need to go over something with Mia,” Chris says.

“Right,” I say as I make my way up the narrow stairs. I roll my eyes. I’m sure it’s more like he wants to be over Mia. I pop up out of the cabin and see Thomas is adjusting the sails, while Logan is at the wheel. I stay out of their way and walk to the front of the boat. I settle myself down and watch as they steer us out of the marina. A few people wave to us as we head out to sea, and I wave back.

I hope my sunglasses and hat keep me from being spotted. I scan nervously for paps, but I don’t see any. I sigh with relief. I wait until we are out in more open water before I make my way back toward Logan. I need to stay cool, calm, and collected. I can’t get distracted by his good looks and charming personality.

“So, finding everything acceptable?” Logan asks me as I approach him.

I smile. “Yes, very much so, thanks,” I respond. “So, how’d you get into chartering?” I ask, trying to pry.

He laughs. “It’s a long story, but the short version is that I grew up sailing with my mom and grandparents. We spent a lot of time here on the islands, and when my mom died a few years ago, I inherited some money and decided to do this full-time,” he says.

“I’m sorry to hear about your mom,” I say to him.

“Thanks. It was very hard. We were close, but I’m luckier than some. She was able to see me through the majority of life’s major milestones growing up,” he says. “Sorry...I didn’t mean...” He trails off as he realizes I, too, have lost a parent at a

much younger age.

I throw up a hand. “It’s alright, really. I was very little when my mom died. It was a long time ago,” I say.

“Still, it must have been difficult,” he says.

I nod. “Yes. I think losing your parent is always difficult, don’t you agree?” I ask.

“I suppose it’s tough no matter at what age,” he agrees.

“So,” he says, “are you enjoying your trip?”

I smile. “Yeah. It’s nice to get away for a while. I’m excited my brothers can join me.”

Chris chooses that second to poke his head out of the stairwell.

“Mind if we join you?” he asks.

“Come on up,” Logan says. “It’s going to be a beautiful night.”

Mia follows Chris up the stairs, and they walk toward us. I notice my brother’s face is a little flush, and I can’t help smirking at him, but he ignores me.

Logan points out various landmarks as we sail amongst the islands. It doesn’t seem long before Vicky is calling everyone in for dinner.

We eat in two shifts, staff eat after the guests who are joined by the captain.

It’s booth seating, and somehow, I get squeezed between Logan and Chris. I inhale

Logan's scent, and I'm suddenly not hungry. He smells like saltwater and fresh air, and there's a hint of an expensive cologne that has my mouth salivating to lick his skin. I shake my head at my thoughts.

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“OK?” Logan asks me. I look up to find him watching me intently. I feel a blush creep across my face.

“Just contemplating what we’ll see tomorrow,” I say as I push food around my plate.

Logan launches into a tutorial of the island we’ll visit tomorrow. It’s a smaller island, and we’ll be able to snorkel. Chris asks a bunch of questions about what sea life we’ll be seeing. I try to take some bites of my fish. It’s very good, but it’s also incredibly hard to eat when I can feel the heat of Logan’s body against mine. As he speaks, his leg bumps into mine, and I want it to stay there, our skin pressed together.

“So?” I hear Chris ask. I look up at him.

“I think you should go to bed early, Anna,” Chris says.

“I’m sorry. Long day, what did you ask?” I ask, turning to Logan.

“Are there any fish or sea creatures you’d like to see this week?” he asks again.

“A shark,” I say without thought.

“I’m sure we can accommodate that,” he replies.

He then starts talking about all the sharks that are in the area. Mia asks questions about them, clearly nervous to be in the water with them. Chris reassures her that it’s fine.

I yawn as the second round of drinks are served after the meal. I look at my phone. “I hate to say it, but I think I’ll turn in early tonight,” I say.

Logan scoots out of the booth so that I can head to my cabin. “Let me or the crew know if you need anything,” he says as I walk past him.

“Will do,” I say as I go to my cabin and promptly pass out.

Chapter 9

The squawking of a seagull wakes me. I open my eyes and find sun streaming through the window of my cabin. I shower quickly and head up to the galley where Vicky has a buffet of breakfast food out on the small counter.

“Help yourself,” she says with a smile. “Our breakfasts tend to be informal.”

“No, this is great. Thanks,” I assure her. I take a bagel and lather some cream cheese on it before layering lox on top of each half. She hands me a coffee, and I take it out to the deck.

Logan is already up and steering us into a small alcove.

“Good morning,” he says cheerfully.

“Good morning,” I reply.

“Ready to paddleboard?” he asks.

I grin. “Yes,” I say.

“Good, I’m gonna drop anchor, and then we’ll tour around the alcove by

paddleboards. We can bring the snorkel equipment. There's a good reef right over there," he says, pointing to a rocky outcropping at the edge of the alcove.

"Is it safe?" I ask him.

"Very," he says.

I sit and watch while he and Thomas anchor the boat and get out the paddleboards. I notice there are only five paddleboards.

Pete pops his head up from the salon. "Morning, Susanna," he says.

I glare at him because in such situations he knows he should just call me Anna.

"Good morning, Anna," he restates.

"Is Anna a nickname?" Logan asks from the far side of the deck.

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I blush. “Yes, it’s a nickname,” I explain.

He looks at me for a moment. “I like it. It suits you,” he says.

“Then by all means, please call her Anna,” Chris says with a laugh as he and Mia emerge from below deck.

Logan nods at my brother.

“So, paddleboarding?” Chris asks as he surveys the boards on the deck.

“Yep. I was just telling your sister about our morning. We’ll paddleboard around the cove, and then snorkel out by those rocks,” he says, pointing to the area he showed me a minute ago.

“Sounds like a plan,” Chris says. “Can I offer you a hand?” he asks Thomas.

Thomas hands him a paddleboard, and the two of them get the boards in the water and ready to go, complete with snorkels and fins tucked into the straps at the front of the boards.

Logan gives me a hand as I climb down the ladder and jump into the water. I manage to get on my board the first time, while Mia falls off hers twice before Chris takes pity on her and helps her on the board. Pete gets on last and the four of us begin following Logan. He points out various corals and fish as we paddle. It’s relaxing and fun. Chris jokes with me, and we mock fight with our paddles. It’s the first time in a while that we’ve just played together like children, not a care in the world. Chris uses

his paddle to splash Mia and pretty soon everyone, including Pete, is splashing each other.

After about an hour, we make it around the cove to the reef. We put on our snorkels and fins and hop into the water. Logan points out sea creatures as we swim along the different types of coral. I'm able to point out some. Logan asks us where else we've snorkeled, and we launch into a discussion about different reefs around the world.

It's lunchtime when we arrive back at the boat. Vicky has paninis ready for us and a coleslaw. We gorge on the food, before spending the afternoon hiking around part of the island. By the time we get back for dinner, I'm exhausted. We eat fresh fish for dinner. Afterward, everyone meanders up to the deck, and Vicky pulls out her guitar. There are drinks passed out, and we all sing songs as Logan steers us out toward a larger island where we'll meet up with Auggie in the morning.

It's peaceful as we sail along, the breeze blows through my hair, and I lie back on a cushion and enjoy the setting sun.

It only takes us a few hours to reach the larger island. I'm still lying on the cushion, staring up at the now dark night sky filled with stars and the moon as the dark shadow of the island grows larger on the horizon. It's quiet and peaceful. It's as my mind wanders that I'm struck by the fact that we are no longer out at the little island. In front of us is a large island with an airport. My stomach flips as I look back at Logan. I still have no idea how I'll tell him about everything. I'm in need of a plan and quickly. I have five days left to figure out what to do. This will be the closest to civilization we get until we dock back on Nassau. I decide not to rush my plans. I'll take my time and come up with some idea; there has to be a way.

I watch as Thomas and Vicky anchor us. I don't go down below for a long time. I just lie there and contemplate my dilemma.

I don't realize that I've fallen asleep until I feel someone touching my arm.

"Anna?" Logan says.

I open my eyes and find that the early morning sky is starting to lighten to a lighter blue. Although it's still dark as the sun isn't yet visible on the horizon. I rub my eyes.

"Sorry, I must have dozed off," I say to him. It's then I realize that there is a pillow tucked under my head and a blanket over me.

"I didn't want you to get cold. I tried to wake you, but you were passed out. I didn't think it was proper to carry a princess, not to mention it's tough carrying someone down those little stairs," he says with a laugh.

I giggle. "Well, I suppose carrying a princess is improper, but I appreciate it that you didn't want to whack my head on a wall," I reply.

"Can I get you some coffee?" he asks. "I was going to get a tender for us to go ashore. We can have a look around the historic part of the town, while we wait for your brother," he says.

A flash of fear runs through me. M could be on that island. M could be anywhere.

"Are you alright?" he asks, kneeling so we are face-to-face.

I nod and swallow. "Sorry, uh, I'd rather do something in the water. Can we tour it by boat?" I suggest.

"Are you sure? There are some interesting old churches." He frowns while he thinks, and it's cute to watch. "Actually, I could relocate the boat, and we could take the dinghy over to a church on the far side of the island if you like?" he adds.

I smile. “That sounds perfect,” I say, feeling thankful that I’ve bought myself more time to figure out this mess I’ve made.

“Great, I’ll let Thomas know. Vicky just started breakfast, so you have time to shower and change if you like,” he says.

He holds out a hand and helps me to my feet. I lose my footing, and he grabs my other arm, hauling me against him. I feel a rush of electricity between us, like static cling but different. He freezes and pulls back. I see a fleeting look of confusion on his face.

“I...are you alright?” he asks.

I nod. “Y-yes,” I stammer, attempting to get my bearings while processing what just happened.

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“Good. I don’t want to be responsible for breaking a princess,” he says with a wink, lightening the mood.

“Wouldn’t be the first bump or bruise I’ve had,” I say.

He frowns. “Not from a person?” he asks, his voice deepening.

I laugh. “Well, aside from my brothers horse-playing with me, no, not from a person. I’ve been known to be a little klutzy at times,” I say to him.

“Well, I guess I’ll need to keep a better eye on you then,” he says, his voice gravelly and chills run through my body, dotting my arms with goose bumps.

“You should get inside and warm up,” he says, pulling the blanket over my shoulders.

“Thank you,” I whisper. He squeezes my arm before letting me go. And I’m left wishing his strong hand was still gripping me.

Chapter 10

Isqueal with delight as a nurse shark swims by me, and I feel its smooth texture against my leg. But it’s the rays that have my attention. We’re feeding them pieces of fish. They are everywhere, rubbing their fins against us as they fight for a piece of food. I keep my hand flat just as I was instructed to and place it in the water. A ray comes up and sucks it off my hand like a vacuum.

I look up to find Logan watching me intently. I grin a big childlike smile. I laugh as a

ray wing tickles my knee.

Logan brings me more fish, and together we place our hands in the water with the piece of flesh. A giant ray comes to claim it, and I giggle again. I hear Chris snap a photo, but I don't even care, I'm so enthralled by these gentle giants.

"See, I told you they weren't scary," Logan says to me.

"I hate admitting that I was wrong, but I was soooo wrong! They are amazing! I could stay here forever," I say to him.

He smiles at me. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Anna," he says. I don't know why, but my nickname on his lips makes me quiver.

"Are you cold?" he asks, noticing my involuntary movement.

I shake my head, blushing. "No, just really happy and excited," I say because it's true.

He nods. "About five more minutes, guys, and then we need to get back on The Matilda," he calls out to everyone. I look up to find Chris helping Mia feed a ray. She also giggles with delight as my brother tosses his head back with laughter. Pete, who has grabbed Chris's camera, snaps a photo. I reach over and steal the camera from him.

"Take a photo of all of us, will you?" I ask Thomas, handing him the camera.

"Sure thing," he replies. We all gather around with ray wings flipping out of the water around us.

"You too, Logan," Chris says. He comes over and Pete wraps an arm around his

shoulder, pulling him in close to our group.

Thomas snaps a few photos before turning around and taking a selfie of us all. We applaud his photography skills and slowly make our way back on board.

After another amazing dinner, I meander back up to the cushion on the deck that I have essentially claimed as mine. I lie down and stare up at the night sky.

“I think we’re going to have to put a plaque with your name on it above your cushion,” I hear Logan say.

I laugh. “I was just thinking the same thing,” I say. I turn as he walks over and sits down next to me.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asks.

I sit and nod. “Oh, yes! Today was...magical! This whole week has been so great, everything, really. Spending time with my brothers, no paps, no pomp and circumstance, just being ourselves. I wanted to thank you and your crew for that. You’ve all made us feel like family and like...well, for a lack of a better phrase, normal people,” I say pausing. “We don’t get that very often. And honestly, I think we needed it.”

He smiles at me. “I’m glad I could be of service,” he says.

Chapter 11

After a morning of walking around a rural part of the island, we are back on the boat eating a lunch of fried fish and chips and waiting for Thomas to get back with Auggie and Nico. Everyone is chatting about the shark we saw in the water when I hear a familiar voice up above.

“Any party people in the house!?” Auggie yells. I laugh and fly up the stairs and into his arms.

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“Hey,” I say smiling. He kisses my forehead.

“Where’s my drink?” he asks.

“Get it yourself, bro. This isn’t the Queen Mary,” my brother says to him.

Auggie laughs. “Well, fuck you very much too, brother,” he says as he claps Chris on the back and walks down into the kitchen. He re-emerges a minute later with a beer in his hand. He takes a long sip of the drink and sighs. “Much better,” he declares. He sits down and looks around at everyone. “So, what’s on the agenda today?”

Logan comes over and introduces himself. “We were planning to head back out this afternoon and sail to the furthest point on our trip. It’ll take us till morning, and then we can slowly make our way back to Nassau,” he explains. Chris and I understand completely because he showed us everything on the map, and Auggie clearly doesn’t give a shit. We all venture up on deck after Logan’s tutorial.

“Yep, sounds good, mate,” Auggie says to Logan as he swigs his beer. Watching Auggie swig a beer from a can is thoroughly amusing. I’ve almost never seen him with a can of beer, minus a few breaking-the-rules nights at camp.

Nico emerges from the boat where he must have snuck on while I was busy hugging Auggie.

“Anna,” he greets me.

“Hey, Nico,” I say to him.

I sit down next to Auggie as Nico sets a cooler down next to us. He lifts the lid and tosses me a can of beer. I make a face, and he laughs.

“Come on, Anna, try it,” Auggie teases.

I roll my eyes and force myself to drink the cool liquid. It’s actually not as bad as I thought it would be, but it’s still not my drink of choice.

I hand my beer to Chris as he sits down on my other side. “All yours, brother,” I say to him as I pat his leg and stand up, walking toward the helm.

“Show me how to steer this thing,” I say to Logan.

He grins. “Have you sailed before?” he asks me.

I nod. “Yes, at camp, a long time ago. Occasionally, a friend with a boat will let me steer it, but that’s about it,” I say.

He shows me what to do, standing with his front against my back and his hands over mine. I can smell his cologne and my mind goes to places it should not. Just when I’m thinking I need to get out of his grasp, he steps back from me. I both grimace at the loss of his body touching mine and at the need for him to stay away, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“You’re doing great, Anna!” he says enthusiastically.

He stands by my side and shows me where to direct the boat as we head out into open waters. I stay there enjoying the power I have over the direction of all our lives for just a few minutes. It steadies me and gives me the strength I have been searching for over the past week.

At dinnertime, I finally give up my captain duties and head down below to eat.

“You did really well today,” Logan says to me as we dig into a lobster mac and cheese.

“This is amazing, Vicky!” Auggie moans as he helps himself to a third serving.

“Thanks!” she calls from the galley. “It’s actually my grandmother’s recipe.”

“Well, your grandmother can cook for me any day, and so can you,” Auggie says. “Mia, make sure to get this recipe before we leave.”

Chris glares at Auggie. “Get it yourself. Mia is enjoying some time off,” he says.

Auggie laughs. “Oh, right. Is that what you call it?” he says. Chris punches him in the arm, and Auggie glares back at him.

“Will you two cut it out?” I say loudly. They both turn and look at me. “I mean it. I’ll call Dad.”

Chris cracks his neck and goes back to eating, and Auggie flicks me off. I smirk and wink at Mia who smiles her appreciation at me. I nod at her. I like Mia. She comes from a fairly normal family. Her parents are both doctors as is her sister. How exactly she came to work for my brother...well, it’s a bit of a mystery to me, but nonetheless, she seems like a great person, and she definitely can keep my brother in line. I notice her hand on his knee under the table, and I wonder if that’s the only thing keeping him from pummeling Auggie.

I turn in early after a round of cards following our meal. I win two out of three hands and call it a night.

I toss and turn for quite a while until sleep takes me. I wake early again the next morning. After a quick shower, I grab a coffee and head out to find Logan at the helm again. I look around and see a few islands in the distance.

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“Is that where we’re going?” I ask him, pointing to the horizon.

“Yep, that’s it,” he says.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” I ask.

“Sharks,” he answers.

“Sharks?” I ask.

He nods. “Sharks,” he confirms.

“Well, that’ll be interesting,” I say to him.

He laughs. “Don’t worry. We’ll likely only see reef sharks and nurse sharks, similar to the other day. We’ll be fine,” he declares.

He squeezes my shoulder. “I promise, I’ll protect you from the sharks, Princess,” he says with a wink.

“Oh, ye brave Logan, what would I do without your protection?” I say, teasing him with a wink of my own.

“Does that mean I get to be knighted?” he asks.

I laugh. “Uh, no,” I answer.

He gives me a pouty face and chuckle. I look around and find a snorkel. I pick it up and tap his shoulder.

“Kneel,” I say playfully.

“Well, if the lady demands,” he says with a devilish grin.

I blush and nod as he kneels.

“By the power vested in me, by the great country of Norddale, I hereby proclaim, Logan Winters, as knight of the...what’s the name of your boat, again?” I whisper the question, and he laughs.

“The Matilda,” he says.

I clear my throat. “Of The Matilda,” I say as I flop the snorkel on one of his shoulders and then the other. “Rise, dear knight, and here unto forth you shall be responsible for the safety of all on board.”

He laughs, and I hold out a hand to help him up.

“Better?” I ask.

“As the lady wishes,” he says with a grin. We stand in silence after that, both watching the islands that come into view.

“What’s after sharks today?” I ask.

Logan launches into our agenda for the next two days. It’s more snorkeling, some hiking on islands, and fishing. I perk up when I hear fishing.

“We’re fishing today?” I inquire.

He grins. “Sure,” he says, looking up at the sky. It’s cloudy and a few raindrops have already landed on the deck.

I jump up and down with excitement. “I’ve never been fishing,” I tell him.

He raises an eyebrow. “Is that a princess thing?” he asks.

I roll my eyes. “No. My dad used to take my brothers, but my auntie Lara always made me come visit. So, I never got to go. She said it wasn’t ladylike,” I pout.

He laughs at that. “Well, Auntie Lara isn’t here, so we will be fishing,” he says.

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I happily contemplate catching my very own fish for dinner as we pull up to an island.

“Let’s go get some breakfast, and then we’ll head out,” he says.

“Wait, we aren’t catching fish on the boat? And what about the rain?” I ask him.

“Whoa, slow down there. First, the rain helps hide us from the fish, so it’s the perfect day for fishing. Second, we’ll use the dinghy to get to a small reef I know. There’s always good fishing on the edge of it,” he explains.

“Oh?” I ask, curious about the entire process.

“Mia’s not feeling great, so I think we’ll stay back and catch up on some stuff,” Chris says as he pops his head up out of the salon.

Auggie winks at me, and I giggle.

“Is that what the kids are calling it nowadays?” Auggie ribs him.

Chris gives him the middle finger.

“Now, now, dear brother, is that behavior becoming of the next in line to the throne?” he says in a mocking tone.

“Fuck off, Augs,” Chris says as he disappears below deck.

I turn back to see Auggie smirking as he helps Thomas get the dinghy set up.

Ten minutes later, Logan, Pete, Auggie, and I set out to the nearby reef. Logan takes his time teaching me how to cast a line. His arms are wrapped around me as he teaches me the proper technique. His chest feels warm against my back in the cool drizzle. I can feel his breath against my hair, and I try to quell the desire to lean back against him.

“I think you got it,” he says proudly. “You’re a natural.”

I sit and wait and wait some more and then my line jerks. “I have something!” I yell excitedly.

Logan is back behind me as he helps to hold my rod. His other hand closes over mine and together we reel in a fish. It’s small and silver.

Logan applauds me, and I bow, while propped up on my knees. Auggie takes a photo of me, and I grin.

“Here, let me unhook him. He’s a little too small to keep,” Logan says.

He reaches for fish and grabs it trying to remove the hook from its mouth.

“Bugger,” he finally says and cuts the hook, tossing the fish back in the water. A moment later my fish floats back up to the surface.

“Damn,” he says. “It must have gut-hooked him.”

I look down at the fish. Out of nowhere, I’m suddenly overwhelmed by an avalanche of memories.

Newton, my pet fish, is floating in the tank. I tap on the glass.

“Newton!” I cry out, but he doesn’t move. I run out of my room. “Mommy! Mommy!” I yell.

My mother rushes out of her room. “What’s wrong, Anna?” she asks as she runs toward me. My nanny, Tessa, comes rushing out of her room as well. “It’s alright, Tessa, I got her.”

Tessa nods and my mother turns back to me. I grab her hand and drag her to my room. I point to Newton. I see her grimace.

“Come here, sweetheart. Have a seat,” she says. She pats my bed, and I jump up next to her.

“Newton’s not moving,” I say.

She pulls me against her and looks down at me.

“Remember when my roses died,” she says to me.

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“The ones on your desk?” I ask. She nods.

“What did I tell you?” she asks.

“That flowers don’t live forever. And when they finish their life, we must let them go,” I repeat.

“That’s right,” she says proudly. “Newton has finished his life. So, we must let him go too.”

“No!” I cry. “I don’t want you to throw Newton away!”

“How about we find him a nice box, and then we can have a funeral for him?” she suggests.

“What’s a funeral?” I ask.

She ponders her answer for a moment. “It’s when you say goodbye to someone you love,” she says.

“Can I kiss Newton goodbye? Won’t he be lonely in the box?” I ask.

“We can put in some things to keep him company and bury him in the rose garden,” she says. “Then you can visit him, and he won’t be lonely.”

“But I want Newton in my room,” I say to her.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but Newton can’t stay in your room with you. It just doesn’t work that way,” she says.

She opens my closet door and rifles through some packages. She pulls out a small box that held costume jewelry that had been gifted to me. She walks over to Newton and scoops him up in a net and lays him on the soft padding in the box.

“What shall we put with him?” she asks.

I find a small pebble and a coin and place them in the box. I touch him. She puts the lid on and walks me out of the garden where she asks a staff member to dig a hole. I place Newton’s box in the hole, and the man covers it up.

“Would you like to say something about Newton?” she asks.

“I will miss you in my room, Newton. But I promise to come to visit you, every day,” I say.

“Anna?” I hear Auggie’s voice.

A strong hand wraps around my arm. I shake my head.

“Hey,” I hear Logan’s voice in my ear. I turn and his concerned face stares down at me. “Hey, where’d you go?” he asks in a soft voice.

I feel tears well in my eyes as my body trembles.

“Anna, it’s just a fish,” Auggie says. “It’s not like—” He freezes when he suddenly realizes why I’m freaked out. “Newton?” he asks.

I nod. “I’d forgotten...” I trail off as I watch the dead fish float away to its watery

grave.

I turn back to see Logan staring at me in both concern and now also confusion. I don't have time to explain before Auggie does.

"Three weeks before our mom died, Anna's pet fish died. And then the week before, her bunny, Chomper, died. Anna was petrified of things dying after Mom was killed. It took her a long time to understand that not everything around her was going to die," he explains. He reaches over and pulls me into a hug. "I got you, Suzy Q. I got you," he whispers as he presses a kiss to my forehead. "Just breathe."

I take a few breaths and, eventually, I feel calm again. I lean back and wipe my eyes. "I'm sorry," I say to them. Pete looks at me with as much concern as Logan had. "I'm OK. I...I think I just had a flashback," I try to explain.

"Should we..." Logan trails off and looks toward Auggie and Pete. I hold up my hand.

"No, absolutely not. We are finishing fishing," I say to them.

"Are you sure, Anna?" Pete asks.

"I can take you back to the boat if you like?" Logan offers.

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“No, really. I’m OK. I’m sorry I scared you all,” I say. I cast my line back out and take in a deep breath. Fortunately, the next fish I catch doesn’t get gut-hooked, and we release it. I don’t end up catching any that we can keep, but Pete and Auggie both do. We head back in at lunchtime, and I excuse myself.

