



A Valiant Prince

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Some princes are born into royalty. And some princes are made into royalty.

Logan Winters just discovered that he's a prince, a prince that someone wants dead.

When Princess Susanna came waltzing into his world, she took his breath away with her beauty and charm and also with the truth about his life.

Now they are racing against time to find out who wants to kill him.

Will they be able to stop a killer? Or will their discovery bring down not one throne but two?

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Prologue

“Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.” ~William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

“Mom?” I ask as I knock on my mother’s door.

“Come in, Logan,” she answers from behind the door. I turn the knob and peek inside. My mother is sitting at her desk. She’s got notebooks scattered about and news clippings. She’s working. She’s always working.

“Mom? Will you be taking me to camp tomorrow?” I ask her. She looks up from her desk. She looks sad, but she often looks sad, as though she’s thinking about someone who died.

“I’m gonna try. I’m sorry, but I have to get work done on this story. Nana will take you if I can’t,” she says. I glance at her desk. There are photographs and a locket. The locket is creepy looking. It has an eye painted on it.

“What’s that?” I say, disgust evident in my voice.

She laughs a little and holds up the locket. “It’s a locket, silly,” she says, opening it to show me the empty insides.

“Why don’t you have photos in there? I thought girls put photos in those,” I say.

She sighs. “We do, but this one is special. Someone special gave it to me. Do you

know why it has an eye painted on it?" she asks me.

I shake my head.

"A long time ago, people would send each other paintings of their eyes. Historians believe that it was a trend started by a king a long time ago. They are called 'lover's eyes.' It's a way to help someone remember you," she explains.

"Why don't they just give you a photo?" I ask, scrunching up my face because the whole thing is creepy and weird.

She laughs again. "I guess they could nowadays, but this is sort of romantic. Don't you think?" she asks me. I roll my eyes. My mom always asks me funny grown-up questions.

"Mom, it's weird," I say.

"I think it's beautiful," she whispers as she carefully sets the locket back on her desk.

"Sure, Mom. I gotta go pack," I say as I turn to leave. She reaches out and grabs my arm, stopping me, and I turn back to her. I'm hopeful for a moment that she might take me to camp because of the look in her eyes.

"Someday, Logan, you'll meet the love of your life, and when you do, don't let anything come between you. Fight for your love. OK?" she says to me.

"Uh, yeah, sure, Mom," I say.

She pulls me in and kisses my hair. "You have your father's eyes," she whispers. I freeze because she so seldom mentions my father. I lean back in her arms and look at her.

“I do?” I ask.

“You do,” she states. I smile. She smiles back and then brushes the end of my nose with her finger.

“You better go pack,” she says.

“OK,” I reply as I skip out of her room, daydreaming about a handsome man with blue eyes.

Chapter One

I lose track of her quickly. The smoke is thick and blankets the air like morning fog. Water is spraying down from the sprinklers, and I take my shirt off and hold it under one before tying the wet cloth around my nose to keep the burning fumes of the fire from filling my lungs.

I make it up the stairs. The temperature rises, as I climb each stair. When I reach the top, I look toward her room. I run there first, but it’s empty. I walk back into the hallway and look toward the fire in the other wing. She wouldn’t. Shit, she would.

I begin to run toward the fire, fighting the natural urge to run back outside, fighting my instincts that say to run away from the fire, because if my fierce princess ran into it, then I most certainly am going in after her.

I hear her before I see her.

“Daddy!” she yells.

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As I run toward the sound of her voice, I begin to make out her figure in the distance. There's fire everywhere. Debris rains down from the ceiling, and I narrowly miss it. I'm momentarily confused as I approach her, she's not looking in her father's room, but inside my father's room.

"Anna!" I call out as I close in on her.

She turns slowly, and just as she sees me, there's a roar of fire, a cracking in the ceiling above her, and then I don't see her.

"Anna!" I scream, sprinting as fast as I can, choking on the smoke that I inhale instead of oxygen.

There are so many flames. I fall to the ground and begin crawling. I can see a beam has fallen, and I jump over it. That's when I see her. Her arm is under the beam, and she's on the ground, pieces of ceiling around her, on her. I don't even think as I start removing burning debris from on top of her. They say that people have superhuman strength when adrenaline pumps through their bodies in times of emergency. This is the only explanation of how I am able to push a giant wooden beam off Anna.

I pick her up in my arms and turn. Then I see my father. King Michael supports him and the two are stumbling toward the door.

"We have to go!" I yell to them. "This wing is going to collapse!"

"Go!" King Michael yells as his eyes focus on Anna. "Get her out of here."

Anna stirs in my arms. “Lara,” she manages.

“What?” I ask, shaking her a bit as her eyes close again.

“Lara,” she says again and then promptly passes out in my arms.

“Where’s Lara?” I yell at King Michael.

“I don’t know!” he yells back. “Go!” he screams again. I take off running away from the fire with Anna in my arms. There are firemen, guards, and staff running everywhere. It is a scene of complete chaos.

I make it down the stairs and find firefighters coming toward us. One of them stops.

“Is she injured?” he says.

“Yes, a beam fell,” I say. “The kings are still up there.”

“Are you OK?” he asks. I nod.

The firefighter radios something and nods. “Get her out front. There are ambulances waiting,” he says and takes off running up the stairs.

I hurry past him. The air outside almost hurts to breathe as I make my way toward the ambulances in the drive. A medic meets me and helps me to get Anna on a stretcher.

“What happened?” he asks as he begins taking her vitals.

“A beam fell on her arm,” I say.

He looks at her arm. It’s bloody and bruised.

“I think she hit her head when she fell,” I say.

“OK, we need to get her to the hospital,” he says.

“I’m coming with you,” I reply.

“Are you family?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer, not even giving it a thought.

I climb in beside her as he shuts the doors. Out of the back window, I can see Auggie, Chris, and Pete running toward the ambulance, their faces white, their eyes wide.

Anna only stirs briefly in the ambulance as a medic puts an oxygen mask on her face. It takes all my willpower not to hold her in my arms as the medic continues to work on her.

Once we arrive at the emergency room, a nurse escorts me to a private waiting area.

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“I’ll come to get you as soon as I know something,” she says. “And, hold on, I’ll get you a shirt.” I look down and realize I must have dropped my shirt when I picked Anna up. I’m in jeans and shoes and that’s it. A moment later, she returns and hands me a scrubs top. I put it on and thank her. She nods and scurries off toward the emergency room. There’s some blood on my jeans, and I rub at it in a vain attempt to make it go away.

Minutes tick by like hours. I sit, tapping my foot. I don’t even have my phone on me. I left it in my room when the explosion happened. Pete is going to kill me. When he realized Anna wasn’t in the room, he lost his shit. And quite frankly, I don’t blame the guy.

The door to the room flies open and wild-eyed Pete is at the door.

“Where is she?” he asks.

“In the ER,” I answer.

“Damn it, Logan. You and I are going to have words,” he says loudly and then lowers his voice, “But not here.”

A moment later, Chris and Auggie come in with Mia, Cain, and Nico.

“They brought our fathers here,” Chris says to me.

I nod. “Your aunt?” I ask.

Chris shakes his head. "I don't know," he says.

The room is utterly silent as everyone sits, paces, and sits again. Mia offers to get everyone coffee, but Chris stops her from leaving.

"No one is going anywhere," he commands.

"Chris...I mean, Your Highness...I..." She trails off and looks at him as her lip quivers. Chris pulls her into a hug.

"I'm sorry. I...we need to be careful, Mia. I know you're trying to help, but please let others take care of that stuff," he says to her.

"OK," she says quietly, her voice muffled against Chris's chest.

They have just separated when the door to the waiting room opens and a young doctor walks in.

"Your Highnesses, I'm Dr. Vanker. Your father, the king, is fine. We are treating him for smoke inhalation. We should probably check everyone here as well. King Edvard sustained some injuries but they are not severe. He has a broken arm and injured foot, and a nasty bump on his head. We'll be keeping him overnight as a precaution. Your sister sustained a severe concussion but her arm wasn't broken. There's some tissue damage, so we'll keep it immobilized for a few days while she recovers. We are also keeping her overnight. Princess Lara was just brought in a few minutes ago. She suffered considerable internal injuries and smoke inhalation. She's up in surgery right now. She coded on her way here. We have some of the best doctors in the country working on her, but I wanted you to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. Her husband should be joining you shortly. I gave him some scrubs to change into," the doctor says.

“Thank you for the updates, Dr. Vanker,” Chris says, extending his hand. The doctor accepts it.

“Is there anything I can get for you?” he asks, looking around. “And can I please check each of you to make sure you don’t need oxygen?” Everyone nods and Dr. Vanker calls in a nurse who begins treating us, essentially turning the room into a triage clinic. She takes blood pressures and treats minor cuts, while Dr. Vanker listens to our lungs.

“Logan, it would be good to get you some oxygen. Of everyone here, I think you suffered the worst smoke inhalation,” Dr. Vanker suggests. I nod and follow him out and down a hall.

He opens a curtain and pats one of those emergency room beds. “Have a seat, and I’ll get a nurse to set you up with some oxygen,” he says. Before leaving, he turns. “I hope you don’t mind a suitemate.” He winks and pulls back a curtain to reveal Anna.

I leap off the bed and run to her. She looks at me and gives me a weak smile.

“Well, if it isn’t my knight in shining armor,” she whispers in a raspy voice and coughs.

“Easy there, tiger. You inhaled a lot of smoke, Anna. How’s the arm?” I ask her as I look down to see she’s wearing a brace on her arm.

“It’s alright. My head hurts more than my arm,” she admits.

“Why are you back here?” she asks.

“The doctor suggested I get some oxygen since I inhaled a bit of smoke,” I say. “Nothing to worry about,” I add quickly.

“Everyone else?” she asks.

I sit down on the edge of her bed. “Our dads are fine, just some minor injuries. Your aunt is in surgery. She had fairly severe injuries,” I say. I see her eyes immediately fill with tears.

“I’m sorry,” I say to her as I wipe a stray tear from her cheek.

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“I couldn’t get to her,” she says.

I pull her against me. “My brave princess,” I murmur as I kiss her forehead.

“Excuse me, young man, but you shouldn’t be on her Royal Highness’s bed. And I need to set you up with oxygen,” she says. I turn to see a stout woman in her sixties if I had to guess. She looks grumpy. I turn back to Anna who’s trying to hide a smirk. I wink at her and jump down.

Once the nurse has me set up, I lean back over to Anna. I hold out my hand, and she places her hand in mine.

“It’ll be OK,” I say to her.

“Sten?” she asks.

I frown. “I saw him outside for a split second, but I don’t know,” I admit as I try to recall who I saw outside. She nods

Just then Pete walks in and gives us both a look that could easily kill a lesser man. He points to us both.

“You two have some serious explaining to do. You are both at the top of my shit list,” he says.

Anna giggles and then coughs. Pete is by her side instantaneously. “Susanna, are you alright?” he asks.

She nods. "Smoke," she explains with another cough. She reaches up and touches Pete's cheek. "I'm sorry, Pete. I really, really am. I had to check. The signal was from the palace. Whoever wants Logan dead, was in the palace," she adds.

"Damn it, Anna. We have people working on this. I thought you gave Victor your computer," he says to her.

She looks away. "I did...it's just not my only computer," she admits.

Pete sighs and runs a hand over his face as he shakes his head.

Anna grabs his hand. "Pete, listen to me. I don't know who to trust, but I trust you, Lucas, Logan, Chris, and Auggie. Something doesn't add up, Pete. I just have to figure out what that is," she says.

"Susanna, the only thing you need to do is heal. Enough of this bullshit. You're not a spy. You're not some secret agent. You are a god damn princess, and it's time you start acting like one," he growls.

"Pete," I start.

"You and I are still going to have words. Otherwise, you two aren't going to be spending any time alone together, do you understand me?" he says, his voice menacingly low.

I sit up and glare at him. "Let's get one thing clear. I don't take orders from you, Pete. I may have just found out that I'm a crowned prince, but that doesn't make me any less royal. If Anna wants to investigate the threat against our families, then Anna will investigate it. Do you understand me?" I snarl.

"Please, the both of you need to put your testosterone back in your pants. This pissing

match isn't helping anything. Pete, I will continue my investigating, but I will keep you looped in. Logan, play nice," she croaks out in an angry tone.

"Fine," we both choke out in obvious distaste for one another.

"Now, if that's settled. I'm exhausted. When will we know about Auntie Lara?" she asks.

I shrug. "I imagine not for a while. Why don't you get some sleep?" I suggest. She yawns and nods.

Pete dims the lights and settles himself on a chair in the corner of the room. I close my eyes, and after a few moments, I feel myself begin to nod off, the adrenaline leaving my system and exhaustion settling in its place.

Chapter Two

The thing about waking up in a hospital is that it's very disorienting. I squint in the harsh light of the fluorescence overhead. I look over to my left and see that Anna is still sleeping. I look toward the door and see that Pete is still sitting there. His gaze fixated on me.

I sit up and stare back at him.

"You could have gotten her killed with that stunt of yours," he says to me.

I sigh partly because I know he's right.

"I know," I admit.

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“She’s reckless at times. You have to be firm with her. Make it seem like her idea, and she’ll go along with it,” he says.

“I find it hard to believe that Anna would do anything that Anna doesn’t want to do,” I reply.

Pete shrugs. “I’ve been her bodyguard for five years now, but I’ve known her for her entire life. I’m not just paid to protect her. I want to protect her. In my line of work, you seldom come across a client that is worthy of their station in life, but Anna, Princess Susanna, she is...worthy. She’s pure and good and the opposite of everything messed up in the world. She’s also a spitfire and stubborn as hell, but her heart is made of gold, and she’d give the shirt off her back to a person in need,” he says.

“You know you aren’t telling me anything that I don’t already know,” I say to him.

“Good, then if you love her as much as I think you love her, you will make protecting her your number one goal in life,” he says.

“I plan to,” I say to him.

“Good. Then, we’re clear. No more stupid stunts, and if she’s going to do one, you or I better be there with her,” he says. “She goes nowhere alone. Do you understand?”

I nod. The explosion was a game changer. We are no longer safe even in our homes. I know this now. I know how high the stakes are, and I won’t ever be forgetting that again. I shudder at the memory of the beam falling on Anna. The split second of fear

that I'd lost her. I make an oath to myself to never let her out of my sight again unless Pete or Lucas is with her.

"Well, I think we can let bygones be bygones then," he finishes.

"Agreed," I say.

"I don't envy you, you know?" he says.

"Why's that?" I ask.

"Being royal...is tough. Your life is going to change in ways you could never anticipate. Just be ready," he says.

"It's already changed," I mutter. Pete stands and walks over to me. Sitting down with him standing over me, makes me realize that he's not a force to be reckoned with, an imposing force not to be reckoned with.

"I mean it. Pull strength from wherever you can get it because you just bought yourself a one-way pass on the wildest roller coaster you've ever seen, and there's no way off it," he says. We both pause as we hear Anna stirring next to us. Pete turns, and I lean around him.

"You two aren't still arguing, are you?" she murmurs.

"No," we both answer.

She sits up and leans over to get a better look at us, raising an eyebrow in suspicion.

"We're not. Everything is fine," I say to her. I pick up my phone and check the time. I frown.

“Has anyone come by while we were sleeping?” I ask Pete.

He shakes his head. I take off the oxygen line wrapped around my face. “I’m going to check,” I say.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” Pete asks.

“I’m fine, really,” I say. “Stay here with Anna.”

I squeeze her hand as I walk out of the room. The angry nurse from earlier sees me.

“Mr. Winters, you need to stay put until Dr. Vanker can check back in on you,” she says.

“I need to get information for Susanna,” I say, leaving off the princess part of her name. The one eyes me like I’m an enemy. “Please. She’s very worried about her aunt who was in surgery last I heard.”

Something about Nurse Ratched softens at that statement. “Let me see if I can get you any information,” she says with a sigh.

“I’d appreciate that. I want to check in on our families as well,” I say to her.

She nods, and I walk down to the private waiting room that we were in earlier. I open the door and find Auggie, Chris, and Mia. Mia’s curled up in a ball, her head in Chris’s lap, and she’s fast asleep. Auggie is staring at a television in the corner of the room. His eyes are blank, and I can tell he has no idea what’s on TV. Chris looks up at me.

“Any word?” I ask him. He shakes his head.

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“I have a room number for your father if you want to go see him. Lara is still in surgery. Uncle Hans is in a special waiting area up in the surgical unit. My father is up with your father. He was going to go check on Anna again in a bit. She was sleeping last time he stopped by to see her. I’m assuming she’s awake now?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes. We both fell asleep for a bit.” I walk in and sit down across from him.

“This is royally fucked up,” I say. “No pun intended.”

“Yes, it is,” Chris agrees. Mia stirs on his lap, and I see his hand tighten over her. She snuggles against him, sighs in her sleep, and stills, her breathing evening out once again. I can’t help wondering when Chris and Mia are going to enlighten the rest of us about their love affair. It’s obvious to everyone. It seems silly for them to pretend.

I put my head in my hands and run them through my hair. “The signal was coming from inside the palace,” I mumble into my hands.

“What?” Auggie turns to me, finally acknowledging my presence.

“Anna had just gone to check a search she had running. Apparently, a message popped up indicating that whoever was responsible for hiring an assassin to kill me was inside the palace. The blast happened before she could get back to me,” I explain.

“What do you mean, inside the palace?” Chris says.

“I mean, someone who was in the palace this morning is the person who has hired an assassin to kill me and most likely blew up your uncle’s plane, and also bombed the

palace,” I say to him.

“We don’t know what caused the explosion,” Auggie points out.

I look at him. “You’re not serious, are you? It was a bomb blast,” I say to him.

They both look at me like I’m an idiot. “My mother was a journalist. I once spent a week with her while she interviewed bomb experts at Quantico in Virginia,” I explain. “Not that that makes me an expert. But I can’t imagine anything except an explosive would cause the type of destruction I saw earlier.”

Chris’s shoulders sag. “I know,” he says quietly. “I don’t want to believe it, but I agree.”

“I don’t know who we can trust,” I admit.

“Well, we need to let Victor know immediately. He’s heading up all the investigations,” Chris says.

“Can we trust him?” I ask Chris. He frowns.

“Yes...I...shit,” he curses. “You’re right. I don’t know who we can trust.”

“We need to start systematically weeding people out of the suspects list,” I say to him.

“Well, I assume you aren’t trying to murder yourself,” Chris says, eyeing me up.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. No, I think I’m in the clear. Anna is the one who is trying to save me, so she’s clear. What about you three?” I ask.

Chris sighs. "I...Mia...I was with Mia when the explosion occurred. We had just gotten off the phone with an events coordinator for a fundraiser that I'm scheduled to speak at next month," Chris says.

Auggie looks at me. "I guess my online gaming buddies can vouch for me if need be," Auggie says with a sigh.

Chris gives him a look. "Seriously, Augs?" he says.

Auggie shrugs. "What? I like to play online, so sue me," he says. "It's one place I can be whoever, and they have no idea."

Chris huffs. "Alright, so that's five of us," he says.

"Our fathers?" I ask next.

"Well, considering the bomb went off by their rooms, it seems unlikely they would be blowing themselves up," Chris says.

"True..." I say, trailing off as I think.

"Lara..." Auggie doesn't finish his sentence. Chris and I just both nod. No words need exchanging on whether Lara is our suspect.

"So, that leaves everyone else," Chris says.

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“How many staff were at the palace?” I ask.

“Shit, I don’t know,” Chris says. “I mean on a given day, there could be anywhere from thirty to fifty staff on the grounds.”

“Well, that’s a lot of people,” I say.

“It’s less, with the lockdown and all. Probably closer to thirty, mostly security,” he says.

“We need to do our own investigation. I don’t want Victor or any other security staff involved except Pete. He was with me at the time, so I know he’s OK,” I say.

“Anna will want to be involved in this,” Chris says.

“I know,” I answer. I look at Chris. “I’m not going to stop her.”

“That’s very wise of you,” he notes.

“We need her computer,” I say to him.

“What?” he asks. “But she gave it to Victor.”

“How do you—”

“Dad’s office isn’t as soundproof as he thinks it is,” Auggie chimes in.

“She gave a computer to Victor,” I correct.

“Oh, where’s the other?” Chris asks.

“A little closet room up on the third floor,” I say.

Chris and Auggie exchange looks. “The butler’s pantry,” Chris says.

“It’s really a storage room, now,” Auggie explains. “Damn, she is one sneaky little...” He trails off.

“I’ll get it,” Chris says. “I’ll have Pete get it.”

I nod. “I’ll let him know where it is,” I say. Chris nods.

“Where will we go?” I ask them.

“Probably to Uncle Hans and Auntie Lara’s country estate,” he says. “Unless we end up back at your father’s palace, but I think Dad will want to stay close to home.”

“Shit, this is so fucked up,” Auggie says, running his hands through his hair, mimicking my earlier actions.

“You guys look exhausted. Let me see if I can get you some beds here, just to sleep for a few hours,” I say to them.

Chris laughs. “Uh, our family is the biggest donor to the hospital, I’m pretty sure we could get a wing if we wanted,” Chris says. I roll my eyes.

“Sorry, Your Highness. I’m sure we can arrange that,” I say, bowing as I leave. Chris flicks me off, and I smirk.

I run into Dr. Vanker in the hallway. “Any word on Lara?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “Not yet, I’m afraid,” he says.

“How are you?” he asks.

“I’m good. Is it possible to get some beds for the rest of us? Everyone needs some rest, and we certainly can’t go back to the palace,” I point out.

Dr. Vanker nods. “Yes, I’ll have my staff find some rooms for your families. The royal physician, Dr. Lasson, is with Lara,” he says.

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“Thank you,” I reply as I hurry back to Anna.

Anna’s sitting up in bed when I return. King Michael is perched on the edge of it. A nurse stands in the corner as does Pete and Victor.

The king rises when I enter the room. There are tears in his eyes as he walks over to me and pulls me into an embrace.

“Thank you, Logan. You saved my baby,” he says.

I awkwardly hug him back as I’m not sure what the protocol is for hugging a king.

“You’re welcome, Your Majesty,” I say as I pull back.

He places a hand on my shoulder. “I think we are well past the point of formalities, my son. You may call me Michael,” he says.

I nod, knowing that there is no fucking way I’m referring to a king as just “Michael.”

“I just spoke with Dr. Vanker. He’s going to get rooms for everyone to stay the night here,” I say.

“I have asked the same. I’m afraid we can’t go back to the palace. Hans has offered his estate, and Victor is having my security sweep it right now. Everyone...who is able, will go there tomorrow,” he says. I notice the pause before he says the last part.

“Any word on your sister?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. "She's still in surgery," he says quietly. "But Dr. Lasson isn't just our physician, he's one of our country's best surgeons."

I nod again as I'm not quite sure what to say.

Anna takes her father's hand in hers. "She's strong," Anna says.

King Michael turns back to her. "Yes, she is, sweet pea, just like you," he says giving his daughter a warm smile.

"Daddy?" she asks.

He cups her cheek. "Yes, love," he replies. I can see the absolute love between them, and I know in this moment that there is one hundred percent absolutely no chance the king was involved in anything that might have hurt his precious daughter.

"I need Pete to grab a few things from the palace for me. Can I send him? Lucas can stay with me," she says. Her words make me think that she trusts Lucas as well.

The king nods to Pete. "Please ask the others. Victor knows what I need and will accompany you," the king says.

Anna looks at Pete, and he gives her the slightest nod, acknowledging that he is to keep her requested item a secret.

"How is my father?" I ask him.

"He's sore, but he'll survive. Why don't you go visit with him? Pete can escort you to his room on his way out," the king says.

"Thank you. I will," I answer. I turn at the door and look back at Anna. "I'll be back

in a bit.”

“OK,” she says and blushes a little. I can see from the look on her father’s face that he suspects there’s more than a friendship between us, but he remains silent.

Chapter Three

I pause outside the door to my father’s hospital room.

“I should go,” Pete says, glancing over at two armed guards that stand on either side of the door. “I think you’re fine.” My father’s secretary, Gregor, sits in the hallway next to the guard. He stands.

“Yes, thank you,” I say. Pete puts a hand on my shoulder.

“I think you’ll do,” he says and walks away without giving an explanation.

“Are you alright?” Gregor asks me as I step toward the door.

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“Yes, thank you,” I say to him, unsure of what else to say since I barely know the man.

I knock on the door. Neither guard stops me or questions me.

“Come in,” my father’s voice rings out from the other side. I push the heavy metal door open and peek inside. My father is sitting up in a bed. His foot sports a walking boot and his arm is in a cast. I can see some bruises on his cheek and other arm, but otherwise, he appears unscathed.

There’s one large window on the far side of the room, and sunlight streams through it, deflecting the otherwise unnatural light from the fluorescents overhead. I look over and see Sten sitting in the corner, he’s fallen asleep in a recliner chair and doesn’t stir as I make my way across to the bed.

“How are you?” my father asks.

“I’m fine. How are you?” I reply.

“Sore and a little banged up, but it could have been worse,” he says. His face is a mix of wanting to smile and frown at the same time. I almost laugh at the internal debate being played out physically on his face.

He motions for me to take the seat next to the bed.

“Any word on the others?” he asks me.

“Lara is still in surgery. Hans is alright and is waiting in the surgical unit. Anna has a bump on her head and an injured arm, but otherwise, she’s fine. And everyone else is unhurt aside from smoke inhalation and some minor cuts and bruises,” I relay.

“I hope Lara will be alright,” he murmurs.

“Me too,” I agree.

“Have you given more thought to our conversation?” he asks.

I recall our chat from the other day.

“I know this isn’t easy to absorb,” my father says as he takes a sip from a bottle of water. He leans forward and gazes at me intently.

“You look so much like her,” he whispers.

“Except for your eyes and chin,” I say.

He nods. “How are your grandparents?” he asks.

I give him a curious look. “I think you already know the answer to that,” I say dryly.

“True, but I don’t know how they ‘really’ are,” he admits.

I sigh. “They are fine. Enjoying retirement,” I say.

“Good,” he says.

“You’ve never met them,” I point out.

“No. But they were important to Leah, so they are important to me,” he says.

I tilt my head to one side. “You still love her,” I state rather than ask.

He nods. “I’ll never stop loving her,” he states, his words resolute.

“I see,” I say slowly.

“Logan, I know you never pictured being a royal as your future. And I know this will take time to adjust to, but I want to get to know you, to spend time with you as a father first. I don’t expect anything from you right now. Just please, give me a chance to know you,” he pleads.

I take in a breath and look at him, into a set of eyes that match mine. He’s my only living parent. I, at least, owe him a chance to explain and to tell me things I should know about my family.

“Fine. We can talk...soon...” I say, trailing off as I look at him.

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“I’m not sure the hospital is the best place to chat,” I say.

“No, I agree,” he says.

“Perhaps when we get to Hans’s home,” I say. “I do have questions for you.”

My father gives me a small smile.

“Good, then I have answers,” he replies.

“I should get back to Anna,” I say to him, standing and glancing over at Sten again.

“He’s tired,” my father says.

“We all are,” I say as I walk toward the door.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Logan,” my father says as I walk through the door and head back to see my princess.

King Michael stands when I enter her room.

“I take it your father’s well?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes, he is,” I answer.

“Good, good. Well, I’ll leave you two to get some rest. I want to check in on my sons,” he says.

We say our goodbyes. Lucas walks to the door behind the king and pauses.

“I’ll be sitting just outside if you need me. I believe Dr. Vanker will be moving you to a more comfortable room soon,” he says. I ponder if that means we’ll be in separate rooms because that is not happening.

I turn to Anna. Even in a hospital gown with wild hair, and soot smudges, she is still the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen.

“What?” she asks me, tilting her head with curiosity. I sit down on the edge of her bed, but she scoots over and pats the space next to it. I move up next to her and lean back on her pillow, she curls against me the best she can in the confined space. I wrap my arms around her and gently kiss her forehead.

“Logan?” she says.

“What is it, Anna?” I ask her.

“I...I’m scared,” she whispers.

“Oh, baby, I know. I’m scared too. But I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise,” I say to her, and I mean it. I will move heaven and earth if I have to in order to keep her safe. She relaxes a little in my arms, and I know it was hard for my fierce princess to admit her fear to me. Hell, it’s hard to admit my fear to her, but I don’t want anything between us, no lies, no hidden truths.

Slowly, I feel Anna’s body go limp in my arms. Her breathing slows, and I feel the soft puffs of her breath against my neck. I squeeze her more tightly to me. I’ve never felt this protective of another being in my entire life. I’m petrified of losing her.

I take a deep breath and her scent fills my nostrils and my soul. This woman

completes me.

Chapter Four

“Logan,” Pete’s voice wakes me. Anna is wrapped around me like a vine, my arms still securing her to my body.

“Yes,” I say.

“There’s a room ready upstairs. We should move you out of the ER,” he says. I look down at the sleeping Anna.

“Grab her IV. I’ll carry her,” I say.

“Are you s—” Pete starts.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I hiss, cutting him off.

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He holds up a hand. “Fine,” he mutters as he pushes the IV line on its metal wheeling rack behind me as I walk toward the door and open it with one hand. Anna feels like air in my arms. I realize just how small she is, like a child almost. She burrows more against my chest, and I wrap the blanket I grabbed with her more snugly against her to keep her warm.

Nurse Ratched is walking toward us and starts to protest, claiming a hospital policy, but one look from Pete and me has her shutting up and stepping out of our way.

“Where to?” I ask Pete.

“Go left. There’s a service elevator we can take. It’s on floor four,” he says.