I curl up on my bed, and sometime after contemplating how and when I’ll tell Logan about everything, I fall fast asleep.

The listing of the boat is what wakes me. I can hear the wind howling outside. I stumble to my feet and throw on my raincoat. In a matter of seconds, I’ve pushed open the hatch and am on deck. I see Thomas securing lines and Vicky and Nico are assisting him. Nico is the best sailor of our bodyguards, so it makes sense he’s out here helping. Logan is at the wheel.

He sees me and his look is fierce. I grimace as I’m probably just in the way, but I do have some experience with boats. I square my shoulders and walk toward him. I huff as I notice my useless brothers are still below deck.

“You should be below deck!” Logan calls out over the wind. “It’s not safe up here, Anna.”

“I can help!” I respond. He gives me a hard look. And I give him one right back. He’s not the boss of me.

“Fine, hold the wheel,” he says.

I go to grasp it and the boat lists again, sending me right into Logan’s arms. He

grasps me hard, pulling me against his body. I grip his jacket and steady myself. For a moment, I don't want to move. It feels safe in his grasp, but I will myself to grab the wheel, to make myself useful.

"You, OK?" he calls out, his arms still holding me. I nod, and he gives my waist a squeeze before heading over to help Nico.

Keeping the boat straight on its course is easier said than done. The waves are large and push us around like a bottle in the sea. I use all my muscle to keep the jerking wheel in place.

Water rains down my face, but I don't dare try removing a hand from the wheel to wipe it away. I know one hand won't have enough strength to hold it in place.

A minute and then two go by, finally Logan's back at my side. His arms come around me, and he grasps the wheel.

"You can let go," he whispers in my ear, his hot breath caressing my skin. "I got us."

I stay there for a moment, relishing in the warmth of his body pressed securely against mine. I feel as though I'm in the heart of a tornado. Everything is whipping around us. The crew yelling at each other as they secure things, the roaring wind, the crashing waves, but here in our embrace I hear nothing but Logan's breath on me. I feel nothing but his heat against my body.

He doesn't say anything for the longest moment. I feel the tension in him.

"Go back to bed, Anna," he finally says. "We're through the worst of it now."

I nod, and he raises his arm to let me leave. I look back at him.

“Thank you for helping,” he says to me, his eyes still fixed on the horizon.

“You’re welcome,” I say softly, so softly I’m not sure he’s heard me over the wind until he turns and gives me a small, tight smile. I head below deck and back to my bed where sleep awaits me until the storm is well past us.

Chapter 12

The next day we snorkel all morning and paddleboard in the afternoon. As I make myself comfy on my cushion after dinner, I realize how much I’ve enjoyed being out on the water in a safe little bubble. I also am realizing that I’m falling for Logan with every touch and every conversation. I lie back and stare at the night sky.

I hear movement behind me. I know it’s him before I see him.

“Hi, Logan,” I say, not turning toward him. He sits down in front of me, partially blocking my view of the night sky.

“How are you doing?” he asks. I know he’s referring to my episode yesterday. I’m glad it’s dark out, so he can’t see the blush on my face. I hate being embarrassed.

“I’m fine. Thank you,” I answer.

He leans back and looks up at the sky. “What’s it like?” he asks.

“What’s what like?” I respond.

“Being a princess, a royal?” he asks. I almost laugh because he’s one too.

I clear my throat. “It’s...good and bad,” I say carefully.

“What’s bad about it?” he asks. He makes himself comfortable, and I feel his arm against my leg.

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“Well, the paps aren’t fun, and I seldom just get to go anywhere. The pomp and circumstance of it all is a bit much at times. Everything is so formal. You know the old adage, ‘duty before self.’ Plus, anytime I want to leave the palace there’s the matter of security. I’m almost never alone except in my apartment or on the palace grounds. I don’t get to do things most people do,” I try to explain.

“What would you like to do?” he asks.

I grin. “Jump in my car and go for a road trip, or go shopping at the mall before Christmas, or just decide to go to the movies,” I say.

“So, what’s good about it?” he asks.

“I get to do things most people don’t. Like, if I want to see a concert, I just get tickets, no questions asked. Or, if I want to go off to the Bahamas for a vacation in forty-eight hours, the king just snaps his fingers and makes it happen,” I add with a giggle.

“Your father must really love you,” he says.

“He does,” I say. “I think he’s always worried the most about me. I don’t know if it’s because I’m the youngest or the only girl,” I add.

“What’s he like, the king?” Logan asks.

“He’s...kind, and fair, and he can be a little stubborn at times, but he’s also funny when you don’t expect it. He doesn’t put up with shit from any of us,” I say as I

pause. He's also lonely, I think to myself.

"He sounds like a nice father," Logan says.

"What about your father?" I ask him.

"Oh, I don't know him," he says.

"Oh?" I pry.

"My parents split when I was a baby. He didn't want to be a part of our lives. My mom brought me home to my grandparents and raised me there," he says.

"How are your grandparents?" I ask.

"They're great. My mom was always a little preoccupied with her journalism career, but they were always there for me," he says.

"Were you close to your mom?" I ask, curious about his past.

"Yes and no," he says quietly.

I sit up and put my hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He shrugs. "She was killed in a car accident, like your mom," he says. We are quiet for a long moment. "She wasn't a bad mom. I mean she tried, in her own way. She was good at telling stories. She always drove me to camp every year, and we'd have fun on the road trip. When she did travel, which was often, she'd send me postcards from each city she went to. She'd always call on Wednesday nights. I don't know

why that was just our thing.”

“How’d you end up here?” I ask him.

“When I was in high school, she decided I was old enough to join her on an adventure. She had a long-term story, she had been working on for a while, and she moved us down here. I still spent summers back at my grandparents’, but I finished school down here. A few years after she died, I decided to buy a boat. I had worked part-time as a mate for a captain, mostly doing weekend trips and fishing charters. I loved it. I got my business degree, and then when I inherited money, I just figured why not do what I love, every day. I mean, life’s short, right?” he says as he looks back at me.

“Yes, it is,” I agree.

I sigh. “I wish I could stay here forever,” I admit.

“Why?” he asks.

“When I go home, I’ll have to start taking on my duties,” I explain. “I’ve managed to avoid them for as long as possible, but I finish with my graduate degree this year.”

“Wow, you seem young to have done that,” he says.

I laugh. “Well, I was privately tutored, so I finished high school at sixteen,” I explain. “Then I did university in three years, mostly online, and I’m wrapping up my grad program in a little over a year,” I add.

“What did you study?” he asks.

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“Computers, literature, various princess-approved topics,” I say to him with a smirk.

He laughs. “Touché,” he says.

“You sure you’re OK, after yesterday?” he asks.

“Yeah. I’m really sorry I scared everyone.” I pause, afraid to tell him about my past.

“What?” he urges, he takes my hand in his and squeezes it. It gives me the strength I need to tell him.

“After my mom was killed, I zoned out a lot. I had night terrors. I would just...disappear into my own world. My dad put me in therapy for years. Eventually, I got over it, but every once in a while, I have a flashback. I guess the dead fish just triggered a memory from my past when my pet fish had died,” I say to him. “All these events sometimes get jumbled in my head. It’s overwhelming.”

“I understand, at least a little. I had nightmares after my mom was killed. It’s hard. I can only imagine it was much harder as a small child,” he says.

I shrug. “Maybe. It was confusing as a small child,” I say.

“I’m glad you booked my tour,” he says. “It’s been a fun week.”

I smile at him. “Yes, it’s been wonderful. I’ll remember it always,” I say to him. I yawn.

“You should get some sleep,” he says.

“I know. Thanks for keeping me company,” I tell him. We both stand and stare at each other in an awkward silence. I give him a quick hug and peck on the cheek before quickly heading down the stairs and into my cabin.

I flop onto the bed and stare up at the ceiling. I am so fucked. I don’t even know where to begin.

We have one more full day on our trip. I’m down to the wire, and I still haven’t a clue on how to save Logan.

Chapter 13

I curse myself as I walk along a sandy shore of a small deserted island while my brothers finish swimming. I pick up a few shells and find a spot to sit. I shake my head at myself. I just need to rip off the Band-Aid and tell him. It won’t be easy, and he may hate me, but I have to save him, even if that means he can never be mine. The fact that M is likely back on the island also grates at me. I don’t want to risk anyone’s safety.

It’s halfway through our last full day, and I still have no plan, nothing, nada. I watch my brothers from a distance. They are playing around in the water now. From here, they look like two college-aged boys having fun with not a care in the world.

I sigh and run my toe across the sand.

“No more snorkeling?” Logan says as he walks toward me. I look up at him, shielding my eyes from the sun. The sun’s rays come from behind him, making it hard to see his features. He looks like a god, a chiseled, tanned god.

“I’m just enjoying the quiet,” I say.

He takes a seat on the rock next to me.

“It’s nice out here, huh?” he says.

I nod. “It’ll be hard to go back to reality after this week,” I admit.

“Where will you go from here?” he asks.

“Back home. I have to start taking on my royal duties,” I say.

“Ah, yes,” he says, clearly recalling our previous conversation.

“Are there duties that interest you?” he asks.

“Some of my mom’s charities,” I explain.

“Charity work is nice,” he says. “I help run a charity for low-income kids on Nassau.”

“That’s nice,” I say to him. His arm brushes mine, and I’m momentarily transfixed by the muscles bulging in it.

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“Do you have a boyfriend back home?” he asks. I look up at him in shock. “I’m sorry, that was inappropriate of me to ask,” he adds quickly.

I laugh. “No, it wasn’t, and no, I don’t,” I say to him.

“Really? Why not?” he asks. “Oh wait, do you have an arranged marriage?”

I burst out in giggles. “An arranged marriage?” I spurt out. “Uh, nope.”

“Sorry, I just didn’t know, I mean...” He trails off and blushes.

I touch his arm. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be mean about that. It was just funny. There are so many misperceived things about royals,” I say.

“Like what else?” he asks.

“That we are all stuck-up. That we can get whatever we want, whenever we want it,” I say.

“What can’t you get?” he asks. I want to say “you,” but instead I shrug.

“Just because I want a vacation, for instance, doesn’t always mean I get one,” I say.

“You got this one,” he points out.

“I did,” I say slowly. “But this is unusual,” I add.

“It must be tough to be famous,” he muses.

I shrug again. “I suppose. For me...well, I don’t know anything else,” I say. “There have been a few times when I went somewhere, and no one knew who I was. It was nice, just being me and living my life.”

“I’m glad you came on this trip,” Logan says.

I look up at him, and he smiles at me. “I’m glad I came too,” I say.

We chat about different parts of the week, and eventually, everyone heads back to the boat. Vicky makes us a feast of seafood. There’s sautéed fish, lobster, and clam chowder. It’s delicious and everyone eats entirely too much. That’s quickly followed by everyone drinking entirely too much.

We play two rounds of cards, pairing up into teams. Thomas goes up to steer the boat, so Vicky and Auggie play together, and Chris and Mia team up, leaving Logan and me to play together. He squeezes against me in the booth to make room for Vicky and Auggie. His leg is warm against mine, but I don’t want him to move it.

We win both rounds and my brothers scoff, saying I hustled them. Logan laughs and says I led the team because cards are not his forte.

The night gets later, and I itch to go up and sit on my cushion again. I just want to feel the serenity of the night at sea one last time. I excuse myself, and I head up to my perch, but first I go and say hi to Thomas.

We chat briefly about the trip, and I thank him for his assistance. Turns out he and Vicky are a thing. I only get that much after a whole lot of prying. I half contemplate whether Logan knows this, but then I think it’d be silly if he didn’t since they all live in close quarters together.

I walk up to the front of the boat and breathe in the salty air. I see a dolphin jump alongside the boat, and I smile. Part of me wishes I could be that dolphin, free to go where I want. Free to live my life how I want.

I once read something that said being royal was like living in a gilded cage, and I think that person had it right. Everything looks beautiful, but you can't leave it. I stand a moment longer, enjoying the view and looking up at the night sky. The moon isn't as full, and there are so many stars in the darkness. It makes me feel small and insignificant, it also makes me feel powerful. I let my mind wander as I contemplate the universe and my purpose in it. I haven't had such lofty thoughts in years. I almost never let my mind wander anymore, but I allow myself these few minutes to relax before I have to go deal with the inevitable task ahead of me.

I walk over to my cushion and lie back on it. I think about all the wonderful things that I've seen this week, giving in to my need to procrastinate from reality for a few more minutes. Then as though my mind is reminding me, I think about Logan. Logan. I groan. I have no idea what to do. He has to know. I need to garner all my bravery and tell him.

Chapter 14

"I wish I could just tell him," I whisper to myself as I stare out at the night sky.

"Tell who what?" Logan's voice comes from behind me, and I jump.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you," he says, walking up to the cushion and taking a seat next to me. He lies back, and I continue looking up at the night sky. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes," I whisper.

“You alright, Susanna?” he says, looking over at me. I turn my head to face him. We’re so close. I see the moonlight reflected in his eyes. They look like endless pools of gray in the darkness of the night.

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“Call me Anna, please,” I say to him. I love when he’s called me by my nickname.

He reaches out tentatively and brushes a finger over my cheek. “Are you alright, Anna?” he says softly.

I swallow. I’m afraid for the first time in my life. Really afraid.

He sits up and looks down at me with concern. “What is it?” he asks.

I sit up so we are nearly nose to nose on the cushion.

I close my eyes and will myself to tell him. I can’t keep this a secret any longer. It’s his life that hangs in the balance. And my time is up.

“I-I have to tell you something,” I blurt out in almost a whisper. I feel tears well in my eyes because of the fear. Not just the fear that he’ll be killed or someone else hurt, but the fear that he’ll hate me. The fear that this amazing man that I’m falling for will never want to see me again. I curse myself for being so weak, for showing emotion like this. He stares at me in confusion.

“You’ve talked about your mother. Tell me more about your father,” I say to him in a rush to get it out before he speaks.

He stares blankly at me. “I...I don’t know who my father is...well, not exactly,” he starts. “My mother told me she fell in love while living in Europe. My father’s family didn’t approve of her. They were married in secret when they found out she was pregnant with me. They were going to tell people, but then something happened just a

few days after I was born. My dad told her she had to leave...that he couldn't be with her anymore. And so, she left. She took me home to her parents, and I lived there until I was a teenager. Then Mom and I came here. She didn't want to leave here. Something about it spoke to her or what did she say, 'it made her whole again.' I can't remember. I went back to Pennsylvania to go to college and shortly after she was killed in a car accident there on the island."

"I know who your father is," I whisper.

"What?" he says, leaning back to look at me.

I close my eyes again and speak. "I've implied my special skill with computers. I'm a hacker, a good one. And, ten days ago, I was looking for something, a misplaced family heirloom. I stumbled into the dark web into a place I hadn't been before, and I saw a bounty for a life. Curiosity got the better of me because the name was familiar to me. So, I dug some more, and...it was a bounty on your life, Logan," I say, opening my eyes again to look at him.

"You aren't making any sense, Anna," he says. There's no shock in his eyes, and I realize it's because he doesn't believe me.

I take a deep breath. "What's your full name?" I ask him.

"Logan Edvard Winters," he says.

"Do you know the name Hansen?" I ask him.

He frowns and nods slowly. He takes a breath. "I think that might be my father's last name," he admits. "I saw something once in my mom's room."

I take his hand in mine. "Will you come with me?" I ask. "Please?"

I stand, and he allows me to lead him down to my cabin. We don't say a word as we walk. The only cabin at this end is his and mine. I open my door and usher him inside, looking both ways before closing the door. I put my finger to his lips to silence him, and he nods.

I open my laptop and pull up the documents that I want to show him.

"I believe that this is your real birth certificate," I say. I turn the screen to face him. He studies it intently and shakes his head. "This can't be," he says slowly.

I point to King Edvard's name. "Edvard Hansen is your father," I say. "King Edvard Hansen."

"Susanna, that's crazy...that's..." He trails off as he stares at the document. I pull up his mother's obituary and point out the foundation that was listed for donations.

"That's his foundation," I say.

"Yes, she was a supporter of it. That's why it was listed," he says.

I sigh and pull up a photo. This one is mine, well, my family's. It's a photo of King Edvard, Uncle Eddie, and my father as teenagers.

"That's my father, and this one is yours," I say, pointing to him.

Logan stares for a long time at his father. There's really no denying it. He's a spitting image of my Uncle Eddie, except for the eye color. He has his mother's eyes, but the face structure, nose, mouth, lips, hair color, everything is so much like my Uncle Eddie it is a bit unnerving.

"I...How...I don't understand," he stammers, sitting back on the bed.

“May I tell you my theory?” I ask him.

He slowly nods but doesn't speak.

"I think your mother met your father while she was working as a journalist in Europe. I think they secretly fell in love and conceived you. I think they secretly wed. And then I think something drove them apart, and she left with you when you were only a baby," I say. "I don't know why your father hasn't reached out to you. I don't have those answers."

"Why would someone want to kill me?" he whispers. "I'm no one."

"Correction...you're the heir to a kingdom, the next in line for the throne of Montelandia. That alone is a reason to kill you," I say.

He looks at me, his eyes wide with surprise.

"You came here to save me?" he asks as his brows knit together.

I nod and then laugh bitterly.

"It was stupid at first, a schoolgirl fantasy of James Bond come to life. Then I met you...and...I'm so sorry, Logan. I should have just alerted the authorities. I've done that before when I see these things, but something stopped me...I can't explain it. I..." I trail off as I look at him, tears in my eyes.

"Thank you," he says, he leans forward and kisses my forehead. He lingers for a long moment and swallows. When he pulls back, he looks determined.

“So, who is trying to kill me?” he asks.

“You believe me?” I ask him, partly shocked because I just dropped the motherload of all information on him. I’m actually surprised that he’s handling it so well.

He sighs. “Well, you sort of just shocked the fuck out of me, if I’m being completely honest. This information is going to take days to fathom, but clearly, you were worried about my well-being, or you wouldn’t even be here. So, let’s hear it,” he says.

I clear my throat. “There’s a man...an assassin. His name online is Martin Mayhem. He goes by ‘M.’ He’s good. He normally kills cartel leaders and the like. I’ve seen his name before, and I’ve never seen any intel that any government agency knows who he is. He’s completely off the grid. I only stumbled upon all this by accident, a needle in a haystack. And because of that, I could see he was offered the bid. I could track him briefly until he left. He used an alias I’ve seen associated with him, Kenneth Jones. He left Dubai the day before we left with you,” I explain. I pause, trying to get a read on him, but he just stares at me. “I don’t know who hired him. It’s a false IP address that links to a false account that links to a server that is untraceable, almost like it was deleted after the message was sent, which could be the case. They are paying millions for your death, whoever it is. That’s what keyed my interest. It’s not normal to see bounties on the heads of normal citizens and especially not at that price point.”

His eyes widen when I say millions. “You’re telling me that someone wants me dead so badly that they are willing to pay millions of dollars to have it done and they’ve hired one of the best assassins in the world to do it?” he asks.

I shrug. “Fifty million to be exact,” I say.

His eyes are nearly popping out of his head now. I touch his arm, concerned.

“Logan, are you OK?” I ask. The words are out of my mouth before I realize what a stupid question that is.

He swallows. “I’m...processing,” he says slowly. I nod and stay quiet while he lets all of this sink in.

“So, to sum up, things, I’m a prince, an heir to a throne of a European country, and someone is paying an assassin fifty million dollars to kill me,” he reiterates.

“Yeah, I suppose that about sums it up,” I say.

He runs a hand through his hair and stares back at my computer screen. “And M’s on Nassau, right now?” he asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know, but I assume so,” I say.

“Shit,” he says.

“Yeah, that also about sums it up,” I say.

“Does anyone else know anything about this?” he asks.

I shake my head.

He reaches out and cups my cheek. “Susanna, this is dangerous stuff. You shouldn’t be involved in it,” he chastises.

I glare at him. “You think I can’t handle myself?” I say, a little too loudly.

“No, I—”

“Just because I’m a princess and small, doesn’t mean I can’t kick someone’s ass. So, don’t even start with me,” I growl.

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He tries to curtail the smile that is creeping on his face.

“Hey,” I say, slapping his arm. “It’s not funny. I can kick ass. Hell, I can kick your ass, and I will if you don’t wipe that grin off your face.”

He laughs at that and stands up to his full height. “I’d like to see you try,” he says with a smirk.

I cock my head to one side. “Are you serious?” I ask.

“As a heart attack,” he answers.

“OK, pretty boy. Prepare for an ass whooping,” I say.

“Pretty boy? Ass whooping? Did they teach you that in princess school?” he teases.

“Oh, that’s it. You’re dead,” I say, standing up and getting in a fighting stance.

I fake a right hook and duck, waiting for him to take my bait, and he does. He whips me around and locks his arms around me. I use the standard kick and hand drop motion to get out of it.

“Impressive,” he says.

“Child’s play,” I say.

He reaches for my arm, and I twist up as he grabs me. I kick off the wall and flip over

him, landing on the bed on my knees. I am thankful I'm small and can tuck my bottom half or that would have hurt considering the low ceiling in here.

"Jesus, you aren't kidding," he says.

I stand and beckon him forward with my hand. He attempts to get me, but I duck and roll through his legs. He manages to grab my right ankle, and I twist my body, pushing into his right leg and causing him to fall to the ground. He pins me down with both hands and stares into my eyes.

"Now what?" he says.

"You should stop," I warn him.

"I need you to show me what you got," he says.

"You're not gonna like it," I say. He leans forward until our noses are almost touching.

"Try me," he says. I shrug and lean up to plant my lips on his. It's just enough distraction that I can knee him in the balls. He groans and rolls off me.

I grab an umbrella and stand, pressing it into his throat as he curls into a moaning ball on my floor. I hear movement in the hallway, and I clamp my hand over his mouth. There's a knock at my door.

"Anna?" I hear Pete's voice. "Everything OK in there?"

I put my finger over Logan's lips, and he nods with a grimace on his face. I actually feel a little bad because it looks like he's going to be sick. I stand and walk over to the door, cracking it open so Pete can see me.

“Sorry, Pete. I’m just doing a little tae kwon do practice in here,” I say.

He raises an eyebrow. “At one thirty in the morning?” he asks.

I shrug. “I’m jet-lagged, can’t sleep,” I explain.

“Well, just be careful. The nearest hospital is a good four-hour ride away,” he warns.

I nod. “Will do. Goodnight,” I say as I shut the door and look back down at Logan, who’s still in the fetal position clutching his manhood.

“Are you OK?” I whisper as I bend down. I’m suddenly tossed on my back, and Logan is again hovering over me on all fours.

“Damnit, Logan. That’s the oldest trick in the book,” I curse at him, annoyed with myself for falling victim to such an obvious ploy.

He winks. “You did get me pretty good, but never check on your enemy. That’s like rule number two,” he states.

“What’s rule number one?” I ask.

“Never fall for your enemy,” he says as he leans down and kisses me.

Chapter 15

I’m momentarily transported to another planet...I think. His lips are as amazing as I thought they would be the first time I saw him in person. I sigh against them, and he licks between my lips. It’s not my first kiss, but it feels like it. I tentatively swipe my tongue against his, and he makes a growling noise as he deepens the kiss, tilting his head to the side. He releases my wrists, and his hands go to my face, cradling it so he can get the access he wants. I find myself reaching out to run my fingers through his hair. I’ve wanted to do this for days now. His thick hair feels amazing. I push his head harder against mine, seeking more.

It feels so wrong to be kissing him, but I can’t stop myself. I remove my hands from his hair and run them down his body, feeling the wall of perfect muscles from his chest down his abdomen. He groans into my mouth as my hands hover just above his shorts.

He pulls back slightly and rests his forehead against mine. “We should stop this, Princess,” he says.

I try to pull him back down, but he pins my wrists again. “Logan,” I pout. “Please.”

We’re both breathing fast as we try to catch our breaths.

“I got carried away. Forgive me?” he asks.

I suddenly feel ashamed as though I did something wrong. “Fine,” I say. I let my body go limp, and he releases me, sitting up on his haunches between my legs. He runs a hand through his hair again as he looks down at me and then stands, offering me a hand. I don’t take it and instead stand on my own.

“I should head back to my cabin,” he says as he walks toward the door.

“Wait,” I say. “We still need to figure out what to do about...you know, everything.”

“Get some sleep, Your Highness. There’s nothing we can do about it right now,” he says as he opens the door and leaves. I stand there staring at it for a long moment. Part of me wants to follow him and part of me is so humiliated that I want to bury myself under a pillow until we dock. I sit back down, and then curl into a fetal position on the floor, hoping that the marine carpeting will suck me into another dimension.

Chapter 16

I wake with a start. I’m still lying on the floor. I’m momentarily disoriented as I rub my eyes. Memories of the previous night flood into my head like a tsunami. I sit up and groan. I’m an idiot. I fumble on the ground searching for my phone. Eventually, I find it on my bed next to my computer which is still up and running. I’m about to head out to the galley to get coffee when I notice one of my searches has a notification. My blood goes cold as I click on the small icon.

I freeze, contemplating what I’m reading. For a long moment, I hear nothing else, see nothing else. The words on the screen slowly start to come into focus like a word puzzle. M is here.

“Shit!” I whisper-yell to myself.

M has checked into a hotel on Nassau under one of his known pseudonyms. Clearly, he’s not worried about being spotted. That alone confuses me. Using his name to get through airport security, yes, I get that. It can be costly and time-consuming to get a proper fake passport, but this...well, it’s odd.

I sigh. Everything about my life at this moment is odd. The double life that I created that once seemed so easy to maintain is now an epic disaster. My two universes are about to collide, and the world will never be the same. I take a breath and garner my last semblance of bravery. It’s time to tell my brothers. I’m an idiot if I think I can do this on my own.

I walk out of my room and then quickly back in after I realize I’m still dressed in my clothes from yesterday. I shower and change. I grab a coffee from Vicky as I walk up to the deck. Thomas and Logan are discussing something, and my brothers and Mia are at the other end of the boat.

For a moment, I’m perplexed as to which direction to go. After weighing my options, I head toward Logan.

Thomas nods at me and is about to say something to Logan when Vicky calls him to help her with something below deck. He heads down, leaving Logan and me alone.

Logan looks like a deer in the headlights. He looks everywhere but at me.

I clear my throat, and he finally makes eye contact.

“We need to talk,” I say quietly.

“No, we don’t,” he says.

I raise an eyebrow. “I just told you there’s a bounty on your head, and you don’t think we need to discuss that?” I ask.

“Nope,” he says.

I sigh. Men.

“Logan, I know everything I dumped on you last night was...overwhelming, but I...you...have to be careful now,” I stammer as I try to search for the right words since telling him that I like him and don’t want him to die seems a little out of the question.

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“I’ll handle it,” he says gruffly as he turns to start preparing the boat for our final sail.

I place a hand on his arm, and he freezes. The wind whips his hair around, and I so desperately want to run my hands through it again. I pull my hand back in order to stop myself from doing that exact thing.

“I’m going to tell my brothers,” I whisper.

His eyes widen. “Really?” he asks.

I nod. “It’s been a long time coming, but you need their help, and I can’t keep this part of me a secret anymore,” I admit. “I’ve been fighting battles on my own for too long.”

Before I can talk myself out of it, I whip around and walk to the front of the boat. I clear my throat and my brothers look up at me.

“Hey, sister, what’s up?” Auggie says cheerfully, but his smile disappears when he sees the look on my face.

“I need to speak with you both,” I say to them. I look at Mia apologetically. “Alone...please.”

Mia nods and heads down toward Logan, who’s watching me like a hawk.

“What’s wrong, Suzy Q?” Chris asks, patting a cushion next to him.

I sit down and take a deep breath, and then I begin to tell them everything, every itty-bitty little detail of my secret life.

My brothers don't say a word while I speak. Their eyes are wide. Chris shakes his head when I talk about giving tips to Interpol a few times in the past. Auggie looks on the verge of a coronary the entire time I speak. I don't leave anything out, including the fact that all this started because I wanted to find our mother's missing crown.

When I finish, they remain silent for a very long time.

It's Chris who eventually clears his throat. "Wow," he says.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Anna!" Auggie finally manages. "Are you mad? You could have been killed!"

I glare at him, and he shuts up.

I'm shocked when Chris is the one to chastise him before I have the chance. "If you started this as a kid, and you have managed to evade all of us and, well, essentially the whole world, I'd say you are far, far more brilliant than I've ever given you credit for, little sister," he says, touching my shoulder. "You're a real-life superhero," he adds.

I giggle. "That's a bit of a stretch, but thank you, Chris. It means the world coming from my lion," I say, using my childhood nickname for him.

I look to Auggie. I can tell he's still pissed, but I'm taken aback for the second time when he pulls me in for a hug.

"I'm just glad you are alright. To think of all the things that might have happened," he says into my hair. He pushes me back to look into my eyes. "Chris is right. You

are bloody brilliant! Crazy, a bit reckless even, but brilliant,” he says finally flashing his world-class smile at me.

“So, all of this was a setup,” Chris says.

I smile guiltily. “Well, sort of, you did happen upon Logan’s services by some crazy coincidence,” I admit.

“Un-fucking-believable,” he murmurs.

“Why exactly are you telling us this now?” Chris asks, suddenly very serious, as though the reality that we are approaching an island with an assassin on it has just dawned on him.

“I-I need your help,” I admit quietly. It’s bittersweet that after all this time, my hand has been forced. I have to tell my secret to save a man that, if I’m being honest with myself, I’m falling for.

Auggie and Chris look at each other and back to me. Then they both glance over their shoulders toward Pete and Logan.

I bite my lip, afraid of what they will say.

It’s Auggie that grins first. “I feel a little like James Bond,” he says. I roll my eyes.

“Only, this is real, and we could actually get killed,” I say in a low voice.

“So, he knows?” Chris asks.

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I nod. “Yes, as I said, I told him last night,” I say.

“OK, what do we do? Do you have a plan?” Chris asks.

I shake my head. “We need to get Logan out of here. We can’t protect him on this island. The assassin that took the job is good, like really good. We need to take him home with us. Then we can figure out everything else,” I say. “We need to buy ourselves some time.”

Chris laughs. “You want to waltz home with a tanned, yacht captain in tow, into the palace, and you think Dad’s just gonna let that fly,” he says.

I glare at him. “Obviously, we’ll need some sort of story, and we’ll need to talk Logan into coming with us,” I add, biting my lip again.

Auggie puts up a hand. “Wait, he doesn’t know anything about your idea to take him home with us?” Auggie asks.

I shake my head.

Auggie runs a hand through his hair.

“Jesus, you do like to live dangerously,” he says.

I shrug. “Please, I need you to help me persuade him,” I beg as I put my hands together.

“He has a life here, Anna. He has friends, a business. You can’t expect a man to just drop everything because you toss him some crazy story about him being a prince and being a target for an assassin,” Auggie says.

“Well...I think he does actually believe me about the prince thing, but I agree, it’s hard to wrap one’s head around it. If I hadn’t spent years on the dark web, I’d have thought it was a little far-fetched too,” I say.

We are quiet again, all three of us in deep contemplation. Only the sound of the wind and water fill the void made by our lack of conversation.

“He’s a businessman, right?” Chris finally says.

Auggie and I look at him. “What if I were to suggest a business partner out our way? Ask him to come back with us,” Chris says.

“Like what type of business proposition?” I ask.

“Well, we’ve had a great week, right?” he asks.

We nod.

“What if we could offer that to other high-end clients who need a week to get away without all the pomp and circumstance,” he says.

I contemplate it for a moment and grin. “I like that idea,” I say.

“Good, cause it’s the only idea we have, and we dock in less than an hour,” he says, looking down at his dive watch. “I’ll talk to him.”

Chris stands, but before he walks away, he looks down at me.

“I’m glad you told us, Anna. I’m glad you trust us. You know we’ll always have your back, right?” he says.

Auggie puts a strong arm around me. “Always,” he repeats and kisses my brow.

“Thank you. I love you both to the moon and back,” I say, repeating a line my mother used to say to us when we were little. They both smile at me, and Auggie and I watch Chris walk over toward the wheel where Logan watches him approach.

I sit nervously waiting, chatting with Auggie, and occasionally glancing over at Logan and Chris who are in deep, deep conversation. It feels like a lifetime, and as land begins to approach, I feel my heart constricting further and further.

“Breathe,” Auggie says to me, stopping his story.

I let out a breath that I didn’t know I was holding and look back at Auggie. He takes my hand in his.

“I’m scared, Augs,” I admit to him.

“It’ll be alright, Suzy Q,” he says. “We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

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Just as he says that, Christian waves us over to him and Logan.

We stand and walk over, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't dragging my feet just a little. I now know how kids getting called to the principal or school director's offices must feel.

"You told them," Logan says to me when I'm close enough for him not to yell.

I freeze and look at him, unsure of what to say.

"Christian has offered me a business venture, but I had a sneaking suspicion that was offered after you divulged some interesting news," he says.

I nod. He holds out his hand to me, and I take it as he pulls me into an embrace.

"That was very brave of you. To spill your deepest, darkest secret in an effort to save my life," he whispers in my ear.

I pull back and fight the tears that threaten to spill down my cheeks. "I don't want you to die," I manage as I swallow a sob.

He places his hand under my chin and caresses my jaw. "I don't want to die either, Anna," he says with a bitter chuckle.

I close my eyes, and he kisses my forehead and pulls me back into a hug. I hear Chris clear his throat, and I suddenly realize we might have been a little too intimate in front of my brothers.

I pull back and step away, looking up at the sky so that I can get my emotions in check.

“I’ve accepted his offer, of course. It’s a great one. I can’t pass it up,” he says.

Relief floods every inch of my body, and I feel as though a ten-ton weight I didn’t know was there, was just lifted off my chest. I breathe freely for the first time in days.

“You’re lucky that this trip was the last one of the season before I turn the boat over to my partner, Chrissy. She runs shorter trips while I take time off each year,” he explains.

“I didn’t know you had a partner,” I say trying to keep a frown off my face.

“Yep, she’s been my business partner since she moved down here about three years ago. She’s one of the best sailors I’ve ever met. She and her teenage son needed a clean start, and I offered them one,” he says.

I feel my frown turn into a smile. “That’s nice of you,” I reply.

He smirks. “I suppose it was, but having been a teenager on this island with my single mom, I sort of felt it was appropriate to return the kindness,” he says with a wink.

“I’m going to arrange everything with our security. We had planned on leaving early tomorrow morning, but I’m going to see if we can leave tonight,” Chris says as he heads below deck where Pete has just gone.

“Chris...” I start.

He holds up his hand. “Don’t worry, this is staying between the four of us...for now. Although, I’m not sure going back to Nassau is the best idea,” he says.

“It’s the closest airport, and we need to get out of here,” I point out to him.

He nods, and he disappears below.

“I guess I should go pack,” I say as I look at the shoreline which seems to be sneaking up faster than I expected.

“I’ll get Thomas to take us in. I need to pack too, apparently,” he says to me with another wink.

“I assume you’ll need to go to your apartment before we leave?” I ask.

He raises an eyebrow. “How do you know I live in an apartment?” he asks. I know that he knows that I know where he lives, but he’s making me say it. Fine.

“I went there,” I mutter.

“Excuse me, I didn’t catch that,” he says.

I let my shoulders droop. “I went there,” I say loudly.

“Did you now?” he asks.

I nod and feel the heat creep up my face and neck.

“You are quite the little spy, aren’t you?” he states.

I shrug. “I’m...I was...” I trail off because I honestly don’t know what to say.

He touches my face, and I look up at him.

“I don’t know why you’ve done all of this, but you may have just saved my life. And for that, I’ll always be indebted to you,” he says.

I frown. “I haven’t saved your life yet. Let’s not count our chickens before they hatch,” I point out. “M is somewhere on that island,” I say, pointing to it. “And in about fifteen minutes, we’ll be on it too.”

Something dark crosses his face. “You better get packed then,” he says to me.

I nod and head down to my cabin. It only takes me about ten minutes to pack my belongings. Normally, I have people that do this for me. It feels oddly liberating to pack my own things. Although I find myself packing it just as the palace staff would. It’s usually Bianca who packs my luggage. She’s also the maid appointed to my apartment. She and another woman, Julia, tend to my rooms and my belongings. I shake my head at the strangeness of it all. And then I think about Logan. He’s about to see all of that for the very first time.

I've never really thought about it through the eyes of an outsider. Most people who visit the palace are either royalty themselves, or very, very wealthy. They are used to staff surrounding them all the time, taking care of their every desire. Logan won't be used to this. Logan does everything for himself.

An idea strikes me as I zip my suitcase closed, jamming the top down so the zipper will work. I go to Chris's room and knock on the door.

Mia opens it. "Yes, Your Highness?" she asks, stepping back to let me in. I can see the hurt on her face. She knows she's being left out of something, and she doesn't like it.

"Chris?" I say to my brother who finishes zipping his own bag before looking up at me.

"Yes?" he asks.

"I wonder if, perhaps, we should take our guest to the summer palace. I mean, let's be honest, our home is a bit...overwhelming," I say.

Chris is silent as he ponders my idea. "I think you might be right. Mia, can you take care of setting up the arrangement for Auggie, Anna, Logan, and myself and our staff to relocate to the summer palace upon our arrival back home?" Chris says to Mia.

"Of course," she chirps as she pulls out her phone. I see the bars and realize our arrival is imminent as she has cell signal. My stomach drops, and I feel queasier than when we sailed through the storm.

I step back into the hallway and find Pete.

"Everything alright, Anna?" he asks. I nod. "I hear that Logan will be joining us."

I nod again. “Yes, Pete. He will,” I say and begin to walk up to the deck. He gently takes my arm.

“Susanna,” he says. Pete seldom says my full name. I pause and look back at him. “I don’t know what you are up to, but I do know you are up to something. Please, be careful.”

“Pete, you don’t have to worry about anything. We’ll be fine. In fact, I just suggested we all head to the summer palace, so that Logan is a bit more comfortable,” I half lie to him.

He raises an eyebrow. “And so the king doesn’t grill him?” he asks.

I shrug. “I’m sure Daddy will grill him regardless. It’s what he does,” I point out.

“Very true,” he says. Before he lets go, he adds, “I’m serious, Anna, be careful.”

I put a hand on his and squeeze. “I will,” I murmur as I pull away and head back to the deck. I can’t help thinking that Pete and Lucas are going to be royally pissed off when they find out what’s going on.

Logan sees me and ushers me over. We’re very close to the marina now.

“I don’t want you near me until we’re on that plane tonight. Do you understand?” he says.

I frown. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not leaving you. I can come help you pack,” I say. “Keep a lookout.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not safe. If what you say is true, then this M is on the island wanting to kill me. Let’s not play Russian roulette, OK?” he says.

I frown. “Logan—”

He holds up a hand to stop me. “I know you are capable of protecting yourself. You proved that to me last night. And we all know how damn smart you are, but for once in your freaking royal life, can you just listen to a commoner? Stay at your uncle’s and don’t leave,” he commands. I’m a little taken aback by the authoritarian nature of his voice. I cock my head and study him. I grin.

“Why are you grinning at me like a fool?” he asks.

“Because you’re more royal than you know,” I say as I walk back toward the salon.

“I’m what?” he asks.

“You’ll see,” I say with a wink and disappear below deck, leaving him gaping at me.

Chapter 17

I admit, the thought of Logan not being in my sight, is making me nervous. I had Lucas and Auggie’s guard, Patrick, drive him to his apartment after everything was squared away with the sailboat. My brothers were antsy to get out of there, but I made them wait.

Now, I’m waiting and pacing the living room of my Uncle Hans’s home. Auggie has opted for one last swim in the pool. Mia, Shannon, and Paolo are all on their phones and tablets, clearly making our travel plans.

“Why don’t you go relax?” Shannon asks me as she glances over to see me walk the same path for the hundredth time in the past thirty minutes.

“I’m good,” I say. Shannon mutters something under her breath and sighs. I hate keeping things from her. She’s one of the few people outside my family that I trust completely, but this secret...well, I don’t want her involved.

My phone pings and I jump, looking down to see a text message from Sonya. I click on it.

Sonya: Soooo? How’s the trip? Radio silence?

I laugh. Leave it to Sonya to make me feel better.

Me: The sailboat was amazing! It was the best week I’ve had in forever!

Sonya: Do tell?

Me: Shut it.

Sonya: So there is a man?

Me: No, not like you think.

Sonya: Oh, well, I’m not a virgin, so I think.

Me: Touché, beotch.

Sonya: (Kissy face emoji)

Me: (middle finger emoji)

Me: I'll fill you in when I get back.

Sonya: Obviously

I roll my eyes and resume my pacing. My mind races through images of Logan's apartment, which I may have just found the blueprints for online while I've been waiting, and every security issue there. It's a death trap! I'm about to make Pete take me over there when I hear a car pull up into the compound. I run toward the door and look through the peephole. It's Lucas and Patrick.

I run outside.

"Where's Logan?" I ask, suddenly feeling very unsettled.

"He had to run some errands. He insisted we let him go on his own," Patrick says.

"No! That's not the plan!" I yell.

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They look at each other like I've gone crazy. I don't wait to hear their excuse, I run inside and straight into Chris.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Logan...he's without security," I say in between breaths.

"Shit," Chris curses, peering beyond me to see Patrick and Lucas walking in from the car. Chris puts a hand on my shoulder.

"I'll go," he says.

"Fuck no, you won't, heir to the throne. That's the last thing I need. I'm not using my spare status," Auggie's voice echoes behind us. We both turn to see him in his swim trunks.

"Augs," Chris starts.

"Get out of my way, brother," he snarls. He places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "It'll be fine, Suzy Q. I'll go get your man."

I glare at him. "He's not my man," I mumble.

"Right, whatever you want to think. I'm on it though," he says as he walks past us toward his room. A minute later he's back in shorts and a t-shirt. "Patrick, please drive me to where Logan said he'd be."

I watch Patrick and Lucas get back in the car and drive off with Auggie.

“Well, that’ll be interesting,” Chris chimes in from next to me. I look at him with a raised eyebrow.

“You do know it’s obvious to everyone else that you two have something going on, right?” he says.

I groan. “We don’t,” I say, which is mostly true.

“Well, if that’s the truth, then it’s only a matter of time before you do,” he quips as he walks away.

I head to my closet and log in to my computer. I search for any trace of M, knowing that it’s useless but doing it anyhow. After confirming that I won’t find anything, by indeed not finding anything, I pull up a link that had the original post about the bounty. It’s no longer there, the link is now completely dead, not just empty like before. Whoever is behind this is smart, very smart. I pull up my tracker I have on Auggie’s phone. Little does my family know that, in addition to the trackers our security has on our phones, I have my own special trackers. I watch the car move toward the downtown area on Nassau. It stops in front of a bank. I bite my lip as I wait for it to move. I could hack the bank’s security cameras, but most likely they’ll be gone before I get them up on my computer. So, I sit and wait, staring at the screen, willing the little blue dot that is Auggie to move.

It’s the first time that I’ve felt helpless in a very, very long time, and I don’t like it. This part of my life has been one hundred percent in my control and with a flick of a switch I changed all of that. My heart pounds with all the what-ifs and my palms are sweaty. I repeatedly wipe them on my shorts.

Then a thought pops into my mind. “The security audio,” I whisper. I’ve already

tapped our security team's audio. I did that a long time ago. I pull up my feed and listen.

"The tiger is still sitting with Logan," Patrick says into the mic. "The tiger" is security's nickname for Auggie. My dad is "lion," Chris is "cub," and I am "falcon."

"What's taking them so long?" Lucas asks.

"Apparently, the bank didn't have our currency and had to get it from another bank. They are bringing it over here," Patrick explains.

"I don't like that," Lucas says. Good man, I think.

"Fine, I'll get tiger and Logan out of here," Patrick says. I hear him talking to Auggie and Logan. There's apparently an arrangement to have the money transferred to an account instead. And then, I hear Patrick announce they are approaching the car.

They get inside, and I see the blue dot move. I breathe. I'm about to sign off when I hear Lucas say, "I think we're being followed."

I freeze and listen to them talk, as Lucas drives a crazy route back here. I want to be there, helping, knowing. But all I can do is helplessly listen as Lucas and Patrick discuss where to turn and speed and calling in for backup.

I hear Pete leave with Nico, and I stay glued to my computer.

"We're on our way," Pete says. I listen as they ask for the whereabouts of the first car. I'm barely aware that I'm biting my nails.

"In sight," Pete says as they approach the other car. I hear a screech of tires, and then I hear Lucas say, "I'm pulling in here."

“I just reported the license plate to the local police,” Nico says.

“The car is continuing on at a high speed,” Lucas says.

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“We’ll follow you back to the compound,” Pete says to Lucas.

I throw down my earphones and run to the front door. The second the cars pull up, I run out, not caring that the gate is still closing, just caring that my brother and Logan are safe.

Pete barely throws the car in park when he runs at me, essentially shielding me with his body as the gate closes.

“Anna! What the fuck were you thinking?!” he yells at me. But I’m not listening, I’m staring at a rather shaken Auggie and Logan who are emerging from the other car. I break free of Pete and run to my brother, throwing my arms around him.

“Are you OK?” I ask them, pulling back and then hugging Logan.

“We’re fine,” my brother mutters. “Not the first time a crazy has tailed us.”

I glare at him.

“We’re fine,” Logan reiterates, giving me a squeeze before letting me go.

Pete comes back toward me. “Change of plans, are you packed?” he asks.

“Aside from a few items, yes. Why?” I ask him.

“We’re leaving now,” he states.

We're ushered back into our uncle's home and within minutes our staff has us packed up into different cars, and we are heading toward the airport.

"We'll get you sorted with your bank when we're settled in Norddale," my brother reassures Logan. Logan just nods and stares out the window.

We pull up to the private jet belonging to a friend of my father's and board it. It'd been a last-minute switch, as my uncle's plane wasn't yet ready for us. I take in the opulent surroundings of the aircraft. It is extravagant even by my standards.

I feel like everything moves in fast-forward as the flight crew readies the plane. And then, we're airborne. I'm sitting next to Shannon. Auggie and Logan sit across from us. Mia and Chris sit with Paolo and Pete and the rest of our security detail sits behind us.

A flight attendant offers us food, but not a single person accepts it. The adrenaline rush has people tapping their legs, drumming their fingers on the tables, and staring out into the clouds. When I finally feel my body lose its energy, I fall fast asleep.

Chapter 18

Arriving home is not in the least bit peaceful. Thirty minutes before landing, I hear a murmur from our security team. I turn around, and they are all on their phones. I look at my brothers who are also taking in the sudden uptake in action behind us.

"What's going on?" Chris asks.

It's Cain that comes forward to speak with us.

"There's a situation. We'll need to transport you all immediately to the summer palace when we arrive. The king will be meeting us there as will your aunt and

uncle,” Cain says.

I feel the color drain from my face because the last time our entire family was whisked away to the summer palace, my mother had been killed in a car accident. Cain sees my face and touches my arm to soothe me.

“It’s alright, Your Highness. No one has been killed. Your uncle’s plane, the one we were meant to take home today, exploded on the runway a little while ago. Local authorities are still at the scene, but it appears that explosives were used,” Cain explains. Something about his American accent makes his news seem less official, less horrendous. It takes a few seconds for his words to sink in, but when they do my eyes go wide.

“Oh, god!” I exclaim. “That could have been us!” I am overcome by profound guilt at the thought that I may have caused this.

“I know. That’s why everyone is going to the summer palace. We’ll have your staff bring over any belongings that you’ll need for the foreseeable future. I’m warning you now, security will be very tight. The normal shenanigans”—Cain pauses and looks between Auggie and me—“will not be condoned.”

Auggie nods his understanding, as do I.

“I’ll debrief you further once we land, but right now our team has work to do,” he says as he turns and walks back to the rest of our security team.

We all stare at each other for a moment as we contemplate the information thrust upon us moments ago. Chris is the first to turn his cell phone back on. I hear the pings of messages popping up on it. Then it rings. Chris picks up immediately.

“Yes. Yes, Father. I understand. Cain alerted us. No, we were all sleeping. I don’t

think anyone had turned their phones back on. Yes. Right. We'll see you shortly then," Chris says as I hear the one side of his conversation with our father, the king.

"Apparently our father was a bit concerned," Chris says with a huff.

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“Oops, forgot to turn my phone on,” Auggie says.

“No shit, numb nuts,” Chris swears at him.

Auggie glares back.

“Oh, for the love of god, this is not the time for a brotherly pissing match. Pull yourselves together, you idiots! This is serious,” I say to them.

They turn, slightly shocked that I’ve yelled at them, I think. Then, I get knowing looks that tell me we are about to go to the back room on this plane. I stand.

“Your Highness, please stay seated,” Pete says to me.

I roll my eyes and look at my brother before sitting again.

“We will talk at the palace,” I say to them.

“Fuck yes, we’ll be talking at the palace,” Chris says in a low menacing tone that has me tensing.