I press the elevator button and look around.

“It’s safe,” he says to me. “Lucas just did a perimeter check for me.”

I nod, and we enter the elevator.

“I take it you will not be staying in a separate room,” he says to me.

“No,” I answer.

“Fine,” he says on a sigh as the doors open. “To the right. Room four-seven-two.”

I walk down the empty hall and find the room. Pete pushes the door open, and I gently lay Anna down on the bed. It’s only when I pull away from her that she stirs in

her sleep.

“Logan?” she murmurs.

“I’m right here, baby. I just need to use the restroom,” I say and kiss her forehead. She nods and falls back asleep. I look over at the built-in shelf in the room and see her computer lying there.

“I brought it up for her,” Pete says.

“Victor didn’t see?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “No one saw me. Do you think he’s involved?” Pete asks.

I shrug. “Aside from the three of us, Auggie, Chris, Mia, Lucas, and our fathers, I don’t know who is involved,” I admit as I walk to the en suite bathroom. I see new scrubs laid out, so I shower quickly and put them on. I walk out to find some snack food on the bedside table.

“Thought you might be hungry,” Pete says.

I scarf down a bag of chips and chug a can of soda. After brushing my teeth, I realize I finally feel a little human again. I walk back out and look at Pete.

“No one but you and Lucas, and her immediate family are to be left alone with her,” I say.

“I work for the royal family, not you, Logan,” he says. His tone tells me he’s not being rude but pointing out the obvious.

“I know that, Pete. And if you do, then you know how important it is that you follow

my instruction on this,” I tell him.

He runs a hand over his face. “I know,” he says. He glances over at Anna. “That young woman is like my little sister. I’ve watched her turn from a little girl into a gangly teenager into the young woman in that bed. I wouldn’t let a hair on her head be harmed, and neither would Lucas.”

“Good,” I say.

“Logan, get some sleep,” he says.

“What about you?” I ask.

“Lucas will come to relieve me in a bit, we’re taking shifts. He’s sleeping next door in the room meant for you,” he says, giving me a pointed look. I roll my eyes and climb in next to Anna, who immediately curls herself around me. I pull her closer. She rests her head on my chest, and I breathe in her scent again. I can still smell the fire in her hair. I close my eyes and remember the carefree princess who sat on the same cushion on my boat every night, watching the stars come out in the sky. I only hope that she can be like that again when this is all over.

My sleep is filled with dreams, and I wake with a start the next morning. The sun is shining through the window, and Lucas now sits in the chair. He’s looking down at his phone, but his head pops up when I move.

“Good morning,” he says.

“Morning, Lucas,” I say to him.

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“We’ll need to get her up soon. I imagine Dr. Vanker and the attending physician will be around soon to discharge everyone. We have the cars ready to head to Harrington House,” he says.

“Harrington House?” I ask.

“Hans and Lara’s estate,” he explains.

“Oh,” I say as Anna stirs in my arms. Her eyes open, and she squints under the harsh lights. I place a hand up, to keep the glare off her.

“Hey,” I say softly, kissing her forehead. “How about we spring you from this joint?” I say. She blinks a few times, her eyes obviously adjusting to the light.

“OK,” she says. Her voice is gravelly, and I can only assume that’s because of the smoke inhalation.

“How do you feel?” I ask her. I can’t help but feel her forehead, her cheek, fearing that something else might be wrong with her. She places a hand over mine.

“I’m fine. My throat is just a little sore, probably from the smoke,” she says. I have to admit her husky voice is pretty damn sexy. I will my cock into submission, knowing my princess is far from ready for that kind of fun.

“Good,” I say. I motion to the corner of the room where Pete has placed bags with our things. Clearly, he had our clothes cleaned, because they don’t smell of smoke, which I appreciate. “Let’s get dressed.”

By the time we are dressed, and Anna has showered, Dr. Vanker comes in and checks us over.

“I’ll send the nurse in with your discharge papers. You’ll need to follow up with your physicians, but I think you’ll both be fine,” he says.

“Lara?” Anna asks.

Dr. Vanker looks serious. “She survived the surgery, but I won’t sugarcoat it. She sustained very serious internal injuries and a head wound, Your Highness. Her chances of pulling through are...well, I’ve warned the rest of your family to prepare themselves for the worse. She’s in the ICU if you wish to stop by before you leave,” he says, squeezing her arm.

“Thank you, Dr. Vanker. Our family is most appreciative of everything you and your staff have done,” she says.

“Well, I’m just glad that I happened to be the one there when this happened,” he says. “I wish you all the best.” Anna and I nod as he leaves.

A nurse brings in some paperwork for us and two wheelchairs. Anna looks at me, and I look at her.

“I don’t need one,” I say to the nurse.

“Dr. Vanker—” she starts.

“Dr. Vanker said I was fine. Princess Susanna will require one though, so thank you so very much,” I say, cutting her off as I push Anna from the room with Lucas in tow.

I find the ICU and push Anna inside past the nurses’ station to the two guards

standing on either side of a door. I nod to them, and one of them pushes the door open. Hans is asleep in a chair in the corner of the room. Lara is in the bed. There are tubes everywhere, monitors beep, and a machine buzzes. There's a strong smell of disinfectant that makes me nauseous. The shades are drawn, and the room is dim. I wheel Anna up to the bed and put the brake on her chair. I help her up, so she can lean over to see her aunt.

She reaches a trembling hand over to her aunt's arm.

"I-I'm s-sorry," she says as she bursts into sobs. "I'm so sorry, Auntie Lara! I tried to get to you!" she cries out as she falls limply onto the bed, her head on her aunt's shoulder.

"Anna," I say softly, as I grip her tightly. She sags in my arms as her uncontrollable crying stabs me like a knife. I hold her, not saying anything, not knowing what to say.

I see Hans stir out of the corner of my eye. He stands and immediately comes around the bed. He touches Anna's shoulder. She turns and launches herself into his arms.

"Oh, Uncle Hans," she sobs.

I release her and let her seek comfort in the embrace of her uncle. He rubs her back and kisses her head.

"It's alright, Anna. It's alright, my dear girl. Now, now...shhhh," he tries to soothe her. He holds her tightly while she continues to cry until she's only sniffing and hiccupping in his arms.

"Lara needs her rest," he says. "Why don't you two head to the house? You can come back and see her tomorrow, OK?"

She nods against his chest and pulls away. Her eyes are puffy and red, her cheeks tear-stained. She turns once more and walks on her own over to Lara. She leans down and kisses her aunt's cheek while gripping her hand.

"I love you, Auntie Lara. I love you so much, please fight, please come back to us. I need you," she whispers loud enough for me to hear her.

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I help her to sit back in the wheelchair. Hans pats her shoulder, and she reaches her hand up to his and gives it a gentle squeeze.

“Get some rest, Uncle Hans,” she says to him. He nods at her as I push her out of the room. I see a box of tissue at the nurses’ station as we walk past. I pull one out and hand it to her.

“Thanks,” she murmurs, taking it without another word. I haven’t seen her like this before, broken, and it scares me.

Lucas follows us down to the elevator. “The car is out back,” he says, leading the way as the elevator opens.

I push Anna down a back hallway, and then follow him down another. He opens what appears to be a random exit door. There’s a large unmarked black SUV with tinted windows. Lucas opens the back door, and I lift Anna up and set her inside, before going around to the other side.

Pete is already in the front driver’s seat, and Lucas gets in next to him. Pete takes one look at Anna in the rearview mirror before driving onward. He doesn’t say a word. I look over at her as she wipes her nose with the tissue.

“Come here, baby,” I say to her, she looks at me, her eyes glazed with unshed tears. I think she’s going to say no but, instead, she leans her head down on my lap and curls into a ball. I wrap my arm tightly around her and stroke her hair with my other hand. I murmur comforting words to her, and after a few minutes, I lean forward, confirming that she has fallen fast asleep.

Pete looks back at us again. “She saw Lara,” he states, frowning.

“Yes,” I say. He doesn’t speak again as we drive toward the estate.

I stare out the window as Norddale passes by us. We drive out of the city, into the hilly surroundings. Thirty minutes later, we wind around a hill and come out on top of it. The sea comes into view, and it’s breathtaking. The coastline is dotted with rocky cliffs, and there are sailboats in the distance. Chris’s suggestion of sailboat excursions here isn’t off base. I see a large manor house in the distance, perched upon the next hill. I can only make out the roofline as tall pine trees block it from view. There’s nothing around it, no gatehouse, no wall, no hedges. It’s a lonely barren land on a rocky hillside. I imagine the views of the sea must be amazing.

There’s one dirt road that leads to the isolated estate. We drive it slowly and as we come back out of the next valley, I see a small gate in the woods. Pete pulls up, scans his hand on a monitor and the gate opens. We pull through into a tunnel surrounded by leaves, branches, and tree trunks. I see a clearing up ahead. We pull in, the sound of crunching pebbles beneath the car, as we come to a stop in front of a fountain in the middle of a driveway that loops around.

I caress Anna’s cheek with my thumb and lean down.

“Wake up, Princess,” I whisper in her ear. She moves slightly. “We’re here.”

She stretches and slowly sits up, blinking up at the large estate house in front of us. She turns to me, her cheek pink from where she lay on my leg for the last thirty minutes.

“Sorry...I was tired, I guess,” she says. I reach out and run my hand over her cheek and jaw.

“Let’s go get settled,” I say to her. Pete opens Anna’s door and holds out a hand to her. She takes it, and he helps her out of the car. I quickly walk around and pick her up.

“Show us the way,” I say to him.

Anna looks up at me. “I am capable of walking, you know,” she says with a sigh.

I lean my head down to hers. “I’m very aware of that, but maybe I like you in my arms,” I whisper in her ear. I see goose bumps form on her bare skin, and something primal in me wants to take her straight to bed and make love to her until she passes out in my arms.

“This way,” Pete says as we enter the house. An older woman greets us in the foyer and tells us to let her know if we need anything.

“I’m Maria. Please, let me know if you or...your guest need anything, Your Highness,” she says. At the woman’s obvious uncertainty on who I am, Anna emits a giggle and it’s like a balm on my injured soul.

“This is Logan Winters, my—” she starts.

“Her boyfriend,” I finish. She looks up at me with wide eyes.

“Oh, uh, so nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Winters,” Maria says.

“Likewise,” I reply. She hurries in front of us.

“Follow me, I have your room all set up as per your uncle’s instructions,” she says. She pauses for a moment. “Should I prepare a separate room for you, Mr. Winters?”

Anna stifles another giggle. “The guest room next to mine is fine. Thank you, Maria,” she says.

Maria gives us a pointed look but smiles and nods. She opens the door to a spacious, airy room with windows that open to a small balcony with sea views beyond it. I set Anna down on a giant lounge chair in the corner of the room. Maria opens the French doors to the balcony.

“There, that’ll help air it out. Mr. Winters, your room is just next door. Is there anything I can get for you?” she asks us.

“No, thank you, Maria. We are both rather exhausted. I imagine my father will want to meet with the family once we have all arrived, so please alert me when he is here,” she says.

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Maria nods. “Will do, Your Highness. Your brothers arrived just before you. I settled them in the guest rooms down the hall,” she says as she walks to the door before stopping to point out a wall of cabinets. “There’s water in the fridge. Call if you need anything.” And with that, she shuts the large carved wooden door.

I look over to a built-in cabinet. On an educated guess, I press a door and it pops open, revealing a small fridge. I take out two waters and hand one to Anna as I sit down on an ottoman in front of her. She opens the water and takes a long sip. I follow suit. The water feels good against my scratchy throat.

“It’s very...isolated here,” I comment, breaking the silence.

“Yes,” she agrees and moves, wincing when she turns her injured arm by accident. I set down my water and pick her up again, moving her to the bed. I place a pillow under her wounded arm.

“There,” I say, admiring my handiwork.

“My computer and my phone,” she requests, motioning toward it.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” I ask her. She glares at me, and I throw my hands up in surrender.

I pick them up and place them on her lap. I sit back and watch her come to life. Her fingers move seamlessly over the keyboard, although I can tell she’s being careful with her injured arm. She’s in her zone, so focused she doesn’t acknowledge the loose hair that falls out of her bun and curls around her cheek. I reach out and tuck it

behind her ear. She doesn't look up but only murmurs a "thank you" as she continues to stare at the screen. The glare of the computer casts shadows on her face as I study her facial features. She just might have the most perfect face of any woman ever.

After a few minutes, I walk over to the French doors and pull back the curtains farther to let in more light. I turn and look at my princess. She seems so small in the giant bed. I smile a bit. Her personality is so big, I forget at times how physically small she is.

"Why are you grinning like a fool?" she asks, not bothering to look up from her task.

"Because, I'm reminded that you may be physically small, but your spirit knows no bounds," I say to her as I crawl on the bed and settle her against me. She laughs.

"What's so funny?" I ask her as I look down at the screen. It's a black screen full of codes that I don't understand.

"You," she says. I brush another loose hair away from her neck and bend down to kiss her there. She sighs but continues her rapid typing.

"What are we looking for?" I ask her as I trail light kisses up her neck.

"I...don't exactly know..." She trails off and pauses before she begins typing at a speed that seems not human.

"What?" I ask.

"What the? Holy fuck," she mutters.

"What?" I say a bit louder.

“M’s signal was near the palace an hour before the bombing,” she says as she keeps typing.

“What does that mean? He planted the bomb?” I ask, my mind starting to explore the possibilities. Was the man hired to kill me here now? Was he inside the palace? Part of me desperately wants to know who the mysterious assassin, M is, but a bigger part of me cares not about the hired hand and instead wants to know even more desperately who hired him.

“I...don’t know,” she admits as she keeps searching for something. Her hand comes up to her forehead and rubs it.

I reach out and start to close the lid on her computer. She grabs it, prying it back open.

“What are you doing?!” she cries out.

“Anna, you need rest,” I say to her.

“No, I need to figure out who planted that bomb, who’s trying to kill you, and who blew up my uncle’s plane,” she snarls.

“Hey,” I say a little more gently as I turn her face so she’s looking up at me. “Your father has hired very smart people to do all of that. I know you can do it too, but right now, you’re not helping yourself. You need to rest and let your body heal.”

Tears well in her eyes, and it cuts me to my very core. I cup her cheek, and she leans against my hand.

“It’s alright. Just breathe, Anna,” I say to her as I run my lips across her forehead. I hear a sob escape her lips, and I push her computer away as I pull her over and press

her tightly against me. I let her cry against my chest, her tears forming wet spots on my shirt, but I don't give a damn. I stroke her back and her hair, which falls out of the bun and runs down her back in messy waves.

After a few minutes, her sobs subside. Aside from her sniffles, she's quiet but I can tell she hasn't fallen asleep.

"I have to fix this," she whispers. I can feel her hot breath through the cotton of my shirt.

“Fix what?” I say to her.

“Everything,” she says on a release of breath.

“Anna, this isn’t your fault. You need to stop blaming yourself, right now,” I say, my voice slightly harsher than I mean it to be.

She sniffles again and pushes up so that I’m looking into her red, swollen eyes. “I can fix it, Logan. I can,” she says, determination lacing her voice.

“I know you can, but you don’t have to,” I say to her, pressing my forehead against hers and breathing her in.

She sighs. “Logan, we don’t know who we can trust. I can’t live like that. I can’t live in fear. I won’t live in fear,” she says. I move my lips forward and brush them against hers.

“Then don’t,” I say, resigning myself to helping her however possible, no matter what rules have to be broken.

She kisses me back, slow and gentle. Neither of us rushes the other in our exploration. I know she’s not ready for more than this, or at least that’s what I keep telling my cock, but it has a mind of its own. It doesn’t help when she begins to grind against it. I moan into her lips as I slide my tongue along them. She opens willing, and I plunge inside, tasting her, owning her, because she’s fucking mine.

My hands explore her body and her hand grip my shoulder, using me as an anchor. It

isn't until she hisses in pain that I pull back.

"Anna?" I say, looking down to see what's hurt her. I see her arm in an awkward position. I sigh and curse under my breath. "We can't do this. You're going to hurt yourself," I say.

"Please, Logan," she begs me. I know she wants to forget for a moment and so do I. I gently lift her and lay her down on the mattress. I prop her arm back up on the pillow and crouch over her on all fours.

"No moving," I instruct. She nods and bites her lip, which only works to harden my cock further.

I go back to kissing her while my hands slide beneath the bottom of her dress. The only good part to her arm injury is the fact that she's not wearing pants right now because it must be too difficult to pull them up her legs. I feel the cotton of her underwear and it's soaking wet. I groan and push it aside, running my finger up her sex. She pushes her pelvis against me.

"No moving," I repeat. She grumbles under her breath, and I can't help the smirk on my lips as I trail kisses across her jaw and back to her lips. I slowly sink my finger inside her, and she whimpers.

"I got you, baby. I know what you need," I murmur. I curl my finger inside her and begin rubbing her where I know it'll feel best for her. I rub circles over her clit with my thumb. Her body begins to tremble, her inner muscles undulate around my finger, and I know she's close. I slide a second finger inside her and repeat the movement, flicking my fingers back and forth over her sensitive spot. The hand of her good arm comes up to my bicep and grips tightly as she cries out. I lean down pressing my mouth to hers, swallowing her cries.

“Better,” I whisper against her lips after I give her a minute to come back down from her high.

“Yes,” she says with another contented sigh.

I feel her hand run down my chest and abs. I grip it.

“You don’t need to do anything,” I say to her.

“I want to,” she says as she fumbles with my waistband and slides her hand inside, wrapping her warm fingers around my dick. I moan as she squeezes slightly before moving her hand up to my tip and swirling the liquid that’s pooling there around the head of my shaft. She lubricates it several times before moving back down and then up. I don’t move. I support myself on my elbows, hovering over her as she gives me the best fucking hand-job of my damn life. I close my eyes and concentrate on the feel of her small hand attempting to wrap around me. When she slides farther down and grips my balls, I almost blow my load, but it feels so damned good that I force myself into composure, seeking more of the pleasure she’s giving me, prolonging the pleasure she’s giving me. It doesn’t last long as she strokes my dick. I see colors flash from behind my eyelids. I feel my cock swell and my balls pull up as I shoot my load into the fabric of my underwear. I brace myself above her, breathing hard into her neck.

“Shit, Princess. You’re fucking good at that,” I say. “Let me change.” I get up and give her a slow kiss before I walk over to my bag and pull out clean clothes. I take mine off, and she watches me intently.

“You’re beautiful,” she says. I grin.

“You think?” I ask, feeling a little cocky. I know I’m above average in the looks department and lord knows I spend enough time working out every day that my body

is well-sculpted.

She rolls her eyes, and I chuckle. “You’re beautiful too, Anna,” I say to her as I walk back over and sit on the bed. She shrugs.

“I’m just me,” she says.

“You don’t think you’re beautiful?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. This woman is drop-dead gorgeous. There’s no way she doesn’t see that.

“I’m OK, I guess,” she says.

I raise my eyebrow farther. I walk over, pick her up in my arms and carry her to the full-length mirror by the bathroom. I set her down, holding onto her shoulders, forcing her to look at herself.

“What do you see?” I ask her.

She sighs. “Short, small, mousy hair, big eyes, petite everything,” she looks down at her body.

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“What else do you see?” I ask her.

She cocks her head to one side. I play with her hair, wrapping it around my finger. “I have freckles and highlights from the sun. My eyelashes—I have my mother’s eyelashes, long and curved. And my father’s eye color. I’m thin...” She trails off as she continues looking at herself.

“You know what I see?” I ask her. She shakes her head. I twirl her hair. “Silky, thick hair that I love to wrap around my hands. Beautiful dark blue eyes that I could get lost in every day, surrounded by the most perfect eyelashes I’ve ever seen on a woman. Your face looks like a painting, everything is perfectly portioned and elegant. You’re right, you are thin, but not so thin that you look sickly. There’s muscle tone and your curves are proportioned to your small stature,” I say. I cup her breasts. “And if you ask me, they are absolutely perfect.” She blushes, the pink creeping up her neck into her cheeks, her eyes flutter, but I take one hand and grasp her chin, holding her face in place so she can’t look away.

“You are the most beautiful woman that I’ve ever seen, Susanna...” I trail off, realizing that I don’t know her middle name. She gives me a curious look. “I don’t know your middle name,” I state.

She giggles, clutching her belly as she laughs. It’s like music to my ears. “Two middle names,” she corrects.

“Oh, I see,” I say as I playfully nip her shoulder. “And what are your two middle names?”

“Susanna Lisbet Louise,” she says.

“Last name?” I ask her.

“Royalty doesn’t really have them,” she explains with a frown. “We are the House of Alexander, so I suppose if I were a normal person, my full name would be Susanna Lisbet Louise Alexander.”

“That’s a beautiful name for a beautiful princess,” I say to her. She blushes again.

“What about you?” she asks.

“Logan Edvard Winters,” I say.

“You mean Logan Edvard Winters Hansen,” she corrects me. I frown this time.

“I...never thought about that,” I admit.

“Well, Hansen is your father’s last name, I mean if King Edvard had a last name,” she muses.

“I suppose...that’s correct,” I say. “Hansen,” I add, testing how the word feels coming from my lips. It’s foreign, yet familiar.

“You look like a prince,” Anna says.

“I do?” I ask. I study myself in the mirror. I look the same to me.

“Since the explosion, you’re...different, stronger,” she ponders.

“It made me realize what was actually important,” I say.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“You,” I answer, spinning her in my arms, so I can kiss her lips. She’s stiff and surprised for a half second and then melts into my arms and wraps hers around my neck, drawing me down while I lift her up to allow myself better access to her mouth.

There’s a knock at the door. I gently lower her to the ground.

“Yes?” Anna answers.

“Ma’am, your father is here. He wishes everyone to meet him in your uncle’s study,” Maria’s voice says from the other side of the mahogany door.

“Thank you, Maria. We’ll be right down,” she says.

“Very good, ma’am,” she says as she walks away.

“Ma’am?” I say to her.

She giggles. “Some staff say that. It’s more formal than calling me miss,” she explains.

I look to the ceiling. “God, I have a lot to learn,” I say.

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She pulls my head down to hers. “I’ll teach you,” she says with a smirk.

“Oh, will you?” I reply. I won’t lie, images of Susanna dressed like a naughty school teacher with a ruler in hand, dance through my mind. I must be transparent in my thoughts because she slaps my chest.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Logan,” she says.

I grin at her. “But it’s so fun in the gutter,” I say. She rolls her eyes and grabs my hand.

“Come on,” she says as she leads me toward the study.

Chapter Five

The room is packed with our families. It looks like we’ve been to war. Everyone has bandages, bumps, bruises, casts, and those without look like they’ve seen war. Anna and I are the last two to enter. We walk in and sit down on the edge of a sofa next to Mia, Chris, and Auggie. The furniture here looks more formal than the summer palace. I note the silk fabrics covering all the sofas and chairs, the rich leathers and the two-tone wallpaper that I can only imagine is also silk. On the stone-tiled floor, there is an area rug that looks to be an antique oriental number. I almost lift my feet up so as not to touch it with my shoes.

I know Hans is wealthy, but this is some real Versailles shit.

“I hope everyone was able to get some rest last night,” King Michael says, looking at

each of us.

“We’ve all suffered a terrible trauma. I know it will take some time for us to recover, both physically and mentally,” he continues as he looks at Anna.

“I have our best experts at the palace now, going through the scene and confirming what caused the blast. Initial reports are that it was a bomb. Fortunately, the individual who placed the bomb did not foresee that there was a former internal blast wall installed during World War II. If it wasn’t for that...well, it would have been significantly worse. I don’t have any news on Lara. She’s still sedated post-surgery. The doctors say they will continue to keep her sedated for a few more days as her body works to heal. It’s a critical time for her,” King Michael poses, clearly finding it difficult to speak of his sister’s condition.

“What’s the game plan?” Auggie asks.

The king looks at him and then over to my father.

“What?” Auggie, Chris, and Anna all say simultaneously.

“It’s clearly not safe here,” the king states. “I’m sending everyone away the day after tomorrow. Your whereabouts will be kept top secret for the next week, as we try to figure out the source of the threat. Your immediate security team will go with you. I don’t want you to contact one another until I know it’s safe. Logan, your father and I have spoken, and you will be assigned a bodyguard.”

My eyebrows rise at this statement.

“Dad, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Chris starts.

King Michael raises a hand. “Christian, that decision is not up to you. You will do as

you're told," he says. I see Chris grip Mia's hand and the king's eyes follow the movement before looking over at my father.

"Do you have anything to add?" he asks him.

My father shakes his head. "I think you've covered it, Michael," he says.

"Very good then. I have to prepare to address the country," King Michael says. And that's our cue to leave. "I'll be in touch with each of you separately regarding your travel arrangements."

Everyone files out of the room. Chris, Auggie, and Anna stand in the corner of the hallway, deep in conversation with each other. I feel a bit like a voyeur and an outcast all at the same time, as though I don't belong and should leave them to their sibling discussion.

"Logan," Chris says. I walk over to them.

"Yes?" I say as I approach.

"You're taking Anna away from here," he says quietly, looking around to make sure no one else is in earshot.

"What?" I ask.

"We are entrusting you with Anna. You two will leave tomorrow with your security detail," Chris says.

"But your father—" I start.

Chris rolls his eyes. "My father has already agreed to this," he states.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

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Chris claps me on my shoulder. “You don’t have to understand. Just know it’s happening. Oh, and your bodyguard is Pete’s cousin, Hendrick. We can trust him,” Chris adds.

Anna launches herself in Auggie’s arms and then Chris’s. “Be careful, you two,” she says.

“We will,” Auggie replies. He looks over at me. “Take care of our little sister, Logan.”

I nod. “I will,” I say to him.

“Anna?” I hear King Michael’s voice from the study. She walks over to the door before turning and beckoning me to her.

I walk over, and she takes my hand and pulls me inside the study, closing the door behind us. King Michael sits in a chair next to my father, and they both look at us.

“You two will leave tonight,” my father says.

“What?” Anna and I both answer.

King Michael stands and walks over to us. “I’d prefer Anna be with her brothers, but since you are still ‘under wraps’ as the prince of Montelandia, I have decided you are the next best thing. Your father agrees with me. However, seeing as how you will be together, we are sending you the farthest away. I have you on a commercial airline, flying into Pittsburgh. Pete has arranged a house for you to stay in near your

grandparents' home. I will alert you when it's safe to return, and we can figure out everything else then," my father says.

"Daddy?" Anna says, looking up at her father. He pulls her into an embrace.

"I don't want to send any of you away, but it's not safe here, sweet pea," King Michael says to Anna.

"I know," she whispers.

"Only communicate with me through Pete, understood?" he says to her as though she's a soldier that he's sending off to battle.

"Yes, father," she replies. He kisses the top of her head and then looks over at me.

"I'm entrusting you with my heart. Don't fuck it up," he says, looking back at his daughter.

"I won't, Your Majesty," I answer. My father hobbles over to me. He's clearly still sore from his injuries.

"Take care, Logan," he says to me. I don't know why, but I embrace him. He doesn't move for a long moment. Then he wraps his long arms around me. "You're so much like her," he whispers for my ears only.

I pull back. "Be safe, the both of you," I say to them. I put my arm around Anna and escort her out of the study. We head up to our rooms and pack the few items, not in bags. Her phone buzzes, and she looks down at it.

"Fuck," she mutters. She picks up her phone and dials a number.

“Hey,” she says. “I’m sorry. Yes, I know. Things have been a little...insane. No, we’re fine. Auntie Lara suffered the worst injury. I don’t know yet. Yes. I have to go away for a while, Sonya. I promise I’ll come to see you as soon as it’s safe. No, not yet. I will. Love you, too.” She ends the call and stares down at the phone.

“Who was that?” I ask her.

She sighs. “My best friend, Sonya,” she answers. “I...things have been a little crazy and...well, she’s pissed at me. I mean, she’s worried, obviously.”

“Oh, right,” I say. I realize just how much we don’t know about each other. I’ve never thought about her friends.

We finish packing in silence. A knock on the door from Pete tells us it’s time to go.

“Pete, why are we leaving so early?” Anna asks.

“We’re not leaving from the airport here,” he explains. “We have a long drive.”

“Oh,” Anna answers. Pete and Lucas grab our bags, and we follow them to a waiting car. A third man stands by it.

“This is Hendrick, your bodyguard,” Pete says. Hendrick extends a hand.

“A pleasure to meet you, Logan,” he says.

“Likewise,” I answer but, really, I’m not so sure about the idea of a bodyguard. There’s no fanfare as we get in the car and head off in the opposite direction from where we came. We drive for over an hour until we reach a border. Pete, who is driving, rolls down the window and hands the man at the booth a pile of papers and passports. The man examines them and nods, allowing us through. I wonder what he

has shown him because my passport is tucked neatly inside the bag in the back of the large SUV.

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I decide it's better not to ask questions. Anna curls up and falls asleep, but I stay awake, watching the scenery of Europe pass by the car window as we continue to drive. Several hours later, I see signs for Copenhagen. We pull up to the airport and Pete drives us to a side area. He turns before parking the car.

"You are going to the U.S. as Anna Alexander and Edvard Hansen," he says to us.

"I'm sorry, what did you just say?" I ask him.

"Your fathers had these passports made up overnight. They didn't want to draw attention to your movements internationally. So, you are a young couple traveling Europe together, and you're heading back to the States to Pittsburgh. Anna, just say you're studying there if asked. Logan, you can make up whatever story you like, since you know the area," Pete says.

"Is this really necessary, Pete?" Anna asks.

Pete gives her a hard look.