I seldom see Chris angry, but he is absolutely seething. I shrink in my seat, hoping I can disappear because, right now, I feel like I’m the bad omen that’s been cast upon every person on this plane. I struggle to wrap my head around how M could have known about us or the plane. Or if it was M that blew up the plane. The mystery that I thought was straight forward just got a hundred times more complicated.

I don't have too much time to contemplate this as we begin landing. As soon as the plane is on the runway, our security team goes into overdrive. As is standard royal protocol in our country, we are each escorted under heavy guard to a separate car. The cars have tinted bulletproof glass. I no sooner slide in when the door opens on the other side, and Logan also gets in next to me.

I look at him, surprised he's with me.

"Pete said to get in this car," he explains. Clearly, the look of shock on my face has prompted his explanation.

Pete and Lucas get in next. We drive off with a car in front and behind us. I notice my brothers' cars all go in opposite directions. The security is not taking any chances of the three of us being together on the road.

I'm silent as I listen to Lucas talking into his earpiece. My mind is running in circles. I don't notice my leg is tapping until I feel Logan's warm hand on my thigh. I still and look up at him.

"It's going to be OK, Anna," he says in a low voice. Something about the soothing tone of his words brings tears to my eyes. In a flash, he unbuckles his seatbelt and slides across the seats until he's next to me. He pulls me into his arms and begins to stroke my back.

"It's OK," he repeats. I nod against his chest, feeling overwhelmed by the events of the last twenty-four hours.

I don't want to admit that I'm scared. I don't want him to see me like this. I want him to think of me as strong and independent. I muster all my strength and pull back from him.

“Are you alright?” he asks, cupping my face.

I nod and bite my lip.

“I’m fine,” I say, taking a deep breath. “I’m just tired. It’s been a long twenty-four hours.”

“Yes, it has,” he agrees. “You should rest when you get home.”

I want to explain that the summer palace isn’t my home. It’s more like a vacation property, but I keep my mouth shut and turn to look out the window. We take the back-country route onto the estate. There are four different ways to get there. The main palace has a wall around it, dating back into the sixteen hundreds. The grounds surrounding it are mostly fields, some forests, and a few small gardens. There’s one entrance with a gatehouse and second entrance with guest quarters. The other two roads in look more like glorified trails. We take the one through the fields. It’s a ten-minute drive up to the wall of the palace. There are ruins of a few old buildings out in the field, but otherwise, it’s just tulips as far as the eye can see.

“This is beautiful,” Logan murmurs as he stares out at the bright colors of the flowers.

“This is the summer palace,” I reply.

“Where?” he asks, looking around.

I point to where a cluster of trees hides the large manor house. He squints.

“You’ll see it in a moment,” I say as the car weaves around the fields and begins driving through the small cluster of trees.

We pop out at the base of the wall and hug it as we drive around to the front gate. A guard stands at the gate, he presses some buttons inside his guard stand before the doors open, giving Logan his first view of the summer palace. I've never considered it impressive. It seems quaint compared to the royal palace but seeing it through his eyes gives its grandeur new meaning.

“Holy hell,” he whispers.

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“It’ll do,” I say with a small forced smile.

“You live here?” he asks, finally turning his gaze to me.

I laugh. “No. We spend a few months here during the year, but we live in the royal palace in the city,” I explain.

He frowns. “You have more than one home?” he asks.

I nod. “My family has several homes and apartments,” I explain.

“So, this is how the other half lives,” he quips.

I roll my eyes. “It’s not exactly like you’re living in squalor,” I say.

He shrugs. “True, but it’s not like this,” he says with a whistle as we stop, and our doors are opened by the footmen. I nod to the staff and make my way up the stairs.

I see my brothers’ cars pulling in the front gate before I turn back and nearly run straight into my father. I step back, and he grabs my arm to keep me from falling.

I launch myself into his arms, and he grips me tightly, laying small kisses on my hair and forehead. I squeeze his waist, and he squeezes back.

I pull away and look up at him. I swear there’s a hint of tears in his eyes, but it quickly fades.

“We’re OK,” I assure him.

“I know. I’ve been fully debriefed. I’m just very thankful that you weren’t on that plane,” he says as he swallows.

“Me too,” I agree.

My father looks past me, and I see that he has noticed Logan. Chris and Auggie, however, distract him as they walk up to him. He takes each into an embrace, foregoing all formalities. At this moment, he’s a father, worried about his children. After a moment, he pulls back from Auggie and looks at Logan again.

“Father, this is Logan Winters,” Auggie says.

“Yes, I know. Chris sent word. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Logan. I’m sorry you were forced to come with my children here. I had instructed everyone be taken here immediately upon arrival. I’m sure my staff can sort out arrangements for your stay later,” my father says. It’s not a royal custom to shake hands. It’s in this moment that I realize this is Logan’s first time meeting a royal in a formal setting. He has no idea what to do. I see him nod and look to me. Fortunately, my father picks up on the cues faster than I do. He stretches out a hand, and Logan shakes it. I want to laugh as the whole thing is so painfully inelegant.

“A pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I’ll be more than happy to stay wherever you see fit,” Logan says, taking his cue from when he first met us.

“Father, I’d like to be debriefed immediately. As for Logan, he is our guest, and if it’s alright, I’d prefer he stay here with us,” Chris says to my father.

“I suppose that will do for now,” my father says before nodding at Marcus who ushers us all inside.

We're shown to my father's study. Marcus pulls up a screen and turns on a computer. The images bring everyone to silence. It's my uncle's plane completely engulfed in flames. It appears the back end is nearly completely missing.

"The plane is a total loss, obviously. We've been in touch with Hans and Lara. They were at their estate in France for the weekend. They will, of course, come to join us later today. We have investigators starting to go through the crime scene as well as local authorities and Interpol. We don't have details yet, but I've been told that our first full report can be expected tomorrow. Security has asked everyone to stay within the walls of the palace until a new security plan can be implemented. Mr. Winters is welcome to stay here if he chooses. Otherwise, we can arrange hotel and security measures for him," Marcus says to us.

My father raises a hand at that. "Mr. Winters is a welcomed guest of my children. He can remain here with us. As for Lara and Hans, please keep me posted on their arrival status," my father says.

"Of course, Your Majesty. I do believe you have a call with the prime minister in five minutes," he adds.

And that's our cue to leave. Other than jaw-dropping video footage, I feel like we've learned nothing new. I want to speak with my father, but I know now is not the time.

"I'll show Mr. Winters to his quarters, Your Highness," Shannon says to me.

"Yes, please, thank you," I reply. Logan gives me a tight smile and nod before following Shannon up the steps to the guest wing.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle! Look who it is!" I hear a voice exclaim behind me. This makes me smile for the first time in hours. I turn to see Tessa standing with her hands on her hips, a giant grin on her face. She opens her arms, and I go into them,

giving her a strong squeeze.

“Your room is all set. I’m making your favorite meal for dinner. Go get settled, and then you must come catch me up on your recent trip,” Tessa says.

“Absolutely,” I reply. She lets me go, and I see a flash of worry in her eyes but the smile stays firmly planted on her face. She nods and heads back toward the kitchen.

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Tessa has worked here for years. She's originally from somewhere in the southern part of the United States. She was a nanny for us when we were very young, but as we grew, we needed tutors more than nannies. She ended up helping in the kitchen at the royal palace. It wasn't long before her cooking abilities were clear to my father. He asked her to stay on but to help run the kitchens at the summer palace. She took the job and has been here ever since. Next to Helga and my aunt, I'd say she's the closest thing I've had to a mother since my mom's death. She was still my nanny then, and she smothered me with love during the two years after the accident. My father was reluctant to remove her from her duties, but I think Auntie Lara talked him into it. Having her in the kitchens of the royal palace helped me with her transition from being in my daily life, since I could still visit with her. Tessa has one sister and two nieces who still live in the States. She goes on a vacation once a year for a month when we aren't here so that she can see them. I remember asking her why she never married, and she told me that she was in love with her soul mate, and he was killed while serving in the military. I guess she never got over it.

I'm deep in thought as I look around my room and find that everything has already been put away. I grab a shower and walk into the sprawling closet. My clothes from the royal palace are hanging neatly as though I've been here for days. I roll my eyes. I wouldn't have thought twice about it except for this last week, doing things for myself, no staff waiting on me, it's been...liberating in a way.

I throw on an oversized, lightweight sweater and some leggings. Since I can't leave the palace, I may as well take advantage of it and wear something comfortable. I head downstairs using the staff entrance. It's a small stairwell hidden in the wall at the end of the wing. It leads straight down to a hallway where the laundry is done and then into the kitchen. I waltz inside and see Tessa is busy at the counter. She must sense

me there because she pulls out her famous cookie jar and whips around, placing it in front of me. She grins and lifts the lid, and I breathe in the aroma of her famous oatmeal raisin cookies. The woman can bake, and she makes all kinds of amazing desserts, but these cookies are my absolute favorite in the whole wide world.

“Go on now, Anna,” she urges as she shoves the jar closer to me. I laugh and take two out of it.

“That’s more like it,” she says with a grin as she goes back to her cooking. I’m inundated with smells, fabulous mouth-watering smells.

I take a bite of the first cookie and close my eyes. I moan as my taste buds savor the perfect combination of spices.

“I’ll have what she’s having,” Logan’s voice comes from behind me, and I jump, nearly choking on the cookie.

He claps me on the back. “You alright?” he asks.

I cough and nod. “Fine,” I say hoarsely as I dislodge a piece of cookie from my throat. I swallow it, and before I can ask, Tessa sets a glass of apple juice down in front of me. I drink it all.

“That’s my girl. Now, who is your friend?” she asks, eyeing Logan up and down.

“Oh, uh, this is Logan Winters,” I say to her. “Logan, this is Tessa Higgins.”

“Well, nice to meet you. Have a cookie,” she says, pushing the jar over in front of the seat next to me. He sits and takes a cookie.

I watch as his eyes close, and he moans. It does strange things to me. I imagine what

those moans would sound like if we were...my mind suddenly flies back to the present as Tessa stands staring at me while I stare at Logan.

“I’m sorry, what’d you say?” I ask her.

She gives me one of her knowing looks. “I asked how you two met,” she repeats with a raised eyebrow. Shit. I know that there’ll be a Spanish Inquisition later from her.

“Logan was the captain on the cruise we took in the Bahamas,” I explain. “Chris is working on a business endeavor and asked Logan to join us here to discuss it. Things sort of got a little crazy because of Uncle Hans’s plane, and well, here we are.”

Her eyes go cold when I mention the plane. “Well, I’m just glad none of y’all were on it,” she says.

“These are amazing, Ms. Higgins,” Logan says after finishing one cookie and going for another.

“Thank you, Logan. Please call me Tessa,” she says to him.

“So, Tessa, what special meal do you have planned?” I ask, intentionally changing the subject.

“Lobster mac and cheese, tomato soup, blackened chicken salad, and corn muffins,” she says.

I grin. When we were having a bad day, even when she was our nanny, she’d go to the kitchen and whip us up what she called “comfort food.” It usually revolved around mac and cheese. As we grew older, she experimented with all kinds of mac and cheese. Lobster is our agreed upon favorite, although personally, I love the classic plain mac and cheese.

“American food?” Logan says with surprise in his voice.

“Sugar, where do you think I’m from?” she says with a laugh.

“No...well, yeah. I just mean I didn’t expect to eat Southern comfort foods here at the palace,” he stammers.

She laughs and turns back to the soup. “Well, I raised those kids to love good Southern cooking, so naturally when I get them all here together, I tend to spoil them a bit. His Majesty doesn’t mind. Secretly, I think he loves my cooking,” she says.

I take one last cookie and stand up. “I’m going to see if Daddy’s done with his phone call,” I say to her as I practically skip over and give her another hug. She kisses my cheek.

“I’m glad you’re here, sweet pea,” she says using the nickname that only she and my father use.

“It’s nice to be home,” I say to her. And what I really mean is that being with Tessa is home, not the summer palace, but those are things royals don’t say out loud. We’re taught at a young age to lock our emotions away. My father is probably more tolerant of us showing them than most kings, but still, there’s a formality expected, especially with the staff, no matter how we feel about them. Only when I’m alone with Tessa, do I completely let down my guard.

I leave Logan chatting with her as I make my way down the great hall and back toward my father’s study. I knock on the door, but I find it open. My father is at his desk, looking at his computer screen intently as Marcus hovers behind him. The look on their faces tells me whatever they are viewing is not anywhere near warm, fluffy kittens.

“Daddy?” I ask.

He looks up and gives me a nod.

“I’m sorry to intrude. I was just wondering if you’ve learned any more since we were debriefed,” I ask.

He shakes his head. “We’re just viewing video footage from the local news. I promise I’ll keep you all informed once I know anything, Anna,” he says in a serious tone.

“Thank you,” I reply, and I walk back out, leaving them staring at the screen. I’m about to head back up to my room to grab my computer and find my secret hiding spot when Logan walks up to me.

“Do I get the grand tour?” he asks, holding out an arm for me to link mine with. There’s not much that could pull me away from my computer and curiosity at this moment, but Logan may be my kryptonite. I put my arm through his and escort him down the grand hall.

“You want the five-cent tour or ten-cent tour?” I ask.

“Well, I want to see it all, of course,” he replies.

I slowly walk him through each room, pointing out famous pieces of art, and the history of various artifacts and furniture. We spend the better part of the next hour walking the entire palace. I hear the buzz of the dinner bell.

“What’s that?” he asks.

I grin. “Dinner,” I explain.

“Fancy,” he says.

I shrug.

“Come on, I’m starving,” I say to him as I practically drag him down to the dining hall. I must admit, it is an entertaining sight to see the royal family dressed down and eating American food while sitting at a three-hundred-year-old table whose matching chairs are leafed in gold.

“You’ve outdone yourself,” my father says to Tessa who bows and takes her leave, but not before giving me a wink and raised eyebrow that tells me I’ll be needing to chat with her later. I give her a small nod, and she exits.

“I take it you have found your accommodations acceptable?” my father says to Logan.

“Yes, very much, Your Majesty,” he says, trying to use a more proper vernacular.

“Father, any news?” Chris interjects.

My father shakes his head. “I imagine we won’t know much more before tomorrow morning,” he states.

“Well, please—”

My father holds up his hand, silencing Chris. “I understand that you all want information, as do I. But we’ll just have to be patient,” he says.

That shuts up everyone. My father asks Logan polite questions, as his royal etiquette kicks in, while the rest of us eat in silence, except for a few statements about our trip.

Chapter 19

After dinner, my father excuses himself, leaving us all staring at each other.

“Well, that was fucking awkward,” Auggie quips.

Chris groans. “Augs, shut up,” he mutters.

Auggie stands. “I’m going to the lounge for a drink if anyone cares to join me,” he announces as he walks out of the dining hall.

I look at Chris who looks anything but pleased. “I’m just going to go up to bed, I think,” I say as I stand.

“Night, Anna,” Chris says to me as he also gets up. He meets me at the end of the long mahogany table and gives me a kiss on my cheek.

“Night,” I reply with a yawn.

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I hear Logan push back from the table. I turn to him.

“You going to join Auggie?” I ask.

“No, I think I could use some sleep, too,” he admits.

I nod, and we all leave the room together. Chris excuses himself to grab a cup of tea in the kitchen, and I head up the grand staircase with Logan behind me. We reach the landing, and I see Logan hesitate. There are guards placed throughout the palace because of the plane incident. I could easily have one of them show Logan to his room, but I decide I’d rather do it myself.

I can’t help the grin that suddenly erases the frown on my face. “Lost?” I ask him.

He sighs. “I do believe this summer palace is a little big for my liking,” he says.

“Follow me,” I say to him as I lead him down the hall and in the opposite direction of my room.

“I can’t imagine growing up here,” he says to me as I lead him in the right direction.

I shrug. “I don’t know any different,” I explain.

“You must have been able to play hide-and-go-seek for hours,” he contemplates.

I laugh. “We did, on occasion,” I admit. “Here you go,” I say as I stop in front of his door, after turning a corner. I open the door and put out my arm.

“Would you like to come in?” he asks me. I freeze because I have absolutely no idea what to do. I look down the hallway where a guard is walking in the opposite direction from us, but he’s far enough away to not hear Logan’s question.

“I-I...” I trail off as words fail me. Didn’t he say we needed to not take this friendship to another level and now he’s wanting me in his bedroom. He must sense my conflict because he grins.

“Just to talk and have a nightcap,” he assures me.

“Oh, uh, sure,” I say, following him inside his room.

The guest room is one of the larger ones. We enter a large sitting area. It’s separated from the bedroom and bathroom beyond by two giant French doors that are ornately carved. Each panel of the door has a different inlaid wood design. I stare at them a while because I realize that I’ve never taken the time to study the sheer beauty of them before.

“Scotch OK?” Logan asks.

“Uh, yes,” I answer, suddenly feeling silly being served by my guest. But Logan seems to have made himself at home as he walks over to a side table and pours us each a glass of scotch.

“The doors are beautiful,” he says, noting my intense gaze.

“They are. I so seldom come in here, I’d forgotten about them,” I say. “They were originally part of a castle. My mother bought them at auction when I was little.”

“I imagine every square inch of this place has a story behind it,” he says as he walks over to me and hands me the crystal tumbler. I take a sip and feel the liquid burn a

path down my throat.

“You must be tired,” I note.

He shrugs. “I could use a little company. One could get lost in this place and never be found,” he says.

“Hardly,” I say with a laugh. “The grounds on the other hand...”

“I look forward to exploring them...when we are cleared to do so,” he adds.

I give him a tight smile. “I’m sorry,” I say quietly. My eyes focus on his shoes as I’m too embarrassed to look up at him.

“Why?” he asks. My eyes follow the sound of his voice, and I find him looking intently down at me.

“For all of this. I was foolish to think I could play at being a spy and rescue you. And I let my stubborn drive to keep my worlds separated lead me instead of my intuition. I’m not sorry that you’re safe, Logan. I just am sorry you’ve had to deal with all of this,” I say to him.

He takes my glass from my hand and sets it down on a table next to his. He clasps my hands in his and stares at me. His eyes boring into my soul.

“I’m not sorry. Do I wish we had met under different circumstances? Yes. Do I regret meeting you? No. This is all...well, it’s a lot to wrap my head around,” he admits. He releases my hands, and I immediately crave his touch.

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“Come sit, tell me about Princess Susanna,” he says. I sit down next to him. The silky fabric of the eighteenth-century sofa feels cool against my skin. I can smell the oaky scent of his cologne. The room falls quiet as he examines me.

“W-what do you want to know?” I stammer, suddenly feeling a little shy, which is very unlike me.

“Tell me something that no one knows,” he commands.

I square my shoulders and look at him. I think for a moment pondering what to say. Now that my secret is out in the open, or at least known by him and my brothers, there are not many things that are just mine. “I once fell off my horse while galloping,” I offer.

He raises an eyebrow but remains silent letting me finish my story.

“I was riding Mister Jenkins. We were galloping right here, out in the south field, and he was spooked by a fox that ran across our path. I fell off and twisted my ankle rather badly. I was so afraid father wouldn’t let me ride anymore, that I forced myself back on the horse once he calmed down and rode him back to the stables. I told my father that I had tripped on a rock in the garden,” I say.

“And you never told anyone?” he asks.

I laugh. “Well, until now,” I say to him as I peer up at him from beneath my lashes. “So?” I ask.

He cocks his head to the side and gives me a boyish, questioning look. “So what?” he asks.

I laugh and take another sip of the scotch. “Don’t I get to hear a deep dark secret of yours?” I ask as I cross my legs. I see his eyes travel down my body and back up again. I feel chills run through me at the intensity in his gaze.

He laughs. “I’m afraid my deep dark secrets pale in comparison to yours,” he replies with a smirk.

“Well, drastic times call for drastic measures,” I say.

“Like leading a double life?” he presses.

I shrug. “I...needed freedom, something that was just for me,” I try to put into words my thoughts.

“Like dabbling on the dark web and bringing down international criminals?” he muses.

“Well, you make it sound so much more exciting than it is,” I reply.

“Anna, did you never contemplate for a moment just how dangerous your ‘hobby’ was?” he asks. His face changes and I can tell he’s quite serious now.

I take a moment, sipping on the scotch again. Allowing the burning sensation in my throat to consume me as I try not to think about my “dangerous hobby.”

“I never thought of it as dangerous,” I admit.

“Anna, you are a god damned princess, for Christ’s sake! You could have been killed

or blackmailed,” he says.

I shrug. “So, you doubt my abilities, then?” I question him, feeling my pride getting the better of me.

He groans. “No. I think you are too brilliant for your own good,” he says. He pauses, and I wait for him to continue. In the five seconds of silence, all I hear is the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner. The palace is eerily quiet at this hour. My eyes drift back to his as he opens his mouth to continue.

“Telling your brothers and me what was going on is the smartest thing that I think you’ve done in a very long time,” he confesses. It stings a bit to hear this from him, but sometimes the truth hurts, or so I’ve learned.

“Truth?” I ask. He doesn’t move but continues to stare at me. “It feels good to tell someone. The burden of keeping it to myself was overwhelming at times...and a bit lonely,” I admit.

“What’s the family heirloom that you’ve been searching for?” he asks. I’m a bit taken aback by his sudden question.

I close my eyes...the memory of the last time I saw her floods my every fiber.

“Mommy!” I say loudly as I pick up her lipstick from her vanity.

“Yes, darling?” she says. She’s reaching into the safe, the one next to her closet behind a framed picture.

“Why do you always wear that crown?” I ask her.

“It’s a tiara, my sweet, and my mother gave it to me the day I got married. So, every

time I have a special occasion I wear it because it reminds me of who I am and the duties I am responsible for,” she explains.

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“It’s a crown,” I declare.

She laughs and pulls the crown out of the secret place. She leans over and kisses my head. Then, she places it on my head and smiles. I grin. It’s too big, and she keeps her hand on it, so it doesn’t fall down.

“Someday, I will give it to you, Anna,” she says.

“Really?” I ask.

“Really,” she repeats with a smile. “Now, off you go,” she adds as she removes the crown from my head and places it on hers. I run to the door and then turn one more time. I look at her in the mirror as she checks her makeup once more.

“Will you come kiss me goodnight when you get home, Mommy?” I ask her.

She turns to face me. “Of course, my sweet,” she says and blows me a kiss. I catch it and blow her one, and she catches it and brings her hand to her heart. I giggle and run off to find Auggie.

“Anna?” Logan’s voice brings me back to the present.

“Sorry,” I say. “My mother’s crown...tiara.”

“Oh?” he asks. I suddenly feel very claustrophobic. I glance around as though we are being watched, which is ridiculous.

“What?” he asks.

“You want to...uh, get out of here?” I ask.

“Anna, it’s not safe. Pete said—”

I stop him from speaking with a raised hand. “It’s a secret place. We’ll be safe,” I tell him as I stand. I grab the bottle of scotch and place it under my arm as I walk to his bedroom door and open it, peering out into the hallway to check for one of the guards my father now has everywhere on the property. Seeing the immediate coast is clear, I walk into the hall across from his room and feel along the wall until I find it. I press a part of the wall, and it pops open.

“Holy shit!” he exclaims from the door.

“A countess lived here two hundred years ago. She had the tunnel installed so she could sleep with her husband’s best friend who often came and stayed at the palace,” I explain. I turn on the light on my cell phone and enter the dark, dusty passage. “You coming?” I call out behind me. We walk down a set of stairs.

I hear his footsteps as I continue walking. He’s quiet as we make our way through the tunnel of mazes until I reach the door that I’ve been looking for, the door that leads out to the back garden. We are technically still within the walls of the palace, or at least the original palace walls. I laugh to myself. I walk up a few stairs and find the exit I have been searching for.

I open the door with a mighty shove and moonlight seeps inside.

“Anna,” Logan whispers.

“It’s OK,” I reply as I walk out into the garden maze. This maze has a small building

in the center of it and one wall is actually faux as it blocks this secret passage. I walk into the enclosure which is open to the outside and follow a path into the garden. It's chilly, and I suddenly wish I had grabbed a coat or blanket. I step toward a bench and sit down, placing the bottle of scotch on the ground after pouring more into my glass. I lean back and close my eyes. The crickets chirp and an owl hoots in the distance, but otherwise the night is quiet and calm.

"Anna?" Logan says.

I open my eyes, and he's standing before me. The moonlight illuminates his face, and he looks so incredibly handsome that I want to jump up and kiss him.

I clear my throat and thank god that I'm in the shadows, so he can't see my blush. "I just wanted to get some fresh air," I say.

"Where are we?" he asks, looking around us.