"Fine," she says, snatching the passport from his hand.

"You both understand, we are going off the grid?" Pete asks.

Anna nods. "Yes, Pete. What about you three?" she asks.

"We are college friends of yours that met up here. We're all heading back to school," he says.

She gives him a pointed look before shaking her head. We grip hands as we head into the airport. Anna fidgets as we snake through the long security lines. She's not used to waiting like this. She has her hair pulled up in a bun and no makeup on. She glances around nervously as we are funneled through to the five metal detectors at the security gate.

"Anna, you need to calm down," I whisper in her ear.

"What if someone recognizes me?" she hisses back.

"Stop fidgeting and no one will pay you any attention," I say to her.

She straightens up, and we continue inching forward. We finally make it through security, and I sigh with relief as we find our gate and take a seat to await boarding. Three different times I have to place a hand on Anna's leg, so she'll stop bouncing it up and down.

She huffs under her breath. "Easy for you to say, I have to pretend to be normal and fly in the cattle car," she mutters under her breath.

I chuckle under my breath. This is the first time she's acted like the princess she is. I squeeze her leg, and she stops bouncing it.

"What happened to my little brave underworld spy?" I ask.

She glares at me. I lean over and kiss her lips, and she un-frowns and freezes. I pull back.

"You, OK?" I ask her.

"I just realized that I'm going to meet your grandparents," she says, her face now

sports a comical look of horror.

I pat her leg. “Yes, yes you will,” I say with another laugh.

“Oh, god...I don’t know if I can do this,” she says, her breathing picking up in little puffs as she tries to process what will occur in less than twenty-four hours.

I get in front of her face so all she sees is me. “Anna, you can do this. You will do this. It will be fine. I promise that they don’t bite,” I say to her trying to prevent the smile that threatens to appear on my lips.

“But...they’re really important to you,” she says. I nod. “What if they don’t like me? What if they think I’m annoying? What if—” I clamp a hand over her mouth to prevent her from continuing with her crazy game of “what if” and she looks up at me in total terror. I can no longer stop the smile that graces my face.

“Anna, you are going to be fine. They are going to love you. I swear, they are harmless, really,” I say, encouragingly.

She sighs beneath my hand and darts out her tongue. I don’t budge. She gives me a look and licks my hand from top to bottom. I lean in, so only she can hear me.

“Are you trying to get me revved up to join the mile-high club?” I ask her.

Her eyes go from horror to annoyance and I release my hand.

“Don’t be an ass,” she hisses.

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I smirk. “Remember, Anna? I don’t always play by the rules,” I inform her. She glares at me but doesn’t go back to her worries.

A few minutes later, a voice comes on an intercom and announces that our flight is boarding. Anna’s face goes pale once more.

I pull her up, and she looks at me. I can tell she’s trying to be brave, but she can’t hide her fear. It makes me ponder how she kept her second life a secret for so long because I can read every emotion on her face like it’s spelled out in neon letters.

I watch Anna scan her boarding pass with a shaky hand. I follow her as we wait in the line that forms down the aisleway of the plane. I keep my hand on her shoulder, and when we reach our seats, I turn her. She scoots toward the window seat, and I take the middle one. As all of us mere mortals do, I internally pray for a not full flight so that the seat next to me remains empty.

And then Hendrick sits down. I sigh. So much for my mile-high club fantasies because I know that Anna will not be going to the stamp-sized airplane bathroom with me if the mere thought of a regular airline seat freaks her out.

I settle myself and am thankful for Anna’s small stature since I’m able to manspread over to her side a bit. She’s curled herself into a small ball and has found a small pillow in her carry-on bag that she’s now leaning against. I put my hand on her leg, and she places her hand over mine while keeping her eyes closed.

The flight is completely uneventful. Anna scoffs at the food and opts to eat the roll from both our trays and a half bottle of wine. She promptly falls asleep somewhere

over the Atlantic and doesn't wake again until breakfast is being served. She again only touches the bread but does manage a few bites of fruit. She has a mimosa with her breakfast, muttering something about it being impossible to screw up champagne and orange juice.

She tugs back down the eye mask that she pulled out from her bag somewhere over the mid-Atlantic and falls back asleep for the remaining hour of our flight.

"She's not fond of flying, huh?" Hendrick says. I look over at him. He's kept himself busy during the flight. Never sleeping, but reading, watching videos on his laptop, and chatting amicably with a passenger across from us who put on Rocky IV, a movie that he has seen at least fifty times, according to their dialogue. I get a strong military vibe from Hendrick. He's stocky, tall but not overly tall. He definitely looks like he could be a boxer.

"So, you're Pete's cousin?" I ask him. He looks over at me.

"Affirmative. And Lucas, since they are brothers," he says. And that military premonition is confirmed. It takes me a minute to realize that I never contemplated that Pete and Lucas are brothers. I funnel that away as something to discuss with Anna.

"Which branch?" I ask him. His accent is all American. He gives me a look and leans in so no one can hear us, which I think is ridiculous because all the other passengers are absorbed in their music and movies, earbuds in and thoughts consumed by mass media.

"Army, special forces. Logan, we can discuss my qualifications later," he says in a low voice. I nod.

"Rocky, huh?" I say. He grins and shrugs.

“Ever run up the art museum steps?” I ask him. He laughs at that.

“A few times, possibly,” he says nonchalantly.

“That was the first thing I always asked to do when we’d visit Philly,” I admit. He chuckles.

“Well, it’s the best thing to do,” he says. We chat about the movie for a while, and then Anna finally wakes up as the captain comes on and announces our descent into Pittsburgh.

It’s a blur of activity as we make our way through customs. There’s a car waiting for us, driven by Pete of course, who somehow got through customs in record time. We hop in, and he heads out to a rented house near my grandparents’ home. It’s strange being here now. It’s like I’ve crossed through to an alternate universe, and now I’m looking back on the one I can never go to again.

Chapter Six

I stare at the closet door. Inside is a box that contains what may be the only photo of my parents together. My parents. One month ago, I had a different life. Hell, I had a different past.

I listen for any sounds below. I came here with Pete and Hendrick who are waiting in the car. Anna is outside, waiting in the driveway, too afraid to come in. My grandmother is downstairs in the kitchen.

I open the door and pull down one of five boxes of my mother’s things. Things I couldn’t part with but didn’t want to take with me. My grandparents carefully boxed them and placed them here, inside her old room. These boxes contain an illusion. An illusion of who I thought my mother was.

I open the box and reach inside to retrieve a much smaller shoebox. I carefully remove the lid and peek inside. It contains remnants of my mother's time in Europe. There's an old journal. I only kept it because she spoke of me, spoke of finding out she was pregnant with me. Otherwise, it only contains old notes, most likely for stories she was working on at the time. There's a locket. I don't know why I kept that. That's a lie. I kept it because of a fuzzy memory from a lifetime ago. It contains no photos. On the outside is a painted eye. It looks like my eye. In all honesty, it creeps me out, but nonetheless, here it is. And lastly, there is a pile of photos. I start searching through them until I find the one that I'm looking for, the only one of my parents.

I stop when I reach it and pull it from the pile. My father stands tall and regal next to my mother. They are speaking about something, not looking at the camera but at each other. I flip it over, it only has E.H. + L.W. and the date which is roughly seven months prior to my birth. For the first time ever, I look at my mother's belly as though realizing just now that I, too, am in this photo, neatly tucked away inside my mother. I toss the photograph back on the pile and gaze inside the closet.

My mother was a journalist first and my mother second. She was always leaving to go cover a story. Sometimes war, sometimes a murder, sometimes politics. When she came home with me, I was only a few months old. She had told my grandparents she had met a man and had gotten pregnant. They begged her to come home, but she refused, saying they had married, and she would fly them out to meet me once I arrived. But that never happened. Instead, we stood on the doorstep of their small brick, Cape Cod in a suburb of Pittsburgh in the pouring rain, or at least that's how I've been told the story. A story I just learned is largely a farce. I was told my father rejected us. That my mother had to leave and that he never wanted to see me. I think back on my life. It wasn't bad. My grandparents are loving people. My grandfather did everything a father would have. He relished having a pseudo-son to play ball with and teach chess to and read to at night. My grandmother spoiled me with food. They were my one constant. No matter where I was or where my mother went, they were

always there, they are still always here.

I put the lid of the box and walk back downstairs. The smell of my grandmother's chicken soup permeates the small space of the house. I walk into the kitchen and find her kneading bread.

"Did you find the photos you were looking for?" she asks with a smile.

"Yes," I say as I lean over and kiss the top of her head. She pats my arm and goes back to kneading the dough.

"Why don't you use that bread maker I bought you, Nana?" I ask her.

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She laughs and shrugs. “The dough feels good on my joints,” she says with a wink. I shake my head and sit down at the old oak table.

“When does Pops get home?” I ask.

“He should be home any minute,” she says. “Will you be able to stay long?”

I shake my head. “No. Unfortunately, I have some business to attend to. I just wanted to stop in and see you,” I say.

“What business is that, dear?” she asks.

I haven’t told them. They have no idea that their grandson is the heir to a European throne or that their daughter was the secret queen of a small country called Montelandia.

“Are you going to invite your friend in, or does she have to stay in the car?” my nana asks with a raised eyebrow.

I curse under my breath. That woman doesn’t miss a thing...except when it came to her daughter.

“I wasn’t going to be long,” I explain. She gives me a sharp look.

“Eddie, you came all this way. The least you can do is stay for dinner,” she scolds.

I sigh. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll go get her,” I say as I stand to walk toward the front door.

I'm greeted by an entertaining sight. Anna is not in the car any longer. She is standing next to it speaking to my pops. She points to the tree in the front yard, and he nods enthusiastically. She whistles or bird calls, and he does the same. A small bird flies over to the light post on the side of the driveway, and she snaps a photo of it with her phone and shows him. He nods and smiles at her.

"Come on in," he says to her. "No point in waiting out here. Besides, if I know my Vera, she will insist you both stay for dinner."

Anna smiles at him. "I'd like that, Mr. Winters," she says.

He chuckles. "Please call me Ned or Pops," he insists.

She grins and links her arm through his. "Well, Pops, it would be my pleasure to stay for dinner," she says as they begin to walk toward me. I step forward, and she looks up at me. I can see she is unsure if going with Pops was the right thing to do.

"Looks like we'll be dining here," I say to her.

Pops leans over and winks at her. "See, I told you so," he says with a chuckle.

They look like old friends, bosom buddies from another lifetime. I open the door for them, and we all walk back into the kitchen to sit. Nana has put the bread in the oven. She washes her hands and turns to greet us.

"And you must be Anna," she says with a warm smile as she embraces her.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Winters," Anna says, her voice muffled against my nana's hair.

"Oh no, please call me Vera or Nana," she says.

She clasps her hands with Anna's. "Very well, thank you for having me for dinner, Nana," she says.

Nana is delighted and ushers us with glasses of tea into the living room. She pulls out a photo album, and I groan.

"Nana," I say pointedly.

She tosses her hand at me. "Pay no attention to him. He almost never brings girls home. So, he'll just have to suffer through," she says as she sits down next to Anna and begins to show her photos of me.

Ten embarrassingly long minutes later, Anna stops my grandmother. "When was this taken?" she asks.

My grandmother looks down and before she can answer, I say, "At Camp Wittakundi."

Anna freezes. "Y-you went to Camp Wittakundi as a kid?" she stammers and leans over to get a better look at the photograph. It's one of the few that I was allowed during my pre-teen/teenage years.

"Oh, yes. Eddie went every year for gosh, let me see, three or four years, Eddie?" Nana asks me.

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Anna's eyes open so wide, I fear for a moment she's having some kind of heart attack or stroke.

"Anna?" I ask, leaning forward. She turns to me and touches my face as though seeing me for the first time. And then it hits me like a ton of bricks. I'm fairly certain my heart stops beating for a second.

"Suzy," I say.

"Eddie?" she replies.

I reach out and touch her face, remembering the first love of my life. How did I not see it? I look her up and down, remembering the gangly, young Anna with the huge eyes that didn't seem in proportion to her body. She had more freckles back then and her hair was a little darker.

"Oh my!" my grandmother exclaims. "I-it can't be."

"Oh, yes, it is," I breathe as I look at Anna. "My Suzy."

Anna giggles at the use of her old nickname.

"No one's called me that for eons," she says.

"But your brothers still call you Suzy Q," I point out.

She shrugs and grins. "How were we so blind?" she asks with a laugh.

I shake my head. “It’s crazy...it’s...I don’t know,” I say.

“You look so different, but your eyes, I should have recognized them,” she whispers.

“Same,” I say to her. I pull her into a hug as though greeting a long-lost friend.

“Well, isn’t that something,” my grandmother says as she looks back down at the photo album, gazing upon what I swear is the eleventh naked baby photo of me. “Are you going to ask your other friends in for dinner?” she asks me.

I sigh and rub my head, releasing Anna. My grandmother is as astute as they come. She must think we’re idiots. There’s not a single photo of us together from camp all those years ago, but I talked about Anna, Suzy, until I was blue in the face after coming home each summer.

“Sure, Nana,” I say as I turn and walk outside to find the parked car with Hendrick, Pete, and Lucas sitting inside. I knock on the window, and they roll it down.

“Everything OK?” Pete asks.

“Yes, my grandparents have invited you in,” I say to them.

“What?” Pete replies.

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t know anything. My nana just saw you sitting here and figured out you were with us, so she wants you to come in and eat with us,” I explain.

“Oh, uh, I guess. I mean, if you want us to,” Pete says, looking at Hendrick and Lucas.

“Yeah, sure,” I say as I turn and head back inside. I hold open the door and the three

of them file out of the car and trudge up the front porch steps.

“Oh, good, your friends are joining us,” my grandmother says. She stands and introduces herself, and then my grandfather comes in and starts telling war stories. Apparently, Hendrick isn’t opposed to talking about the army with my pops, because he launches into a long story of a mission he was on in Afghanistan. The story merges into dinnertime and pretty soon we’re all sitting around the dining room table being regaled by Hendrick and my pops swapping stories of gunfire and bombs.

By the time Nana pulls out a pie and begins serving us, I’m leaning back in my chair, taking in the most unusual scene at the table where I spent most of my childhood suppers. I breathe in the familiar scent of my grandmother’s cooking and a hint of tobacco smoke from my pops’s pipe that he tries to hide from Nana. Nothing about this room has changed in the last twenty years. The maple wood paneling that is neatly cleaned every week. The old oak table with matching chairs that’s seen more family meals than I can count. The old blue checkered curtains that haven’t been in fashion ever, but that Nana loves, so they remain. The chandelier that came with the house. Even the old paintings that hang on either side of the room are the same ones that have been there since I can remember. The matching oak cupboard that houses the floral china set my grandparents got when they were married, still has a drawing I made in the second grade, stuck against one of the glass panes of the cabinet’s doors. It’s comforting in a way, that this small part of the world has remained unscathed, unchanged.

Even the plates that we eat from are the same ones we had when I was a child. I look up to find my grandmother studying me. I give her a small smile. She taps her nose, and I sigh. When I was a kid, I would always confide in her, no matter what. She could sense something was up the second I walked in the door. She always waited, gave me my space until after dinner when she’d tap her nose and head out to the back porch to sit on her swing. That was my cue to follow her and spill it, as she would say.

She gets up and everyone promptly tells her that they will clear the table.

“Well, I can’t turn down such a wonderful group of young people,” she says with a laugh. “I’m just going to go enjoy my swing.” Pops gives me a grin because this means he can sneak off to the front porch to smoke his pipe. I laugh at his childlike joy at this simple pleasure that is so bad for him, yet I can’t bring myself to stop him.

I take my plate into the kitchen where Anna is at the sink starting to wash dishes. “Go talk with your grandmother,” she says to me. I want to ask her how she knows that’s what I want to do, but I don’t. Instead, I walk out back and take a seat next to my grandmother.

“I like her,” Nana says.

“So do I,” I admit.

“Uh huh,” she says. “So, you gonna spill it?”

I sigh. “Nana, it’s...complicated,” I say.

“Eddie, nothing is complicated unless you make it so,” she says to me.

I turn to her. “What do you know about my father?” I ask her.

She raises an eyebrow. “So, you found him,” she says.

“Found who, Nana?” I prod.

Now she sighs. “I didn’t mean to pry. Your mother kept that part of her life a secret from us. I never asked why. I only assumed it was too painful for her to speak about, but one day I saw some papers on her desk. And a photograph of a king. I only recognized him because his father had recently died, and he had just inherited the throne. I asked her about him, but she blew it off, said he was a story she had worked on. Only, that king had your eyes. I knew then. I figured they had good reasons to keep you hidden here,” she says as she looks up at me. “I suspect you have good reasons to come here with a princess and security guards. I only hope this doesn’t mean that you are in danger,” she says with a frown. Nana is still beautiful even at eighty years old. The lines on her face may be a bit more prominent and her blonde hair is now a beautiful silver, but her eyes still twinkle when she speaks, and she moves with the grace of someone half her age.

I put her hands in mine, tracing the familiar lines of them just as I did as a child. Because it's Nana, her knowledge doesn't surprise me. "It's complicated, Nana. Does Pops know?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "Pops wouldn't handle all this very well. He'd be worried sick about you," she says. I raise my hand to touch the soft skin of her cheek.

"Nana, I promise, one day soon, I'll explain everything, but right now, please keep this to yourself," I say.

"So, you are in trouble, then," she replies, her eyes aren't twinkling any longer, but show true concern.

"I'll be fine. I mean look in there," I say, nodding to the kitchen window where Pete, Hendrick, and Lucas are drying dishes and putting them away. "I have my own army."

She squeezes my hand, stopping me from my absent-minded tracing.

"Logan, be careful, please," she says. Something in her tone tells me there's more she knows or suspects that she's not saying. I don't pry though, I decide if she needed me to know, then she'd say it. Nana isn't one to hold back if it's not necessary.

"Well, then, now that we got that out of the way, tell me more about Anna," she says, as she leans her head on my shoulder and begins to rock the swing. I grin and lean my head on hers as we stare out at the backyard. It hasn't changed at all. I can smell the lilac bushes and hear the frogs and crickets chirping.

"I think I love her," I admit. "Is that weird?"

Nana laughs softly, a laugh of a woman that's seen it all, experienced a lifetime of

love.

“No, Eddie. After eating one meal with her, I can see why you’d fall for her so fast. She’s delightful, nothing like what I’d think a princess would be. And she’s very beautiful,” Nana says.

“Yes, she is,” I agree.

“Well, I feel like you have a lot to figure out. Just remember that I’m here if you need to talk,” she says, getting to her feet and walking back inside after leaning down to kiss my cheek. I stay there on the swing, surrounded by familiarity. I’m so engrossed in my thoughts, I don’t notice I have company until the screen door slams shut, alerting me to Anna’s presence. I turn and look at her as she walks over to me and takes the seat vacated by Nana.

“You, OK?” she asks as she turns to look up at me.

“I’m fine. There’s just a lot to process,” I say.

“You can say that again,” she huffs.

“There’s a lot to process,” I repeat. She slaps me on my chest but laughs. Then, she wraps her arms around my waist and snuggles against me.

“I love your grandparents,” she says quietly.

“They like you too,” I say to her.

She’s quiet for a long moment and so am I. “It’s nice back here,” she says as though she’s taken the minute to consider the serenity of the backyard.

“It is,” I say to her. All of a sudden, she pops her head up and looks out into the woods.

“Is that a swing?” she asks excitedly.

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I laugh. “Uh, yep,” I say. She’s off running toward it before I finish my answer. I follow her and watch as she sits down on the old wooden swing that’s tied to a tree branch.

“Push me?” she asks as she grips the ropes.

“As you wish,” I say. She grins, and I give her a little push.

“Harder,” she says.

I push her harder, and she goes sailing through the air. In her dress, in the moonlight, she looks magical, like a fairy flying across the night sky. She leans her head back and her hair falls down, blowing in the wind. I can’t help myself. I grab the rope when she comes back and stop the swing. She leans her head back, looking up at me.

“Hey!” she says as the perfect pout forms on her lips. I lean down and kiss her.

“What’s that for?” she murmurs against my lips.

“For being so god damn beautiful,” I say to her before kissing her once more. She puts her head back down and lays it against my chest.

“I can’t believe it’s you,” she whispers. I lean her head back again so I can see her.

“The odds are pretty crazy,” I reply.

“The craziest,” she says as she pulls me down for another kiss. She sighs with

contentment and leans back against me.

“What are we going to do?” she ponders.

“We are going to say goodnight to my grandparents, and then head back to the house,” I say.

Chapter Seven

Pops greets us at the back door.

“You found the swing, huh?” he asks, motioning out to the yard with a nod of his head. He smells of pipe smoke and butterscotch candies, and a hint of the aftershave he’s used my entire life.

“Yes. You have a beautiful yard,” Anna says to him.

“I’m glad it’s getting some use,” he replies. “Will you come back again this week for another meal?” he asks us. “You can bring your friends with you,” he adds.

I clap him on the back. “Absolutely, Pops,” I say to him.

“Good, good. Nana will love it,” he says. Anna gives him a kiss and hug, and I swear the old man blushes.

“We’ll be back over soon,” I say to him as I walk to the door. Nana comes down the stairs and gives us both a hug, and then forces Pete, Hendrick, and Lucas to hug her as well. They look a little ridiculous, big burly men leaning over a little old lady, but it makes me actually like them...maybe, a little.

Pete gives me a look as we walk out. I try to talk them into letting me drive

separately. Lucas had driven a separate car from the airport.

“We’ll be fine. I know these roads way better than you do,” I point out.

“No way,” he scoffs.

“Fine,” I grumble with a sigh as I open Anna’s door to let her inside the car. I get in and we head out of my grandparents’ tree-lined-street neighborhood.

“It’s very...picturesque here,” Anna comments as we wait at a stoplight.
“Very...Americana.”

“I guess,” I say. “It’s a pretty typical suburb here in the States.”

“You’re lucky to have them,” she adds. I place my hand on her leg and give it a squeeze.

“I know,” I answer. Pete drives us through the distantly familiar streets. I recognize some buildings but not others. There’re a few reminders of my childhood. I point out my elementary school. The church my grandparents go to for certain holidays. The seasonal ice cream stand my friends and I would bike to when we were young. The old library where I used to lose myself in comic books. The old main street that looks somewhat the same with a few new stores.

Anna sits quietly and listens to my tales as I take her on a trip down memory lane. “It sounds like the perfect childhood,” she says as we drive past the security gate into the community where we are staying.

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I contemplate that for a moment. “It was a good childhood. Honestly, I can’t really complain. My mom was a little...hyper-focused on her job, but I never questioned whether she loved me. I didn’t know my dad back then, but my grandparents were the most loving, caring guardians I could ask for,” I say. “I did all the things I wanted, little league, bike rides, tree forts, soccer, and all the kids loved hanging out at our house because Nana always made cookies.”

Anna laughs. “Sounds like Tessa and her cookies,” she says.

“See, our childhoods weren’t that different,” I say to her.

“We both lost our mothers,” she says quietly.

“True, although I was pretty much an adult,” I say to her.

“It’s still tough,” she replies as she grips my hand in hers.

I shrug as we pull into the driveway. Lucas pulls in behind us, and we wait for him to check the house. Pete had gone over our security protocol about ten times in the car on the way from the airport and then another ten times on our way here. We wait in the car, and when Pete gives the all clear we head inside.

“We’re off to bed,” I say to them.

“Goodnight,” Hendrick says. “I like your grandparents, by the way.”

I laugh. “You and everyone else who’s ever met them,” I reply as I walk down the

hall to the master suite. I shut the door and turn to see the best sight I've seen in days. Anna, naked, lying on the bed.

"Hello," I say to her as I lock the door and saunter toward her.

"Hi," she says almost shyly.

"Ready for bed?" I tease.

She crooks her finger at me, and I crawl up on the bed, encasing her between my legs.

"Does the princess need something?" I ask as I lean down and run my tongue over her erect nipple.

"Y-yes," she stammers on a breath.

I slowly trace my finger up her leg until I reach the hot wetness that I've been missing for the past thirty-six hours. I run my finger up and down, tracing her clit, before sinking it inside her. She whimpers and thrusts against my finger.

"I need to taste you, Princess," I say as I crawl back down her body so I can run my tongue along her sex. She tastes of Susanna, flowers, honey, and a little salty. I make love to her with my mouth, my tongue, my lips. I unleash my cock and stroke myself, needing more, needing her wrapped around me.

She's thrashing on the bed, and I know she's close, when I feel her muscles begin to quiver around my finger, I pull it out and thrust my cock inside of her. She lets out a small cry, and I cover her mouth with my own, letting her taste herself on my tongue. My thrusts come fast and hard. I need a release, I'm chasing it, and she's right there with me. Our bodies smacking against each other and making a sucking wet noise in the otherwise quiet room.

I could lose myself in this woman. Her pussy trembles around my cock and the pulsing muscles drive me farther toward the edge of the cliff. I start to lose control, my thrusts becoming deep and uneven. She grips my shoulders tightly, and her head falls back. I look down at her as she squeezes her eyes shut.

“Look at me, baby. I want to watch you come,” I say to her. Those giant dark blue eyes pop open and that’s my undoing. I feel my cock swell inside her, her walls tighten around me and squeeze every last drop of come from my dick as she silently cries out her release. I slow my thrusts, trying to prolong the pleasure for both of us. My body shakes with the last pulses of my orgasm, my balls so tight I’m sure they are up inside my body.

I stop moving and look down at her sated face. I lean down and kiss her, slowly, gently. I pull out of her, and she winces a bit. The caveman in me hopes she feels the remnants of our lovemaking tomorrow. I shake my head at my ridiculous alpha thoughts.

“What?” she asks, rolling onto her side and looking up at me.

“You make me think crazy things, Anna,” I say to her.

“You make me think crazy things too, Logan,” she says with a small grin. I lean down again and kiss her.

“Shower and bed?” I ask her.

“Really, bed?” she asks as she gets up and struts toward the bathroom. “I was thinking more like round two followed by round three.”

I smirk and follow her. She’s already got the shower going and the steam is fogging up the mirrors, it’s like an optical illusion as I see her fuzzy reflection. I turn the

corner and walk into the shower, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her neck. I give it a little bite, and she squeals.

“Behave,” she says, turning in my arms and wrapping hers around my neck.

“With you? Never,” I say as I lick at her lips, encouraging her to open them for my exploration. She obliges, and I get lost in her mouth for a few minutes until I feel her grinding against my leg.

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“Does my princess need relief?” I murmur.

“Please,” she says on a sigh.

I lift her up, and she wraps her legs around me, guiding my once-again steel erection into her tight wetness. Once I’m embedded inside her, I push her against the tile wall of the shower and take control. She holds on to me for dear life as I slam into her over and over. Her nails rake down my back, and it only urges me on toward my release, but I want hers first. I grip her breast with one hand and support her with the other as I start losing control. I pinch her nipple, and she explodes on me, her body violently shaking as she cries out my name. I keep thrusting, and when her pussy clamps down on the head of my cock one last time, I feel my release coat her insides, her juices mixing and sliding down my cock and balls, along with the hot water.

I set her down on the floor gently, letting her get her bearings. She sways for a moment, grips my arm and turns the water to a cooler temperature. She grabs the soap and begins to wash me, tracing the outline of each muscle on my body. By the time she’s at my cock, I’m hard again.

“Again?” she asks coyly.

I give her a look that says not to play with fire, but my little princess is fierce, and fire doesn’t scare her. For a split second, I shiver at that thought because it’s too true.

“What’s wrong?” she says on a frown. I shake my head and cup her jaw.

“Nothing, baby,” I lie, and she sinks down to her knees and takes me in her mouth. I

groan. I want to taste her too.

“Anna?” I groan.

“What?” she answers, letting my cock pop out of her mouth.

“Do you trust me?” I ask her.

She looks up at me under heavily hooded lids, and it’s the fucking sexiest thing I’ve seen.

“Yes,” she whispers. I grin.

“Lean over onto the bench. I’m going to pull you up my body upside down,” I explain.

She frowns, confused, and then when she realizes what I want to do her eyes go wide.

“Will that...can we do...are you sure?” she stammers.

My grin intensifies over her innocence and concern.

“Susanna, you weigh nothing. Trust me, it will work,” I say as I urge her to bend over with a press of my hand. She complies and looks back over her shoulder. That look has my cock hardening to epic levels. I pull her legs up and hook them under my arms and over my shoulders. Her juicy pussy is right there, right where I want it. I feel her hands grip my hips as her mouth envelops my dick again. I groan and lick her pussy. At this angle, I can feast on her and I do, sucking, nipping, and fucking her with my tongue. Her velvety mouth returns the favor. After a few minutes, she gets bold and removes one hand from my hip, wrapping it around the base of my cock that won’t fit in her mouth. I hear her wince and I know she’s putting too much pressure

on her injured arm.

“Careful, Anna. Let me hold you up,” I say to her. She relaxes her injured arm again, but her other hand is still tightly wrapped around me. I groan, feeling myself edging toward my release. I double my efforts and run my teeth over her clit and that’s all it takes for her to come, her cries stifled by my cock in her mouth which only pushes me toward my own release.

I slowly move her over to the bench, and she shakily sets her good hand down on it. I unhook her also shaking legs and slowly lower them to the floor, her knees buckle, and she sags to the ground. I grab the soap, lift her up onto the bench and start to clean her. She slowly stands and lets me have access to her body. I massage her muscles and kiss her as I clean each inch of her, paying special attention to the still slick area between her thighs. She returns the favor before we head to bed.