"The maze in the back garden," I say. I lift the bottle and nod at him. He brings his glass to me, and I pour scotch into it.

He sits down next to me, the heat from his body feels delicious against my cold skin.

"You're cold," he states. He wraps an arm around me, and I snuggle against him, leaning my head on his shoulder.

"So?" I ask. "Tell me a secret."

"My secrets aren't as grand as yours," he retorts.

"You are living the life you want to live," I say to him. I immediately regret my statement.

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“What do you mean, Anna?” he says.

I sigh. “I just mean...it’s not always easy...being a royal,” I try to explain.

“Is it really that bad?” he asks.

The scotch is starting to warm me up, and it may also be making me less guarded. I scoot down and turn so I’m lying on the bench with my legs over the arms and my head in his lap. I stare up at him, and he looks down at me with amusement.

“Well, Dr. Logan,” I start, clearing my throat, and he chuckles. “It’s not that bad. But it can be stressful at times. I’m supposed to be this perfect little princess. You know? The one in the photos from my mother’s funeral that made the world weep, the one that was always photographed being silly at state affairs, the one that was supposed to grow up to be perfect in every way possible.” I sigh again.

“It’s a lot to live up to,” I admit, gazing up at his eyes. His hand comes to rest on my belly and I feel it flutter in response.

His eyes grow hooded and his gaze darkens. “You are perfect, Anna, in every way possible. And the fact that you are a rebel makes you even more perfect,” he says in a low voice that sends chills throughout my body.

“No, I’m not,” I answer.

“You are to me,” he replies, lifting my head in one of his hands as he leans down to kiss me. Just before he does so, he pauses. “I shouldn’t do this,” he breathes.

“Yes, yes, you should,” I coerce, reaching behind his head and forcing his lips against mine.

I sigh against his skin. His lips caress mine and his tongue darts out to taste me. I open my mouth, giving him full access to plunder it. He complies, and I meet each thrust of his tongue, tasting the scotch on it. I feel weightless, cradled in his arms. It’s a heady sensation that I’m not sure is caused by the kiss, the scotch, or a combination of the two.

His strong arms pull me up, and I willingly straddle his lap, feeling his erection press against the juncture of my thighs. I grind against him as we continue to claim one another’s mouths. His hands travel along my body, squeezing and caressing. By the time we pull back to breathe, I’m panting with need.

“Please,” I beg as I rest my forehead against his, my eyes closed.

“Not like this, Princess,” he says as he strokes my hair.

“Yes, just like this,” I urge.

“Anna,” he growls as I grind against him.

“Logan,” I whisper against his mouth before kissing him again. His hands grip my hair, and he angles my face to his liking. He takes control, and for the briefest moments, I can feel his power, the power of an heir to the throne. He’s taking what he wants. He’s taking what is his.

I feel his hands move back down my body, searching for the hem of my shirt. He finds it, and I feel his calloused fingers grip the flesh at my waist. I moan against his mouth. I want more of his touch. He knows this and slowly runs his fingers up my rib cage and skimming the underside of my breasts. I jump at the sensation, and he stills.

I nod against him, giving him permission to continue. He pushes up the cups of my bra and lifts my breasts, running a thumb across each erect nipple. I whimper and push against him, wanting more. I can feel him grow harder beneath me, and I want to feel him, taste him.

“Take me back to your room,” I murmur against his lips.

“Anna,” he says. “I don’t have...I didn’t bring anything.”

I pause, stilling in his arms. It takes me a very long moment to understand what he’s saying. I lick my lips and pull back to look into his eyes. The desire in them is so thick, it weights his lids.

“I-I’m on birth control...” I say. I hesitate, unsure if I should tell him what he’ll find out soon if we do this. I don’t say anything more.

He caresses my jaw. “Are you sure?” he asks. The desire in his eyes wanes for a moment, and he looks...concerned.

I nod. “Yes, please,” I beg. I want to tell him that I’ve been lusting after him for nearly ten days, that I wanted him from the first time I saw his photo, but I refrain.

He picks me up in his arms, and I wrap my legs tightly around him. He kisses me and leaves the scotch and glasses sitting under the bench as he carries me back to the secret passage, down the steps, through the passageway, and when I tell him to press on the wall, he does. We are suddenly back in his bedchamber. Only one dim lamp on the bedside table is lit. It creates shadows around the room. He lays me gently on the bed and steps back. My legs hang apart over the side of the bed. My shirt is still bunched up at my waist. I start to push down my leggings, but he stops me with a look. I freeze.

“Let me,” he says softly as he gently pulls them down my legs, removing my boots, socks, underwear, and the offending leggings all in one movement. I’ve never been shy about my body. To be honest, I’ve never really thought about it. He places his hands on my shirt, and I lean up so he can pull it over my head. Then, he reaches around my back and releases the clasps on my bra, freeing my breasts. I lie back down and gaze up at him. If desire could be gauged by how a person looks at another, I would say that no man has ever desired a woman more than Logan desires me right now. The wonder and need written on his face are palpable.

“You are the most beautiful woman that I’ve ever seen, Anna,” he says to me as he runs a single finger from between my breasts, down my belly, and then he stops. I force my legs apart farther because that’s where I want that finger. I don’t know if he doesn’t get my subtle movement or if he chooses to ignore it, because he keeps his finger just below my belly button as he continues to scan every inch of my body.

“Logan,” I finally say with a slight moan as I rock my body, seeking the friction I so desperately desire.

“Give me a moment,” he says, as he moves his finger, tracing back up my belly and around each breast. “You’re perfect,” he states.

He leans down and presses a gentle kiss to my lips before running his tongue along my neckline. I shudder as his tongue moves down to my right breast, and he takes my nipple between his lips and sucks. I arch into his mouth as he grazes my skin with his teeth. I cry out into the silence of his room. I know I should be quiet, but at this moment, I can no longer control myself. I no longer care if Pete is looking for me or if my father finds us, because I want Logan so badly at this moment that I would sell my soul to the devil himself.

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He repeats the motion with my other nipple. I feel on fire. I'm so hot that I feel sweat forming on my body. His finger lazily trails down my inner thigh as he continues to suckle at my breasts. I squirm as he traces the crease of my sex, parting it slowly with one single finger.

He groans against my nipple when he finds my wetness. His finger slides along my damp folds, and I thrust against it, seeking the relief I need. He circles my clit once, twice, before slowly making his way down to my entrance. His finger cautiously glides inside.

"Jesus, Anna, you're so tight," he murmurs against my skin.

I know I need to tell him, but fear or pride or some combination of the two has the words frozen in my throat. He gradually adds a second finger as he explores me from the inside out. I can feel my tight skin stretch to accommodate both his fingers, and I wonder what it will be like when he takes me for the first time, for my first time. I stop thinking and start feeling. My eyes slam shut, and I grind against his hand. I feel myself inching toward a precipice. He pulls back for a moment as he lifts his shirt off, then he's back, kissing me, hard. The sound of his zipper being pulled down and the feel of him wriggling out of his pants and underwear are but background noise to the sensations he's creating between my thighs.

Just when I don't think I can take it another second, I feel him there. The tip of his erection lodges at my entrance as his thumb comes up to lazily circle my clit. He lies down over me, and through my hooded eyes, I watch him watching our bodies as he slowly sinks inside me. I see him groan.

I know when he realizes what I haven't told him because I can feel his cock hit a barrier inside me, a part of me that is keeping him from going deeper. I close my eyes, take a breath, and with my legs wrapped around his waist, I thrust hard against him, essentially taking my own virginity.

The sting is quick and sends a small cry of pain from my lips. Logan is frozen, not moving, his eyes wide when I lift my gaze to meet him.

"Anna..." He trails off, unsure of what to say. I see him glance down, clearly seeing the evidence of my virginity on his cock. He looks back at me. "Why didn't you...you should have told me," he says quietly.

I squeeze my eyes shut, partly to block my embarrassment and partly to give myself a moment to adjust to the invasion of my no-longer-virgin body.

I feel him lifting me and moving us up farther onto the bed, so my legs no longer hang off the side. He keeps his hard-as-steel cock buried inside me as he leans down and kisses me gently.

"Are you OK?" he asks. His body is tense as he tries not to move a single muscle, as though in fear of hurting me more.

I open my eyes to look at him. I wiggle a little. It's still stinging a bit, but the pain is gone.

"I'm fine," I say as I slowly move my body, encouraging him to continue.

"I didn't know. I wouldn't have..." He trails off as he stares at me.

"I know. I'm sorry, I should have...I didn't know how to tell you," I admit. I feel the color rise in my cheeks.

He lifts his hand and caresses my face, kissing me again before he starts to move. The friction of his cock pulling out of me and then slowly sinking back in is divine.

“Tell me if I’m hurting you,” he says.

I nod and pull his face back down toward mine, so I can kiss him. His thrusts become a little harder as I lift against him, encouraging him to take more, to take what he needs. I feel myself build toward that precipice again. I scrunch my eyes closed and focus all my energy on feeling the movement of him inside me. He reaches behind my legs and pushes them up and over his shoulders, and then he reaches under me and grabs my ass cheeks, forcing me against him. I groan as his cock slides deeper.

“Is that OK? Am I hurting you?” he asks. I shake my head as I acclimate to him. He searches my eyes once more before I feel him move against a part of me that is so sensitive that, with each slide of his skin against mine, I climb higher and higher. When he reaches between us with one hand and runs his thumb over my clit in small circles, pushing my wetness around, I explode, falling over the edge into a weightless darkness, the likes of which I’ve never known.

In my post-climax haze, I can feel his thrusts getting more uneven, his cock swelling, and then he lets out a loud groan as I feel the heat of his release spread inside of me. He pulls all the way out and pushes back into my pulsing channel twice more, before falling on top of me, bracing his weight on his elbows, his breath hot against my neck.

Chapter 20

“You should have told me,” he murmurs.

I open my eyes to find his penetrating stare. I blush. “I...” I can’t think of one single thing to say. My body is more relaxed than it’s ever been. I feel him slowly pull out

of me, and I grimace slightly. I look down to see his cock tinged with my blood. I feel my cheeks heat even more.

His finger goes under my chin and pushes my face up to look at him again.

“Are you OK?” he asks.

I nod. “A little sore, but I’m fine,” I admit.

“Damn it, Anna. Had I known...I would have taken my time,” he says in a low, gravelly voice.

“I didn’t want you to take your time, Logan,” I say. I reach up and touch his jaw. I let out a laugh because I don’t know what else to do.

“It’s not like I was saving myself for my betrothed or something,” I say to him. “This isn’t the Middle Ages. I just...being me is...isolating,” I stumble, trying to find the right words.

“What do you mean, exactly?” he asks, still hovering over me.

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“I’ve only kissed two boys,” I whisper sheepishly. “I’ve never had a real boyfriend.”

He sits up on his haunches staring down at me in complete and utter shock.

“What?” he asks.

“I dated a boy for about a month in middle school before my dad pulled me out to be tutored privately. Then, there was a boy at camp before that. But I’ve not thought about it much. My brothers are usually with me when I go out clubbing or such. I can’t exactly meet boys that way...I mean men. And most of my university courses are done online,” I explain.

He shakes his head and runs a hand through his hair. He gets up and walks to the bathroom, returning with a hand towel that he’s soaked in warm water. He gently cleans me. I notice he’s already cleaned himself.

“I...” He trails off and climbs onto the bed, lying back against the pillows. “Come here,” he says, patting the bed next to him. I crawl up and slide against him. He pulls a blanket from the end of the bed over us and tucks me under his arm. He kisses my forehead.

“Get some sleep,” he says.

I’m so confused that I poke my head up and look at him. “Was I bad?” I ask, my words stumbling out of my mouth before I have time to think about them.

He’s serious though and doesn’t laugh. He cups my face in his hand and runs his

thumb over my cheekbone.

“No, you were amazing. You are amazing. I just can’t believe you’d give me all of you like that. It’s...humbling,” he says.

I frown. “Come on, like you haven’t done it with a virgin before?” I say with a glare.

This time his cheeks turn a little pink. “No,” he says.

I bite my lip. “How many women have you been with, Logan? And how have you not had sex with a virgin?” I ask, my brain suddenly catching up with me. These are questions I should have asked before letting lust get the better of me. I inwardly curse at myself.

He stares at me, cocking his head to one side. “Do you really want to know that?” he asks.

I sit up and look at him. “Yes,” I say adamantly.

He sighs. “I lost my virginity in high school. My girlfriend, Becky, had already had sex with her previous boyfriend. We dated until I went to college. Then I had two more girlfriends and a few one-night stands. I’ve slept with a couple of women while living in the Bahamas. My last girlfriend and I broke up a little over a year ago. And that’s my sex life in a nutshell,” he says.

“You haven’t had sex in a year!” I exclaim.

He laughs. “No. I’ve been rather busy, I guess,” he admits.

“So, you’ve had the worst case of blue balls ever?” I say. I clap my hand over my mouth in horror as the words I’ve spoken come out of my mouth. “I’m sorry...I...” I

try to recover but his body is shaking with laughter.

“You don’t talk like a princess,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “I grew up with two brothers...so...I sort of talk like a dude, or so I’ve been told by Sonya,” I say.

“Who’s Sonya?” he asks.

I smile. “My best friend,” I say as I remember that I need to text her back. When we arrived at the summer palace, I noted several mixed calls and texts from her.

“I’ll have to meet her,” he replies.

“Uh huh,” I say. He opens up his arms, and I curl back up against him.

I yawn. “Get some sleep, Princess,” he says to me in a low voice.

“Just for a little while,” I reply. I close my eyes and snuggle against his warm skin. I can feel his muscles ripple as he settles himself and that’s the last thing I think before I fall fast asleep.

“Anna?” I hear Logan say.

“Ten more minutes,” I murmur.

“Anna? There’s some sort of buzzer going,” he says. His voice is laced with panic.

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“It’s the breakfast...oh, shit!” I half yell as I suddenly sit up, knocking my head into his. “Ouch,” I groan. “Sorry...shit, shitty, shit,” I mutter as I jump out of his bed and find my clothes strewn on the floor. I quickly dress. “I’m sorry...I...uh...need to go back to my room,” I say. I look toward his door and then his wall. I grin and give him a wink. He reaches out one hand, and I grab it as he pulls me back into bed and gives me a smoldering kiss before letting me go.

“I wasn’t lying when I said you were amazing, Anna,” he says to me.

I grin at him. “You weren’t too bad yourself,” I say with another wink before opening the secret door and leaving. I hear him laugh and I know he’s shaking his head at me. I giggle to myself as I race down the corridor toward my room. The passageway empties into Auggie’s closet. A slight problem, but I can get around that.

I crack it open and peer toward his room. The closet door is open, and he’s still asleep on his bed, his face buried in his pillow. I creep out and across the floor.

“Walk of shame, already?” he mutters into his pillow.

“Fuck off, Augs. I-I...shut up,” I say as I sprint out of his room and down the hall to my own. I know my face is bright red, and I can hear him laughing as I leave his room. Asshole.

I should warn Logan but there’s no time as I strip and take the world’s fastest shower before changing into another pair of leggings and an off-the-shoulder sweater. I do my hair into a messy bun, throw on lip gloss and head downstairs. I run smack into Auggie as I exit my room. He smirks. I roll my eyes.

“Soooo...do I need to give Logan the third degree?” he asks.

I shove his chest. “Don’t be such an arse,” I say to him.

“Well, it only seems fair considering that one time...” He trails off because I know exactly what time he’s talking about and if he even tries retribution for it, there will be a murder, and it will be his. I may have, as a much younger, immature, annoying little sister, announced the departure of one of his overnight guests. He got the third degree from our father and was sent to visit Auntie Lara for a month. Needless to say, he’s never, ever let me live it down. I glare at him.

“If you even...so help, Auggie...you won’t have any appendage left to require overnight guests, ever again!” I stammer at him, seething with little sister anger.

He holds up his hands. “Fine...fine. Just know, paybacks are a bitch. And karma will come back to bite you in the ass, little sister,” he says with a cocky grin on his face. I sort of want to deck him, but that’s exactly what he wants me to do. So, instead, I turn on my heels and walk quickly down to the dining hall.

Tessa has out all our favorite breakfast foods. It’s her full holiday spread. There are lox and bagels, toast, eggs Benedict, hash browns, cereal, bacon, sausages, and fruit. She always goes over the top when we first arrive. It’s like she’s been saving up, waiting for us to come to visit her, like a little, old grandmother whose grandkids just came for the summer.

I salivate at the smell of her food, and I suddenly realize how starving I am. I grab myself eggs, bacon, and half a bagel with lox, capers, and cream cheese. I’m about to bite into it when Auggie and Logan walk in together. They are talking and laughing, and I feel myself grow hot.

“OK there, sister?” Auggie asks, with a raised eyebrow. I glare at him.

“Why yes, brother,” I say to him. Logan looks between us and takes a seat next to Auggie and across from me.

I’m about to say something when Chris walks in with my dad. I can tell from my dad’s face that he has gotten more news about the explosion, and I can also tell that it’s not good news. He sits and gracefully lays a napkin across his lap before pouring himself freshly squeezed orange juice.

Silence descends upon the room as we stare at him and wait.

Chapter 21

My father drinks his orange juice, and then takes three long sips of his coffee. His eyes bounce from each of us as he does so.

“No news yet,” he states as though reading our minds.

I can hear every person at the table release their breath at the same time.

“I expect a briefing by noon since it’s now the middle of the night there,” he explains.

We all nod, and various conversations ensue at the table. I catch Auggie giving me a knowing smirk several times, and I return it with my best dagger eyes, but I also know Auggie won’t drop this, possibly ever.

I excuse myself first and hightail it to the one place I know no one will look for me, the butler’s pantry on the third floor. It hasn’t been used for decades, so everyone seems to forget about it. I grab my laptop on the way and settle myself in an old wooden chair in the corner. I log in and begin scouring, looking for any sign that M has followed us here. I see nothing that suggests he’s here. I also find nothing to suggest that he’s still in the Bahamas. An unease settles over me. I don’t even notice

how many hours have passed until my phone pings.

I look down and see a text from Logan.

Logan: Where are you? I think I'm lost.

I laugh.

Me: Describe your surroundings.

Logan: Well...lots of pink...

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I groan. That little bastard is in my room. I smirk, close my laptop, slide it in a drawer, and head downstairs.

It's my father's voice that stops me cold in the hallway. He's in his chambers, but I can hear him through the door.

"That's not acceptable!" he roars. I jump at the anger in his voice. "I'm not going to fucking calm down. My children could have been on board. I want answers, and I want them fucking yesterday. Do you hear me?"

It's quiet for a long moment. "I'll expect to hear from you within the hour," he says, and I hear something slam. I jump again and scamper off toward my room. I've never heard my father that angry. Part of me, the brave part, wants to knock on his door and speak with him, but I know now that he has nothing to tell me yet.

I open the door to my chamber and walk in, expecting to see Logan. My sitting room is empty. I continue on and find my bedroom also empty. And then I hear water. I open the doors to my bathroom, and there in my giant jetted tub, is Logan. I grin and lean against the doorframe.

"Making ourselves at home, are we?" I ask him with a raised eyebrow.

"What happened to su casa es mi casa?" Logan asks.

"I don't believe I ever said that," I answer walking over toward the tub and sitting down on the edge of it. I glance down at his amazing body that I honestly didn't spend much time exploring last night.

“I thought you might need a bath,” he says. “It’ll help...if you’re sore.”

Part of me wants to admit that I can still feel him between my legs, but a bigger part of me doesn’t want him to have that satisfaction.

“I suppose I could join you, seeing as how you have made good use of all my scented Dead Sea salts,” I muse as I strip off my clothes and slide down into the tub, opposite him. I sink down in the water and lean my head back against the pillow I have there. I know it’s only a matter of time before Shannon comes knocking on my door, wanting to update me and tell me about a thousand appointments I have once our quarantine ends.

“You probably shouldn’t be here,” I say to him with my eyes closed.

I feel his strong hand on my leg. He rubs gentle circles on my calf. The motion has me wanting him within seconds.

“Then, I’ll leave,” he says. I feel him move, and I place my legs over his.

“No need,” I say. I know he’s grinning before I even open my eyes.

His hand travels up to my thigh and begins to massage it. I groan as it feels so good.

“Enjoying that?” he asks.

“Very much, thank you,” I quip.

“Turn around, I’ll rub your back,” he offers. I can’t turn down a back massage, so I swivel in the water and lay my head on my bent knees, wrapping my arms around them. I feel his hands begin to massage my neck and shoulders. I sigh in contentment.

“You’re rather good at this,” I murmur.

“I aim to please,” he says, his breath hot against my ear. After a few minutes, he stops, and I groan.

“Come lie down,” he says. I open my eyes and turn to see him leaning back against the tub. I move toward him. “Nope, other way,” he corrects. I frown and he motions for me to turn so my back is against his chest. I sigh but comply with his request.

I settle myself between his legs. His arms come around mine, pulling me tightly against him. I can feel his erection dig into my backside. I squirm, and he hisses.

“Princess, careful, unless you want round two,” he says between gritted teeth.

“Who says I don’t want it?” I ask, looking up at him with a smirk.

He laughs. “You are a rebel, aren’t you?” he asks.

I shrug and grin. I trail my fingers along his arms and thighs. He remains still, letting me explore his body. Eventually, I turn and gaze at him. I tentatively run my hands over his pectoral muscles and then each indentation of his six-pack. My wrist grazes his erection that is now protruding from the water. I hesitantly grasp it in my hand. He wraps his hand around mine and guides it up and down, showing me what he likes. His eyes become hooded, and I see his chest rising and falling faster. His pupils begin to dilate. I explore all of it, the vein running up it, the rim at the head of it, the sac below it. He waits patiently, allowing me to examine him.

“Sit on the edge of the tub,” he says to me after a few minutes. I give him a curious look but comply. He pushes my knees apart and settles himself between them, so his head is aligned with my core. I feel a little awkward until he moves closer and licks at my folds. I shudder. He looks up at me as he continues to lick and suck at my

intimate parts. My eyelids become heavy, and I fight to keep them open, to watch him watch me as he brings me bliss that I didn't know was possible. He slowly pushes a finger inside me as he sucks at my clit, and I shake with pleasure.

"Come back down here," he says after a few long moments of ecstasy. I comply as he helps me back into the tub. He turns me around so I'm on my knees, my pussy is now pressed against a jet and it's doing magical things. I feel his erection slowly ease into me. I groan as he goes deep inside me. I push back, and he thrusts forward as we find a rhythm. I hear my moans and gasps as he reaches around me and begins to circle my clit with two fingers. The sensation overload has me spiraling toward my release within seconds. I cry out as he keeps thrusting deep. He doesn't stop moving until I sag over the edge of the tub. I feel him pull out of me gently. I turn to see him sitting against the tub.

"You're in charge now," he says, offering me a hand. I climb on top of him and slowly lower myself onto his thick cock. I'm sore but the feel of him stretching me is so exquisite that I don't care. He places his hands on my waist and guides me up and down. I settle on a rhythm and lean forward to kiss him. His cock slides deeper inside me and I moan with pleasure.

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“That’s right, Princess,” he murmurs as he thrusts up when I thrust down. I start frantically moving, I’m so close, and I need my release.

“Yes, take it, baby. Take what you need,” he urges. I grip his shoulders tightly as I slam down one last time and cry out his name. I feel all my inner muscles pulsating around him and then I hear him groan as he thrusts up harder into me, releasing his seed deep inside my channel.

I place my head on his shoulder as I regain my composure.

“That was...” I trail off.

“Really fucking amazing,” he finishes.

I grin against his skin and give him a playful bite.

“Did you just bite me, Princess?” he asks, swatting my ass playfully.

“Princesses don’t bite,” I correct him.

He laughs and the movement of his body inside me makes me moan as my muscles clamp down on him one last time.

“Jesus, Anna,” he grates out through his clenched jaw.

I grin, feeling powerful. I lift myself from him and sit back down.

“How come this water is still warm?” he muses, pulling up his fingers and examining them.

I laugh. “It circulates the water through a heater,” I explain.

“Fancy,” he says. I shrug and lift myself out of the water.

“I should dry off. I’m sure Shannon will want to debrief me soon,” I say as I grab a towel and wrap it around me.

He gets up and grabs another towel. Once he has it secured around his waist, he pulls me against him and kisses me hard. He leans his forehead against mine.

“You’re addictive, Anna,” he whispers. “Everything about you is addictive, your smell, your words, the feel of your skin, your taste, everything.”

I hear a knock on my door, and I pull back from him. “Shit, that’ll be Shannon. I’ll tell her to bugger off, while I dress,” I say. I run out and tell her I was just relaxing, and I’ll meet her in the drawing room in ten minutes. She gives me a suspicious look, but nods and leaves. I turn and lean against the closed door as Logan peeks out from the bathroom.

“All clear?” he asks.

“All clear,” I reply.

It’s only then that I notice Logan’s clothes on my bed. I sigh and hope that Shannon didn’t notice them. I silently curse myself for making my life more complicated, which is actually fairly impressive considering everything going on.

Logan walks over and puts his clothes on. I stay against the door, watching him,

partly fascinated by how he pulls on his trousers and buttons his shirt. It's different from how my brothers and father do it. I've never given much thought to how people dress, but Logan's movements have all my attention.

"Enjoying the view?" he asks as he turns around with a smug smirk on his face. I roll my eyes at the boyish sentiment.

"Are you?" I retort as I release the towel and saunter toward him. I can hear his intake of breath from across the room. When I reach him, I lean up on my tippytoes, grab his hair, and pull him down so I can kiss him.

He hauls me up against his body and I comply, wrapping my legs around his waist as we battle with our tongues for control of the kiss. Once I feel like I've won, I pull back and grin.

"I gotta go," I say as I slide down his body and bounce over to my wardrobe to grab a new outfit. I feel his eyes on me, so I take my time pulling on a dress. I pull my hair up and turn my head, glancing at him.

"Be a doll and pull up my zipper, will you?" I ask. I see his jaw tense as he walks toward me. He runs a single finger up my back, giving me chills before he complies.

"Thanks," I whisper, my voice breathy.

He leans in and whispers back in my ear, "You're welcome, Your Highness." I shiver. Those words on his lips sound so naughty, and I love it. I'm not at all sure what Logan's doing to me, but I think he's stolen more than my virginity.

"Alright, I'm off to slay a dragon. I take it that you can find your way back to your chamber without my assistance, Mr. Winters?" I say to him.

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“I’ll manage,” he replies as he follows me to the door. I peek out, and seeing the coast is clear, I quickly usher him out of my room. And just in time too, because Pete comes walking down the hallway, clearly on patrol in this wing. I give him a smile before I run down to the drawing room and find Shannon sitting with a pot of tea. I take the seat next to her.

“So?” I ask as I look down at my watch. It’s 11:30 a.m., which means my father will be debriefed soon.

“We’re fortunate that you had no appearances booked for another two days because we weren’t expecting you back so soon. I’ve managed to discreetly rearrange the rest of the schedule this week. Obviously, the press has heard about your uncle’s jet. The drastic security measures are, of course, not public knowledge. I’m suggesting we leave your schedule for next week in place for now. You don’t have any commitments until mid-week,” she says, stopping to sip her tea.

“That’s fine,” I reply as I pour myself a cup of Tessa’s famous tea. I’m not completely sure what spices she adds, but it’s heavenly.

“So, what’s going on with Logan?” Shannon blurts out. I almost spit the tea all over her.

“I beg your pardon?” I answer with a bit of a cough.

“Anna, I wasn’t born yesterday. And, hell, if I had a chance, I wouldn’t miss that opportunity either. That boy is fine,” she says.

Her completely honest answer has me laughing. “I’m just enjoying his company,” I say to her because it’s the truth and also very noncommittal.

“Oh? You’re ‘enjoying’ his company, are you?” she says with a smirk.

I do my best to prevent the eye roll that I know I’m incapable of stopping.

“Shannon,” I growl.

“Fine, be that way,” she says. “Your father has asked everyone to be in his office at quarter after twelve. I believe he expects to have information to share by then.”

I nod.

“Anything else?” I ask.

“Not yet. Your aunt and uncle just arrived though, so...” She trails off as she looks past us. I want to groan because I know my aunt is likely impatiently waiting at the door. The fact that she hasn’t entered the room and interrupted us surprises me.

“Hello, Auntie Lara,” I say as I turn to find her standing with her arms crossed. She’s wearing a skirt suit that looks more like she belongs in a corporate business boardroom than a palace.

“Hello, darling,” she says as she makes her way into the room. I rise, and she greets me the standard double cheek kiss. I can see the worry in her eyes. As much as Auntie Lara can be a royal pain in my ass, she’s the closest thing I have had to a mother, along with Tessa and Helga, since my mother’s death. Auntie Lara is too formal to ever smother me with kisses, but she does keep a hand gripping my arm before she pulls away.

“I was so worried; both of us were,” she says, referring to Uncle Hans. A little part of me wants to laugh because I’m pretty sure Uncle Hans was as worried about his jet as us. His “toys” are like his babies. When we were younger, my father would send us out for a week or two at school breaks to visit my aunt and uncle at their cottage home in the countryside. And by cottage home, I mean a sprawling manor house not much smaller than the summer palace. Uncle Hans always had a new car, boat, jet, or some sort of contraption. He comes from a long line of entrepreneurs. He inherited his father’s empire when he was twenty-three and never looked back. Money is his life. Once Auggie scratched his brand-new limited edition Bugatti with his bike pedal. You would have thought he single-handedly brought down a space shuttle. Needless to say, we were always very careful around Uncle Hans’s toys after that incident and the ensuing three-hour lecture from our uncle regarding taking care of belongings.

On the flip side, Uncle Hans was also the most mischievous of our clan. He always allowed us to go out on the boats on the lake without adult supervision, once we could prove to him that we could operate them to his liking, of course. Those boats, jet skis, four-wheelers, were all child-approved. He explained all this in that three-hour diatribe. It’s funny how I’ve forgotten so many conversations, while others stick in my head like glue.

“We’re fine, Auntie,” I say to her.

“Well, I need to get settled, but I will see you at dinner, darling,” she says as she pulls away. She gives me a small smile, and I smile back at her. She very much resembles my grandmother, what little I remember of her as she passed away when I was only four. I have a few fleeting memories of her though. She was kind, but stern. She was the epitome of an old-school royal.

I turn back to Shannon. “I’m going to Father’s study, unless we have more to discuss,” I say to her. She shakes her head and follows me. I knock on the giant

wooden door.

“Come in,” my father’s voice calls out from the other side. The fact that Marcus doesn’t answer for him gives me pause, but I open the door and walk in. Shannon freezes, clearly taken aback as well. I look back at her, and she shakes her head and steps to the side, sitting down on the antique bench in the hallway.

I walk in and find my father sitting not at his desk, but at a large oversized leather chair by the window. He doesn’t look my way but stares out at the garden.

“Father?” I ask.

“Have a seat, sweat pea,” he says, using my childhood nickname.

“Are you alright, Daddy?” I ask as I sit and tentatively place my hand on his arm. He finally turns and looks at me. In the light shining in from the garden, I can see all the lines on his face. His thinning, gray hair looks even more sparse on his head. He looks...old.

He doesn’t smile his reassuring smile, and that causes me to swallow nervously. “It was a bomb,” he says, his voice low.

I grimace and flinch because now the guilt I was feeling is crushing down on me like a ton of bricks.

“Do we know who?” I ask, trying to keep my voice level.

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He shakes his head. “Our security team is on the ground over there going through the video from the airport, but so far they haven’t seen anything suspicious. It appears as though only people with clearance were given access to the hangar where the jet was stored. Most of the workers wear hats, so it’s difficult to identify people that were coming and going, and there is one space of time when a camera was down for a few minutes. It was from a storm that went through and knocked out some power, a generator didn’t kick back on and caused a lapse of about twenty minutes in two video cameras, one was in the hangar,” he says.

“What does security think?” Chris’s voice booms from the doorway.

I jump, completely surprised by my brother. Auggie stands next to him, and Marcus, Shannon, Mia, and Paolo are all huddled behind them. Slowly, each one steps inside my father’s study, a most unusual occurrence, seeing as how he has not granted them permission to enter, but then again, the circumstances of this conversation are also most unusual.

My father sighs and swivels in his seat to face the audience in his study.

“They are investigating all possibilities. They aren’t sure whether it was directed at Hans and Lara, or if it was directed at one or all of you. It’s troubling. While we always have small factions in the country that would like to dissolve the monarchy, there hasn’t been any intel as of late that they were becoming violent in their stance. The head of our intelligence ministry has appointed a special task force to work with our security team to investigate the bombing. I hope to be debriefed by them within the next forty-eight hours,” he says.

Chris frowns and is about to speak when a voice from the door stops him.

“I have also hired a private security firm to investigate,” my Uncle Hans says. He stands next to Aunt Lara whose eyes are wide with fear.

“Good, the more eyes we have on this, the better,” my father replies. “I’d like everyone to remain here until we obtain further information.”

Everyone nods.

“For how long?” Auggie prods. I almost want to laugh because it’s so typical of him to poke the beast.

“For as long as your father, the King of Norddale, declares it,” my father says to him in a voice that says he will not be entertaining further conversation on the issue.

Auggie doesn’t respond other than a slight nod.

“Now, if you all don’t mind, I have work to do. If there is an update, I will call for you,” he says to us all, essentially dismissing us.

Everyone files out of the room, but I remain. For the first time ever, I consider telling my father. I hesitate because he will be angry, so very angry with me. I decide to wait, to go back to my computer and to gather more intel before I tell him.

“What is it, Anna?” he says to me. I look up to find him watching me.

“Nothing, Daddy,” I say slowly. I rise to leave but he grips my arm. I turn to him.

“There is nothing that you can’t tell me, my love. I am king, but first and foremost, I am your father,” he says. I lean down and kiss his cheek, touching it gently with my

hand before pulling away. It's bristly, as though he hasn't shaved yet today, which is unusual for him.

"I know, Daddy," I say to him. My throat tightens as I look away, ashamed that I can't bring myself to say the words.

I leave his study and head straight up to my secret hiding place and pull my computer from the drawer. I begin searching for answers. I'm afraid of what I'll find but I'm now more determined than ever to find out who is trying to kill Logan Winters.

Chapter 22

It's the buzz of my phone that pulls me from my search several hours later. I glance down. It's Auggie.

Auggie: The Room—Now

I sigh. "The Room" is Auggie's code for the billiard room. He's bored in other words and wants a playmate. I smirk remembering when Paolo was sent as his secretary instead of the young, blonde-haired woman he had wanted, who my father deemed not fit for the position. Her name escapes me but her attempts to push the royal dress code boundaries do not.

Auggie has a penchant for women and fast cars. The fact that he is unable to play with either is probably killing him right now.

Meanwhile, I'm pretty sure Chris is using this lockdown as an excuse to spend inordinate amounts of time with Mia. I sigh again and lock in my latest search before hiding my computer in the cabinet to work while I go play babysitter.

I decide I need backup, so I knock on Logan's door. I don't hear anything, so I slowly

open the door.

“Logan?” I call out. His room is dark. I frown. I walk down to the kitchen to ask Tessa to bring Auggie and me snacks.

“These are amazing, Tessa,” I hear Logan’s voice, and I smile.

I open the door and find him sitting on a stool, eating more of Tessa’s cookies.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say that you are indeed a cookie monster,” I say to him.

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He grins as he chews. “These are hands down the best cookies that I’ve ever had,” he declares. I look over and see a glass of milk.

“Milk, huh?” I say to him.

He nods. “I needed it. It’s the perfect pairing for these chocolate chip cookies. I can’t decide if the oatmeal raisin or these are my favorite,” he says.

“Well, I for one love the oatmeal best,” I say to him as I walk over and remove one from the cookie jar. “Tessa, can we get a snack plate for the billiard room?” I ask.

She turns and wipes her hands on her apron. “Of course, sweetie pie. I’ll have someone bring it over shortly,” she says as she eyes up a staff member on the far side of the kitchen. I feel a little bad, as there are a few new hires since I’ve been here last. I walk over to the young woman.

“Hello,” I say.

She turns and shyly smiles at me, curtsying.

“Oh, no need for formalities. I’m Anna,” I say.

“Liza,” she replies.

“Nice to meet you, Liza,” I say to her. She nods and quickly scurries off like a nervous rabbit.

“Thanks,” I say to Tessa as I kiss her cheek and grab another cookie for the road.
“You coming?” I ask Logan as I waltz toward the door.

“Sure, if I eat any more of these, I’ll need two plane seats for the way home,” he says.
He gives Tessa a wink.

Logan follows me down a corridor and then another. I hear the distinct sound of the balls clicking against the billiard table as Auggie must have started playing on his own.

I walk into the room, and he stops.

“Hey, I found a straggler,” I say to him.

“You play?” Auggie asks Logan.

“I’ve been known to play a bit,” Logan says. I can tell by his voice that he’s trying to be cool about the fact that he must play regularly.

“Chalk it up, then,” Auggie says with a smirk.

“Seriously?” I say to them. “Is there room for me in this testosterone-filled party?” I ask them.

They both turn to me with sheepish looks. I roll my eyes but see an out to continue my research. “Why don’t I leave you two to play and I’ll come back down in a bit to join you?” I say to them.

“Why, what are you doing?” Auggie asks, his voice laced with suspicion.

“I just want to check my grades; they should be posted by now,” I say to him

innocently.

He gives me the “I know you are up to something” look. I smile and sneak out of the room and back to my laptop.

I pull it from its resting place.

I scan the search and my eyes narrow on two things. One, M has arrived in my country. I see one of his aliases in the passport entry records that I’ve hacked. His arrival is timestamped as 3:46 p.m., yesterday. I also find an interesting message buried in a chat room in a part of the dark web that even mildly bad criminals would not want to be caught in.

It reads, “Finish it now.”

I pull up the encrypted message file details. It was posted fifteen seconds ago. I quickly begin typing, running a trace as fast as I can. I have a very, very limited window if this individual is anything like I think they are, they will have this erased and the server untraceable in a matter of seconds. M must have a search running that gives him this information immediately, so he doesn’t miss it. I push the thoughts of what hacker is working with both M and my mystery person as I zone in on the numbers and symbols flying across my screen.

Then, I see it, the location is coming into focus for me. In my head, it’s like a giant map of the world, and I’m slowly zoning in on the area. Europe and then France and then Saint Tropez. And then a section of town, and I’m almost to an exact block of a street when the connection dies.

“Damn it,” I mutter. I pull up the location on a map. There are only six large homes back in the area that I’ve locked into. I see pools in the satellite imagery. I stare at it, puzzled as memories flood my mind.

“Again!” I cry out.

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“One more time, and then Uncle Eddie and I need to go,” my dad says from the edge of the pool.

I squeal in delight and swim back to my Uncle Eddie. He launches me across the pool, and I swim up to the surface again, giggling and spurting out water.

“One more time?” I ask.

“Anna,” my father warns.

I pout and Uncle Eddie laughs.

“Maybe Sten can launch you a few more times,” he says as he looks toward his brother who is reading a book on a lounge chair.

“In a little while, Princess,” Sten says with a wink. I grin at him.

“Practice your breaststroke,” my father suggests. I nod and swim to the edge, grabbing my goggles and putting them on.

“Holy fuck,” I mutter.

I go back through the data, not believing what I’m seeing. My mind doesn’t want to believe what I’m seeing. Uncle Eddie would never hurt us, unless...

I back up the data on my secret server and then erase any history of my work from the current one. I double secret server everything I do. I know now, that I need to talk to

my father, I just don't know what I will tell him.

I walk out of the room and down the hall. I hear voices in the distance, noises in the garden through the open windows, but I'm in a fog. My mind is spinning a million miles a minute. Every event of the last ten days is on autopilot in my brain.

It's not until I physically cannot go farther, that I realize Logan is blocking my path.

"Anna?" he asks, and I have the distinct feeling this is not the first time he's said my name in the past minute. "Anna, are you alright? You're as white as a ghost."

I shake my head. No, I'm definitely not alright.

He doesn't press me, but instead scoops me up in his arms and carries me to my chamber. I don't even have the wherewithal to tell him to set me down. There's a security guard down at the end of the hall but he doesn't turn toward us. I grip on to Logan's shoulders as though he were the last raft in a vast ocean.

He doesn't release me when we reach my room. Instead, he sits down on a sofa with me in his arms.

I finally look up into his worried eyes. "Why aren't you playing with Auggie?" I ask.

"You didn't come back, so Auggie and I split up and went looking for you when you didn't respond to our texts," Logan says. "We were worried."

I close my eyes and muster my courage. "I...found something," I stammer.

"What?" he asks, confusion twisting his facial features.

I clear my throat and sit up slightly. "I was running a search to see if M followed us.

He did. He's been here since yesterday. I just happened to be online when someone tried to message him. I was able to trace the message to a street of houses," I say to him.

"And?" he pries.

I look down, my eyes fill with tears.

"Anna?" he asks, pushing my chin up so that I'll look him in the eyes.

"Y-your father," I whisper.

"What?" he asks.

"The only house I recognize on that street belongs to the royal family of Montelandia," I say.

"How did you..." He trails off.

"I recognized the pool. I ran a quick check, and it's the house. The other few are owned by some movie stars," I explain.

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“But why would my father want to kill you?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I say slowly. “It doesn’t make any sense. Uncle Eddie loves us.”

“Uncle Eddie?” he asks.

“He and my father are very close. They both became kings when their fathers passed away only a few years apart from various ailments. So naturally, they remain close. Since Edvard had no children, well no known children, he spent a great deal of time with us,” I explain.

“He never remarried?” Logan asks.

I shake my head, frowning.

“Don’t you know about him at all?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I don’t spend much time reading about royals,” he answers dryly.

“Oh,” I say softly. “I...shouldn’t have assumed...I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Anna. What are we going to do?” he asks.

“Tell my father,” I answer resolutely.

“Tell him what exactly?” he asks.

I sigh. “Everything,” I whisper.

His phone pings and he looks down and responds to a text.

“Auggie,” he says.

I nod and a minute later Auggie walks into my room. I don’t even care that I’m still on Logan’s lap.

“What’s wrong?” he asks immediately upon seeing me.

“My father is apparently trying to kill you,” Logan says bitterly.

“What?!” Auggie yells.

“Shhhh,” I say to him.

“Jesus, Anna, how’d you figure that out,” he says.

“Augs, grab Chris, I only have the strength to tell this once, and we need to bring Dad in on my secret,” I say to him. His eyes widen.

“Anna, are you sure? We could make up something. I know how important it was that you had that freedom,” he says to me, taking steps forward so he’s hovering over me.

“It was, but the safety of all of us is much more important than my freedom,” I answer.

He squeezes my shoulder. “You’re little, but you’re fierce, Anna,” he says.

I smile at his rephrasing of the Shakespeare quote.

“Get Chris, meet me in Father’s study in ten minutes,” I say to him.

“Will do,” he says. He pauses at the door and turns. “Are we telling Father, everything?”

He looks from Logan to me, and I turn red with embarrassment.

“Well, maybe not everything,” I say.

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He grins. “And for the record, Logan, if you hurt her, you won’t need to worry about your father, because I’ll kill you myself,” Auggie says as he exits the room.

“Why do I get the sneaking suspicion that Auggie is speaking the truth?” Logan asks.

“Because he is,” I say with a small smile.

Logan sets me on my feet and grasps my shoulders, staring down into my eyes. “He’s right you know. You are incredibly brave. Stupid at times, but brave as hell,” he says. I roll my eyes.

“Thank you?” I answer.

But instead of responding, he crashes his lips down to mine and kisses me hard. I let him take control from me. He gives me power with his kiss as though he’s handing over all his strength to bolster my own. I find solace there in his arms, his lips against mine.

“Better?” he asks when he finally pulls away.

“A little,” I admit.

“Good. I’m going to be right next to you, Anna. We’re doing this together,” he says as he takes my hand, and we walk down the hall and the stairs. When we reach my father’s study, we pause. I look up at him.

“Let me do the talking,” I say to him.

He nods and knocks on the door.

Chapter 23

As my hand raises to knock on the door, I suddenly feel foolish. Why I thought whisking Logan away would protect him is beyond me. I realize I've been playing a game and not well. I should have alerted my father immediately. We should have contacted Interpol. I swallow my pride and my guilt as my hand makes contact with the door.

"Enter," my father's voice calls out. His solitude again taking me by surprise.

I cautiously open the door.

"Father?" I ask. He's back in the chair, staring out the window.

"Come in—" He starts but stops when he turns to see Logan next to me.

"What's wrong, Anna?" he asks.

I walk across the room and drop to my knees at my father's side. I take his hands in mine and look up at him, hoping his love for me is enough to forgive me for what I have to tell him. I sense my brothers at the door, but my father's eyes stay fixed on me.

"I need to tell you something," I whisper, my voice straining to break free from my body.

It's then that my father looks beyond me to Chris, who's shutting the door, Auggie, and Logan.

“I take it these three already know what you’re about to tell me,” he states.

I nod. I take a deep breath and sit down in the chair opposite him. My brothers move in and flank me on either side, offering me silent support. Logan stands behind me. For a moment, I almost laugh at the picture of me surrounded by big, powerful men, like my own little security force.

I launch into the tale that I told my brothers just several days ago. I skip some parts, glossing over why I became obsessed with hacking, and some of the crimes I may have informed on over the years. I speak for minutes, uninterrupted. My father’s face remains neutral, not giving away a single thought. It’s as unnerving as telling him is.

When I finish, he looks at all four of us one by one.

“I knew Logan was Eddie’s son,” my father admits. I’m fairly certain all of us have our mouths hanging open in shock now.

“W-what?” I stammer. “How?”

My father clears his throat and stands. He begins to pace in front of his desk. Something he’s known to do when deep in thought.

“I met Leah, once. Eddie confided in me that she was pregnant. I didn’t know they had secretly wed. He told me he had been forced to send them away, that it wasn’t safe, and no one could ever know about his son,” my father says. “I always assumed it was in regards to the political unrest in his country at the time. It may still be linked to that. Some of those rebels that were part of the anti-monarchist group are still around. Although it’s mostly in the form of greedy businessmen and politicians now. But why they would hire an assassin to kill Logan makes no sense to me. Logan didn’t know he was a prince. He wasn’t searching for his father. I don’t believe for a minute Eddie or the royals have anything to do with it.”

“Dad,” I pause. “That doesn’t explain why the last message to M was sent from Uncle Eddie’s house in Saint Tropez.”

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My father stops pacing. “What did you just say?” he asks me.

I shudder. “I just tracked the last message to Uncle Eddie’s house. The one we used to visit with the pool,” I restate.

“It’s not him,” my father says firmly.

“Daddy—”

“Susanna, stop! I’m telling you, Edvard is not trying to kill his son,” my father yells. “I know because he has provided security detail to keep tabs on Logan since he was born.”

The room goes deathly silent.

“What?!” Logan says, breaking the silence.

My father walks around his desk and sits in the imposingly large leather chair behind it. He runs his hands through his thinning hair and looks back at us.

“Everyone sit down, please,” he says. Just then, Paolo, Mia, Shannon, Pete, and Marcus emerge from the hallway. “You might as well come in too,” he adds to them, pointing at the sofas along the wall of the study. They scurry in and take seats.

He places his elbows on the desk and folds his hands together. He’s silent for a long moment and then glances down at his phone as it pings.

We all stare expectantly at him.

“We have one more joining us,” he says, his voice seems loud and echoes in the silence of the giant two-story room.

There’s a knock on the open door a minute later, and we all look up as our butler, Gerard, stands at the door with King Edvard behind him.

“His Royal Highness, King Edvard, Your Majesty,” he announces as he steps back and allows Uncle Eddie to enter the room.

I know that my mouth is on the floor, but as I look around every face in the room is staring at the door in complete and utter shock.

“Michael,” he says to my father.

“Good to see you, Eddie. I believe you are just in time,” my father says.

Everyone is looking from Dad to Uncle Eddie and back again. I can feel the tension radiating off Logan, and I reach over and grip his hand. Uncle Eddie’s gaze travels across the room and, eventually, stop when it reaches Logan. I had noticed similarities before, but now that they are both in the same space, the common physical traits between them seem magnified exponentially.

I swear I see tears form in Uncle Eddie’s eyes, but he quickly composes himself.

“Shall I begin, or do you want to?” he asks my father without removing his stare from Logan. Logan is now so tense that he feels like a statue against my hand.

“Well, I think introductions are required first, don’t you?” my father suggests, glancing between Uncle Eddie and Logan.

Uncle Eddie sucks in a deep breath. "I've waited for this moment for so long that I'm not entirely sure where to begin," he says to Logan and no one else in the room. I suddenly feel like a voyeur, as though it's very wrong to be in the room. But Logan squeezes my hand, and I know being here is giving him strength, so I remain still.

Uncle Eddie clears his throat. "We have so very much to catch up on, my son. But first, I think everyone in the room, especially you, deserves to hear the truth," Uncle Eddie says. My father motions for him to take a seat in the chair by the window. Uncle Eddie complies and looks back at my father.