We’re both sated from our lovemaking, and she curls into a small ball against me. I hold her tightly and kiss her once more, not able to get enough of her.

“Get some sleep, Princess,” I say to her.

“Uh huh,” she says, her eyes closed.

I grin and kiss her forehead, smelling her hair, her skin. I hold her as though she’s going to disappear if I let go. My need to protect her is growing with each day, each hour, each second. I only hope we can figure out this mess in time.

Chapter Eight

It’s the click-clack of the keyboard that wakes me. I open one eye. It’s not quite light out yet, the sky is that in-between blue color that only exists twice a day right before and after the sun rises or sets. I see the blue glare of Anna’s computer screen. I sit up

in bed and rub a hand over my face. She has on her headphones, and she's deep in code, or at least I think that's what she's doing. I watch her for a few uninterrupted minutes. This is where she is most in her zone, she filters out the whole world and homes in on letters, numbers, and symbols. I know nothing about hacking, coding, or any other computer things, but she is a genius. I've seen bits and pieces of it over the past few weeks, but it's in this early hour, with her messy hair, her naked body, her injured arm in its brace, one leg tucked under her and the other curled up against her chest, the foot planted on the seat, that I see her for who she truly is. She's more than a royal, more than a hacker, she's Susanna, and the world is at her fingertips because she's in control. I admire that about her, her strength and determination, her focus.

She pulls the headphones down and turns to me. "I'm going to attempt a different approach," she says, laying the headphones down on her shoulders. She leans her head to one side and then the other, cracking her neck as she does so. "I think I've been approaching it the wrong way. I don't know why I didn't think of it until now. I'm trying to go forward, but I need to go backward."

I hear her but what she's saying makes zero sense to me. "Anna, I don't understand a damn thing you're saying but seeing as how you are a class A-level genius, I'm just gonna go with it," I say.

She giggles. "A class A- level genius, huh?" she says.

"Yep," I reply as I get up and walk over to her. I massage her shoulders, and she leans back into my grip.

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“Baby, how long have you been at this?” I ask her.

She scratches her head. “Uh, I...maybe two hours or three?” she answers.

“You need sleep,” I say to her.

“I know,” she says on a yawn. “But I feel like I’m so close. Like I’m seeing the puzzle pieces but they aren’t quite fitting together yet,” she adds. “You know what I mean?”

I shake my head. She sighs.

“I just feel like we’re missing something, something really obvious. It’s almost like...” She trails off.

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like...Sten seems like the most obvious answer...maybe he’s too obvious,” she says slowly, contemplating each word as it leaves her mouth. My hands drop to my sides and consider what she’s saying.

“You don’t think Sten is behind this, do you?” I ask her as I sit down on a chair next to the desk where she’s working.

She shakes her head slowly. “No...I don’t,” she says. We stare at each other as we both process that.

I know that there is no way that I'll be tearing Susanna away from that laptop. And there's also no way that I'm going to go back to sleep. That's when I remember that I left the box of my mother's belongings in the car. Maybe, I'll do some of my own research.

"I'll be right back," I say to her as I pop up and walk out of the room. Pete's in the living room, a single lamp is on, illuminating his face in the otherwise dark void.

"Where you off to?" he asks me.

"I just forgot something in the car," I say as I walk to the garage. I grab the box and head back to the room, glancing over my shoulder to see Pete look up from his phone briefly before continuing to text or peruse social media, or whatever the hell guards do in the early morning hours.

I plop the box on the bed and take the lid off.

"What's that?" Anna asks, turning in her chair.

"Some of my mother's things," I say to her.

She leans over from her chair to exam the contents of the box.

"Is that a...lover's eye?" she asks, pointing to the locket.

I nod. "You've heard of them?" I ask her, a bit surprised yet not. I hand it to her.

"Yes, they are very rare, but..." She pauses as she examines it in her hand. She looks up at me.

"This isn't old. I mean, it's not an antique," she says, turning it over and putting it

under a lamp to further examine.

“I honestly don’t know where she got it from. I have a vague memory of her showing it to me when I was a kid. Actually, it was the day before I left for camp,” I say.

“Strange,” she says as she hands it back to me. “It looks like your eye.”

“Yes. I wonder now if she had it made with a photograph of me,” I ponder.

She shrugs and looks back at the box. “Is that a photo of your parents?” she asks.

I nod and hand the photograph to her. “I saw photos of your mom at your grandparents’ home,” she murmurs as she surveys the photo. “This was taken before Uncle Eddie was king.”

“Yes, it’s around the time they met,” I explain.

“What else is in there?” she asks, pointing to the box. I hand her a stack of newspaper articles and some photographs. She sifts through them.

“What was she covering? I mean, she was in Europe to cover a story, no?” Anna asks, glancing back up at me.

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“Yes. I’m not totally sure, but I think it was some coverage of the anti-monarchist movement. That’s why she interviewed my father. She wanted the royal side of things as well. She covered some other things during her years there. Some business stuff, some other political stuff, but that was her big story,” I say.

I watch her as she flips through the photographs and documents. She circles back to a photograph when she’s done.

“What is it?” I ask her.

She frowns and bites her lip. “This man here,” she says, pointing to a young man in a suit with blond hair and piercing blue eyes. “I think that’s Lars Clausen. He’s an old friend of Uncle Hans’s from when Uncle Hans started his company. And the man next to him is Sebastian Bach. He’s another businessman who some claimed was linked to the anti-monarchists years ago, but there were many false accusations back then. It was a bit of a witch hunt. I don’t recognize the others though. And Sten’s not in the photographs. Did your mother interview him?” she asks me.

I shrug. “I honestly don’t know,” I admit.

“Your mom was hanging out with some powerful people,” she says as she turns and goes back to her computer.

“What do you mean? Because of my dad?” I ask.

“And the others. The anti-monarchists were powerful in Montelandia’s parliament back then. There were famous businessmen, politicians, even distant members of the

royal family that wanted the monarchy dissolved,” she explains.

“I wonder how my father feels about all of that,” I say. I stop and consider Anna’s thoughts about this for the first time. “Anna?”

She turns back around.

“How do you feel about it?” I ask her.

“I...I’m not sure,” she admits. “I mean, would my country continue on without my family? Yes. But it’s more than that. The royal family is a symbol of my country. We also are a stable unchanging entity in politics. There are things to be said about the modern-day monarchies with elected parliaments and prime ministers. I can see why people want us removed but I also can see the good we do. I don’t know. It’s a strange philosophical question. There are whole courses taught about that sort of thing,” she adds.

“Well, clearly you’ve given this some thought,” I say to her.

She shrugs. “Yes...and no,” she says as she turns back around.

I decide it’s time to learn about my father’s country. While Anna works on god knows what on her laptop, I pull open mine and begin to search about my family, Montelandia, and the anti-monarchist movement.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but the sun begins to shine in the room, and when it reflects off the mirror above a dresser, I put down my laptop.

“Coffee?” I ask Anna.

“Yes, please,” she says without looking away from her screen. I want to say

something about that not being good for her eyes but decide now is not the time to lecture her about proper eye care.

I get up and head into the kitchen. I find Lucas sitting at the table.

“Morning,” I say to him as I start to make some coffee. Thankful that we stopped for some necessities on the way here from the airport.

I make us coffee and head back to the room. Anna takes the cup of coffee from me.

“Thank you,” she mutters as she continues looking at the code on her screen. She takes a sip of coffee.

“You know what would go great with this?” she asks without looking up.

“No, what?” I respond.

She finally swivels around from the computer to face me. “Double Stuf Oreos!” she exclaims.

I raise an eyebrow. “You want Double Stuf Oreos with your coffee?” I ask.

“You haven’t tried that before?” she says in mock horror.

“Can’t say I have?” I respond.

“Can we go get some? Do you think they have it at the grocery store?” she asks, clapping her hands like an excited child.

“Uh, yeah, the grocery store most definitely will have those,” I reply with a laugh.

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She pops up out of the chair. “OK, let’s go,” she says, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the door. Pete is now back at the island holding a cup of coffee.

“Pete, we need to go to the grocery store, STAT,” she says as she walks into the living room.

“And why do we need to go there?” he asks.

“Because Her Royal Highness has a hankering for Double Stuf Oreos,” I say.

Pete’s eyes light up. “I’m in. Let’s go,” he says, grabbing car keys and heading toward the car.

Amused, I follow Anna and Pete and get in the car. Pete calls Lucas and puts him on house detail.

“Where’s the closest store?” he asks.

I point him toward it. “Why are you two so excited about this? I mean they are good and all, but you’re acting like this is some rare delicacy,” I say, perplexed.

“Oh,” Anna giggles. “It’s hard to find the Double Stuf ones at home,” she says. “I used to get them when I’d go to camp, and I told Pete about it and then it became our thing to find them when we traveled. He thought I was weird for liking them with coffee too, but he came around.”

“Well, I guess I’m about to find out,” I say as we pull into the shopping center. It’s

still fairly early, so there are not many people here. I lead them toward the cookie aisle, and Anna's eyes about pop out of her head when she sees all the Oreo options.

"Holy—" she starts.

"Oreos, Batman," Pete finishes. "Stay here. Do not move." I watch as Pete quickly moves across the store and finds a cart. He's back in a manner of seconds and begins loading our cart with every flavor of Oreo. And then Anna spots them, the Mega Stuf Oreos. You'd think that she just discovered the last of a rare species of animal, or the Holy Grail because she completely loses her shit in the middle of the grocery store. She jumps up and down and grabs five containers of them.

"Oh. My. God. This is incredible!" she exclaims, hugging a package to her chest like it's a prize.

"Really?" I say.

She shakes her head and pokes my chest with her finger. "Don't even start with me. Now, Pete, let's grab some other provisions while we are here," she says.

I follow the two of them around the store as they go batshit crazy over the strangest things. I'm half amused and half confused, but I keep my mouth shut and grab items as I am instructed. Thirty minutes later, we have a car full of groceries.

"Well, that should do it for a while," Anna says. She has Pete pull into a coffee shop and gets us all coffee before we head back to the house.

Anna and Pete work in harmonious unity putting away the groceries. They laugh and reminisce on previous Oreo binge sessions. I take a seat at the kitchen island and watch them. It's sort of fascinating. It's like two old friends chatting when in reality it's a princess and her bodyguard. Although, if Anna grew up with Lucas and Pete,

then I suppose they are like old friends in a way. I'm deep in thought about this when Anna sets the Mega Stuf Oreos down in front of me.

"It is time," she says, taking the lid off her coffee and then motioning for Pete and me to do the same. She makes the "ah, ahhhh" sound as though this is some religious experience. I grab an Oreo and dunk it in my coffee and take a bite.

I chew and consider. Anna waits patiently, her head propped up on her hands, her elbows on the countertop.

"Soooo?" she asks.

"What's the verdict?" Pete follows.

"It's good," I say. "I mean. I'm more of a milk and Oreos guy, but it's good."

Anna tosses a hand at me. "Pish posh. Milk is so old school. Coffee and Oreos is where it's at," she says and grabs one, dunking it in her coffee. She takes a bite of the Oreo and moans, and I swear to god, her sound goes straight to my dick. I watch her lips move and her eyes roll back in her head, and I want to take her right here, right now.

"God, I love these cookies," she mutters as she grabs another. "This Mega Stuf is off the fucking charts! Seriously, why didn't they think of this earlier?"

I laugh. "Glad you approve," I say as I grab a second cookie.

"Breakfast of champions," Pete says as he dunks his cookie into his coffee. I'm about to make a smartass comment when Lucas pokes his head into the kitchen.

"Oreos?" he asks.

I roll my eyes. I'm not sure what Anna has done to un-man these two when it comes to cookies, but I'm seriously worried about them right now.

Hendrick walks and yawns. "What's all the hubbub about?" he asks.

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“Sorry,” Anna says, her mouth full of cookies so it sounds more like “chworry.”

“Oreos and coffee, huh?” he inquires.

Anna nods enthusiastically. He shrugs, grabs a coffee and an Oreo, and takes a bite.

“Not bad. I’m heading back to sleep unless we need to debrief?” he adds, looking over at Pete.

“No, I think today will be a low-key day,” Pete says, glancing at us. “Do we have plans?”

Anna shakes her head. “Nope, I’m sort of jet-lagged, so I want to catch up on my sleep. Do you all have anything from Shannon? I know she canceled my appearances for a while, but I probably should check in—”

“Anna, no checking in. Remember, we are incognito,” Pete cuts her off.

“Right, like sending us to where Logan’s family is from is going to make us incognito?” she questions. “I get my dad wanting us to go overseas, but this seems not well thought out if you ask me,” she says with a huff, grabbing a package of Oreos with red cream and heading into the bedroom.

I look at the three of them. “She does make a good point,” I say.

“Well, Victor ordered it. He said it would be safer to have you all split up,” Pete says. I shake my head as I walk over to the bedroom and shut the door behind me.

Anna has flopped on the bed on her belly, her legs are bent at the knee, and she is swinging her feet back and forth. Her laptop is now on the bed next to the package of Oreos. She looks up grinning, and I chuckle because she has cookie all over her teeth.

“Good?” I ask.

“Of course,” she answers and pushes the package toward me. “Try these.”

I sit down and bite into an Oreo, as I grab my laptop. “Why does my dad sign his name like that?” I ask, pointing to a document I found online. It’s merely signed “Edvard R.”

“Oh, both our countries adopted the same standard as the British monarchy. The ‘R’ stands for Rex for king and Regina for queen. It’s a long story having to do with our history, and its intertwining with various monarchies in Europe,” she explains.

“Oh?” I ask. I know nothing about our small countries. Until a week ago, I could have barely located them on a map.

Anna stops and looks at me. “You don’t know much about our countries, do you?” she asks as though reading my mind.

I shake my head.

She sits up and changes the screen on her laptop to the regular internet, or what appears like it. She searches for something and then sets the laptop on her lap, patting the bed next to her. I scoot up and sit, our shoulders touching. She launches into a history about our countries. Really, they are principalities not much larger than a metropolitan area. They are heavily influenced by Scandinavian culture, and also British, German, and French culture. She weaves the stories of kings and queens and rebellion and all kinds of interesting tales. She pulls up photos, portraits, and maps on

her computer. When she finishes, she turns to me.

“Better?” she asks.

I nod. “Thank you for the impromptu lesson,” I say. This wasn’t what I had in mind when we came in here but listening to Susanna speak with such pride and enthusiasm for her country and even mine, is fascinating. Her depth of knowledge on history and politics is impressive, so impressive I wonder if she ever considered being a teacher. I have to stop myself there because for just a moment, I forget that she’s a princess, not a mere mortal like...I was.

“Why didn’t you question your dad about sending us here?” I ask her, recalling what she said before coming in here.

“I...it’s not always wise to question the king, especially when he’s your father,” she says.

“But, you’re right. I mean, this would be a place someone would look for me,” I say.

“You, yes. Me, no,” she says, pointing between us, and then she frowns.

“What?” I ask her.

“Why...that is puzzling,” she says, biting her lip.

“What?” I prod.

“Well, I could see why my dad might send me here, but he sent me here with you. Why would your dad agree to send you here?” she asks.

“Who says my father agreed to anything? Besides, Pete says that Victor was the one

who suggested it,” I question.

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She rolls her eyes and gives me a look. “Seriously? I’m pretty sure the King of Montelandia would most certainly have a say in where his son was sent on a temporary exile. And I can’t believe my dad would let Victor dictate where we would be sent, but...perhaps, I mean, if Marcus agreed too,” she replies.

“Exile? Isn’t that a bit extreme?” I ask.

“Whatever. I feel like I’m missing things, so many things,” she says. Her finger taps the corner of her keyboard as she studies the screen.

“OK, let’s start with what doesn’t fit together,” I suggest, lying back against the headboard and grabbing another cookie because I have a feeling this will take a while.

Chapter Nine

“Well, we know someone inquired on the dark web to hire an assassin to kill you. But we don’t know who. We know someone planted a bomb on board Uncle Hans’s plane and now at the summer palace, but again, who? We know M made it to the Bahamas and then Norddale, but where he is now, I have no idea. We also know that some influential people in Norddale and Montelandia were accused of being anti-monarchists twenty-some years ago,” she states.

“Alright, so who would want me dead?” I ask her.

She tilts her head to the side and considers my question.

“Anti-monarchists, maybe. Sten, possibly. But why us now? There would have been no indication you were coming back with us until right before the flight, and we know the bomb was planted on the plane earlier than that based on when the video glitches occurred. So, who would want to kill us and you? Same person or group? Different people and it’s just a coincidence?” she ponders.

“You think it could be a coincidence?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “My gut tells me no. It’s too...the odds are just too great for it not to be connected,” she says.

“OK,” I respond slowly. “So, then who would want to kill members of both the royal families?” I ask her.

“Now that, my dear, is the million-dollar question,” she replies.

“And let me guess, we don’t have the million-dollar answer yet?” I say.

“Nope. But, we are going to find out,” she says.

We begin a marathon session of research. I haven’t studied this hard since college. Fine, if I’m being honest with myself, I have never done research like this, ever. Of course, my life and others have never been at stake either. Pete makes us all sandwiches for lunch, and we eat them in the bedroom while we continue to work. At some point in the mid-afternoon, Anna sends Lucas to go buy her a printer.

“I just need to look at some of this, not on the screen,” she says, surprising me because her life is on a screen.

“Whatever you need,” I reply as I look through article after article, news clip after news clip. By dinner time, I’m mentally exhausted.

“I need a break, Anna,” I say to her. I’ve all but forgotten the reason I originally followed her in here this morning. I lie back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. We’re no closer to figuring this out than we were six hours ago.

Anna stops her typing and turns to me. She pulls out her hair band and lets her hair fall down around her shoulders as she walks over to me and plops down on the bed, lying back too, so we are side by side.

“I feel like the answers are just out of grasp,” she huffs.

I reach down and grab her hand, holding it in mine.

“I think we need a break,” I say.

“I know. Maybe we can relax for a bit tonight,” she suggests.

“No, I mean, let’s take tomorrow off. Let’s do something fun,” I say, leaning up on my elbow and looking down at her.

“What do you have in mind?” she asks, her eyebrow raised.

“Ever been to Niagara Falls?” I ask her.

Her eyes go wide. “Uh, nope. But isn’t that really far away?” she asks.

I shake my head. “A few hours, but we can get up early and be there by mid-morning,” I say. “And then we can come home at night.”

She looks at me for a long minute, contemplating my idea. “OK. Let’s take a break. Maybe clearing our heads will help. But good luck talking our security team into this idea,” she says.

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I grin. “Excellent,” I say as I get up and walk out to the kitchen where Hendrick sits.

“We’d like to go to Niagara Falls tomorrow,” I announce.

His head whips up, and he looks at me like I’m crazy. I give him a smile.

“Niagara Falls?” he questions.

“Yep. We can leave around six,” I say.

“Tomorrow,” he says.

I nod. “Tomorrow,” I repeat.

“I’ll need to run this past Pete and Lucas,” he says as he stands.

Just as he’s about to walk down the hall, Pete enters the room.

“Did I hear you correctly?” he asks me.

“If you heard me say we’re going to Niagara Falls tomorrow, then you most certainly did,” I say to him.

Pete considers my request. “I prefer to have more time to prepare for a trip like that,” he says with a frown.

“It’s only for the day. We’ll come back after dinner,” I explain.

“There’s a chance we’ll draw attention to ourselves,” he says to me.

“Nah, we’ll have on those crazy rain ponchos and sunglasses and hats. We’ll be fine,” I say.

Pete shakes his head. “You two are a real pain in the ass, you know that?” he says to me.

I laugh. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” I respond.

“We’re heading to bed early,” I add as I walk back to the bedroom.

Anna’s still lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. She props herself up on her elbows as I walk in and gives me a questioning look.

“All set,” I say.

“Really?” she asks, skepticism lacing her voice.

“Yes,” I respond as I shut the door and walk over to her. “Now, I think we could use a little relaxing before we go to sleep.”

She eyes me as the corners of her mouth twitch. “Relaxing?” she questions.

I pull my shirt off as I reach the end of the bed. “Relaxing,” I repeat.

“Is that what the kids are calling it nowadays?” she asks.

“The kids?” I say.

She rolls her eyes.

“However shall we relax?” she says in a mocking tone.

“Now, now, Princess, don’t be bratty,” I say as I push my sweatpants down, letting my erection spring free. I grip it in my hand and watch her, watching me.

“You plan on relaxing in the nude?” she asks me, batting her eyelashes. I try to contain my smirk.

“Yes, and so do you,” I say to her.

“Oh really?” she asks.

“Yes, really,” I respond.

She sits up on her knees. I watch as she pulls off her t-shirt and unhooks her bra, letting her breasts bounce free. My hands itch to touch them, but I remain where I am. She stands up on the bed, which makes her a little taller than I am. I can see her triumph over her height. She pulls the string on her shorts and lets them fall down her legs, and then she pushes her underwear down until they fall to her feet. She stands perfectly still and completely unclothed.

I can no longer keep my hands from reaching for her. I grip her hips and pull her against me. I lean in and plant a kiss on her belly, right below her breasts. She arches against me. I run my hand down her thigh and back up the inside until I feel the wetness between her legs. I stroke her there as my lips close around one nipple and then the other one. She moans softly as I bite and suck at her.

I suddenly can't wait any longer. I need to be inside her, possessing her, making her mine. I flip her down on the bed, and she gives a little squeal and a giggle as she bounces once, but then I'm on her and in her and her squeal turns to a moan and my name on her lips. I move rapidly, thrusting deep and hard, over and over. My release sneaks up on me, and I reach down between us to pinch her clit, so she explodes right before I do.

I catch myself on my elbows as I thrust once more into her on a groan. Her trembling

body stills beneath me. Only our heavy breathing fills the silence of the room. I open my eyes and find her gazing at me. She removes her good hand from my shoulder where she's been death gripping it through her orgasm and gently strokes the side of my face. I lean into it and plant a kiss on the palm of her hand.

She sighs but it's more in frustration than contentment. My gaze widens at the realization and also at the realization that I am able to tell the difference.

"What's wrong, Anna?" I ask her.

"Why does this have to be so complicated?" she says, searching my eyes as if I could answer that.

I lean down and rub my nose against hers before kissing her slowly. "Everything else is complicated," I say to her and then motion between us. "This isn't complicated at all."

I get a grin out of her with that statement. I rest my forehead on hers as her face goes fuzzy in my vision from the proximity.

"You don't think we are complicated?" she asks as she blinks and her long eyelashes brush against mine.

I smile. "No, Princess, I don't think we are complicated," I say to her. "Yes, we met under some very...unusual circumstances. And yes, our families are...well, complicated seems like an understatement there. But maybe the universe meant for us to meet, so we could be the uncomplicated in each other's lives." I stop and ponder the words of truth that just spilled from my mouth. I seldom speak without thinking, except around Anna. My heart hangs on my sleeve like a badge of honor.

I want to tell her that I'm falling for her, but my fear keeps me from saying it.

“Maybe,” she says.

“Let’s get a shower,” I say to her as I stand and hold out my hand to her.

This time we’re all business in the shower. While washing her hair, Anna looks up at me.

“Have you been there before?” she asks.

“Where, Niagara Falls?” I reply.

She nods and puts her head under the spray of the shower. Her eyes close, and I watch the hot water run down her face. She’s breathtaking. I lean forward and kiss her, and she grins against my lips.

“What’s that for?” she asks.

“For being you,” I say.

“Are you gonna answer my question?” she asks me, opening her eyes again.

I laugh. “Yes, I’ve been but not for a very long time,” I say to her.

“Is it very beautiful?” she asks. “It looks very beautiful in photos.”

“It is. It lights up at night,” I tell her. Her eyes widen.

“Can we stay until the lights go on?” she asks. I grin and nod.

We finish our shower and crawl into bed. I turn off the lights, and she curls up against my side. My mind wanders to when we first met.

“Anna?” I ask.

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“Uh huh,” she murmurs.

“Why’d you wait so long to tell me?” I ask her.

“Tell you what?” she replies as she props herself up onto her elbow.

“In the Bahamas, why did you wait so long to tell me everything?” I rephrase.

“Oh...” She trails off and looks down at her hand. “I-I...didn’t know how to,” she stammers. “I mean, how do you tell someone you just met that you have this whole secret life, and you stumbled upon a plot to kill them and oh yeah, by the way, you’re a prince.” She raises an eyebrow.

I laugh. “Well, when you put it like that,” I say.

She shakes her head and her hair falls in her face. I reach out and slowly tuck it behind her ear. Her eyes seem bright in the dim light of the bedroom.

“Would you have believed me if I told you on day one?” she asks.

I shrug. “I...don’t know. I mean, maybe, but I guess by the end of that week...well, I still had a hard time believing you,” I admit.

She places her hand over mine. “I imagine it must be very hard for you,” she says. “I know we’ve talked about it a bit, but I’m proud of you. I’m proud of you for not shying away from all of this and for stepping up to the plate. You’ve shown strength and bravery that many would be unable to muster when faced with such revelations.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I guess I figure that there are only two options. One, to slink away from all of this and hide myself from the world. Or, two, face my future full-on and don’t look back,” I say.

She nods and snuggles back against me. “Do you remember when we first met?” she asks.

“Sure, you came aboard, and—”

She giggles, stopping me. “No, not that. I mean when we first met...Eddie?” she says, using my childhood nickname and something about that tugs hard on my heartstrings.

I cup her face and look at her. “I’ll never forget it,” I whisper to her because it’s the truth. “You were the first girl that I ever loved.” I don’t add that I’m hoping she’ll be the last one too. I’m suddenly jolted by that thought. I love her. I’m not falling for Anna, I fell for her years ago.

She bolts up and looks down at me. “You...loved me?” she asks, her eyes wide.

I grin. “I may have had the world’s biggest crush on you,” I admit.

She grins, a giant toothy grin at my admission. “I had a crush on you too,” she admits and settles back down into my arms.

“You were on the overlook rock,” I say.

“I was?” she asks.

“Yes, you were sitting up there, looking out over the valley. You were so small and by yourself. I was surprised you were able to climb up on it,” I say. “And then you

turned when you heard me, and the wind picked up and blew your hair around. You looked like an angel.”

She giggles. “You looked like a puppy that hadn’t grown into his feet yet,” she remembers.

I laugh. “I suppose that’s accurate,” I say, recalling what it was like to be a gawky pre-teen, all arms, and legs.

“You were so cute,” she says.

“Cute, eh?” I ask, and she nudges my rib. I grin into the darkness of the room.

“I guess we’ve both changed a lot since then,” she considers.

“I suppose we have,” I agree.

“Goodnight, Eddie,” she says, and I can tell she’s grinning when she says my nickname.

“Goodnight, Suzy,” I reply, using the nickname she had at camp.

She leans her head on my chest and pulls her knees up so that she’s in a tight little ball at my side. I turn my head and plant a kiss on her hair, and she sighs a contented sigh. I lie awake for a long time after her breathing has slowed, trying to figure out the puzzle of our lives.

Chapter Ten

“Wake up,” Anna’s voice pulls me from my sleep, and I blink. I reach for my phone.

“It’s only five forty-five,” I note.

“So? I’m up! Let’s get ready and get on the road earlier. Come on, the early bird catches the worm,” she says and jumps out of bed. I watch as she turns on a light, and I blink, adjusting my vision to brightness. She leaves the room and returns a few minutes later.

“Coffee’s on, and the guys are getting up,” she announces as she shuts the door and heads into the bathroom. I groan. My princess is a morning person as much as a night owl, and that might just kill me.

I run a hand over my face and rub my eyes as I get out of bed and stretch. It’s funny that I’m not a morning person except when I’m on my boat. Something about the salty air gets me up and going. I walk into the bathroom to find that she’s already gotten in the shower. I admire her form through the glass door for a few minutes before I join her.

She eyes me suspiciously as I close the shower door. She pokes my chest and places her hands on her hips. She looks utterly adorable because she’s giving me a stern look with soap on her face.

“No funny business. We need to get ready,” she says before quickly turning around and rinsing the soap away. I’m about to answer but she walks past me and gets out,

leaving me alone with my morning wood. Once she leaves the room to get dressed, I wrap my hand around my cock. It only takes a few strokes while remembering images from the night before for me to shoot my load against the tile wall of the shower. I lean forward and let the hot water pour over me. This woman is changing me in ways I didn't think were possible.

I quickly finish getting ready. As I walk out of the bedroom, I find Pete and Anna at the kitchen island already nursing cups of coffee. Anna reaches for a mug on the counter and pushes it toward me.

“Caffeinate. It's going to be a long day,” she says with a wink. I shake my head and down the coffee. The five of us are in the car after Lucas and Hendrick join us for coffee, and we begin our road trip. Of course, Pete has to be a buzzkill early on and note all the rules we will have to follow in order to be safe. Anna rolls her eyes so many times that I warn her that they may stay that way. That only earns me another eye roll.

We listen to music. Anna makes us play a game of “I spy,” saying it's not a road trip until we do so. I question her on whether she's actually been on a road trip.

She cocks her head from side to side and shrugs. “What counts as a road trip?” she asks me.

“Have you ever traveled in the car for multiple days?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “No, just for a few hours,” she admits.

“Well, then you are a road trip virgin,” I tell her. She hits my chest, and Lucas stifles a laugh as Anna glares at him.

“Oh, OK, Mr. Know-It-All. How many road trips have you been on?” she asks me. If

she wasn't seated, I'm pretty sure her hands would be on her hips. The corners of my mouth threaten to turn up, and I have to use my will power to prevent that from happening because I'm fairly certain daggers would shoot out of Anna's eyes if I laughed right now.