"I suppose I should begin with why I sent you and your mother away," he says, looking back at Logan. "It was the hardest thing that I've ever done. I loved her...I still love her," he continues, his voice laced with emotion. He pauses, composing himself again. "I met Leah when she was covering me for a story. I was immediately awestruck by her. She was not only beautiful and intelligent and kind, but she was so full of life. We fell in love quickly. I kept it a secret from everyone, even my family because I knew that they wouldn't approve of my being with a commoner. We were together for a year or so when she became pregnant. Around the same time, there was a threat from anti-monarchists in our country. They had attempted to assassinate me. I was newly king after my father's death, and I was scared for Leah and for you," he says, pausing to look at Logan. "I knew it wasn't safe, and I didn't know when it would be safe again. Your mother and I secretly wed. I kept her hidden in an apartment not far from the palace until she gave birth to you. I managed to sneak you both out to a small cottage on our country estate. You remained there for a few months. I hoped the leader of the anti-monarchist group would be captured and tried for my attempted assassination. But that didn't happen as quickly as I liked. I begged your mother to go home to Pittsburgh, to stay away from me. If her connection to me got out...it was too dangerous. She refused. We fought, and I left her. I knew she was too stubborn to listen to my reasoning, so I did the only thing I thought I could. I told her I no longer loved her, and she needed to leave. She packed up and went home the next day."

Uncle Eddie stops for a long minute and the pain in his eyes radiates across the room.

“The threat ended when my military forces stormed a compound and killed the leader of the group that was attempting to assassinate me. I went to your mother but she refused to see me, refused to speak with me. You were three and still living with your grandparents. I didn’t give up though. Every few months, I’d try to contact her. When you were just a teenager, she finally agreed to meet with me. I told her everything. She said that she didn’t know if she could forgive me for abandoning you both. But after that meeting, we began to speak again, regularly. I talked her into moving to the Bahamas where I had a friend with a property,” he says as he looks toward my father. “She agreed, and we began to see each other in secret. We were about to tell you, Logan. She hadn’t wanted to introduce us until she was sure that I wouldn’t leave again, but that took several years of convincing. Then she was killed in the car accident.” Uncle Eddie looks completely heartbroken. I’ve never seen him like this before, and it scares me a little.

“I saw you at the funeral. I watched you, and then I watched you back in the Bahamas. You had a life and a good one. You had friends and freedom to do what you wanted. I knew if I came to you and told you the truth, you’d lose all of that. So, I made the painful decision to stay away from you. I secretly hired security through Hans, so it couldn’t be traced back to me. They kept general tabs on you. Reporting back to me once a week through a secret email account I had set up. When Michael said you’d shown up here, I thought it was an odd coincidence at first. He talked me into coming here. But from the conversation I just heard from out in the hallway, I do believe we are faced with more than a family reunion, years in the making. I don’t know who’s trying to harm you, but I do know it is not me.” Uncle Eddie closes his eyes for a moment. The silence in the room is all-consuming.

“I would never harm a hair on your head, my son. You’re all I have left of her, your mother. And I would die protecting you from any enemy, even myself,” he says.

He walks slowly toward Logan and kneels down next to his seated son. He takes Logan's other hand in his and looks into his eyes.

“Please, please forgive me. I never abandoned you. I’ve always loved you. I would die for you,” he says. This time a tear does escape his eye. He wipes it away and reaches into his pocket. He pulls out a photo, and I look down to see an image of Uncle Eddie holding a baby, Logan.

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Logan doesn't say anything at first. He merely reaches out and takes the photo, studying it closely. His left hand is still gripped in mine. I look between him and Uncle Eddie, examining their noses, chins, the shape of their eyes.

Logan hands back the photo to Uncle Eddie. He releases my hand and stands. "I need a few minutes," he says quietly and walks past his father and out of the room. I look back to see the hurt and shame on Uncle Eddie's face. I put a hand on Uncle Eddie's arm, looking up into a face that I've known my whole life.

"Give him time, Uncle. It's a lot for anyone to take in. Logan's entire world has been changed in the course of a week," I say to him. He nods at me and pulls me into a hug, bestowing all the pent-up love he feels on me. His affection radiates through my body, and I squeeze him back. I know now, in my heart of hearts, that Uncle Eddie is not the one behind the plane explosion and the bounty on Logan's life. I feel ashamed for evening thinking such a thing, but I know all is forgiven when Uncle Eddie kisses my forehead.

"You are full of surprises, Anna. I should have known you would be a knight in shining armor instead of a princess being rescued. You're so like your mother," he says, cupping my face in his hand. I see sadness in his eyes when he mentions her.

"I-I should go check on him," I say to my uncle who nods and releases me. I turn toward my father. He simply nods in the direction of the door, giving me his permission to leave, even though I know I would have even without it.

I have no idea what will be said next in my father's study, but my heart tugs me in the direction of Logan more than my curiosity tells me to stay put and listen more to a

story that I'm sure will change the course of all our lives.

I head to the kitchen and find Tessa alone.

"Have you seen Logan?" I ask her.

Tessa looks up from kneading dough and wipes her brow.

"No, my love. Are you alright?" she asks.

I shrug.

"Sit," she commands as she walks to one side of the open counter and points to a stool on the opposite side.

I sit because I would never disobey Tessa.

"Tessa—" I start to explain that I need to find Logan, but she holds up a hand.

"You're in love with that boy, aren't you?" she asks rhetorically.

I nod and bite my lip.

A huge grin breaks out on her face, and I can't help but mirror as her joy is completely contagious.

She reaches over and clasps my hands in hers. "I'm so happy for you, Anna. Logan is a good boy. I approve," she says.

"Now you go find your boy, and then you come tell me all about him later," she says, ushering me out of her domain. I turn before making it to the door and run around the

counter, throwing myself into her welcoming arms.

“I love you, Tessa,” I say to her. She squeezes me against her ample bosom, and I feel like I’m home, safe and secure and loved.

“I love you too, my sweet girl. Now go find that man of yours and fix whatever problems are going on in this place,” she says. She holds me out at arm’s length for a moment and then gives me a wink and little pat on the behind to get me moving. I shake my head but continue to grin. Leave it to Tessa, to bring me out of the chaos of the moment.

I spend the next ten minutes scouring the palace for him. Just as I’m about to give up and head back to the study, I remember our escape the other night. I head to the tunnel and pop out in the garden. He’s sitting on the bench, and I look at him. He looks like a little lost boy. I want to hold him in my arms and comfort him, tell him everything will be alright, but that would be foolish of me.

I walk toward him, but he doesn’t turn to look at me. Instead, his gaze is on a nearby fountain.

“I don’t know if I can forgive him,” Logan whispers. I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or himself. I hear birds chirping in the distance, and then they take flight overhead. I watch them go. They look so free, flying away to wherever their hearts desire. I look back at Logan.

I sit down next to him, and he turns to look at me. I physically ache from the hurt I see in his eyes.

I touch his cheek, carefully, because I’m afraid he’ll run away from me.

“I’m sorry, Logan. I feel like this is all my fault. A few days ago, you were Logan

Winters, captain of a charter boat, enjoying living in the Bahamas. And now...now, you're an heir to a throne, who has a bounty on his head, and a father who he doesn't remember popping back into his life telling him he never stopped loving him." I grimace at my last statement. I feel tears in my eyes.

"Don't cry," Logan says to me as he wipes a stray tear that's escaped and run down my cheek.

"But, it's all my fault," I murmur, looking down at the bench.

Logan's hand reaches out to push my face up, and I see his eyes also glistening with tears.

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“Anna, it’s true, your one action flipped my whole world upside down. I’ve gone down the rabbit hole. But if it means that I can keep you, then I don’t want to go back,” he says softly.

It takes a few seconds for my mind to catch up to what he’s just said. I never contemplated a relationship with Logan. I’ve never had enough time to fathom that or anything else in the whirlwind of the last two weeks.

“Are you mad at him?” I ask tentatively.

Logan sighs and puts his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. “I...don’t know,” he admits. “I’m overwhelmed. This is a shit ton to process.”

“I know,” I agree. “I think he really did believe he was doing what was best for you both.”

“But is missing my whole childhood what was really best?” he asks, turning his head to look up at me.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I can’t imagine being in his shoes. But I know he feels guilt for his actions. He never intentionally wanted to hurt you.” I shudder thinking that a few minutes ago I thought Uncle Eddie might be trying to kill us. “I can’t believe I thought he could be behind all of this. I feel ashamed.”

Logan sits up and looks at me. “You have nothing to be ashamed about, Anna. You’re trying to save lives. It’s brave and noble of you. I admit you’ve been reckless in your actions, but your intentions were good.” He pauses as though catching up

with his words.

“So were your father’s,” I say what I know he’s thinking.

“It’s just all so fucked up,” he replies.

I place a hand on his arm. “At least go talk to him, you owe that to yourself,” I tell him.

He nods. “I know. I just needed a few moments to myself, to process it all,” he says.

“I understand,” I say. “I’ll leave you to your thoughts.” I stand, and he reaches out his hand to me.

“Don’t leave,” he pleads.

I sit back down, and he puts out an arm, I snuggle against him and lean my head on his shoulder.

“Tell me a story,” he says. “Tell me something good.”

I take a breath. “Once upon a time,” I begin. I tell him about a little princess who lived in a castle and saved it from the evil dragon queen. It’s an old fairy tale, but I remember it well since I made Tessa, Auntie Lara, and Daddy read it to me every night.

When I finish, we sit in silence. “You’re the brave little princess,” he states.

“I used to think so,” I say.

“I know so,” he says to me, tipping up my chin and laying a soft kiss on my lips.

“We need to go back in, Logan,” I say to him as our lips hover millimeters apart.

He closes his eyes. “I know,” he says, his voice strained.

I stand and hold out my hand to him. He slowly takes it, stands, and pulls me against him.

“I don’t know why we were brought together, but you’re the only thing that seems right in my life now,” he whispers in my ear. I tighten my hold on him.

“We’re going to figure this out,” I say with conviction.

“Brave, little princess,” he says softly.

We pull apart, and I take his hand leading him back to the study.

Chapter 24

I can hear voices talking from the hallway as we approach the door. It’s closed, and I knock. Marcus opens it and ushers us back inside.

Everyone stops the chatter as we enter. I squeeze Logan’s hand, and he squeezes it back.

Uncle Eddie stands.

“Logan,” he starts, “I would very much like to speak with you in private. If that’s alright with you?”

Logan nods.

“You may use the drawing room,” my father says to them.

“Thank you, Michael,” Uncle Eddie says as he follows Logan out of the room.

I stand there, unsure what to do, nervously shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

“I think you should sit down, Anna. There are things we all need to discuss,” my father says as he nods at the chair I had left earlier.

I sit back down and look at him.

“We are not sure how the signal came from that house. We both have sent special ops teams there to investigate. While you and Logan were...gone, I called my contact at Interpol, Jack Ross. He’s very good at tracking underworld criminal activity. He’s formerly with the MI-6 and U.S. intelligence but he’s currently overseeing an international crimes unit for Interpol. I think he’ll be quite resourceful in helping us stop this,” my father says.

“But M is here, in Norddale,” I say to him.

“I’ve alerted my intelligence minister, and he is putting together a special operation to track down M, alive, and bring him in for questioning,” my father says.

“You may have stopped a murder, Anna. But now we need the professionals involved,” he says.

I nod, although deep down I know that I’m not going to give up my own search for who’s behind all of this.

“Marcus, I’ll need you to handle setting up a meeting with my cabinet tomorrow,” my father says. “Via our secured video,” he adds. “We will all be staying here until further notice. I had planned on letting you all go in a few days, but not when there’s an assassin on the loose and not when we haven’t figured out who’s responsible for Hans’s jet.”

“Do we have more information on the jet?” Chris asks.

“My investigation team believes there was a breach in airport security and an unidentified person gained access to the hangar approximately two hours before you left. They are still working on face recognition as the individual was wearing a baseball cap, most of his face was obscured. The video equipment that was not working appears to have been tampered with at some point earlier that day. It was not due to power outages as they originally told me, in fact, the power outages may have been an act of sabotage as well. That’s all I know right now,” my father says. He runs his hands through his hair again, and I want to tell him to stop or he’ll be bald by the end of the week.

“Shannon, Mia, and Paolo, you can go ahead and cancel the children’s events for the next five days. Marcus will take care of mine,” he adds. “Victor, make sure all the security is coordinated with King Edvard’s. Consult with his chief of security, Fredrik, first. Have his secretary, Gregor, debriefed,” he adds looking at Victor Wolf,

his head of security. Victor gives me a look that tells me he is not pleased with my hacker antics and less pleased with the security threat that he clearly believes I have caused. I shrink under his stare. Victor is a tall imposing-looking man. I've never been a huge fan of his, but my father believes he is the best. I've never felt shame about my double life like I have these past few days. It never dawned on me the danger it posed until it posed danger. I feel idiotic for playing spy, more or less, although I trust my hacker skills more than I trust Victor with our lives. So, I keep my head held high as he exits the room.

Everyone else stands and begins to filter out of the study, but I stay. Finally, it's just my father and me.

"What is it, Anna?" he asks me.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to him.

He stands and walks around the desk. He pulls me up into his arms and hugs me in a very unroyal-like show of affection.

"Don't be sorry. I'm sorry you felt you couldn't live your life. I know it's not easy being a royal, and I know you have expectations cast upon you that are unbearable at times, but you're strong and you will do amazing things as a princess. I promise. But please, no more secret agent princess, OK?" he asks. He pulls back and looks down at me. "I don't think I could survive knowing that you were constantly putting yourself in jeopardy."

"Yes, Father," I say, my fingers crossing behind my back as I do so, a silly childhood superstition that I still haven't let go of as an adult.

I walk to the door and then turn back. "Sten," I say slowly, looking at him.

“We’re investigating all possibilities,” he answers, his voice takes on a serious tone.

“Is he...there?” I ask.

“He was,” my father states. “His plane took off earlier.”

“To where?” I ask.

“Here,” he says.

My eyes widen. Could it be that Sten is trying to kill his nephew?

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“Does Sten know about Logan?” I ask my father.

My father nods. “Yes,” he confirms.

“Does Uncle Eddie know about Sten?” I ask him.

My father nods.

“Please make sure Victor gets your laptop. He’ll need it for evidence,” my father explains. My body goes rigid. I don’t want to give up my laptop. And I don’t know who I can trust.

“Yes, Father,” I say. I step out of the study, knowing full well that I will not be giving Victor my secret laptop, the one hidden in the butler’s pantry. He will get my burner laptop. He’ll see some things, enough to make it look like my secret laptop.

I run up to my room and find my burner laptop. I pull some information from my server and put it on the laptop, and then I walk it to Victor’s office.

“Father says you’d like this,” I say as I knock on the door and open it without asking. Victor is at his desk, his phone pushed between his ear and his shoulder. He nods and motions for me to set it on his desk.

“Password?” he asks me.

I grab a sticky note from his desk and write it down.

He nods and goes back to his phone conversation. I walk back up to my room and look around. I feel lost in the moment, overwhelmed by the events of the day. My worlds have merged in the most unexpected way. I never gave it much thought, how that might happen. If I'm being honest with myself, I never thought it would happen. The fact that I didn't expect this makes me realize how ignorant I've been. I don't know why this reality wouldn't have slapped me in the face before today.

I am about to go check on my actual laptop when there's a knock at my door.

"Come in," I say. The door opens and Auggie and Chris stand in the doorway.

"That was interesting," Auggie says as he walks over and sits down next to me.

"Very," Chris echoes as he sits on my other side. Something about being squished between my two big brothers gives me such comfort. I lean my head on Chris's shoulder, and he kisses the top of it.

"You alright, Suzy Q?" he asks quietly.

I shrug. "Cat's out of the box, now, isn't it?" I answer.

"More like the lion is out of the box," Auggie says.

"It's Sten," I say. "It has to be."

"We know," they say in unison. I know they are looking at each other over my head.

"I just...Sten's always been so kind to us. I-I can't believe he'd do something like this," I admit out loud.

"People will go to crazy lengths to get power and to destroy it," Chris says.

“I know,” I agree.

“Now what?” Auggie asks.

“Now, I do some more research,” I tell them. “I just gave Victor my burner laptop. But I don’t trust him with my real one.”

“Anna,” Chris chides.

I sit up and look up at him, squaring my shoulders as I ready myself for an argument.

“Chris, listen, I need to have access to my data. I need to know what’s going on. I only trust you two, Logan, and Daddy. That’s it, no one else, yet,” I say to them.

“Be careful,” Chris says, and I’m a bit shocked that he’s not fighting this more. He squeezes my leg. “You’re the bravest, smartest princess that I know. If anyone can save the world, it’s you.”

I laugh. “I’m not trying to save the world, just us and Logan,” I say.

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“About that,” Chris says, raising an eyebrow and looking past me to Auggie.

“Seriously, Auggie? Is nothing sacred in this family?” I ask, turning my head to glare at him. He has the audacity to look a little sheepish.

I look back to Chris who is giving me his best stern big brother look.

“Are you sure we can trust Logan?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes, we can trust him,” I confirm. But if I’m being really honest with myself, a very small part of me questions this knowledge when Chris asks me.

“OK, then you have my blessing,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “Seriously?” I say.

He laughs. “What? It’s my brotherly duty,” he says.

I groan and slap his chest. “One more word about brotherly duties and I will kick your motherfucking ass,” I say as I stand.

“Wow, clean that mouth out with soap, Princess,” Auggie says. “Let’s go get Tessa’s cookies. I think we could all use some.”

“And something to drink,” Chris mutters as he follows us out of my room.

We waltz into the kitchen and find Logan already sitting on a stool. We all plop down next to him, taking up the remaining seats. There's a bottle of vodka in front of him and a shot glass.

He looks over at us and slides the bottle down our way.

"Goes well with the cookies," he mutters.

"Rough chat with Daddy?" Auggie asks.

"Fuck off, Auggie," Logan grumbles.

Auggie slaps him on the back. "Welcome to being a royal. I think your hazing is complete. I mean an assassination attempt, a long-lost king father, sleeping with a princess. I'm pretty sure you've covered all the bases...and I mean 'all' the bases," he says, smirking at me.

I stand up and punch Auggie in the arm. "You are such a dick!" I say to him.

Tessa walks over and puts her hands on her hips. "That is quite enough, you four! This isn't a sleazy bar on the wrong side of town. Now, I don't care if you want to come drown your royal sorry asses in here, but you will not talk to each other or about each other like that in front of me," she says in her best stern voice. Immediately, all four of us straighten up and there's a chorus of "yes, ma'am" from our mouths.

"Now, you'll need some food to go with that alcohol," she mutters, tapping her cheek. She puts her finger in the air. I can almost see a lightbulb turning on over her head as she spins around and fires up the brick oven.

I look over at Auggie and Chris, and we all grin. Tessa makes killer homemade pizza,

and it will go perfectly with the alcohol.

Tessa gets to work on the pizza dough, entertaining us, or maybe distracting us with funny stories about how she learned how to make pizza from some old Italian guy who owned a pizzeria and hired her to serve pizza when she was fifteen. She sets glasses down in front of us and like a real-life bartender she mixes up drinks and hands us each one.

She pushes a vodka tonic at Logan. “You need something other than straight vodka, boy,” she says.

He grins at her and takes the drink. The smell of pizza fills the room as we munch on cookies and sip our drinks. I know each of us desperately wants to forget about everything going on outside of this room.

When Tessa slaps the pizzas on the marble counter in front of us, we all dig in and devour them within minutes.

Liza walks in as we are stuffing our faces. “Go ahead on out, child. I won’t be needing your help tonight. The king has ordered food sent to his suite as has our guest,” she says.

Liza nods, looks at us with curious eyes, and heads back out. We all start laughing. I peel myself from the chair and lie down on the cool tile of the kitchen floor, patting my full stomach.

“That was sooo good,” I moan.

“Anna, get your ass off the floor,” Tessa chides.

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“Nope. I’m too comfy,” I say. We all continue chatting as I lie there. Eventually, Auggie comes and lies down next to me.

“You’re right, this is nice,” he says as he rests his head on my belly.

“You children are gonna be the death of me,” Tessa says, shaking her head in disapproval. “I’m out of here unless you all need something else.”

“No, no. We’re good, Tessa,” Chris says to her.

I lie on the floor and stare at the pattern in the ceiling of the kitchen. “I vote that we stay here, permanently,” I announce.

“I concur,” Logan says.

“Agreed,” Chris says.

“Auggie?” I ask. I look down to see my brother is snoozing on me.

“Huh?” he says with his eyes still closed.

“Never mind, motion passes. Go to bed,” I say to him.

“I’m heading up to sleep this off,” Auggie says. I roll my eyes.

“Good idea,” I say as I help push him up. He waves to us and stumbles out of the kitchen. Tessa has dimmed the lights so just the undercabinet ones are on. It’s warm

and cozy in the kitchen, the heat from the pizza oven is still giving off warm air and a most delicious smell.

“I should go too,” Chris says.

He stands and holds out a hand to pull me up. I accept, and once he has me steady on my feet, he kisses my cheek.

“Night,” he says.

“Goodnight,” Logan and I answer in unison.

I plop back down on the stool next to Logan. The palace is quiet except for the hum of the giant refrigerator.

“Soooo?” I ask, turning to Logan. “The conversation with your dad didn’t go well, I take it?”

He shrugs and sighs. “It was fine. I...it’s just a lot to process,” he mumbles.

“I bet,” I say to him. “I feel bad that I thought he was trying to kill you.”

“He’s worried. He’s not mad about that. He’s concerned,” Logan says.

“I think we’re all concerned,” I say.

“He has a lot of regrets,” Logan confides.

“I’m sure,” I say as I look at him.

In the dim light of the kitchen, he looks almost boyish. I reach out and touch his

cheek.

“I’m sorry, Logan,” I whisper.

“For what?” he asks, looking back at me.

“Everything,” I say softly.

He turns his chair and pushes my legs apart to make room for his. He leans forward until we are a mere few centimeters apart.

“Stop being sorry. Like I said before, you are brave, reckless, but brave, and I’m glad you found me,” he says, brushing a stray hair away from my cheek. He leans in slowly until our lips are but a hair apart.

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“I need you,” he whispers and then presses his mouth against mine. I sigh with contentment, and climb over onto his lap, straddling him as he deepens the kiss, his hands cupping the sides of my face and tilting it to allow him more access. I moan as his tongue slides against mine. I start to work on the buttons on his shirt, sliding it down his arms, and letting it fall to the floor.

I run my hands over his chest, feeling his muscles flex as I do so. I trail my fingers down his well-sculpted abdominals until I reach the waistband of his jeans. I can feel his steel-hard erection beneath my palm, and he groans in my mouth and pushes against my hand. I unbutton his jeans and free his cock, which bounces up into my hand. He sighs as I wrap my fingers around him, feeling his hard length.

I stand and shimmy out of my leggings and toss my sweater on the ground. I stand in front of Logan in just my bra and underwear. Logan looks down at my body, running his finger across the swell of my breasts, and then down my side. He grasps my hips and pulls me back against him as he kisses me once again.

I feel his hands teasing me against my panties. I feel the fabric of them getting wetter as my desire grows. He takes his time kissing a path down my jaw and neck before pushing the cups of my bra down so that he can feast on my breasts. And feast he does. He’s like a man starving in a desert as he nips and sucks at me. I push against him, my need growing with each flick of his tongue.

I reach for my panties, becoming impatient. His hands stop me.

“Not yet,” he says breathily. He unhooks my bra and lets it fall to the floor. There’s something naughty and exciting about being naked in the kitchen, where anyone

could walk in on us.

He lifts me up onto the counter and pushes me down. The cold marble leaves goose bumps on my skin as he slowly peels my panties down my legs and lets them fall on the floor. His hands knead the muscle above each knee as he slowly pushes my legs apart. He lets his underwear and jeans fall to the floor as he stands before me, gazing at my flesh.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he says as he strokes a hand up my thigh and runs a single finger between the lips of my sex. I shudder under his gentle touch.

I grind against his finger, wanting more of his touch. He slides his finger inside me, and I thrust against it.

“Shit, you’re so wet, Anna,” he murmurs against my neck as he sucks on my skin. His thumb grazes my clit, and I quiver.

I sit up and reach out and wrap my hands around his cock. He pushes against my grip, each of us fucking the other’s hand. He pulls back and looks at me with hooded eyes, filled with such desire I squirm with need.

“Not yet,” he says again as he bends down and parts my sex with his fingers, running his tongue over my folds and then sucking on my clit as he pushes two fingers back inside me. I grip his shoulders and shamelessly grind against his face. I’m so close, and I need to let go.