"Two," I answer.

"Details?" she asks.

"My grandparents rented a camper and drove me out West one summer after I got back from camp. We spent two weeks driving around. It was really cool. And then in college, my friends decided to drive to Mardi Gras. We ditched class on Friday so that we could leave Thursday afternoon. We took turns driving. We spent two nights sharing a hotel room and then drove all the way back so we could get to classes on Monday morning," I tell her, smiling in fondness at the second memory.

"People seriously do that?" she asks.

I laugh. "Yes, crazy young people definitely do that," I say.

"Well, count me out, that does not sound like a good time," she says. I laugh again.

"How much longer?" she asks, pulling out her phone.

"About an hour or so," Lucas says from behind the wheel.

"Why don't you take a nap?" I suggest.

Anna shakes her head. "Heck no! What if we see something cool, and I miss it?" she exclaims, making all four of us chuckle.

“What if I promise to wake you if we see something cool?” I ask her.

“Nope, your idea of cool may be different than mine,” she declares as she crosses her arms and gazes out the window. She asks questions about things as we drive past. She makes us play one more car game before she sees the first sign for the American side of the falls.

She squeals in delight and points to it. “We’re here!” she says excitedly. You’d think this woman had never been anywhere before, and yet, I know for a fact she’s been all over the world.

“How come you are so excited?” I ask her.

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She shrugs. “I love seeing new things,” she says. “You know, the adventure of it all.”

I watch her excitement grow as Lucas finds an acceptable parking spot. We get briefed again by Pete before we’re allowed to get out of the car. Eventually, Anna places her hand over Pete’s mouth. He quiets immediately.

“Yeah, yeah. We get it, security, blah, blah, blah. We’ll be good, I promise. I’m pretty sure whoever is trying to kill us, won’t be looking here or suspecting that we’ll take a sudden road trip. Now, can we go?” she asks.

Pete nods, and we all get out of the car. The plan is to act like normal tourists. So, we do. There’s a formation to us but not one that a normal person would pick up on if they walked by us.

We walk a little way until the Canadian falls come into view, and Anna breaks the formation and runs over to the fence along the walkway. She leans over and looks out at the falls.

“Oh my god!! This is so cool,” she exclaims. I can barely hear her over the pounding of three thousand one hundred and sixty gallons of water that fall every second. I grin at the weird fact I remembered learning last time I was here.

“Can we go down there?” She points to where people are walking down by the falls. I nod and grab her arm.

“Stay next to me, Anna,” I say in her ear. She nods, and we walk toward the entrance to the pathway.

Anna's enthusiasm for the day is contagious. She makes us all go on one of the boats that take you out to the falls and back. She takes selfies of us all in hats, sunglasses, and those ridiculous ponchos they give out for the boat ride.

We grab lunch and walk around some more, taking in every tourist attraction we come across. By dinner time, I can see Anna's slowly winding down. And by the time the lights come on behind the falls, her eyelids are drooping.

"Are we ready to head back?" Pete asks, as we all lean against the railing and look out at the color display.

"Yeah, let's head back," Anna says, as she laces her arm through mine as we walk back to the car. She curls up against me once we are settled inside.

"Thanks," she murmurs. "That was so much fun."

"It was," I agree.

"Sometimes, it's really nice to just be me for a day," she whispers as she falls asleep against my shoulder. Pete hands me a blanket from who knows where, and I lay it over her. She snuggles down against me, her head falling into my lap. She sleeps the entire way back to the house and doesn't even stir when Hendrick stops the car.

"I got her," I say to them. I unbuckle her seatbelt and walk around the car. I open the door and lift her into my arms. Pete closes it.

"She needed this," he says quietly. I raise an eyebrow.

"What?" I ask.

"She needed a day to be her," he says.

“So did I,” I say as I carry Anna into bed. She stirs as I remove her shoes, but quickly curls up under the covers that I wrap around her.

Something about the happiness and carefreeness of the day, feels like an ominous sign, as though something this good can’t possibly last. I can’t shake the feeling of it as I slowly fall asleep with Anna in my arms.

Chapter Eleven

It’s the click-clack of the keyboard that wakes me again the next morning. I look over to see Anna with those big earphones on, and I grin. She looks like Princess Leia.

I get up and walk over to her, placing my hands on her shoulders. She jumps.

“Jesus, you scared the shit out of me!” she exclaims, whipping around to face me as she sets her headphones down on her shoulders.

“Sorry,” I say, rubbing her shoulders.

She leans her neck to one side and then another as she turns back to face her laptop. “If you keep that up, then you’re forgiven,” she says. I laugh.

“Noted,” I say. “What are you working on?”

“Digging,” she says.

“Find anything yet?” I ask.

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She shakes her head. “Nothing useful, anyways,” she says to me with a huff. As she says this, she freezes. “Hold on...” She trails off and begins typing a mile a minute.

“What are you doing?” I ask her.

“Trying another angle,” she says.

“What’s that?” I prod.

“Hacking into the royal security servers,” she says.

“Wait, as in your security’s servers?” I ask her.

She glances at the door to our room and back at her screen. “Yes, as in those servers,” she says.

“Anna...I...maybe we shouldn’t,” I stammer.

“Or, maybe that’s exactly why we should,” she says like the badass, rule-breaking princess that she is.

I sigh and pull up a chair for the show. Although, I really have no idea what the hell I’m looking at as she scrolls through code on the screen.

“I’ll get us coffee,” I say to her as I lean down and kiss her head before heading out to find caffeine.

Pete's in the kitchen when I come in.

"Morning," he says.

"Morning," I reply. I make Anna and myself coffee before heading back to the bedroom. I set the coffee down for her, and she thanks me without looking away or stopping the tapping of her fingers on the keyboard.

I sip my coffee and watch her. Her brows furrow and then un-furrow. She frowns and then stops frowning and then frowns again.

"What is it?" I ask her.

"It's just...this doesn't make sense," she says.

"What?" I ask.

"Why would Victor and Marcus ask my father to send us here?" she says, biting her lip.

"What do you mean?" I ask, setting my coffee down on the desk.

"It says here that Marcus determined the locations with Victor that were the most appropriate to send us all. But why would Marcus determine that for Victor? That doesn't make sense. Victor's our chief of security. He should be making those decisions," Anna says.

"How long has Victor been your father's head of security?" I ask her.

She stops typing and considers the answer. "Well...let's see. He came on after Lara and Hans were married but before I went to college. I'm trying to remember. I think I

was eight or nine, maybe? I don't know, like ten plus years ago?" she contemplates.

"And how about Marcus?" I ask her.

"Oh, Marcus was longer than that," she says. "He's been my dad's personal secretary for, gosh, since I was little, even before my mother died."

"Where are your brothers?" I ask her. She types some more before answering.

"So, it looks like Chris is staying at a small inn near Mia's family's home just outside of London. And Auggie is at a friend's chalet in Switzerland," she says.

"OK...why so separated, especially us?" I ponder.

"That's a good question," she notes as she types some more.

She sighs as she leans back in the chair after a few more minutes of searching.

“What?” I ask.

She turns her head toward me and purses her lips. “I have a theory,” she says.

“Which is?” I ask.

“Which is, what if we were separated for a reason other than our safety?” she asks.

“What reason would that be?” I ask.

“Exactly,” she says.

“I’m not following,” I say to her.

She turns her chair so she’s facing me. “Before, we were all together. We changed the plans. And then we weren’t where we said we’d be; thus we weren’t in the plane when it blew up,” she notes.

“What about the palace?” I ask her.

“Well.” She taps her lips. “If I hadn’t gone to your room, then I would have been in mine which is down the hall from the blast. Auggie was supposed to have been on that side of the palace if he hadn’t have stopped to get cookies and play video games in the game room, and Chris said he had been heading to a meeting with Mia in the drawing room where I’d been earlier which is right below where the blast was. So, all of us could have been there, but for various reasons, ended up not being there. Our dads were both in the blast as well as Auntie Lara.” She stops when she says her

aunt's name.

"Any word on her?" I ask her. I haven't mentioned it since we've gotten here three days ago now.

She shakes her head. "There are no updates, which I guess is better than bad news," she says, looking away.

I place my hands on hers. "I'm sorry, Anna. I hope she makes a full recovery," I say to her.

"Me too," she whispers. She shakes her head and clears her throat, squaring her shoulders. "So...anyhow, I...where was I. Right, we were together all those times. What if, whoever is behind this, thinks it would be easier to take us down if we were separated?" she hypothesizes.

I consider her theory. "Divide and conquer?" I muse.

She nods. "Divide and conquer," she repeats.

"But, we're together," I point out.

"True, but maybe that's part of the plan," I point out.

"You think this is a plan?" I ask.

"Yes, I do," she says.

"So, why come here then?" I ask her.

"Because, I think if we are going to take down whoever is behind all of this, we need

to go along with their plan for a bit. Plus, it buys us time to figure things out, and then, we pounce,” she says.

“I don’t know, Anna. This is...” I trail off because I honestly don’t know what to say.

She gets a look on her face, and I know she’s just come up with an idea.

“What?” I ask, almost afraid to hear her answer.

“My dad mentioned a name...” She pauses and turns to her computer and begins typing. A minute later, she pulls up what looks like a phone number pad on her screen, and she places a call...through some secured audio chat on her computer. I shake my head at this amazing woman.

“Is this Jack Ross?” she says when a deep Scottish accented voice answers on the other line.

“Who’s speaking?” he says gruffly.

“Mr. Ross, this is Princess Susanna of Norddale. I need to speak with you, privately,” she says.

“How did you obtain this number?” he questions.

She grins. “I’m a princess,” she says.

“Your Highness,” he growls, clearly not having the patience to be toyed with even by a member of a royal family.

She sighs. “I hacked the phone system at Interpol,” she says.

“You what?” he exclaims.

“Listen, I don’t have time to explain. I’m calling from my secured server which is working remotely, and I only trust it to stay secured on such a call for a short period of time. So, can you meet with me?” she asks.

“You’re in the States?” he asks, but in a way that tells me he already knew that.

“Yes,” she answers.

“Tomorrow,” he states. Not a question, just a statement.

“Fine, what time?” she asks.

“I’ll come to you,” he says. “I’ll be in touch.” And then he hangs up as she looks over at me.

“Well, this ought to be interesting,” she muses as she closes down her laptop.

“Very,” I agree.

“Let’s go visit your grandparents,” she suggests.

“Now?” I ask.

“Why not? I mean, they are retired, and it’s not like they are going to be busy,” she says. “Plus, we promised them we’d come back over this week.”

“We did,” I recall.

“Good, it’s settled then,” she says. And just like that we get ready and head back to my grandparents’ home.

Chapter Twelve

“I’m so glad you came over,” Nana says as she busies herself in the kitchen preparing a feast fit for a holiday.

“Nana, you really don’t have to go through all this trouble,” Anna says. “At least let me help.”

Nana shakes her head. “Oh, thank you, my darling, but I love cooking. It relaxes me. Plus, we so seldom get a house full of young people. It’s my pleasure to cook for you all,” she says as she chops vegetables on a cutting board.

“What can we do to help?” I ask her.

“Yeah, put us to work, Vera,” Hendrick says as he walks into the room with a mouth full of food from the appetizers Nana set out on the living room coffee table.

I half grin at the fact they are still there, remembering the days when we had Muffin, a mutt who we adopted and who would eat everything off any surface she could

reach.

“Pish posh, you go relax, young man,” Nana scolds as she sweeps the chopped vegetables into a bubbling soup on the stove.

With a sigh, I start toward the living room. “You could go through more boxes up in your mother’s room?” she suggests gingerly. Nana has been gently hounding me forever to clean out that closet. She refuses to do it herself, hiding behind the fact that my mother’s belongings are technically mine, but in truth, I think it’s more because she doesn’t want to be reminded of the loss. Nana was always strong, even after my mother died, but I know Mom’s death took away a piece of her that she’ll never get back; it took away a piece of me too.

I walk up the stairs, and Anna follows me. My mother’s room hasn’t changed much. It still sports a light green mint color and the dark wood furniture of her youth. There’re a few family photos sitting out on the dresser. Mom always kept it tidy.

“This was your mother’s room?” Anna asks as she runs her hand over the dresser.

I nod.

“Which room is yours?” she inquires as she hovers by the door. I point to the door across the hall. She turns and opens it. I hear her giggle.

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“What’s so funny?” I call out as I walk over to where she’s standing. Then I see it, my comic book action heroes are lined up on my shelf. My awards, medals, and trophies are laid out on a shelf below them. I have posters of rock bands and supermodels. It’s an homage to my childhood.

“Didn’t take much with you, then?” she asks, fighting like hell to stop a smile from curving her lips up on each end.

“Well, this is where the magic happens,” I say, whirling around with my arms out. And she can no longer hide the smile or the laughter.

“You’re hilarious,” she says as she walks toward my shelf. She picks up various items, studying each one. “You were quite the collector,” she notes as she holds up one of my action figures.

I shrug. “You didn’t collect anything?” I ask her.

“Sure, I just don’t have them out in my room anymore,” she says with a smirk.

“To be honest, I don’t come up here as often as I should,” I admit.

“I guess not,” she says. “Come on, let’s go see what we can clean out over there,” she adds as she walks toward me.

“You know...I haven’t had a girl in here for quite a while,” I say to her.

She raises an eyebrow. “Quite a while, huh?” she asks.

I grin and shrug. “What can I say? I may have brought home a girl or two when I was in college,” I admit. She rolls her eyes.

“Well, then that fantasy has been fulfilled,” she says, and I can practically hear the jealousy roll off her voice.

“Are you jealous?” I ask, following her into my mother’s room.

“No,” she grumbles.

I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her. “I think you might be jealous,” I say.

She squirms out of my hold and opens the closet door. “I’m not jealous, OK?” she scoffs as she pulls the string that turns on the single light in the closet.

“OK,” I say, but I grin like a fool from behind her.

“Where do we start?” she asks, looking at the rows of neatly stacked plastic boxes.

I pull down one and place it on the floor of the bedroom. “Let’s see what we’ve got,” I say as I open it. I know most of the boxes contain my mother’s research. She was meticulous and something about that kept me from getting rid of these things. There were only two small shoebox-size boxes of her personal belongings that I took with me, and those items are in my apartment in the Bahamas. They were mostly photos of us, a few necklaces I made her for Mother’s Day, and a few of the nicer carvings she collected on her travels. She had kept them sitting out on a shelf in here, but now they sit on a shelf in my home. There is also a collection of Roald Dahl books that Nana and Pops gave her, and in turn, she would read to me. They inscribed things on them for her, and she inscribed things on them for me. But these remaining boxes are her work.

“What types of stories did she work on again?” Anna asks.

“Mostly business, some politics,” I say. I leaf through the papers. “I think this is from a story she did on campaign financing here.” Anna grabs a handful of papers and notebooks and looks through them.

“Do you want to keep them?” she asks. I shake my head. “I think her colleague has copies of these and even if they don’t this story is very old. I think it’s largely irrelevant now.” As much as it pains me to clean out the boxes, I feel as though it’s time, and something about having Anna here with me makes it easier.

“OK,” she says as we place the papers back in the box and push it to one side of the room. We spend the next forty-five minutes going through one box after another. Stories out of Morocco, Israel, Germany, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, Montelandia, and then I pause, Norddale.

Anna grabs a stack of newspaper clippings and notebooks from me. “Your mom did a story about Norddale?” she asks.

“I guess so,” I say, a bit confused. “I...don’t remember her talking about this.”

Anna reads through the notes. “It sounds like she was investigating the anti-monarchists who were also a problem for Norddale like they were for Montelandia at the time she was there,” she says as her finger trails the words across the pages of the notebook.

“What does that say?” I ask.

“Hold on,” Anna says as she continues reading. I pull out more clippings. One makes me stop. It’s a photo of Anna’s family, her mother, father, Chris, Auggie, and baby Anna. It’s talking about the political relations between Montelandia and Norddale.

There appears to have been some sort of trade agreement signed between the two countries, which both royal families supported. I read on and see that Marcus is quoted as saying this will merge the two countries' economies and strengthen them.

“Our countries have strong economic ties?” I ask Anna. She nods, half listening to me.

“Anna?” I ask. She looks up at me. “How strong?”

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“Our parliaments have many agreements and our prime ministers have signed a number of treaties that the royal families approve of,” she explains. “Why?”

“Say there were no more royal families in our countries,” I muse, not even flinching at saying Montelandia is my country. “Then, what would happen, economically speaking?”

She frowns, considering it. “Well, I suppose under the current set of treaties, the parliaments could form a sort of super-parliament to co-rule the two countries as a united entity. Essentially, it would lead to more economic ties between the two jurisdictions. Why?” she asks.

“Who profits from that?” I ask her.

“Well, lots of people would profit I suppose, I mean if all trade barriers were broken down, and we were essentially one giant super power,” she muses. “I mean, it’s not what the people want, they very much identify with their individual countries.”

“I understand, but...” I trail off and wait for her to consider what I’m suggesting.

“There are a handful of companies that would profit if that happened,” she says.

“Any to be worried about?” I ask her. She shakes her head.

“No, I don’t think so,” she says. “I mean most companies are so global now. I’m not sure it would matter much for them.”

“You don’t think so, or you know so?” I ask.

“No. I know all the owners of those companies. They wouldn’t attempt such a thing,” she says. I decide to investigate that on my own because clearly Anna feels too tied to these people to objectively consider them. I push that aside and look at her.

“Find anything?” I ask.

“No, not really. Your mom was worried about the anti-monarchist movement possibly being a bigger threat than known in Norddale. It sounds like she had set up some meetings with people to inquire, but there aren’t any notes on it. There are a few pages ripped out of here. I...don’t know,” she says as she hands the notebook to me. I flip through it but don’t find anything additional.

“Let’s set this box aside,” I say to her. “We can take it with us and go through it later.”

We continue looking through the remaining boxes. My grandmother calls us down when we are left with only three more boxes.

“I’d say we did good,” I note as I survey the wall of boxes that I can empty out in the trash.

“Well, hopefully, we’ve cleared some space for your grandmother,” she says as she walks downstairs. I want to tell her, yes, but I know my grandmother won’t change my mom’s room into a den or sewing room or anything else for that matter. It will stay a museum until my grandparents sell this house.

Lucas, Pete, and Hendrick are already seated at the table, digging into the soup, sandwich platter, potato salad, and fruit salad. Pops is sitting next to Hendrick, and they are already deep in war story conversation.

“Sorry,” Lucas says to us. “We were hungry, and you guys were taking forever,” he adds as he shovels some potato salad into his mouth.

I shake my head. Anna sits down, and I follow suit as Nana brings out a pitcher of iced tea. It’s a pleasant late lunch that bleeds into the afternoon. We clear the table after the conversation has died down. The dishes are done in no time, and Nana insists that we pack up some leftovers to take with us.

While Anna helps Nana pack up food, I walk out to the front porch where Pops is smoking his pipe.

“She’s a keeper, that one,” Pops says to me.

“Yes, she is,” I agree as I sit down in the other rocking chair.

“I get the sneaking suspicion that there are things you aren’t telling me,” Pops says as he takes a puff on his pipe.

“It’s complicated, Pops,” I tell him. “Very, very complicated.”

“I may not have a fancy college degree, but I’m pretty smart for an old guy,” he says, giving me a pointed look.

“Pops, I’m not questioning your intelligence. I...honestly, I’d need a whole week just to explain it all,” I tell him, which is close to the truth.

“Well, you know where I am, when you’re ready to talk,” he says.

“I appreciate that, Pops,” I say to him. In his typical fashion, he quickly changes gears and starts telling me about some nature show they watched on television. Pops is an avid birder and loves watching shows about birds.

I listen and nod, but my mind is a million miles away.

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“Eddie, my boy, I think you need to go get some rest and clear your mind,” Pops says, stopping his diatribe about some bird he’s seen in the garden.

“Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind,” I admit.

“Well, like I said, I’m here when you need to talk,” he reiterates.

“Thanks, Pops,” I say to him. Anna comes out carrying a bag full of leftover-filled Tupperware.

“Ready?” she asks.

“Yeah, let me just grab that one box,” I say as I head back up to get the box of documents we had begun to go through earlier. We pack up the car and bid my grandparents farewell before heading back to the house.

Chapter Thirteen

I look through the box again. The contents are spilled out across the bedroom floor with Anna at one end of them and me at the other.

“Who’s that?” I ask, pointing to a man in an article I found tucked inside another article.

She reaches across the pile of papers and slowly brings it up to her face. She squints and cocks her head to one side.

“I...am not sure,” she says with a frown as she surveys the article which is about e-commerce, or the infancy of e-commerce in her country. The article names two of the men in the photo but the third, who is in the background, is not named.

“We can’t wait on this,” I say to her. “We have to start figuring this out.” I feel an obsession coming on, a need to spend every waking moment analyzing the situation until the puzzle pieces come together.

“Eddie, we can’t figure it all out this second, or at least I don’t think we can,” she slows her speech and frowns.

“What?” I ask her.

“Did you and your father speak about why your parents separated?” she asks me.

I recall the conversation with my father at the summer palace.

“Logan, you must understand, it was a dangerous time, especially for a journalist like your mother. The anti-monarchists were gaining power and connections in our parliament. There had already been several assassination attempts. I couldn’t keep you safe, either of you. So, I did the only thing I thought I could do,” my father tried to explain.

“Abandon us?” I say in mocking tone.

“No,” he says, and he gives me a look that is both sad and angry. “I sent you away, so you both would be safe. Your mother said if she left, she wouldn’t come back. I didn’t want to make that decision, but she left me no choice. At the end of the day, I would have rather you both lived than risked losing everything I loved.”

“Not really. He said it wasn’t safe for a journalist like her at that time because of the

anti-monarchists,” I explain.

Anna hands me an article written by my mother. I read it. It’s about my father and his family, and it paints them in a very good light. One might even say it’s a bit of royal propaganda. I look at the publication date and see that it is about six months before my birth.

“Do you think someone would have wanted to cause her harm because she was clearly not supporting the anti-monarchist movement?” I ask Anna. She shrugs.

“I don’t know, but it might be worth investigating further,” she notes as she picks up more articles written by my mom and a picture of my dad’s secretary, Gregor, who I met briefly when we were at the palace.

“We should probably get some sleep,” I say as I set a pile of papers back in the box.

“Probably,” Anna says, reading over something without looking up at me. “Just let me check in on things first.”

She stands and walks over to her laptop. I hear the click-clack of her fingers on the keyboard. It’s fast becoming a sound that I associate with her.

“It’s strange,” she says.

“What is?” I ask, standing and walking over to her.

“M hasn’t popped back up since the explosion at the palace,” she says. I look down at her arm. She’s taken off her brace, and I want to yell at her about it. I start to say something about it, but she frowns.

“What?” I ask, placing a hand on her shoulder.

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“It’s like everything has been wiped clean. It doesn’t make any sense,” she says, biting her lower lip as she clearly contemplates the reasoning behind the disappearance of both M and whoever is behind all of this.

“Anna, it’s late. Let’s get some sleep, and we’ll work more on this tomorrow,” I say to her.

She sighs and closes the lid of the laptop. “Fine,” she grumbles. We all but fall into the bed as exhaustion takes over. My last thought before sleep claims me is about the mysterious Jack Ross.

It’s a knocking on the door that wakes me.

“Logan?” I hear Pete ask.

I stumble out of bed and toss on a t-shirt and some shorts.

“Yeah,” I whisper as I open the door. I can tell the sun is up, but it’s early still. The house is quiet and there aren’t the typical morning sounds of the neighborhood where we are staying, no cars going by, no lawn mowers starting up, and not even birds chirping.

“Jack Ross is here,” he says.

I blink and look back at the nightstand where an old alarm clock sits. The red-lit numbers tell me it’s a quarter till seven in the morning.

“Give him some coffee while I get Anna up,” I say to Pete.

He nods, and I shut the door. Anna stirs, and in the dim light, I can see her rub her eyes.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Not what, who,” I correct her.

“Huh?” she says in a sleepy voice.

“Jack Ross is here,” I say to her.

That gets her up quickly. In a matter of minutes, we are both showered and dressed.

I walk out to the kitchen first to find a middle-aged man sitting at the kitchen island sipping coffee. He stands when I enter the room and outstretches his hand.

“Logan, good to meet you,” he says in a strong Scottish accent. He’s tall and fit, the muscles in his arms flex as he grips my hand in his. His hair is a reddish-brown with a few grays stuck in it. His skin is freckled from the sun, but he has very few lines indicating his true age. He’s dressed in slacks and a polo shirt.

“Likewise,” I reply as I hear Anna walk in behind me. Jack’s eyes leave mine as she does so.

“You look like your mother,” he says to her. She gives an almost imperceptible nod.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness,” he says to her and gives a subtle bow of his head.

“So, you’re the infamous Jack Ross?” Anna asks.

“And you’re the famous Knight2E4,” he replies. I see Anna’s eyes widen slightly and then narrow.

“I see you’ve done your homework,” she says coolly.

“Well, I wouldn’t be very good at my job if I hadn’t have done it, now would I?” he responds with a raised eyebrow.

She tilts her head to one side as though inspecting him.

“You’re not how I imagined you,” she admits, and Pete stifles a laugh from the far corner of the kitchen.

Jack, however, doesn’t even attempt to hide his amusement. “I’d love to know what you envisioned me looking like,” he says, sitting back down on the stool.

Anna walks up to him. “Younger,” she says as she sits down next to him. Pete sets coffee in front of her while Jack laughs.

“I once was,” he says.

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“How’d you become...well, whatever it is you are now?” Anna asks him.

“What do you mean?” he asks her. I take the seat on the far side of Anna after grabbing myself a cup of coffee.

“Your father was a baron. You should have been one too,” she states the obvious and something I did not know.

“You’re royalty?” I ask, cutting off their dialogue. They both swivel to look at me, Anna with annoyance and Jack with amusement.

“Well, I think royalty might be an overstatement. I think I’m somewhere around eightieth in line to the throne,” Jack muses.

“And they let you work for Interpol?” Anna asks, a trace of hope in her voice.

Jack laughs. “I think the term ‘let’ may be a little loose of a description,” he says. “But you, Your Highness—”

Anna holds up a hand. “Please, Mr. Ross, none of that formal shit, please. Call me Susanna or Anna,” she says.

“Well, then call me Jack,” he responds with a grin. Anna nods. “What I was going to say, Anna, is that your reputation precedes you. You may very well be one of the best hackers in the world.”

At that, Anna grins and shrugs. “I enjoy it,” she says nonchalantly.

“Your skills are...well, everyone in the intelligence community knows about you,” Jack says. Anna’s face is one of shock. “I mean, they don’t know that Knight2E4 is you, but they do know that Knight2E4 has helped bring down some pretty big players in the underground criminal community.”

“I do what I can,” Anna says.

“It’s appreciated,” Jack says to her. “So, what is it that I’m doing here, exactly?”

Anna wrings her hands. This surprises me because my princess is not the type of person to get nervous. She stops herself and looks into Jack’s eyes.

“Because I trust you,” she says.

Jack’s eyebrows both go way up at her statement. “Oh?” he says.

“Jack, I’m almost one hundred percent sure that whoever is trying to kill us may actually be one of us or working for one of us,” she says. Her admission makes me catch my breath because while we’ve discussed this, we haven’t put it quite in those words.

The look on Jack’s face tells me that this theory is not shocking to him. And that makes me wonder what he knows.

“That is the most likely theory,” he says. “I’ve been trying to fit the puzzle pieces together but the more I dig, the puzzle pieces I find.”

“Exactly,” Anna replies. “That’s just it. This goes deep, deeper than I know we’ve considered up until now. I feel a little...well, stupid, for not having ever investigated my own family before. Until now, I never thought anyone I knew personally could be...well, I never thought they were a threat. And that’s why I need your help.”

“Do you have an idea?” Jack asks her.

She clears her throat and looks back over her shoulder at me, and I’m momentarily confused because she’s giving me a very guilty look and I don’t know why.

“I think it’s time we flush out our bad guy,” she says to him.

“And what’s your plan to do that?” Jack asks. Pete steps forward, clearly disliking this idea as much as I do.

Anna holds up her hand to stop Pete from speaking. “Just hear me out, OK?” she says, looking around the room. I follow her gaze and see that Hendrick and Lucas have joined us. I question whether we can trust them, but then Anna speaks again. “I trust everyone in this room because I’ve investigated each and every one of you. You’re all clean.” She looks at back at Jack. “You are a little harder to investigate, but I trust you. I’m concerned about my brothers. I think there’s a reason we were separated a few days ago.

“What if we go somewhere that looks like we’re hiding...together, but we’re not. If the plan was to separate us, then let’s change up that plan,” she starts. Pete, Lucas, and Hendrick all take a step forward so that they surround the island. “Jack, you still own a gatehouse on your family’s property, yes?”

Jack looks a little surprised, but nods.

“What if my brothers and Logan and I all went there and maybe we leave a little trail of breadcrumbs,” she says. “I’m guessing that house is actually a bit of a...what’s the saying, ‘Fort Knox’?”

“Anna, you know what you’re saying, right?” Jack asks.

She nods. "I'm saying we all play sitting ducks so that someone thinks they can take us out. Only, we aren't playing sitting ducks. Up until now, we've had a poisoned pawn in our midst, gentlemen, but I think it's time to turn the tables, it's time for us to be the poisoned pawn. Whoever this fucker or fuckess is, we are going to bring their ass down," she says. She's damn sexy when she talks like this, and I have to push that feeling way down because it's completely inappropriate timing.

“I’m not sure your fathers would agree to that idea,” Jack says.

Anna smirks. “And that’s why we don’t tell them,” she says.

“Anna...I...” Jack stammers, clearly attempting to find the right words.

“Jack, I’ve been through every scenario, and this is the best option. My statistical skills are almost as good as my hacking skills,” she says to him. “It’d be better if our fathers were with us, but you’re right. They will not agree to this. But your job isn’t to protect us, it’s to find who’s threatening not one, but two royal families.”

“True,” Jack says. I can almost see him biting his tongue as she speaks.

“So, you know I’m right,” she states.

“Just because I know you’re right, doesn’t mean I want you to be right,” Jack admits.

“Anna, may I speak?” Pete interjects. Everyone turns to look at him.

“You may,” she says.

“God help me, but I agree with you,” he says. He looks over at Jack. “There’s only a handful of us that I trust with security, so I’d need backup.”

Jack nods. “I can provide that,” Jack says.

“When?” Anna asks.

“Give me twenty-four hours to pull everything together, including how we’ll be getting you and your brothers to this location without your fathers knowing and without anyone else knowing but with enough tracks behind you so that the one person that we don’t want knowing will find out,” Jack says. When he puts it like this, I’m momentarily struck with how intricate the plan will have to be.

Anna grins. “I can help you with my brothers...we have...well, there’s a way we can get them there,” she says.

Jack shakes his head. “Anna, no funny business. I know you three have ways of sneaking off without your staff, but it’s too dangerous,” he scolds.

“Jack, it’s the only way. I trust Mia, but everyone else, including most of their security, I’m still on the fence about,” she says. “Cain and Nico, I think are in the clear and can help us, but I still have digging to do on Auggie’s bodyguards, Patrick and Vince. Paolo, well, I’m not sure yet.”

“OK, so I’ll reach out to Cain and Nico, they will help Chris, Mia, and Auggie get to Jack’s place,” Pete says. “We don’t need your shenanigans, Anna. Jack is right, it’s dangerous.”

Anna sighs. “Fine, but only Cain and Nico,” she huffs.

“Agreed,” Pete says.

“Anything else I need to know about?” Jack asks.

Anna shakes her head. “Not yet. I may have some more info, but until I can figure it out, it’s useless,” Anna says to him.

“Hand me your phone,” Jack says to Anna. She passes her phone to him, and he gives

her a pointed look.

“I mean, your ‘phone,’” he reiterates. With another sigh, Anna hops up and walks into the bedroom. A moment later, she walks back out and sets a phone down on the counter. Jack motions to her with his chin, and she punches some numbers into it and hands it to him.

“I’m programming a number into this phone. There are two ways to reach me. Either dial my contact number or hold down the seven key for seven seconds,” he says.

“I’ll be back in touch tomorrow,” he adds as he stands.

We walk him toward the door. He turns before opening it.

“Once I leave here, this plan goes into action,” he says to Anna.

“I know,” she says in a quiet voice.

“There’s no turning back,” he says to her.

“I know,” she says, slightly louder.

“The stakes are high,” he warns.

“They’ll be higher if we don’t do this,” she says. “I won’t hunker down and cower like a frightened rabbit. And my brothers won’t either. It’s a risk, but it’s a risk I know we are all willing to take. We can’t live under a threat like this forever. We won’t.”

“Very well, then. I don’t love it, but I agree, it may be the best option to flush out whoever is behind this,” Jack says. He sighs as he walks through the door. “I just hope your fathers don’t have my balls for this.”

Anna stifles a giggle. I nudge her, and she looks up at me with a grin. I shake my head at my little fierce princess.

Anna looks out the window as Jack gets in a car and takes off down the street.

“Anna, this is risky,” Pete says as he crosses the room to stand beside her.

“So is staying here. And if my hunch is correct, then staying is playing into the hands of the killer,” Anna points out.

“Agreed,” Pete says.

“Good, then prepare yourself because we are leaving here...I reckon in about forty-eight hours,” she says.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Pete says. I know he uses the formality to rib her a bit, and

she glares back at him as he heads up to his room to no doubt let Cain and Nico in on the plan.

“This is crazy,” I say, finally finding my voice.

“Yes,” she says. She turns and walks back to our bedroom. I follow her and watch as she logs in to the computer.

“What are you looking for now?” I ask.

“Checking on something,” she mutters. A minute later she closes the laptop.

“What?” I ask.

“Checking to make sure Auntie Lara is still alive,” she says.

“And?” I prod.

“For now, she’s stable and still in the ICU,” she says softly as she crouches down and grabs the papers we had gone through earlier.

Chapter Fourteen

Anna spends the next twenty-four hours scouring the web and every document I’ve brought over here. She pinpoints a number of people in the photographs my mom had, most are staff, a few family members, and security.

“Anna?” Pete’s voice calls from the hallway.

“Come in,” she says.

Pete stands at the door with a phone in his hand. He holds it out, and Anna frowns but takes the phone from him.

“Yes,” she answers. “I see. Understood. Jack, they can’t know anything, or this will all be called off. Fine. Yes. At what time? We’ll be ready.” She hangs up and looks between Pete and me.

“We’re leaving on a flight this evening. Jack wants us to drive to the Cleveland airport. He has a plane waiting there for us. He’ll call you back in a few minutes to explain more, Pete. He has a few additional calls to make,” she says.

Pete nods. “I’ll make sure we’re ready,” Pete says as he walks back out toward the kitchen.

“I should call my grandparents,” I say.

Anna shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Logan. When this is all over, we can come back here to visit them, but we can’t tell anyone anything. It puts them in grave danger,” she says to me, a look of sympathy on her face.

“Oh,” I say, feeling silly that I hadn’t thought of that myself.

Anna crawls over to me and sits on my lap. “First time in espionage, huh?” she says, trying to make light of our situation.

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I look down at her. “Anna,” I scold.

She shrugs. “I have a feeling things are going to get crazier before they calm down,” she says.

I sigh and lean down to kiss her head. I let the smell of her shampoo fill my nostrils. It smells like home and that’s when I realize that no matter how insane the world is around us, I love this woman, and if I’m with her, then it’s all fine. I wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly against me, feeling her in my arms, breathing her in, listening to the soft sound of her breath, and looking down at her so my vision is filled with only Anna. If only I could taste her right now, then my sensory overload would be complete perfection.

“We need to pack,” she says, squirming in my arms. I let go of her, and she heads over to the closet. I watch as she pulls out her suitcase and starts placing items inside it.

“Logan?” she says, looking down at me on the floor.

“Right,” I say as I stand and go to grab my own suitcase.

We pack in silence, working around each other like a well-choreographed dance. When we finish, Anna looks down at the box on the floor.

“Bring that with us,” she says.

“Why?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “Intuition, a hunch, just put the lid on it and make sure Pete packs it in the car,” she says as she lugs her suitcase and carry-on bag down the hallway. I follow her and pretty soon the car is loaded, and we are on our way to Cleveland.

It takes us a little over two hours to get to the airport. No one says much in the car. Every single one of us deep in our own thoughts. And I can’t blame us, what we’re about to do is...crazy.

Pete pulls up to an area of the airport clearly reserved for celebrities because it is not the main departure gate. We are quickly processed through customs and led by an airport employee to a transport car that takes us to a hangar where I see a jet, a private jet. I want to make some snide comment about rich people and their planes, but then I remember that I’m now one of them, so I shut my mouth. Not surprisingly, Anna does not.

“Whose plane is this?” she demands as we walk up to it.

“A good friend of Jack’s,” Pete says. Anna stops walking and glares at Pete.

He rolls his eyes. “Bryce Gallagher. He owns a private security firm and consults with several intelligence agencies,” Pete says.

Anna’s eyes widen at the name, which I don’t recognize. I shrug and get on board the plane, making myself cozy. Anna walks in behind me and eyes her surroundings before choosing a seat next to me.

“Everything OK?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she says.

“Who’s Bryce Gallagher?” I ask.

“He’s...well, a sort of legend. We’ll be safe on this plane,” she says but doesn’t elaborate. I decide I’ll search his name later. We’re served drinks as the pilots go through their pre-flight check. It isn’t long before we are flying, and everyone is on their electronic devices. I settle myself into my seat and close my eyes, hoping to catch a little sleep before we arrive because god knows I won’t be sleeping once we get there. The thoughts of the trap we are setting bounce around my mind. I can’t shake the feeling that this is a bad idea, a dangerous idea that could get us all killed. I ponder what my father would think of that and that makes me think of Pops and Nana. I wait till the seatbelt signs have been turned off before getting up and walking over to Pete.

“Yes?” Pete asks me.

“My grandparents...” I start but he holds up his hand.

“Are being watched. Don’t worry. Jack’s on it,” Pete says.

“Oh, alright then,” I say as I walk back to my seat.

“Everything OK?” Anna asks me.

I laugh. “If running back across the ocean while trying to evade and then draw in a killer is OK, then I’d say everything is just perfect,” I grumble.

Anna looks up at me. “I’m sorry,” she says. I suddenly snap out of my doom and gloom.

“For what?” I ask.

“I feel like going to you...maybe I should have just alerted the authorities,” she says.

I want to groan. “We’re not seriously back to that are we?” I snarl.

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Anna glares at me. “Well, sorry I care,” she says with a huff and turns away from me. I feel like an ass. I put a hand on her arm, and she shrugs it off.

“Anna...listen...I’m sorry. I...I’m glad you came for me, OK? I don’t regret meeting you for a second. And you might very well have saved my life and your own by doing that. So, stop apologizing, alright?” I say.

She turns slowly and looks at me. “Do you mean that?” she asks. I want to roll my eyes and knock some sense into her, but I refrain.

“Yes, I swear it,” I say to her.

She nods and turns back toward me, resting her head on my shoulder as she yawns.

“It’s been a long day, and I think the coming days will be long too. We should get some rest,” I say to her.

“I agree,” she says, and with that, I pull a blanket over us, and we fall asleep.

Chapter Fifteen

The thing about being royal is you are never alone. I’m starting to understand that, and I’m also starting to loathe it. Pete, Hendrick, and Lucas might as well be an awkward third wheel in Anna’s and my relationship. They are with us twenty-four seven. It takes about two hours to drive from Glasgow, where we land, to Jack’s home.

I've never been to Scotland. It's beautiful. I sadly wish we could sightsee, and then remember that we're not hiding any longer. We'd need to be cautious, but I think we also all need to get out of here for a few hours. I contemplate this for a minute.

"Can we go somewhere tomorrow?" I ask Pete, who drives us down a country lane with hedging that is entirely too close to the road on one side and a stone wall on the other.

"I...well...maybe?" Pete says. I want to laugh because he sounds so conflicted.

"We could go down to Edinburgh for the day," Anna suggests. "You'd like it there."

"Sure, I mean, if it's safe for us to go there. I do think we all need to get out of here for a bit," I acknowledge.

Anna frowns. "Where all have you been?" she asks me.

I contemplate it for a minute. "Well, Canada," I start and grin at her while she rolls her eyes, "Mexico, Costa Rica, obviously the Bahamas and a few other islands in the Caribbean, France, England, Italy, Norddale, and as of today, Scotland."

She giggles. "And Montelandia," she states.

"Oh, right, Montelandia, if you want to count where I was born but have no memory of," I say to her.

"Still counts," she says. I shake my head and smile back at her.

"It should be up here," Pete mutters as we come upon a giant stone wall with a gate. He pulls up to the gate and through the metal bars, I can see a rather large stone home off to the side of a driveway that goes through a tunnel of trees. It's very picturesque.

Pete punches a code into the security box on the side of the drive and the gates open. We pull inside and up to the old stone house.

“Wow,” I say as I look up at it.

Anna giggles again. “It’s just the gatehouse,” she says.

“If this is the gatehouse, I can’t wait to see the main house,” I muse as we get out of the car. The pebble drive crunches beneath my feet as I walk up to a giant wooden door. It’s curved at the top and looks like some sort of medieval entrance. Pete punches a code into what I presume is a lockbox and it opens, revealing a very ancient-looking skeleton key, only it has been retrofitted with some interesting-looking electronic sensors. I note that while the keyhole is still ancient looking, there clearly has to be more security going on here than what meets the eye.

Pete slides the key into the keyhole and turns it. There’s a beep and the door opens. Once inside, Pete punches another code onto a keyboard by the front door.

“Jack had the house retro-fitted with a number of security upgrades after he had an incident here several years ago,” Pete says.

“Oh?” I ask, curious as to what incident occurred here.

Pete just nods and walks away, giving me no answer. I shrug. I walk back toward the car and grab my suitcase and the box of my mom’s things. Anna is already upstairs. She finds the master suite like a dog searching for a treat.

“Found our room,” she says with a grin. I look around and wonder where her brothers will stay.

“Don’t worry, there’s like four suites with bathrooms, plus there’s like three or four

more bedrooms,” she says.

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“And how do you know this?” I ask.

“I just ran around while you were busying getting luggage,” she says with a laugh.

“Does Jack still live here?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “No, he lives in Maryland, but he keeps this property. He and his brother are turning the area around the manor into a nature preserve or something like that, I guess it takes a while to get it legally resolved,” she notes.

“Interesting. So, this was his family’s property?” I ask.

“Yep,” she says as though every family has property like this. I want to laugh at her, but I also know that this is her world. She knows no different. It dawns on me in this moment just how very different we are.

“What’s wrong?” she asks from across the room as she sets her backpack down.

“Just realizing how different our childhoods were,” I admit.

She’s quiet for a moment. “Yeah, I suppose they were, huh?” she says.

“We should probably go grocery shopping and whatnot,” I point out. I’m about to say something else when there’s a commotion at the door.

I run down the hall to find Auggie, Chris, and Mia all standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Well, they’ll just let any old riffraff in, huh?” Anna’s voice mocks from behind me.

Auggie flicks her off, and Chris rolls his eyes.

“I take it you already claimed a room,” Chris says to us. I look over at Anna who smiles sweetly at him.

Chris shakes his head and starts up the stairs. He drops his bag when he reaches Anna and picks her up in a giant bear hug.

“I missed you, Suzy Q,” he says.

“Missed you too, Lion,” she replies.

“What about me?” Auggie quips as he tosses his bag inside a nearby bedroom.

Chris releases Anna, and she jumps into Auggie’s arms, nearly knocking him to the ground. He laughs, and they squeeze each other before he sets her back down.

“So, you came up with a plan, huh?” Chris asks, his eyebrows raised.

Anna shrugs.

“You could have alerted us through security protocols,” he grumbles.

“Chris, I didn’t want to ruin the plan. If it looked like we were communicating and planning it, well, then that would make it too obvious. So, we needed intel out there from our trusted security folks,” she explains.

“You are scary, you know that, right?” Auggie says.

Anna laughs. “Thanks,” she says, her voice laced with sarcasm.

“So...what’s the game plan?” Mia pipes up from where she is still standing on the top stair.

“If you can all get settled, then meet me in the parlor, I’ll explain,” a voice comes from the bottom of the staircase, and we all whip our heads around to find Jack Ross standing there like he owns the place. Well, he does own the place.

“How the hell did you get here?” Anna asks.

Jack smirks and then gives her a wink. “I have my methods,” he says as he turns and walks away.

Chris shakes his head. “We are living in the Twilight Zone,” he says as he walks down the hall and steps into the room across from Auggie. I follow Anna as she walks downstairs and into what I suspect is the parlor.

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“You are an enigma, Jack,” Anna says to him.

“Drink?” he asks as he opens a giant globe which is actually a cocktail setup. It’s all very James Bond.

“How about a martini?” Anna says with a wink.

“Shaken or stirred?” he asks with a smirk. I roll my eyes at the two of them.

“Shaken, of course,” Anna replies with another wink before sitting down in a dark leather chair.

“It’s a nice house you have here,” I say to Jack.

“I haven’t been able to let it go,” he admits. “How about you?” he asks, catching me off guard. I look over and realize he’s asking for my drink order.

“Scotch,” I say, thinking of the first manly drink that comes to mind because I’m guessing he doesn’t have beer stocked here.

“Sure. There is a wine and beer fridge in the kitchen. Please help yourself to whatever,” he adds as though reading my damn mind. I want to curse at him for not bringing this up sooner, as though I’m staying at some five-star hotel.

He hands me my drink, and I sit down next to Anna. A few seconds later, Mia, Chris, and Auggie enter the room. From Chris’s protective arm around Mia, I’m left wondering when they will just fucking admit they are an item. At this point, I almost

just want to call them out on it. But my brain is sent back to the present as Jack offers them drinks and then proceeds to make them before sitting down in a giant leather chair. He looks like James Bond, he's wearing suit pants and a white buttoned-down shirt. I'm sure the matching suit jacket is around here somewhere. He has one leg crossed over the other, and he's holding a martini in his hand. He looks cool and collected as though assassins and explosions are just part of his typical day.

He stirs the spear with olives around in his glass and takes a sip as everyone in the room stares at him, which now includes our security detail.

"The intel has been dropped on the internet, very secretly of course. This will look like a plan from your security. A plan to hide you all. I imagine it will take whoever this is a good twenty-four hours from now to devise a plan. We'll be tracing the breadcrumbs, so we'll know when someone bites. So, if we are cautious, I do think we can be out and about tomorrow. Hell, it may expediate our plan. We'll keep tabs on the situation and let you know when a fish has been hooked. In the meantime, after tomorrow, I'd appreciate it if you all stuck closer to home. Once we lure our perp here, I'll decide how to proceed. I'm going over careful plans with your security detail. There are a number of exit strategies that can be employed at any time. I want you all debriefed on those by immediately. The situation will be closely monitored, and we will have briefings twice daily as the things progress. With any luck, we will nail the SOB by next week," he says casually as though we are talking about defeating a fellow sports team.

"Yes, I'd like to be debriefed of all exit strategies as soon as possible," Chris interjects.

"I will go over them with you personally after this," Jack says as he sips his martini. "Also, be aware that I have my own security team here on the property. They are split up into several different units. I will make sure that they meet each of you, so you know them. They are patrolling the grounds and also providing additional intel to us.

The main headquarters of the operation is actually at a cottage on the edge of the property, so we'll be nearby," Jack adds.

I really, really want to know what shit Jack has been through in his life that he can sit here so calmly discussing exit strategies as though discussing bank drafts and tax codes. I also don't really want to know what horror this man has seen that a possible high-level assassination attempt doesn't even get his adrenaline pumping even a little bit.

The one thing I do know, Anna is completely enamored by him. I'm not sure if it's his high-level espionage career, the fact that he is pseudo-royalty, or the combination of the two that intrigues her the most. But what I do know, is she is sitting next to me hanging on to every word he says as though he's a revered god.

"Jack, can I be blunt?" I ask him.

He laughs. "I prefer you are," he says.

"Why is Interpol so worried about this?" I ask him.

Something about my question unsettles him because he sets his drink down on a marble coaster on an inlaid wood mahogany table and leans forward with his elbows on his knees.

"Let's just say that my particular unit is very concerned with matters of international instability. Potentially taking down not just one but two royal families of economically prosperous countries, albeit small, within the European community, would have far-reaching political impacts. So, Interpol is very much concerned with such matters. Additionally, when criminals are committing crimes across borders and threatening world leaders, we tend to take note," he says, looking at me with very serious green eyes.

I nod because my speech fails me after his explanation is laid bare.

“Now, whoever wants to follow me, I will go through the security exit plans,” he says as he stands and walks to the kitchen.

Chapter Sixteen

Whoever questioned Jack’s readiness for a disaster, would be grossly mistaken. And whoever would think this is just some old house, also would be mistaken. Jack has shown us every security update to his home, yet I suspect there are others that we don’t know about.

There is a tunnel leading to a small garden shed about a hundred yards away. There’s not just one but two safe rooms. There are motion sensors literally all over the house. It’s impossible for a person to move about the house without Jack knowing. There are cameras covering most of the house, except the bedrooms and bathrooms. There’s a faux external security system that emits a signal when lines are cut, and there is a hidden internal security system within the walls. There are fancy heat sensors and weight sensors and electronic wave sensors. I would never have believed the house was fitted with this insane amount of security, but I would be very, very wrong.

And so, here we are, standing around the massive kitchen island in Jack’s kitchen. The kitchen itself, along with some of the bathrooms, are the only things that look truly out of place in the house. It is a magazine-worthy modern kitchen that looks straight off one of those home improvement shows.

Jack hands us each a bracelet. They look like basic fitness bracelets, but they apparently have tracking mechanisms in them. He also fits each of our cell phones with some crazy modern apps that can track us as well, similar to what he did with Anna’s phone back in Pittsburgh. He promises to remove the software after the threat is over, whenever that may be.

He shows us several concealed buttons in the house that are panic buttons that will send alerts to his team if something is amiss. This, of course, is on top of the regular alarm system features that we've all been instructed on.

And so, we are now standing around the kitchen as Jack puts several beers on the counter for us.

“I’ll be up at the main house,” he says.

I eye him suspiciously. “Won’t that be...suspicious?” I ask.

He chuckles. “No, I was actually going to stay with my brother, but his house is being renovated and he’s at his in-laws’ while the repairs are finished. So, staying at the main house seems perfectly normal for me. I do this a few times a year,” he notes.

“Aren’t you worried about your family?” Anna asks.

He shrugs. “All our family’s homes have very good security systems. I’m not concerned,” he says. But I see a look in his eye, and I wonder if that’s completely true.

“We should go shopping,” Anna announces. Everyone stops and stares at her.

“For food,” she elaborates.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Auggie says. “Food would be good.”

“I’m in,” Chris says.

“I could use a little fresh air,” Mia says meekly.

And with that Pete piles us in a giant SUV, even by U.S. standards, and we head down to a small coastal town. Jack has given Pete directions on where to go shopping, and we all head into a store. It only takes us thirty minutes to get all the

food, and then we head back up to the house, but not before I talk them into walking down by the water for a few minutes.

Auggie spots a pub, and we all grab a pint of beer before piling into the car for the ride back to Jack's house.

It's when we arrive that I learn that Anna and her brothers are skilled in the culinary arts. They start making steaks, appetizers, some sort of potato side dish that looks like it's an obscene amount of calories but worth every bite, and a dessert that makes my mouth water. Mia and I sit at the island and watch them as though they are our own private cooking show.

"Well, if this isn't amazing, I'm going to be very disappointed," I say as I sip another beer. It's odd sitting here with my new friends and Anna. I feel like we are on vacation, yet I know we are not.

We eat at the dining room table. Jack joins us and regales us with stories of growing up on the property. He's shown us a few secret passages in this house but assures us that there are many more up at the main house which we can walk up to after dinner.

"You guys do know that you'll be cooking every night, right?" I say to Anna and her brothers as I finish my dinner.

Anna laughs. "We all actually love cooking. We just don't get to do it very often, so you don't have to ask twice. Tessa and Helga trained us well in the art of cooking," she says as she sips a glass of wine.

"Anna?" Jack says as he sets his glass down. "I'm guessing I can't keep you from perusing the web, but can I ask that you use the secured Wi-Fi at the cottage," he says. "I just don't want to skew the breadcrumbs we've left."

She nods. "Is the cottage far?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "Nope, less than a mile walk, or a two-minute drive," he says. "I can show you in the morning if you like."

She nods. "Yes, please, that'd be great," she says. After dinner and cleanup, which apparently is a novelty to the royals as they don't have to do this at home, we head up to the manor. It's a pleasant walk down the tree-lined drive.

I'm taken aback by the size of the manor house when the trees clear. It's at least two or three hundred years old and made of stone. And it is immense. It strikes me as I look up at it that Jack's upbringing probably wasn't that different than Anna's. Her fascination with him now makes more sense in my mind. She already knows this about him. She sees herself in him.

Jack unlocks the door, and we are greeted by a woman. Jack says a few whispered words to her, and she nods and bids us good evening before making herself scarce. He shows us around the main rooms of the manor.

"It's a beautiful home," Anna says as we look at the library.

"Thank you," Jack replies. "We're still trying to figure out what to do with the manor after we put the majority of the land in a preservation trust."

Chris starts brainstorming immediately. I grin. He's a businessman through and through. "You could make it a bed-and-breakfast?" he suggests. "Or, you could rent it out for parties and weddings. There's a number of options."

"Yes, Oliver, my brother, and I have considered those things. I suppose it'll come to us, eventually," he says.

As we walk toward the door, he knocks on a smaller door and opens it. It leads to an office area. There are about five men in the room, and they all jump to attention. I can tell they are former military immediately.

“These are five of the security officers on the property,” he says and introduces us to each one. “I’ll have Pete bring you by the cottage in the morning to meet the others.”

We finish our greetings to the men and start back toward the entryway of the manor. It dawns on me that I may never feel at home around such...opulence.

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“So, you all want to go to Edinburgh in the morning?” Jack asks.

Everyone nods.

“I’ll have your security arrange a trip. Please note, if we have any intel that concerns me, then the trip will not happen,” he says as we begin walking back down the drive to the gatehouse. Cain is at the door when we arrive back. Pete and Nico have been introduced to the five men, but now Pete relieves Cain and Jack motions for him to head up to the manor to meet the security team as well. “It’s important everyone knows everyone by tomorrow morning.”

I’m not sure why he says this, but I have a feeling that everything Jack does is carefully planned and strategized in advance. Anna and I bid goodnight to everyone and retire to our room once we’re back inside.

She immediately walks over to the box I brought from my grandparents’ home.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I just want to go through this stuff again,” she says.

“Why?” I ask. “I mean, we can go through it later. Aren’t you tired?”

She shrugs as she opens the box, and I know I’m not going to sleep. I sit down on the floor next to her. The old floorboard creaks as I settle myself. She lays out the contents, including the “lover’s eye” and starts going through the photographs and journals.

I settle myself back against a wooden chest at the foot of the bed and begin to read the articles again. This time I start with the ones my mother wrote. They are in order from the time she first arrived in Europe until shortly before I was born. They trace a series of wealthy men, anti-monarchists, and politicians. I stop as I realize that I've categorized them. I slowly go through them again, setting them into piles on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Anna asks.

"I...I'm not sure," I admit as I begin to go back through in their categories. It's then that I realize there's a pattern to them. My mother's journal had indicated that she was first here to cover the anti-monarchist movement in Montelandia. So, it makes sense that her earliest articles were about the individuals involved in that movement. But then she somewhat abruptly stopped covering them and began to cover politicians. Now, it's not a crazy move. The anti-monarchists clearly had gotten the attention of some politicians who backed their cause. However, it's the next move that leaves me pondering where my mother was going with her investigation. After investigating three different politicians, she began to write articles on businessmen. She did write two more on politicians after that, but then the remaining were about several businessmen. She didn't come out and say they were bankrolling the anti-monarchist movement, but her investigation implies that this may have been the case.

I look at the journal where she made notes during that time period. Her journals were always dated in the front. I can feel Anna's gaze on me, but I'm deep into my search. Something about the last businessman jogs a memory.

"Anna, do you know who Sebastian Bach is?" I ask her. Her eyes widen slightly, letting me know she does know him.

"Yes..." she says slowly. "He was in a photo we found in the box. Why?"

"How do you know him?" I ask.

“He owns and operates the largest commercial transport company in our area of Europe. He was friendly with my parents,” she says and frowns.

“What?” I ask.

“He was in charge of the charity event, the gala, my mother was attending the night she died,” Anna says.

“Do you know if he’s an anti-monarchist?” I ask her.

Her eyes widen further. “Oh no. Of course not, he’s always been very supportive of our family,” she says.

“Are you sure?” I ask her.

She sighs. “I...I’m not sure. I have never heard that he has ties to that movement,” she admits.

I place a hand on hers. “I’m not saying that he’s behind this, but we need to look at every angle, right?” I ask her.

“Yes, you’re very right,” she says, her tone tells me she’s admitting this begrudgingly.

“Anna, listen to me. Whoever is after us, they are likely going to be in the inner circle. They will be someone you trust,” I say to her.

“I know,” she whispers. She takes a deep breath. “It’s just hard to reconcile it, you know?”

“I know,” I say as I squeeze her hand.

“Sebastian doesn’t have any shady ties, as far as I know,” she says, biting her lip.

“Can you search him?” I inquire.

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She nods. “Jack says I can use the Wi-Fi at the cottage,” she says. She picks up her phone and sends a text. Her phone pings a moment later.

“He’s coming to get me,” she says.

“I’m going with you,” I say to her as we stand and head down to meet Jack.

Chapter Seventeen

Jack wasn’t kidding. He’s holed up in an actual cottage. Not like a cottage-style house back at home, but a real honest-to-god cottage. I look beyond to see the North Sea. Jack opens the door and even in the dim moonlight the view beyond him still steals my breath.

“This is quite an office view,” I say to him with a whistle. He laughs.

“It was a caretaker’s cottage originally. We rent it out now,” he says.

“You didn’t have it rented out, did you?” Anna asks.

“No, no. Don’t worry about that,” Jack says. Three men poke their heads out of what I can tell is a kitchen. “Harris, Brent, and Malik, this is Princess Susanna and Logan,” he introduces us.

“Please, call me Anna,” Anna says, blushing at the use of her formal title.

They all say hello.

“Do you need anything, Jack?” Brent asks.

“No. Anna here is going to use our Wi-Fi,” he says with a wink and offers up some space at a writing table in the corner of the room.

“Thank you,” Anna says as she pulls out her computer from a bag and begins to make herself comfortable.

“What exactly are you looking for at this hour?” Jack asks as he leans against the back of a sofa.

“Logan can explain, I need to get searching,” she says as she puts on her giant headphones and focuses in on her computer. She turns for a moment to face Jack. “Passcodes?” she asks. He nods, and she pushes back for a minute to allow him to enter some passcodes, giving her access to the Wi-Fi.