“Let go,” he murmurs against my sex, as though he’s reading my fucking mind. His fingers bend inside me and rub against some deep spot that sends me plummeting off a cliff of ecstasy. A silent cry on my lips is all I can manage to do as my body shakes violently from my release. He laps at me, tasting everything spilling from my body.

When he pulls back, his face is wet, and he leans down and kisses me, letting me taste myself. I'm not sure why but it makes me need him even more. It feels dirty and wrong and yet so right at the same time.

I'm too lost in our kiss to feel him line up with my entrance, it's only when he plunges inside me on one long thrust that I throw my head back and let out a cry, which he quickly stifles with his hand. Our movements become frenzied and messy as our hands move over each other's bodies, and we push harder against each other. I want him deeper, and as though sensing it, he pulls my legs up and over his shoulders, his cock reaching new depths inside me.

It's just enough to make me come even harder than before as he bucks against me in a wild frenzy of need. I grip the countertop to keep from sliding across it from the force of his movements. As I start to come back down from my sensory high, I feel him thrust one last time and spill his seed deep inside me on a long groan.

He collapses on me and nuzzles my neck. I'm thoughtless, weightless, and completely content as I feel his weight on me. As my mind starts to fire back to life, I'm suddenly hyperaware of just how life-altering today has been for Logan. I knew, but the depth of the events hit me harder as we lie there naked and panting. I can't imagine finding out my whole life was a lie, that my father was a king, that I was royalty. I don't know any different, but Logan's world is altered forever. He won't be able to go back to his old life. A profound sadness comes over me. I'm grieving his past life for him and a tear escapes my eye.

Logan's up on his elbows as the single drop runs over my cheek and onto his.

"What's wrong, Anna? Did I hurt you?" he asks, concern etched on his face.

I shake my head. "You can't go back," I whisper, my voice laced with emotion.

“Back to what?” he asks me.

“To your life,” I reply. He stands up, his cock slipping from my body. I sit up so that we are nearly face-to-face. I see the recognition in his eyes at my words.

“I know,” he says softly. “I know.”

“It’s all my fault,” I say. “I should have just contacted the police. I can’t get over it. I can’t stop thinking that this is all my fault. I can’t—”

Logan’s hand covers my mouth, and I abruptly stop speaking.

“Stop. Just stop, Anna. You have to stop blaming yourself. You did nothing wrong. Yes, you were a bit impulsive in how you went about saving me, but your heart was in the right place. Your heart is so big. I see how you care for your father, your brothers, everyone. You don’t even see it. You want everyone to be alright. But what about you? What do you want?” Logan asks.

His words, his questions, have my head spinning.

“I...don’t know,” I admit. “I...it’s different for me. I don’t have choices.” The weight I’ve been keeping away from me now presses down on my shoulders.

Logan’s hand forces my head up, and I look into his eyes.

“You have choices. What do you want?” he asks again.

I sigh. “I...want to be free to do what I want, when I want. But I also want to make a difference. A small part of me wants to be like my mother, make the world a better place. But a bigger part of me remembers how much that cost her, her freedom, her ability to be herself. I don’t want those things. The week on the boat was...so perfect.

I could just be me, Anna. Not Princess Susanna. Not Her Royal Highness. Not a public figure, but just me. I haven't had that in a very, very long time. That's why I'm so sad for you. You've had that your whole life until right now. You have no idea about the pressures of putting duty before self. It's suffocating at times. It's unbearable at times. But mostly, it's an albatross around your neck that won't ever go away," I say, looking at him as I bare my soul.

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He cups my cheek and runs his thumb across my lips. “It’s also an opportunity. An opportunity to make the world a better place. An opportunity to use a position of power for good. It’s not all bad,” he says. He pauses as though listening to his words and really believing them for the first time. He smiles at me then.

“Plus, I have you,” he adds.

I laugh. “I’m not sure I’m much of a consolation prize for losing one’s freedom,” I say.

The look on Logan’s face could ignite a fuse. “Don’t ever say that again. You are worth everything. How do you not see it?” he asks.

“Logan, I’m just me. I was born into all of this,” I say, motioning to our surroundings. “I didn’t do anything to earn this.” I stop and realize for the first time in my life that I want to do something to earn what I have, to be worthy of what I have. It’s like the world’s largest lightbulb just went on over my head.

“What?” Logan asks, clearly seeing my face light up with my one thought.

“I want to earn this,” I whisper. “I want to be worthy of all of this. I’ve never thought about that before...I’ve never thought of what motivated me to do what I do. I mean, not really thought about it.”

“So, do something. You have the world at your fingertips. You can do something, something big,” he says.

I nod, my thoughts exploding in my head like an atomic bomb. My mind begins racing with possibilities, possibilities that I've never considered before this very moment. I look up at him and grin.

He smiles down at me. "What I wouldn't do to keep that very look upon this face," he murmurs as he bends down and kisses me.

"Thank you," I say against his lips.

"I'm not sure for what, but you are very welcome, my princess," he says back as we continue to kiss.

I sigh in contentment and throw my arms around his neck. I hear movement somewhere in the palace, and I jump back and look up at him. He laughs and bends down, tossing me my clothes. We dress in a hurry, giggling as we do so, and then I wipe down the counter because I'm anal like that.

When I've determined that no one can tell we've desecrated the kitchen, I turn to Logan. He holds out a hand, and I look at it for a good long moment. Somehow, this seems different than just asking me to come with him, this seems like he's asking me to be with him. I slowly reach out and grasp his hand. He smiles at me and pulls me against him, crushing me to his chest.

"You know what?" he whispers into my hair.

"What?" I reply.

"We are going to be a force to be reckoned with, my fierce princess," he says. His words melt into my soul. I don't know if he knows the Shakespeare quote that my brothers always recited to me, but the fact that he called me fierce confirms that he understands me on a cellular level. I melt into his embrace.

“Come with me,” he says, and he leads me to his room. I look around as we walk through the palace, curious if anyone will see us, but I don’t find a single soul meandering the halls, just the occasional shadow of a guard turning down the next corridor. It makes me a little curious, as I know I heard someone awake, but the palace usually has a handful of staff wandering about at all hours of the day. I decide it was probably a security guard. I don’t give it another thought as Logan pulls me into his room and closes the door behind us.

Chapter 26

It’s my phone buzzing that wakes me in the morning. I reach for it and look down.

Chris: Sten is here

I bolt up in bed. Logan reaches out and tries to pull me back down against him. I resist, and he opens his eyes. As soon as he sees me, he sits up.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I turn my phone around to show him the text.

“Your uncle is here,” I say.

He opens his mouth and then closes it. “Why?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t know,” I admit. “If our fathers thought we were in danger, then Sten wouldn’t be in here.”

“What if they are setting a trap for him?” Logan ponders.

“By bringing him into our home? Why would they risk our lives like that?” I ask.

Logan rubs his forehead. “I don’t know. I mean, I don’t even know Sten. I don’t know what to think,” he says.

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“Stay here,” I say to him as I climb out of his bed and throw on my clothes. “I’ll text you once I know it’s safe.”

Logan gives me a look that says there is no way in hell he’s staying put. I sigh.

“Fine, come with me,” I say to him. I hate to tell anyone where my secret hiding place is, but something about Logan makes me trust him. I lead him a roundabout way to the butler’s pantry and then shut the door behind us. I frown when I notice my computer is on a different shelf than I normally set it on, but I can’t remember putting it away last. Was I in a hurry? Maybe.

“What’s wrong?” Logan asks.

“I think someone was in here,” I admit.

“Staff?” Logan asks.

“No, no one comes in here. Thus why my laptop is here,” I explain.

I fire it up and begin my search. Nothing seems out of place on my computer, so I decide I must have moved it. I don’t exactly know what I’m looking for. I stumbled upon the last message, lucky really that I was able to trace it.

“What are you looking for?” Logan asks.

“I don’t know...clues, I guess,” I answer as I continue to search. My searches of the dark web are almost like shining a small flashlight into the vastness of a dark cavern

and hoping to find a missing ring. The odds of hitting the ring at just the right angle with the small amount of light in such a huge void, are almost null, but I keep searching. Logan jumps up on the counter of the cabinet. He watches me in silence. I feel his penetrating stare, but I don't stop my quest. I can't stop. I'm a woman on a mission now. The minutes pass as I look, and look. The code starts to scramble in my brain, and I blink back the blurriness I see on the screen.

"We should get you something to eat," Logan says.

I sigh. I tap out a search and set it to run. "You're right," I agree. "But I'm having breakfast brought to you; I don't trust Sten yet."

"Like hell then that I'm letting you go without me, especially if you don't trust him," Logan says. "Besides, what's he going to do, shoot me in front of everyone?"

I sigh again. "I suppose not," I admit.

"Then, let's go eat," he says. I grumble as I give in to his demand and follow him down to the dining room. I open the door and find my family, Logan's family, and our staff all seated around the giant table. Everyone pauses mid-bite as we enter the room. My gaze travels down the table to Sten, who's seated next to Uncle Eddie. He gives me a warm smile and then looks curiously at his nephew.

Sten rises from the table and walks toward us.

"Hello, Sten," I say to him.

"Anna, so good to see you, my dear," he says as he leans forward, and double cheek kisses me. He then looks at Logan. "So, I hear I've gained a nephew. It's a pleasure to meet you, Logan."

Sten holds out his hand, and Logan shakes it. I internally cringe. My mind is trying to meld the Sten I know with the Sten I am now fearing. I look past him to the table. Everyone is watching us closely, including Uncle Eddie.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sten,” Logan says, splintering me from my thoughts.

Sten nods and walks back to his seat. Logan and I take seats across from Chris and Auggie. Tessa hurries in with Liza behind her as they lay out a second course, or at least what I guess is a second course considering that everyone’s plates are already filled with fruit. The whole thing seems so formal for the summer palace. This is typically a place where we put aside many formalities and customs, a place where we act more like a normal family than the royal family. But today, looking around the table with its fine china, crystal goblets, silver-plated serving dishes, and multitudes of silverware, it looks like a state dinner at the royal palace. If Uncle Eddie were any other king, I would expect this, but he’s not, he’s Uncle Eddie. He’s the man that played hide-and-go-seek with me and had tea parties in my room. He’s the man that camped in a tent with us in the garden and roasted marshmallows over a fire pit while telling us scary stories. He’s the man that has cold beer from the bottle with my dad while sitting out at the pool.

I catalog everything I know about Sten next. Sten is five years younger than Uncle Eddie. He’s always been kind to us and at times played with us when we were visiting, but he’s not nearly as close to my father as Uncle Eddie is. It’s probably the age difference and the fact that Sten lived a rather charmed and boyish existence. Well, Sten still lives a rather charmed and boyish existence. He’s been the fodder of tabloids for years. He’s a known playboy who always has a new woman on his arm. As second in line to the throne of Montelandia, he is constantly scrutinized. The public has a real love-hate relationship with him. The anti-monarchists were often citing Sten as a reason to dissolve the monarchy. I know Sten had one close relationship years ago, but it’s a bit of mystery why that ended, or at least Uncle Eddie and Daddy never speak of it. I always viewed Sten as a bit of a wild

child/wounded bird, but now I'm rethinking everything I know.

"So, this all must be quite a shock for you, Logan," Sten says as he helps himself to eggs and sausages.

"It's quite a lot to process," Logan says.

"Well, I'm happy to talk with you whenever. Give you pointers and such," Sten says.

"That's very kind of you," Logan replies. I want to roll my eyes. Like Sten should be giving anyone pointers on being royal, unless they want to end up on page six. I look over at Auggie, who's clearly trying to keep from laughing. My father gives him a sharp look, and he pretends to wipe his mouth with his silk napkin, only I think he's really stifling a chuckle.

This entire meal is completely strange and awkward. My aunt and uncle are silent as they eat. And I wonder why Hans hasn't tried dominating the conversation yet. He's known for creating friendly table banter.

I excuse myself as soon as I can, looking at Logan and pleading with him through my gaze. I don't want him staying here. I don't want him near Sten. But he only gives me the subtlest shake of his head. I frown and head toward the door.

"Anna?" my father says as I attempt to escape.

I turn and look back at him. "I'd like to see you in my study," he says and rises, excusing himself as well.

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I follow my father down the hall, and he closes the door behind us. I note that Pete is already in my father's study. He's standing at attention.

I look from Pete to my father.

"Sit, Anna," he says.

I comply and give Pete a questioning look. He doesn't give anything away but keeps his face indifferent.

"I've asked Pete to join us," my father states the obvious.

"I can see that. What is this about, Daddy?" I ask him.

"I'm uncertain if Sten is involved or not. I have Victor working on things and Jack at Interpol, but in the meantime, I want security with us twenty-four seven," my father says. My eyes bulge.

"In the palace?" I say.

"Yes, Anna, in the palace. Now, Pete will accompany you from here out. Your brothers were made aware of the situation before breakfast, this morning. I can assure you, that no one is happy about this situation. However, I see no other way around it for now. So please, for the love of god, Anna, just do as I say. Don't argue with me," my father pleads as he pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Fine," I say curtly.

My father looks slightly surprised that I'm not putting up a fight, but Pete is also my closest security confidant. So, if I have to have a shadow, it might as well be him.

"Is that all?" I ask.

"That is all. I'll keep you updated if anything changes," he says to me. "Oh, and, Anna?"

"Yes, Daddy?" I ask.

"Please don't attempt to keep up your game of spies. Victor has things under control," my father tries to assure me.

"Right," I mutter.

"Anna, I'm serious," my father says.

I look at him. His eyes are hard, and I know he means business. I sigh.

"Fine," I lie.

"That's all," he says, dismissing me.

I nod and exit the room with Pete in tow.

I swivel around once we are out of earshot.

"Listen, I know you don't like playing babysitter anymore than I like to be babysat. Can we just agree to our normal working relationship?" I ask him.

His serious look tells me that he's not going to back down easy. "Anna, I'm under

strict orders. I'll do what I can to make this...less painful for you, but I'm not letting you out of my sight except when you go to your chambers. Understood?" he replies.

My shoulders sag. "Yes," I say to him. Undeterred, I begin to hatch my escape plan as I walk to the drawing room to meet Shannon, whose text conveniently pops up the second Pete and I finish speaking.

Shannon drones on and on about the canceled event that I had scheduled. Her voice is laced with strain as she tries to reorganize my appointments.

"Shannon, calm down, really. You're going to give yourself a coronary. I'm barely missing anything," I try to reassure her.

"Well, I don't like you to miss any appointments. It looks bad," she says as her fingers click-clack on the keyboard of her laptop.

"I know. I know. But...these are very unusual circumstances," I try to reason with her.

She looks up at me, pushing her black-rimmed glasses up her nose. "I understand that, Your Highness, but I still have a job to do. We all still have jobs to do. Now, let's talk about the possibility of presenting this award tomorrow via video conference," she says as she begins to go over details of some charity award ceremony the next day.

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I'm about to lose my mind as minute fifty-eight approaches. Serious Shannon is a force to be reckoned with, and she's also a taskmaster. She's rearranged my schedule, called in favors, and lined me up for several video appearances over the next week. When she finally closes her laptop's lid, I slouch against the chair that I'm sitting in and sigh in relief.

"We're done then?" I ask her.

"All done," she says.

"Thank god," I mutter as I rise and walk toward the door. Pete tries to keep a subtle ten feet behind me, but I find that even more annoying.

"Pete, just walk with me. You don't have to act like my invisible shadow," I protest. "If we're indefinitely stuck together like glue, then you might as well walk next to me."

He picks up his speed until he's walking by my side. "So, where to?" he asks. Fortunately, while Shannon was lecturing me on video conferences, I devised a rather brilliant plan.

"Mr. Winters's chambers," I say. He rolls his eyes.

"Great," he mutters.

"What was that?" I ask, almost gleeful.

“Nothing, Your Highness,” he says slightly louder.

“Uh huh,” I reply with a smirk.

We walk the rest of the way in silence. I knock on Logan’s door, and a moment later, he opens it.

“I’d like a word with you,” I say to him.

“Uh, sure, please come in,” he says, looking at Pete and then back to me. I turn to Pete.

“Is it acceptable if I have an audience with Logan in private?” I ask him.

He rolls his eyes. “Yes,” he answers.

“Good. I’ll just be a few minutes,” I say as I shut the door and quickly usher Logan into his bedroom.

“What are you doing?” Logan asks.

“I’m using you,” I say with a wink.

“Excuse me?” he replies.

“I need to use your passageway,” I say as I motion to the secret door in his bedroom that I used the other night.

“Oh, can I come with you?” he asks. I shake my head.

“I need you here to cover for me in case Pete knocks on the door,” I say to him.

“Anna,” he says.

“Logan, I just need to get my laptop. It’s running a search, a follow-up to my other one. I need to know where the signal is coming from now,” I say.

“But wouldn’t you expect it to be here, since Sten’s here, and we all think he’s the guilty party since he was down at the house?” Logan asks the obvious question.

“Yes, but something doesn’t add up. Why would Sten send a signal from a house where we knew he would be? It’s too obvious. I...it’s just a hunch, but I’m questioning whether he’s involved. Maybe he is, but maybe...just maybe, he’s not.” I say out loud the possibility that’s been in the back of my mind.

“You think it’s not Sten, then, Nancy Drew?” Logan prods. I roll my eyes.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

“Fine, I’ll cover for you, but you better hurry,” Logan says. I start to walk away but he grips my arm and pulls me to him.

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“Be careful,” he whispers before crashing his mouth to mine.

“I will. I promise,” I say to him. “Well, as careful as I can be,” I add with a wink. He returns the eye roll.

“Anna, why do I think that you might be the death of me?” he asks. I grin.

“Why are people always asking me that?” I say in my most innocent voice.

He cups my cheek, and all humor is gone. His eyes penetrate my soul as he stares into them. I swallow hard.

“I’m serious. Be careful,” he reiterates as he leans his brow against mine. I close my eyes and breathe in that oaky cologne, which I immediately commit to memory once more. I feel the strength of his muscles under my grasp on his upper arms, that too is immediately committed to memory. His lips brush against mine, and I sigh with contentment. For a split second, I wish I could stay here in his arms forever, safe from the world. But then I open my eyes again, resigned to the fact that I have to face the future. I can’t rest until I know who’s behind all of this, and I don’t trust anyone but myself to solve that mystery.

“OK,” I answer, seriously this time. I kiss him once more and then go to the door and pop it open. I turn as I go through, and I see that he’s watching me. “I’ll be right back,” I say as I hurry into the passageway. It doesn’t take me long to sneak through Auggie’s room, which he is thankfully not in as I use another hidden passage to get to the butler’s pantry. I find my laptop, undisturbed this time.

I look down at the screen. My fingers pulling up my search. There's a new message.

"It's been taken care of. You are relieved of your duty." I frantically follow the trail left by the message, hoping that's it not too late to track it down. I home in on it, tunneling through the dark web, mapping out the signal, until it stops. I stare in complete and utter shock.

The signal is coming from the palace. And it's live. I look again and then again. It can't be right. I double-check once more, but there's no denying it. Whoever it is, is here, right now. My stomach lurches as I ponder who. Is it Sten? My mind races through the faces of my family, of Logan's family, of our staff. I'm not sure who I can trust, anyone in this palace could be a killer. When I was a child, I loved to play the board game Clue. Only right now, I don't know who, or with what, or the biggest question of all, why?

I back up my data to my server and slide the laptop back into my new hiding spot, which is a loose board in the bottom of the cabinet. I head toward my father's study. I need to talk to him. My father has nothing to gain from Logan's death, so I know he's not behind this. I stop mid-step and shake my head. I can't even think he'd be behind this. I continue walking. I have to trust someone. And that someone needs to be my father. I'll tell Logan as soon as I can. I make it to the study and knock on the door. There's no answer, so I peek inside to find the room empty. I sigh. I turn to walk back up toward my father's chamber when I feel the ground shake and a loud boom.

Chapter 27

The sound is deafening. The building shakes for a few seconds. And then for half a second...silence...utter, eerie silence before there are screams and shouts. I shake my head to clear it. My ears are ringing, and I look around. There's so much smoke that I'm momentarily disoriented. The smoke stings my eyes and burns my lungs. I cough and sputter as I look, but I can't see through the haze in front of me. There are flames

in the distance and pieces of wood and stone on the ground. I get down on my hands and knees and crawl toward what I think is the front door. When I arrive, I use my shirt to turn the metal handle and push it open. I stumble down the front steps and land on the pebbles, gasping for fresh air. A moment later, Gerard is standing next to me.

“Are you alright, Princess?” he asks, crouching down to examine me. I lift a hand.

“Yes,” I choke out. I wipe my face with my hand and sit up, looking around. I only see Gerard. “Where is everyone?” I cry out as I stumble to my feet.

A second later, Chris emerges carrying Mia in his arms. I run to them.

“Is she OK?” I yell.

I notice her arm is bloody.

“She fell; I don’t know,” Chris says, his eyes wild. I hear sirens in the distance. I realize there are security guards running into the palace, my gaze follows them, scanning up to see flames shooting out of the top of the palace. Movement at the door draws my attention back down. I see Logan, his eyes scanning until they find me. He runs toward me and crushes me to me.

“Thank god!” he yells. “I couldn’t find you.”

“Where is everyone?” I call out. The sounds of the flames, sirens, and shouting of security permeate the air. It’s like a fuzzy background noise in my ringing ears, and I can’t exactly pinpoint the volume of my voice over the other sounds.

“I don’t know,” he says, looking back at the chaos.

I see Tessa and Auggie stumble around from the back. They seem OK, and I assume the kitchen area was not compromised by the explosion as the flames are shooting out toward the wing where my father, King Edvard, and Lara and Hans's chambers are located. My mind freezes at the realization, and I shudder.

I take off running back inside. I hear the calls of my brothers and staff. I turn for a brief moment, Shannon and Marcus are now coming from around the building behind Auggie, Tessa, and Liza, who has stumbled out of the building as well.

I lock eyes with Logan. He gives me a pleading look, and then I turn and run inside.

The spray of the fire sprinklers is going now and coats me in a fine mist of water. I rip my shirt and wrap it around my mouth and nose to keep my lungs from inhaling the pungent, smoky air. I see staff running out with priceless antiques, paintings, and such. I yell at them to get out of here. They tell me to turn back, but I continue up the stairs. The smoke becoming thicker with each step.

"Anna, stop," I hear Logan's voice behind me.

"I won't let them die," I say. I recall him saying I was brave and reckless, and at this moment, I feel very much both, but I also feel determined. I won't let anyone die without a fight.

I continue on, I hear Logan behind me, but I sprint in the direction of my father's chambers. I know I'm close to Lara and Hans's door. I feel for it and push it open. I'm pushed back by flames.

"Aunt Lara!" I yell.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:39 am

“Anna?” I hear her. I can’t see her through the flames and debris.

“I’m here, where are you?” I call out.

“Get out! It’s no use,” I hear her voice. I spot her face for a brief second before flames lick higher and cover her from my view once more.

“No, I won’t go without you,” I say, desperately scanning the room, looking for a way to get to her. There’s so much debris. Pieces of the wood beams lie broken and on fire. There are giant chunks of wall piled on the floor.

“Anna, my love, listen to me. You can’t get to me, and even if you could, I’m pinned under a beam. It’s no use.” I hear her voice waver, and I feel hot tears splash my cheeks.

“I’m not leaving you,” I say, my voice cracking on the last word.

“Anna, I won’t break my promise I made to your mother when you were born. I promised I would always take care of you if anything ever happened to her. You will not die trying to save me,” she says. I hear her coughing, and I know she’s probably inhaled a lot of smoke.

“I’ll go get help,” I cry out.

“Anna, just get out, please,” she says.

I’m crying now. “I love you, Auntie Lara,” I say.

“I know, my love. I know. You’re the closest thing I’ve had to a daughter, and you’ve made my life a better one. Now go live yours,” she says, her coughing growing more prominent with each word.

“I’m getting help,” I call out.

I run from the room. I hear the voices of what I presume to be firefighters down the hall. “Down here!” I yell and sputter on smoke. I continue toward my father’s room. I try to open the door, but the handles are so hot, I wince. I take off my shirt, wrap it around my hand and turn the knob.

I back up as flames burst from the doorway.

“Daddy!” I yell and cough.

“Anna?” I hear him. I turn and see the door open to the suite where Uncle Eddie stays when he visits. I’m about to run inside when I hear a crack above me.

“Anna!” I turn just in time to see Logan running at me, motioning for me to move with his arms. I start to step to the side, and then everything goes black.

To be continued...