“Well?” Jack asks, turning to me once Anna is online.

“What do you know about my mother?” I ask Jack. Jack gives me a hard stare.

“Follow me,” he replies as he walks into the kitchen and opens the fridge. He pulls out two bottles of beer and opens them, handing me one before he heads toward a back door. “Come on, let’s talk,” he says as he holds the door open for me. The three men we just met are on computers set up around a kitchen table. I follow Jack out to a patio area surrounded by a small garden of flowers. The sea breeze whips through my hair as I sit down across from Jack at a bistro-style table.

“What do you know about your mother?” Jack asks me as he turns his beer in his hands.

I look at him with a raised eyebrow. “What do you want to know?” I ask him.

“Logan, what do you really know about your mother?” he asks me.

I lean in and set my beer on the table. “What exactly do you mean, Jack?” I ask, enunciating each syllable.

“Sit back, Logan. I think there are things you need to know,” he says to me.

I lean back in silence and confusion.

“Do you know what your mother was doing when she met your father?” Jack asks me.

“Yes, she was over here researching and writing articles about the anti-monarchist movement in Montelandia as a freelance journalist,” I say.

“What if I told you that was just a cover?” Jack says slowly, his eyes don’t leave mine, and I know he must see the complete and utter look of shock on my face.

“What are you saying?” I demand.

Jack sighs. “Your mother worked in intelligence,” Jack says.

“No. No,” I stammer.

“Logan, your mother was investigating anti-monarchists and her journalism background was the perfect cover to do it,” Jack says.

“But...I don’t understand,” I say.

“Your mother was a journalist, at first. You know she studied journalism and politics and minored in foreign language studies, right?” Jack asks me as though my mother was some unknown person to me.

“Of course,” I say, sounding a bit defensive.

“Well, a few years after she graduated, she was covering a story in the Middle East. She ended up uncovering an assassination plot. She was inadvertently pulled into an investigation. She had the access to individuals that some agents needed. However, she was so good at her job, her language skills, her knowledge of global politics that she was offered a position, and she accepted it.” Jack pauses, letting this sink in. My mind is blank at first and then bombarded by a million memories. All those times she was gone, now I wonder what top-secret mission she was on, what kind of danger she may have been in.

“Becoming...close...with your father, was not part of the plan. When she became pregnant with you...well, she had decisions to make. If her cover was blown, she now risked not only herself but both you and your father. As a member of a royal family, your father was told about the situation upon your birth. Once you were old enough to travel internationally, they decided it was best to feign a breakup and move

you back to the States, for your own safety. Leah was given some time to be with you, but when you were old enough, she went back to work. Obviously, it's harder when an agent has a family," Jack says.

"Moving to the Bahamas..." I trail off and look up at him.

"Was part of the case she was working," Jack says. "She was tracing financial movements by large corporations with ties to the anti-monarchists. There are a number of countries, many in the Caribbean, where it's easy to launder money in offshore accounts. The Bahamas put her in a good location to travel amongst islands but also stay slightly separated. We were able to give her a cover story of freelancing for some U.S. papers to cover the politics of various Caribbean nations."

"We?" I ask him.

Jack lets out a breath. "I worked with her for a short period of time. My expertise is more in the organized international crime world. Not surprisingly, those organizations also like to launder money in offshore accounts," Jack explains.

"Shit," I mutter.

"Well...there's more," Jack says, taking a long sip of his beer.

I look at him. He seems almost uncomfortable.

"What aren't you telling me, Jack?" I ask him.

"What do you know about your mother's death?" Jack asks me. I don't like where this is going, not one little bit.

"She died on impact in a car accident in Freeport. A man had a heart attack and his

car plowed through the intersection and straight into hers. He was in a large van. She was in a small rental car. The rental car's airbag didn't deploy. Her lower half was pinned between the wheel and the seat, but her head went through the windshield. The blunt force trauma killed her, although I'm told her internal injuries would probably have killed her if the windshield had not," I say, keeping my voice steady as I recite the medical examiner's notes that I read and re-read after the accident.

"That man did not die of a natural heart attack," Jack says.

"What?" I snarl, setting my beer down so heavily on the table that it splashes out of the bottle.

"He was injected with a chemical that causes heart failure," Jack says. "He was a pawn. Her murder was calculated. It was planned. She was going to a meeting with an informant. That informant was later found dead, also from a heart attack. We were able to examine his body and found the needle mark. He still had traces of the chemical in his body. We had the driver's body inspected after that prior to burial and concluded the same chemical was used on him as well. We were in the middle of the investigation, so no one was told, not even your grandparents know this information. It is classified. But I feel you must know this now. It's too important," Jack says.

"And why haven't we been told this before," I inquire, my mind half numb.

"Because...the investigation is still ongoing," Jack announces.

My eyebrows shoot up. "What do you mean, exactly?" I ask him.

"I mean..." Jack trails off and lowers his voice. "The anti-monarchist movement is not dead."

My eyes might as well fall out of my head because I think I raised my forehead up

enough that gravity could suck them from my skull.

“You mean...” I can’t even find the words.

Jack leans into me. “My unit has been keeping tabs on some individuals that we believe are still active as anti-monarchists. It’s not been on the front burner, as we didn’t think there was much traction for them. However, when Anna stumbled upon the bounty for you, all hell broke loose. Clearly, we underestimated the game plan,” he growls. He runs a hand through his hair. “I should have known better. It’s like a sleeper cell. You think it’s dead for years, and then boom.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You are telling me a sleeper cell of anti-monarchists are now after Anna’s and my family and that group also killed my mother who was investigating them?” I say.

Jack puts a finger over his mouth, indicating that I need to lower my voice.

“Aren’t they working for you?” I point out, motioning to the three men in the kitchen.

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“Yes, but it’s also frowned upon to give out classified information,” he whispers.

“Jesus Christ, does Anna know?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “No, I need to tell her. But I wanted you to know first. You deserved to know first,” he says to me.

My brain has a million and two questions now. I feel like the mother I thought I knew, I didn’t know at all.

“Jack, we’ll have to talk about my mother later. I need more answers, but what Anna found...well, it may start to bridge our intelligence gap,” I say to him as I begin to fill him in on what was in the box in my mother’s closet.

“How many boxes are there?” he asks.

“There’s probably about a half dozen left and another half dozen that I had piled up for trash,” I say.

He curses. “I’m sending someone over to get them and scan them,” he says.

“But...my grandparents?” I say.

“Call them. Tell them you have a friend who’s going to stop by for the boxes,” he says. “Make up something; you’re a smart kid.” Jack picks up his phone and walks to the edge of the patio, clearly making a call to whoever will be getting my mom’s things.

I dial my grandparents and tell them that we had to head out of town for a meeting and that a friend is picking up my mom's boxes for me, so I can get them shipped to my house to go through later. I hate lying to them, but I know it's better to keep them safe right now. I freeze when that thought pops into my head. I now know why my mother kept her life a secret, why she did what she did. She was protecting me. And then my stomach flips because I realize that I don't completely know what she was protecting me from and that unknown scares the shit out of me because now it's not just me, but my family and Anna and her family.

Chapter Eighteen

I walk back into the living room where Anna is busy typing away. It dawns on me suddenly just how scared I am right now. I'm scared to tell Anna what Jack just told me. I'm scared for Anna. I can't lose her.

As though sensing me, she slowly turns. I can tell by her face that whatever she's been finding online is not any better than what I just learned.

"What's wrong?" I ask her before she can inquire about what Jack and I spoke about a minute earlier.

"Sebastian...he's not so clean," she says, frowning.

"Meaning?" I ask.

"Meaning, I found some strange offshore bank accounts. People with nothing to hide would not have these accounts," she says. A little crease forms between her eyebrows.

"But how do we know that he's using those accounts to hide something?" I ask her.

She moves over so that I can see the screen. My jaw drops. There are photos of Sebastian with a number of the anti-monarchists that were in my mother's articles, and then there's a screenshot of an email account, his email account. I almost want to roll my eyes, of course, Anna just went straight to the source and hacked his email. I read the emails and my stomach clenches.

"Is that..." I trail off as I look at the "To" and "From" columns in his account.

"He's been corresponding with our favorite underworld assassin," she says.

"So, it's him. He's behind it all," I say.

She shakes her head. "I don't think he is," she replies.

"What do you mean? He's got emails with M!" I practically yell. Anna's eyes dart toward the kitchen.

"Shhhh," she hushes me. "There are also encrypted emails. I'm trying to break the code right now. It'll take a little while, probably a day of me running my encryption software to break the code. But he's talking to someone else, and I'm thinking that he's a middle man. His encrypted emails to M are basically like he's giving directions but for someone else. It's odd, almost like he's not actually sending them. The verbiage doesn't match his normal dialogue. But then there are these other ones, that I can't quite figure out," she says, pursing her lips. "What's wrong?" she asks, suddenly realizing that I too have news.

I sit down on the back of the sofa. She stands and walks over to me as though sensing whatever it is, it's something very serious.

"Jack...just told me some interesting information," I say.

She takes my hands in hers and squeezes them a little. “Is everything alright?” she asks as her brows knit together once again.

I run my thumbs over the soft skin of her hands. “My mother was intentionally killed,” I blurt out because I really don’t know what else to say.

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“What?!” she exclaims.

“It turns out my mother wasn’t a journalist, but a spy,” I say because I don’t know how else to say it.

“Holy. Shit,” she says enunciating each word.

“Yeah, holy shit,” I repeat.

“But...I don’t understand. Why was she killed?” she asks the million-dollar question.

“She was using her journalism background as a cover while she investigated anti-monarchists. Apparently, she had traced some of their funds to offshore accounts in the Caribbean. That’s why she moved us there. They had her killed when she figured out too much,” I explain as best as I can.

Anna’s frown only deepens. “I don’t understand. That was years ago. Why wouldn’t they have told you the truth?” she asks me.

I take a deep breath before I answer her because the answer will change everything.

“Because the investigation is still open,” I say as I exhale.

Her eyes widen. “But the anti-monarchists...” She trails off as the realization dawns on her. She bites her lip as she does when she’s deep in thought. “They are behind all of this,” she states.

I nod. “Yes, I think so,” I say.

Chapter Nineteen

Jack walks in and takes one look at us before hurrying over to the computer. “What did you find?” he asks.

“Sebastian Bach,” she says. Jack’s already reading the emails on the screen.

“Damn...he’s clever. We investigated him but we didn’t find these emails,” Jack says.

“I don’t know if they are his. They were heavily encrypted. These emails have never been accessed from any device he owns,” Anna explains. “I only came across it because I stumbled upon a burner account that M was using a while back. I wasn’t sure he still used it, but I checked and...well, he’s still using it, or he was up until the palace bombing.”

“If M is behind that, then he’s probably gone dark,” Jack says.

“True,” Anna agrees.

“What does Sebastian have to gain from any of this?” I ask. “I mean, I get the economic incentive, but the risk seems too high for someone with his public profile.”

Jack laughs. “You’d be surprised what people in powerful positions are willing to do to stay powerful,” Jack declares. I contemplate his statement. I know he’s right, but something doesn’t sit well with me. I feel like Sebastian is just one part of the puzzle.

“It’s very late. I should get you both back to the house,” Jack says. Anna nods.

“Yes, I should get some sleep. But tomorrow night, I need to research more,” she says.

“I’ll arrange it, once you get back from your day trip. It doesn’t appear our breadcrumbs have been found yet, so your plan for tomorrow is still cleared,” Jack says.

“Thanks,” she says as we follow him out to a car, and he drives us back to the house. We barely pull on night clothes before we pass out from exhaustion.

The next thing I know, I hear Auggie’s voice.

“Come on, lazy asses. We need to get going,” he says from the hallway. I groan and put my face into the pillow.

“Fuck off, Auggs,” Anna grumbles beside me, making me smile against the pillow. I turn to face her. Even in the morning, with her hair disheveled and no makeup, she’s gorgeous.

“What’s so funny?” she asks on a yawn.

“You two,” I state.

She rolls her eyes. “Trust me, having two older brothers is not funny,” she says as she pulls herself out of bed. I wonder why they haven’t given me the third degree about being with Anna. I cringe for that future conversation.

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“You’re lucky, you know? I always wanted siblings,” I muse as I follow her into the bathroom.

“Well, the grass is always greener,” she says as she disrobes and turns on the shower. I follow her inside, my hands itching to touch her.

“Let me,” I whisper as she reaches for the shampoo. She releases it, and I grab it, pouring some on my hand. She walks under the spray of the shower, letting the water pour down over her perfect body. My morning wood just went from steel to diamonds. I try to not focus on that as I begin massaging the shampoo into her hair. She closes her eyes and moans.

“That feels so good,” she murmurs. Her scratchy morning voice makes me want her even more.

I rinse the shampoo out of her hair and put conditioner on it. She continues to sigh in contentment as I rinse it out.

“A girl could get used to this,” she says with a smile, her eyes still shut.

I can no longer control myself. I lean in and kiss her. Her eyes fly open and meet my gaze before closing again. This isn’t a gentle, slow, morning lovemaking kiss, this is an “I want to fuck you in the shower now” kiss. It only takes a few moments of us owning each other’s mouths before Anna is climbing up my body and wrapping her legs around me. I press her against the shower tiles as she grinds her wet core up and down over my cock, driving me insane.

I don't waste any time as I slam into her. She grunts as she takes the force of my thrust. I pull back out and push back in, coating my dick with her wetness. I bite down on her shoulder, and she moans again, her arms gripping around my shoulders. I take her weight on one arm to support her as I reach between us and start circling her clit. I need her to come because I don't want my girl to go without, and I'm not going to last long with her tight pussy squeezing my dick.

She's so keyed up that it only takes several swirls of my thumb before she detonates around me causing a chain reaction in me. My body trembles as I thrust one last time into her, my balls drawing up tightly as I pour my release deep inside her body. I grab her with my other arm to keep her supported, and I lean us tightly against the tiles because my knees almost give out from the force of my orgasm.

I press my forehead against hers as our mingled breaths slow. I open my eyes to find her looking at me. She touches my cheek gently.

"Promise me, Logan," she says.

"Anything," I say to her.

"Promise me that we're going to be OK," she says. I see the fear in her eyes for the first time, and I don't fucking like it. Anna is one of the strongest people I know. Seeing her afraid, makes me want to do caveman things to keep her safe.

"I promise you that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe," I pledge to her.

She closes her eyes and kisses me, gently. I brush my lips against hers, and slowly let her down, making sure she's on steady legs before I let her go.

I'm about to say more, but there's knocking on the bedroom door.

“Stop shagging and hurry the fuck up,” Auggie’s voice rings out, making us both laugh.

“Maybe being an only child is a good thing,” I say to her with a wink.

She giggles as we quickly finish getting ready.

Chapter Twenty

I can’t say I’ve ever walked on so many cobblestoned streets in my life. Auggie makes us play tourist the entire day, and if I’m being honest with myself, I love every minute of it.

We go through the castle, the palace, the ghost tour of Mary King’s Close, and then grab food and picnic in the park. It’s Auggie that decides we need to walk up the hill overlooking the city.

“Come on, lazy arses,” he calls out as he leads our group up god knows how many steps.

“Does he always have this much energy?” I ask Anna. I groan at how oblivious Auggie seems to be to the danger we are in at this moment.

She giggles. “Yes,” she says, and I can tell by the way she says that she wouldn’t want Auggie any other way.

Jack, Pete, Hendrick, and Cain accompany us on our day trip. After Anna had a strict talking to them about acting normal, they have tried to mimic a group of guy friends. It’s been entertaining to watch them. Pete and Cain clearly have this act down. They stay vigilant all day, constantly scanning our surroundings. We all seem a bit on edge, although we’ve relaxed a bit more throughout the day. I’m glad we are taking a

moment to relax before the impending chaos comes, whatever it may be. I watch them with Anna and Chris and realize that Anna and Chris really do have a close relationship with their bodyguards. It's been interesting to see the bonds they have with so many of their staff.

I watch as Cain claps Chris on the back as they joke about something from earlier today, and Anna links arms with Pete as we walk up the hill.

"See, I told you it'd be worth it," Auggie declares as we climb a tower that looks down over the city. A couple nearby asks us to take some photos of them, and I ask them to take one of us. Jack quickly whips out his phone for the photo. I almost want to groan, but decide Jack knows best. After posing for a photo, Jack tells us we should head back to the house.

"But dinner...I'm starving," Chris grumbles.

"Fuck dinner, we need beer," Auggie says.

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Jack groans and shoots Pete, Hendrick, and Cain a look. Pete and Cain shrug, while Hendrick just shakes his head.

“Great, ’cause we passed a pub on the way here,” Auggie says as he turns and starts back down the hill.

“Augs, we passed about fifty pubs on the way here,” Chris mutters as he wraps his arm around Mia and starts down the stairs. Watching Chris with Mia, makes me wonder what Paolo and Shannon are doing without their bosses around.

“What does Shannon do when you are away?” I ask Anna, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“Well, it doesn’t happen often. I mean, normally, she comes with me. I suppose she’s taking a vacation,” Anna contemplates.

“Doesn’t she work for you?” I ask.

Anna grins. “Something like that,” she says with a wink. I look at her in confusion, but she just grabs my arm and pulls me into the nearby pub that Auggie has already entered. “You’ll understand, someday,” she adds.

Someday...I consider what she’s implying. Someday...I could be a prince. Someday...I could have a secretary just like she does. This seems all too overwhelming. So, I do the most reasonable thing ever and drink several pints of beer with Auggie.

I have to admit, where Chris screams royalty, Auggie screams frat brother. I like Chris. He's got that wise-beyond-his-years sort of mentality. He's also very smart, very kind, and very intuitive. I can see the similarities with Anna. Auggie, well, Auggie is a whole other type of royal. He's definitely the one that ends up in those page six photos. He's kind too, and he's definitely smart, but there's a certain carefreeness about him. I snap out of my thoughts as Auggie begins yet another story.

"So, there we are halfway up Kilimanjaro and my guide says, 'hey, who brought the water.'" His voice slurs half the words, and he laughs at the memory.

"Auggie, I think we should call it a night," Jack interrupts the story. Auggie is definitely the most relaxed of our group. I've watched Jack get more tense throughout the day. But I think everyone else senses it is time for us to leave. The last thing we need is to draw more attention to ourselves.

"Ahhh...come on, man," Auggie says as he leans too far over and nearly falls off the bar stool.

"And, that's a wrap, folks," Chris announces as he stands up and helps Auggie off the stool.

"Oh, s'come on, Lion, the night s'is young and s'are we," Auggie slurs.

"Yeah, and some of us are out past our bedtime," Chris says, giving him a hard stare. Auggie rolls his eyes and laughs.

"You're such a lump of coal," he says.

I shake my head, trying to stifle my grin which I know will only egg him on. It takes us the better part of thirty minutes to get Auggie back to the car. Pete and Jack look like they want to murder him. Once inside, he promptly passes out.

Anna falls asleep next, her head on my shoulder.

Chris looks over at us. Mia has fallen asleep on him as well.

“You better take good care of her, or I’ll kill you myself,” he says.

“I was wondering how long it would take before we had this conversation,” I say with a smirk.

“I’m serious, Logan. That right there,” he says, motioning to Anna, “is precious cargo. Guard her with your life.”

“I will,” I say sincerely to him. We stare at each other for a long moment, a silent understanding passing between us.

Then, I look out the window as Jack drives us back to the house. The realization about my mom and Sebastian Bach bounce around in my head. I replay conversations with my mom, conversations I overheard between my mom and her parents. I start to second-guess everything. What was real in my life? I can feel my anger growing as the car travels north into the dim light of the evening.

Jack’s phone rings as we make the turnoff toward Stonehaven.

“Yes?” he answers gruffly. “When. Shit. Yeah, I understand. I’m heading to the safe house now.”

He hangs up as I try to process the words that have just left his mouth, but Chris is a step ahead of me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks from the back of the van.

“A sensor was tripped on the perimeter of the property about five minutes ago,” Jack explains as he makes a U-turn in the road. “I’m taking us to a safe house until the situation is cleared.”

“Where’s the safe house?” I ask.

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“Not far,” he says. He makes a call on this phone to alert Hendrick, Cain, and Pete to the situation as they are following us in another car.

About ten minutes later, Jack pulls off onto a small lane and then another and, finally, we are driving down a drive no bigger than a trail. We pull up to a giant field with a very old house sitting in the middle. There’s a nearby barn and some other outbuildings. I can see what appears to be a helipad in the backfield.

“What is this place?” I ask as Anna starts to stir next to me.

“Let’s just say, I called in a favor with an old friend,” Jack says as he parks the car.

“Where are we?” Anna asks sleepily as she sits up and rubs her eyes.

“We are at a safe house,” Jack says. Anna sits up straighter.

“Why?” she asks.

“We had a possible perimeter breach back the estate. I made the executive decision to move us here for the night,” Jack says.

I see the color drain from Anna’s face.

“Do you think...” She trails off.

Jack turns toward her as he walks around the car. “Listen, let’s not get ahead of ourselves, OK? It could be nothing. And besides, it’s exactly what we planned for,

right?” he says as he places a hand on her shoulder.

She takes a steadying breath. “Right,” she agrees as she squares her shoulders. My brave princess is ready for battle.

Jack walks up to the front door which opens. A man in scrubs shakes Jack’s hand.

“How the hell are you?” he asks.

“Fan-fucking-tastic. And you?” Jack replies.

The man laughs. “These are your assets?” he asks, looking back at all of us.

“Those three are security,” he says pointing to Hendrick, Cain, and Pete. “And this is Anna, Chris, Auggie, Mia, and Logan.”

“Hello, I’m Eli Bachman,” he says as he holds out a hand to each of us. “Sounds like you’ve had a change of plans for tonight. I have some rooms set up for upstairs. There are scrubs set out if you want to change. There are showers if you need them.”

“Thanks,” Anna says to him in unison with her brothers. Although they are all polite, I can tell everyone is tense.

“Sure, no problem. Don’t mind that the rooms are surgical suites. We tend to house injured people here,” he says. We stop in our tracks and turn to Eli and Jack.

“What type of safe house is this?” Chris asks them.

Jack looks to Eli who nods.

“It’s a facility used to care for injured assets and personnel,” he says not giving away

anything else.

Anna and Chris nod and Auggie shrugs as they turn and trudge up the steps. There's a woman at a desk in the hallway.

"Oh, hi, I'm Nancy. Let me show you the rooms we have available," she says. Nancy is also wearing scrubs. She shows us to four different rooms each with four beds and an en suite bathroom. Anna and I take one room and settle ourselves in for the evening. There's a knock on the door after we've changed into the scrubs laid out for us.

"Yes?" Anna calls out.

"May I come in?" Jack asks.

Anna opens the door for him and motions for him to enter. He does but he doesn't sit down on any of the beds or chairs, he simply lingers by the door.

"Is everything OK for tonight?" he asks us.

Anna nods. "Yes, it's fine. Thank you," she responds as she cocks her head to one side.

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“This...isn’t an Interpol safe house, is it?” she asks him.

He shakes his head. “This is mostly used for British Intelligence,” he explains.

“I see,” she answers.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything, OK?” Jack assures us.

“Fine,” Anna mumbles as she turns and walks toward the window.

“Anna...we’re close. We’re going to get whoever is behind this. I promise,” Jack says before he walks to the door.

“Jack,” Anna says without turning from the window. I look from her to Jack. “There’s another matter I’d like to discuss with you when this is over.”

Jack’s eyebrows shoot up. “Sure,” he says, quickly covering the surprised look on his face.

“Goodnight,” she says as she pulls the curtains closed.

“Goodnight,” he replies and shuts the door behind him.

“What are you going to ask him about?” I question as I walk over to her.

She shakes her head. “Nothing important,” she replies and the fact that she’s willing to share something with Jack but not me makes me irrationally jealous.

I walk away from her and crawl into bed. The mature side of me knows this is silly, but I can't help it. I want her to share things with me. I want her to feel about me the same way I feel about her.

She comes to bed a minute later, crawling in beside me and curling up on the far side of the bed, as though sensing my anger and frustration and giving me space. My nana's words fill my head, mocking my jealousy. "Never go to bed angry."

I roll over and pull her against me. She stiffens for a moment.

I kiss the back of her head. "I wish you would tell me, but I respect your privacy. I'm just...I wish you could trust me with all your secrets," I whisper in her ear.

She turns in my arms and looks at me. Her eyes appear as dark puddles in the dim light of the room.

"I'm not trying to hurt you or keep things from you, Logan. I...have kept this part of me a secret for so long that it's hard to let go of, to just be open about it; it's like giving myself up," she says.

"Maybe you aren't giving yourself up. Maybe you're freeing yourself," I suggest.

She frowns. "I never thought about it like that," she says to me.

"Well, maybe consider that," I say to her.

"I will," she says softly. She leans up and kisses my cheek. "Thank you for understanding."

Her words break through the wall I had started building around my heart a moment earlier. I give her a small smile. "For you, my princess, anything," I say as I kiss her

forehead and pull her tightly against me.

I hadn't contemplated that Anna was still fighting demons. I had been so fixated with myself, the revelations in my life the past few weeks, the enormity of the changes in her life had completely escaped me. As I lie there considering this, my jealousy starts to melt into guilt. Susanna's whole world had changed too, and I needed to have more patience with her. My stubborn, fierce princess has a lot of things on her mind. And that thought was the last one as I closed my eyes, the adrenaline from earlier leaving my body and taking my consciousness with it.

Chapter Twenty-One

The knock on the door wakes us both.

"Yes," I croak.

"Can I come in?" Jack's voice rings out.

"Yes," Anna says, her voice gravelly from sleep.

Jack peeks around the door.

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“False alarm, we think it was just deer tripping a motion sensor,” Jack says. “I’m rounding up everyone else; we’ll head over to the house shortly.”

“Alright. Thanks for letting us know,” Anna says.

Jack nods and closes the door.

Anna sighs and pulls her legs up against her chest, wrapping her arms around them and placing her chin on top.

“I want this to end,” she murmurs.

“That makes two of us,” I agree.

She turns her head to look at me. “Can we go on the boat?” she asks.

I furrow my brows. “Now?” I ask.

She half smiles. “No, when this is over. Can we go on the boat?” she reiterates.

“Of course. You are always welcome on The Matilda,” I say to her.

We decide not to change into our dirty clothes. So, we pile them in some plastic bags we find in the room and head down to the car. Eli is down in the waiting room, which looks more like a living room.

“Hope you all slept well,” he says cheerily.

“We did. Thank you again for your...hospitality,” Anna says, searching for the right word. He grins.

“You’re welcome,” he replies as we make our way toward the car and back to Jack’s house.

We are all quiet on the way there. It still feels like a calm before the storm, before the inevitable happens. As we reach the house, the wind picks up and an actual storm begins moving in.

“Let’s get inside,” Jack yells, ushering us in as the rain begins. We aren’t in the house for five minutes when a lightning bolt hits nearby and the power goes out.

“Well, that’s fucking fantastic,” Auggie mutters.

“Wait here,” Jack says. He’s back with battery-operated lanterns for each of us.

“Seriously?” Anna asks.

Jack shrugs. “You can never be too prepared,” he says.

“Well, someone was a Boy Scout,” I mutter.

“Is the power out at the cottage?” Anna asks.

“The cottage has a backup generator. This house does too, but that lightning strike was pretty close, I’m going to have to check on things. Give me a few minutes to get the power back up here, and then the storm should be passing, and I can take you over there,” Jack says to her.

“Anna, seriously? Do you really need to go out in this?” Chris asks.

“Yes,” she says defiantly, jutting out her chin. I do my best to keep my grin in check.

Chris rolls his eyes. “I can’t sit around here. I’m going to see if Jack needs any help,” he says. He turns to Mia. “Why don’t you wait in our room?”

“Sure,” she says. I practically bite my tongue as they look longingly at each other. If they aren’t having sex yet, they might physically combust from it.

Chris disappears down the hall where Jack went. Cain and Hendrick follow him. Pete turns to us.

“Anna, maybe you should stay put for now?” he suggests, glancing out the window where the rain is pelting the glass.

Anna looks outside just as another lightning bolt illuminates the dark sky.

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“I suppose it can wait till later. It does look pretty bad out there,” she says with a frown.

I squeeze her arm. “It’s fine. Worst case we can go get your computer tomorrow,” I say to her just as the lights flicker back on.

“Fine,” she agrees. Pete gives me a look of gratitude.

“Let’s head up. I’m exhausted. I could use a nap,” I say to Anna.

We make our way up to our room.

Anna flops down on the bed. “I don’t even think I have the energy to shower,” she says as she pulls the scrubs off and tosses them on the ground. She lies on the bed naked, and I have to look away because a naked Anna is just too damned tempting.

I hear her pull the covers up as I remove my scrubs, climbing into bed naked beside her. She turns off the side table lamp and curls up against me. She feels amazing in my arms, our skin touching.

“I think I’m instituting a new rule,” I say to her as she lays her head on my chest and starts to trace small circles on it.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“No clothes at bedtime ever again,” I say, using my best authoritative voice.

She laughs. “Oh, OK,” she says, her voice laced with sarcasm.

I poke her. “I’m serious,” I say to her. She turns in my arms and looks up at me.

“What if it’s cold?” she asks.

I grin at her. “I think I can find a way to keep you warm,” I respond as I run a hand down her side. I can feel the chill bumps break out across her skin.

She shakes her head slightly. “We can’t have sex every time I’m cold,” she says.

“Why not?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes again. “Men,” she huffs and snuggles back against me. I grin even though she can’t see it. I love teasing her. I take a breath and her scent fills my nostrils. Damn it, I love breathing her in, tasting her, touching her, talking to her. I love her. The realization of how far down the rabbit hole I am hits me in my gut. I must tense because Anna looks back up at me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing. Just tired,” I say because I’m too chicken shit to tell her I love her.

“If you say so,” she says with a yawn.

We lie in silence, listening to the rain pelt the windows and roof until we both fall asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The storm doesn't let up until dinnertime.

"I'll take you over to the cottage after dinner," Jack says to Anna when we meander downstairs in search of food after spending most of the day in bed. I grin to myself because Anna woke me in the best possible way.

"Get that shit-eating, post-coitus smirk off your face," Auggie says, throwing a chip at me.

I laugh. "Damn, that's harsh," I say, placing a hand over my heart.

Auggie tosses me a beer from the fridge.

"Fancy a game of billiards later?" he asks me.

"Sure," I say as I pull out items from the fridge to make sandwiches. Everyone heads downstairs at some point over the next hour as people eat and graze off the snacks set out by Jack. He's a good host but disappears often to go to his study where I can hear him making phone calls.

"You want to go get your computer?" Jack asks Anna as Auggie racks up the balls on the billiard table.

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“Sure,” Anna replies, turning to me.

“You want me to come with you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Stay here and play with Augg. I’m just going to get the computer and check on my query, and then I’ll come back here,” she says.

“Alright,” I say as I kiss her.

“Get a room,” Auggie quips. I smile against Anna’s lips as does she.

Anna and Jack head out, and Auggie lets me break. He stands to the side looking at me.

“You love her, don’t you?” he asks.

The cue slips in my hand and I miss the ball. I look up at him.

He’s smirking. “Well, I guess that’s a real ‘yes’ then, isn’t it?” he says.

I lean back and take a breath. “Is it that obvious?” I ask.

“Uh, yeah,” he says.

“Shit,” I reply.

“You haven’t told her yet, have you?” he prods.

I shake my head.

“You know she loves you too, right?” he questions.

“How do you know?” I inquire.

“I might be a prick, but I’m not stupid, and I’m certainly not blind,” he responds as he hits a ball into the corner pocket.

I let out another breath. “I’m in fucking deep,” I admit, running a hand through my hair.

“Don’t fuck it up, or I’ll have you killed,” Auggie says with a grin but then quickly realizes what he’s said.

“Oh, shit. I mean...I...fuck, I didn’t mean it like that,” he tries to explain. I laugh.

“Auggie, if you wanted to kill me, I’m pretty sure you would have figured out a way to do it while we were on a boat in the middle of nowhere,” I say with a laugh.

He shrugs. “Yeah, still...” He trails off. “How are you...you know, handling things?” he asks, his voice taking on a serious tone that is very unlike him.

“I’m sorting shit out the best I can, I guess. It’s a lot to take in all at once,” I reply.

“Fuck yeah, it is. If you ever need to talk or anything...I mean, I know what it’s like and all...being a prince that is.” He stammers through as much of a heartfelt speech as I think Auggie is capable of.

“I appreciate that,” I say to him.

“Chris is a good one to talk to. He’s flipping brilliant, but he’s also sort of that wise-beyond-his-years type of guy,” Auggie suggests.

“Good to know,” I say as I call the winning ball in the corner pocket.

The door to the back flies open and very pissed-off Anna storms inside.

“I just don’t understand. Why would the storm have knocked out the power to the Wi-Fi, Jack? I thought you said there was a backup generator,” she grumbles.

“Anna, I’m sorry. You can re-run the search tomorrow. The lightning must have struck close to the cottage and fried the Wi-Fi,” Jack says. Anna doesn’t bother looking in at us as she storms past Jack and upstairs. Jack turns to us and sighs, running a hand through his hair.

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Auggie smirks. “Wow, way to piss off the princess,” he says.

“Auggie, don’t take this the wrong way, but piss off,” Jack snarls. “Your sister about blew a gasket when she realized the search she’d been running for the past twenty-four hours had been sabotaged by Mother Nature.”

“Oh, shit. Yep, that’s one way to piss her off. Don’t fuck with any computer things,” Auggie says. “You want to play another game?” he asks me.

I shake my head. “I better go check on her,” I say to him.

“Hey, it’s your life. Good luck,” he calls out after me as I head upstairs.

I head toward our room and stop when I reach the door. I can hear Anna slamming things around inside. I pause for a moment unsure of how to proceed. I suddenly realize that I’m not sure if Anna is the type of person who needs a minute to cool down or needs to be comforted. As I stand, hesitating, the door flies open and a wild-eyed Anna looks up at me.

“Are you going to come in here or just stand there contemplating god knows what?” she cries out as she paces the room.

I can see various things tossed around the room as I enter.

“I...uh...you seem...upset,” I stammer.

“Well, of course, I’m fucking upset. I wanted us to have that intel tonight,” she

grumbles.

“What exactly were you searching for?” I ask her.

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter. I’ll have to restart it tomorrow once the Wi-Fi reboots,” she moans.

I shut the door and look at her. On pure instinct, I walk over to her and grab her by the face. Her eyes go wide as I bring my mouth down on hers.

I can feel the protest on her lips for a split second before she caves to my advances. In the next second, she’s crawling up my body and wrapping her legs around me. And just like that, I’ve figured out how to calm down my princess.

I grab her ass firmly in my hand as she grinds herself against me. I trail my mouth down her jaw and neck, sucking at her skin. She moans, and I can feel how much she needs this. She breaks our kissing to pull her t-shirt over her head and remove her bra. I lay her down on the bed and pull down her leggings to reveal that she’s gone commando. I grin up at her, and she shrugs. I whip off my clothes in record time because I want to fuck the frustration out of her.

I crawl up her body, kissing a path over her skin as I go. She trembles under my touch. I feel all my blood rushing to my dick. The things this woman does to me. She has no idea either. And I think that turns me on even more.

I feel her hand wrap around my cock, and I groan.

“Slow down,” I say between gritted teeth.

“No, I need you to fuck me, now,” she whimpers as she strokes my cock up and down her wetness. As the head of my cock finds her entrance, I lose all self-control as I

plunge inside on a hard thrust that has us both groaning.

“Yes!” she calls out as I thrust again. She wraps her legs around my waist again, angling her body to give me deeper access. And like I was just granted an all-access pass to the greatest theme park on earth, I accept it. I close my eyes and feel her wet warmth around me, and I slam harder and harder into her heat.

Our bodies find a rhythm, and I’m completely lost in her. I never want to leave. I lean down and kiss her like she’s water and I’m in a desert. We devour each other as our bodies create the most amazing friction. I can feel her losing control first. Her muscles tremble around me.

“Yes, come for me, Anna,” I urge her on as she squeezes her eyes shut and grabs ahold of my biceps. Her whole body freezes as she calls out my name. Her muscles squeeze my cock, and I can no longer hold on as I follow her over the cliff of ecstasy.

I pump once more into her before rolling us over, so that she’s lying on top of me. She drops to my chest as we both breathe heavily.

“That was...” she manages in between breaths.

“Fucking awesome, as always,” I finish her thought as I kiss her nose.

She giggles and her muscles involuntarily clench around me once more, and I groan.

“Careful, Princess, unless you want round two, right now,” I say to her.

“As tempting as that is, I think I need—” She’s cut off by a knock at the door. I groan, figuring it’s Auggie asking us to come back down to play billiards.

“Anna? Logan?” Jack calls out.

“Shit,” I mutter as I crawl off Anna. I toss on my clothes. “One minute!” I add. I look over and Anna has her leggings and t-shirt back on and is standing next to me.

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“Come in,” I say, something keeps me from going to the door.

Jack cracks the door open. “Your aunt has taken a turn for the worse, I’m afraid. We are being summoned back to the palace,” Jack says with a sigh.

“What?!” Anna says. “What do you mean ‘a turn for the worse’?”

“Her vitals aren’t staying where they should. It doesn’t look good. Your father wants you all home,” he says. I wince because their father doesn’t know where they are.

“So, our plan is ruined then,” she says with a huff and sits down on the bed.

“Well, our plan has changed. You will all still be together. We will need to very carefully orchestrate the next few days. I have no intel that anyone has been here, although it’s only been a little over forty-eight hours, so...anyhow, we’ll need to adapt. I will fly out ahead of you tonight. Your father has contacted your security. He’s going to be calling each of you to let you know. Act like this is news. Ask questions. I’ll tell him I want to stay close because we have some concerns about anti-monarchists attempting something with Lara’s condition worsening,” he says.

“Fine. When do we leave?” she asks.

“You are technically flying tonight to London, where you’ll meet your brothers and fly on to Norddale tomorrow morning. Pete is dealing with things now. We’ll get you all down to London tonight and out first thing in the morning,” Jack says.

“But...” Anna trails off and looks longingly at her computer. “Never mind. It can

wait,” she says as her phone buzzes. She reaches over and picks it up, giving us a nod that tells us it’s her father.

I follow Jack out of the room to give her some privacy.

“Jack? I’m not leaving her. Will my father be there?” I ask him.

“Yes. He came back as soon as he heard about Lara. They are good friends as well,” Jack explains, making me realize just how little I know about my father.

Jack starts to walk down the hall but turns to me. “Give him a chance, Logan. Your father is a good man,” he says before he walks down the stairs, leaving me standing by myself, immersed in my own thoughts.

Chapter Twenty-Three

As we land in Norddale, I realize that I’m getting entirely too used to flying on private jets. Our security team quickly ushers us through a private area in customs, and we are whisked away in SUVs. I place my passport back in my bag as I sit next to Anna. I feel something in the pocket and pull out my mother’s locket.

“I thought you shouldn’t keep it in a box,” Anna says quietly from next to me. I place it in my pant’s pocket because I’m not sure what I should do with it. Less than thirty minutes later, we pull up to the royal palace.

My eyes nearly bug out of my head. I had no idea of its grandeur until this moment. The summer palace had seemed so large, so ornate, but this...this is a whole other level of opulence.

“This...is your home?” I ask, turning toward Anna. She looks out the window and nods.

“You grew up here?” I reiterate.

She places a hand on mine. “It’s just a building,” she reassures me. It dawns on me, as we drive through the gates where citizens have laid out flowers for Lara, that my father probably lives in a ginormous castle too. I don’t know why that never dawned on me before today.

We exit the cars in a private courtyard area. An older woman greets us at the door.

“Oh, Anna! I was so worried!” she cries as she sweeps Anna into a giant bear hug. Anna hugs her back and pats her shoulder.

“I’m fine, Helga. Really,” she says as she pulls back.

“Helga, this is Logan,” she introduces me. I won’t lie, I’m a little hurt she doesn’t say that I’m her boyfriend, but I try to hide that with a smile.

“Pleasure to meet you,” I say as I extend my hand which is promptly swatted away. I, too, am pulled into a giant bear hug.

“If you’re Anna’s friend, and she brought you here, then you are family,” she says. Her warmth and hospitality seem unusual juxtaposed against the lavishness of the castle.

“Your room is ready for you,” she says to Anna. Anna nods and takes my hand, leading me into the castle or palace or whatever you want to call the monstrosity of a building we are entering.

I lose track of where we go as Anna drags me up a flight of stairs and down various corridors.

“Should we have left a trail of breadcrumbs?” I ask her as we ascend a second staircase.

She laughs. “You’ll figure it out quickly. I promise,” she says just as she pushes open one side of a set of giant double doors. We enter a sitting area. I realize we are in an apartment essentially.

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“This is mine,” she says, spinning around with her hands in the air.

“Y-you have an entire apartment in here?” I ask her as she leads me around several rooms. There’s a wet bar of sorts in the corner, a bathroom, a room for clothes, her bedroom, a small office, a second bedroom off the main sitting room complete with en suite, and a balcony.

“Yes,” she says with a laugh.

A woman walks in and jumps back, a bit startled.

“Hello, Julia,” Anna says to the woman whose mouth is hanging open.

“I’m so sorry, Your Highness. I didn’t know you had company,” she says.

“It’s fine. Really. This is Logan,” she says. “He’ll be staying with us.”

“Oh?” she says confused. “I thought the guest suite was for...” She trails off.

“Please prep my guest room,” Anna instructs.

“Yes, ma’am,” she says as she quickly exits, leaving us alone.

“She’s a skittish one,” I say.

“Yes, she is, I suppose,” Anna says. Her phone pings and she looks down.

“We’ve been summoned,” she says.

“We?” I ask.

“We,” she reiterates.

I follow her back through the maze of the palace. She leads me into an office where a woman sits. “Harriett, he’s expecting us,” she says to the woman at the desk.

“Yes, please go on in,” she says.

We walk through massively ornate wooden doors into a huge office space. King Michael sits at a desk that I can tell is antique and probably used by every king of this country for the past several hundred years. He stands and walks around the desk, taking Anna into an embrace. I can see the dark circles under his eyes.

“I’m glad you’re back, sweet pea,” he whispers loud enough for me to hear. A moment later, we are joined by Chris, Auggie, Sten, and my father. I’m startled to see my father and uncle here.

“We’ll head over to the hospital shortly. I just want you all to be prepared. Lara...well, things don’t look good. She has not come out of her coma. Some of her organs are showing signs of failing,” King Michael says. I can see a glimmer of tears in his eyes.

“How long?” Chris asks.

The king shakes his head. “I...don’t know,” he admits. “I’ve started putting together plans for a state funeral, if she continues to deteriorate at this rate, it may not be long.”

“Montelandia will provide you with any support you need, Michael,” my father speaks up from the corner of the room.

“Thanks, Eddie. I appreciate that,” he says, giving his friend a small smile.

“Security is quite tight right now. I just want to warn you all. Lara’s been moved to a secured wing at the hospital with very limited access,” he explains.

“Can we go now, Father?” Anna asks.

He nods. He presses a button on his desk and a moment later security leads us to waiting cars. Anna is quiet on the ride over to the hospital. I’m not sure how close she is with her aunt, but I can imagine this is a difficult moment for her.

The scene at the hospital is chaos. There are journalists everywhere, onlookers stand in the street, people are setting flowers near the emergency room sign out front, and there are dozens of uniform police officers. We are driven around back, pulling into a parking garage area reserved for hospital staff.

Our security detail ushers us through the hospital and straight to a private wing that apparently has been shut down because the princess is the only one there. A doctor greets us at the nurses’ station.

“Your Majesty,” he says bowing his head.

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“Dr. Lasson, any change?” King Michael asks.

The doctor shakes his head. “We’re monitoring everything, Your Majesty. There has been no change in vitals over the past several hours. I would say that she’s stabilized for now. However, we will have her latest bloodwork back later. We didn’t see any improvements in organ function after the last round of testing,” he states.

King Michael nods his head. “Thank you, doctor,” he says. I hang back in the hallway as King Michael, Anna, Auggie, and Chris walk in a room. I can see Hans sitting in a chair before the door shuts, leaving my father, Sten, and me standing in the hallway.

“Let’s give them a minute with her,” my father says. I nod.

It doesn’t hit me fully that I’m standing next to my uncle, a potential criminal, until I turn to see him looking at me.

“You OK?” he asks me.

I have trouble finding the words. “I-I...yep, I’m fine,” I stammer as I take a seat next to my father, putting much-needed distance between Sten and me.

“How are your grandparents?” my father asks.

I shrug. “Fine,” I say.

“I’m sure it was nice to see them,” he says. I nod. I’m not much for talking right now,

and this small talk bullshit in front of Sten is grating on my nerves.

Sten's phone rings. "Sorry, I have to take this. It's about a charity function I'm supposed to be at next week," he says as he answers his phone and walks down the hall.

My father looks at me. "You look like you could use a walk," he says as he stands. "Come on." He waves a hand. The part of me that can be a dick wants to tell him to go walk by himself since he's so good at being alone, but something else in me makes me stand and follow him. Maybe, somewhere deep down, I yearn to know my father. I yearn to have a parent again.

We walk in silence. I don't know where he's taking me. His bodyguard follows us, but my father doesn't seem to notice. Hendrick is also behind us, but he gives us a wide berth, following behind my father's bodyguard. I guess when you always have security with you, you become oblivious to it.

My father's clearly been here before because he meanders the hallways like he owns the place, and eventually, he pushes open a door that leads to a small garden on the rooftop. It has a path around it, some trees in planters and flowers and a few benches. There's no one up here as it's a bit cold and breezy but the fresh air feels good on my skin.

"Why didn't you tell me that my mother was a spy?" I ask him, breaking the silence.

He comes to an abrupt stop, and in my peripheral vision, I can see his security guard stop as well, keeping a good twenty paces behind us.

"Who told you that?" he asks, but then I see a look of recognition on his face. "Jack," he states dryly.

I nod. “Yes, he told me everything,” I reply.

“I see,” my father says tersely. Clearly, he didn’t want me to know.

“Why would you keep that from me? I’m not a child you have to protect. I’m an adult. I deserve to know the truth,” I say to him.

My father sighs. “I know you are an adult. I’m very aware of that,” he says, his voice tinged with sadness, so much so, it’s hard to stay mad at him. He starts walking again, and I follow him.

Now it’s my turn to sigh. “Listen...I...” I trail off before I decide to say “fuck it,” and lay it all on the line. “I want to get to know you. I do. I have so many questions. And now that I know what my mother was doing for all those years, I have so many more questions. But please, no more lies and no more secrets. If you can promise me that, then I will promise to give a relationship between us a chance.”

My father stops walking again. “I would very much like that, Logan. I don’t have all the answers. Hell, Jack probably knows more than I do about certain parts of your mother’s life, but I won’t keep anything from you...you deserve to know the truth, no matter how much I want to protect you,” he says, turning toward me.

“That’s all I want...the truth,” I say to him. He motions to a nearby bench and we sit.

“I’m not sure where to begin,” he says.

“How about at the beginning?” I suggest as I turn and the locket falls out of my pocket. I pick it up, going to stuff it back inside when my father reaches out and snatches it from my hand.

“Where did you get this?” he asks, his eyes wide.

“It was with my mother’s belongings,” I say to him.

A sad smile emerges on his face. “I had this made for her,” he says, looking up at me.

“You did?” I ask.

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“Yes. We had seen ‘lover’s eyes’ that were part of a friend’s private collection. She found the history of them fascinating. So, I had that made for her as a gift after you were born, because she said you and I had the same eyes. I had no idea she had kept it,” he reminisces.

He gets a far-off look on his face and smiles, clearing his throat, and handing the locket back to me. “But you want to know how we met,” he begins. “It was at a press conference for a charity event. That’s where I first saw her. She was beautiful, the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen,” he says. My father continues to tell me everything over the next hour. He tells me about falling for my mother, about keeping their romance a secret, about how she confided in him about her real occupation after she had to warn him of an assassination attempt on his life. He talks about secretly keeping tabs on her and me. He tells me all about my birth, how I was as a baby, and the photos my mother would send him every month. He talks about the decision he and my mother made for us to leave, and how it was the hardest thing he ever did besides keeping us a secret. I’m surprised to hear all of this. The more he speaks, the more I realize how much I really didn’t know my own mother. It saddens me.

“I think that’s everything,” he says. We’re both quiet for a long moment, letting the last hour sink in.

“I’d like to hear more about your life,” my father says, and then looks down at his watch. “But perhaps we should save that for later. I’d like to peek in on Lara before we leave.”

We stand and head back toward Lara’s room. “You know Michael and Lara well?” I ask.

He nods. “Yes, very well. Our families spent a good deal of time together when we were young,” he explains. “Michael and I, well, we hit it off. He’s more like another brother to me.”

“Are you close with Sten?” I inquire.

My father looks at me. “I know Sten is...a little wild. He has a harder time with being royal, always has. But he’s a good person, just give him a chance. You’ll see,” he says. I want to shout out that I think Sten might be who is trying to kill us, but I think that conversation is best had later as we approach the room and find Sten sitting in the hallway.

“They invited us in. I already paid my respects to Lara,” Sten says. And for a split second, I see immense sadness on his face. I suppose they were closer than my father explained to me, having grown up together and all. I wonder if he’s behind all of this, does he feel bad about hurting Lara?

My father’s arm on my shoulder drags my attention back to the door as he opens it, and we walk inside. It’s a solemn scene. The only sound is the beeping of the machines, the swish of the air of the ventilator, and the sniffles coming from Anna.

I walk over to where she sits in a chair, her hand on Lara’s arm. When she sees me, she launches herself out of the chair and into my arms, a sob escapes as she does so.

King Michael’s hand on my shoulder has me looking toward him. He motions for me to take her out of the room, and I nod.

“Come on, let’s go outside and get some air,” I say to her. She walks with me out of the door. I look back to see my father sit in her place and put his hand on Lara’s arm.

Sten looks up as we walk by him, I take Anna down the hall and into an empty room,

helping her sit on the bed.

I just hold her as she weeps. I pull a Kleenex box off a side table and hand it to her.

“Th-thanks,” she stutters in between sobs.

“Sure,” I say as I rub her arm. She blows her nose and her sobs quiet to sniffles.

“I-I don’t want her to die,” Anna whispers. I squeeze her in my arms.

“I know, baby,” I say to her as I kiss her forehead.

“The doctor came in and said while she’s stabilized, there’s not much hope of her recovering from the damage to her organs. He basically said she would either start improving over the next forty-eight hours, or she would start declining, but odds aren’t favorable for a recovery,” she says.

“I’m sorry, Anna,” I say because I don’t know what else to say. Lara sustained serious injuries, smoke inhalation, and burns. The fact that she made it this long is somewhat of a miracle.

“At least we’re here,” I offer. She nods against my chest.

“You want to go back home?” I suggest. She shakes her head.

“I want to spend more time with her,” she says.

“OK,” I say as I help her up. She looks up at me, and it nearly breaks my fucking heart. Her eyes are rimmed in red and her nose is red from crying. She looks so young and so vulnerable.

I help her back to Lara's room. My father stands as we enter.

"We should head back to the palace," he says to me.

Anna looks up at me. "Stay, please," she pleads.

"Of course," I say to her as I help her sit. She grabs my hand as though afraid I'll leave her.

I look up at my father. He gives a small nod at me and walks out of the room.

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Auggie and Chris both come over and whisper words to Lara before exiting the room. It's just Hans, who still sits in the corner, King Michael, Anna, and me.

"Hans, why don't you come with me? Take a shower, get a change of clothes, some food. Anna and Logan can stay with Lara for a while," he suggests.

Hans gets up and walks over to us, looking down at his wife. He looks tired.

"I suppose since she's stable. I could use a shower," he admits.

"Good. It's settled. You can ride back with me to the palace. I'll send you back later, once you've gotten a little rest," the king says.

Hans looks once more at Lara and then follows Anna's father out of the room. I pull up a chair and sit next to Anna.

"She was always trying to get me to be more ladylike," Anna laughs softly. "I'm sure I was a big disappointment to her."

"I don't think so," I say to her.

She shrugs. "She always wanted me to dress up and sit properly and say the right things, even when I was little. I know she loved me, but I think she hoped I would turn out differently," she says.

"I'm sure she's proud of you," I say to her.

I see tears in Anna's eyes again. "She told me that I made her life better," she manages before another sob breaks loose.

"See, she's proud of you," I say, squeezing her shoulder.

"This is all so fucked up," she says and turns to me.

I swallow. "I know," I agree.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Two hours later, Anna has fallen asleep with her head on her aunt's hand. I don't have the heart to wake her, so I sit in the chair off to the side and watch the two of them. I drift off to sleep after a while and wake with a start. I look around. Anna's still asleep, but her aunt's foot is bobbing back and forth under the covers.

I run out into the hall and find a nurse. I pull her back inside and point. Her eyes widen.

"I'll get the doctor," she says as she runs back to her desk and picks up a phone.

The next thirty minutes are a blur as I wake Anna. The doctor comes in with two other doctors, and they examine Lara. They take her to run a battery of tests. Our families show back up, and we all sit gathered in a private waiting room.

Two more hours pass with all of us trying to occupy ourselves. At the hour mark, Auggie and Chris get bored with their phones and start playing a ridiculous board game left in the waiting room. Anna curls up next to her father, who talks to my father. They tell funny stories from their childhood. Even Sten tells stories. I'm so confused by Sten. I watch him like a hawk for any sign that he's evil, but I get nothing. He's either the best actor in the world, or he's not guilty.

When the doctor finally comes in, everyone stands.

“Please, sit down,” he says to us and takes a seat himself. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Lara is showing signs of subtle improvements. Her organs that had been in a state of failure are now stable. Her lungs have responded well to the treatment we’ve provided for the smoke inhalation. The first time we tried to bring her out of the induced coma, she didn’t respond well. I’m hesitant to try again so soon, but I think we need to in order to see what we’re dealing with here.”

“When would you do this?” Hans asks.

“Tomorrow morning,” he says. “I’d like her to rest for one more night.”

Hans nods.

“I think you all should go home and rest tonight. It’s been a long few days for you. Lara is absolutely stable right now. There’s no need for you to stay the night. I’ll call if there’s any change at all,” he says to us. “If we do bring her out of the coma, the next few days or even weeks will be very difficult for her. She will need you well-rested and strong.”

There’s a resounding chorus of affirmative understandings from everyone except Hans.

“I’d prefer to stay with her,” Hans grumbles.

“Hans, don’t make me be royal and command you to go get sleep,” King Michael says. Hans sighs and runs a hand over his thinning hair.

“I suppose I could sleep for a few hours and come back early,” he says.

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“Good, it’s settled,” King Michael proclaims as he turns to Victor. “Please get the cars ready for us.”

Victor nods and a few minutes later we are all led down to them and whisked back to the castle. As soon as we are back in Anna’s apartment, we both collapse on her bed.

“I’m so tired,” she moans.

“Let’s take a nap,” I say to her, rolling on my side to look down at her.

She shakes her head. “I need to check on my search. I got it up and running again before we left,” she says.

I frown not remembering that. In fact, the only time she left my sight was when she went to change quickly while I was looking around her apartment when we arrived. Then it dawns on me

“Does your closet have a secret passage?” I ask her with a raised eyebrow.

Her guilty face tells me everything.

“Where’s your computer, Anna?” I ask.

“Oh, no. Sorry, I am sworn to secrecy forever. I can’t tell you that,” she says.

“Seriously?” I say to her.

She shrugs. “I’m sorry,” she whispers and looks away. “I promised my mother.”

The gravity of that statement takes a moment to hit me.

“Your mother?” I reiterate.

“Yes, there are many secret places in the palace. This one is special,” she tries to explain. She looks up at me. “I’ve never even talked about it with another soul until now.”

“Fine, go find your computer,” I say to her. “But hurry back.”

I lie back on the bed as Anna bolts to her closet and disappears, leaving me contemplating life in a castle. I wonder where all the other secret passages go, and how many there are. I also wonder how she manages to avoid the enormous amount of security guards in the palace.

The room is suddenly very silent except for the ticking of an antique clock that sits on a mantle over the fireplace in Anna’s bedroom. Even though the palace is in the heart of the city, there’s enough trees and gardens around it that the city noise can’t be heard inside its walls.

I push off the bed and begin looking around the room. On Anna’s nightstand, there’s a family photo. She can’t be more than five or six in it, and she sits on her mother’s lap. She looks so much like her mother that it’s almost eerie seeing them together.

Her room looks like a room in a palace with antique furniture, silk fabrics, and tastefully decorated walls. But here and there, there’s a splash of Anna. In her office, there’s a bulletin board with concert ticket stubs on it. A bobblehead of Thor sits on her desk. There’s a shelf in her office where there’s a cluster of family photos, mostly of her, Auggie, and Chris as kids. There’s another of her and a very pretty young

woman. And then I see a small carving that I recognize because I have one too. We made them at camp. I pick up hers and run my finger over the initials carved under it. We had carved each other's initials in the base of each bear. I smile at the memory.

Princess Susanna seems like one person to me now, and then there's Anna, a completely different person.

My thoughts are torn from me as I hear movement in her bedroom. I turn and peer around the corner.

Anna is laying the laptop on the bed, she hardly glances up at me as she begins furiously typing.

"Anything?" I ask as I meander back out into her bedroom.

"I'm confused," she says frowning.

"About?" I prod as I walk over to her.

"The IPs that are used...it doesn't make sense," she says as her brows furrow and her typing speeds up.

"I don't understand. What do you mean?" I ask her.

"Just give me a minute," she says as she bites her lip in concentration. All I see are numbers and symbols scrolling across the screen. I sit down next to her and rub her shoulders. She's tense, too tense.

"Hey, calm down. It's OK," I whisper in her ear.

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She shakes her head.

“Damn it, I don’t understand,” she mutters. I place my hands on her arms and pull them back, forcing her to stop typing and to look up at me.

“Tell me what is going on,” I demand calmly.

“Remember that I traced the M email to Sebastian?” she says.

“Yes,” I answer.

“Well, I ran this search. Sebastian had another email account set up on his assistant’s computer. But the IP address associated with the account he was emailing, comes up in three places. It’s an IPv6 address, so it’s a little different than what many people use, but it’s the locations that are bugging me. It’s not the fact that it’s more than one in this case,” she explains.

“OK, that’s like the link to the internet ID number thing, right?” I ask.

“Sort of, yeah,” she mutters, staring back at the screen.

“So, where are those locations?” I ask her.

“The summer palace, a café downtown, and...here,” she says, her voice fading on the last word.

“I don’t understand. You mean Norddale here?” I ask, confused.

She shakes her head. “The palace,” she says.

My body tenses under those two words.

“Jesus Christ!” I say loudly.

“Logan, remember when we contemplated whether this was an inside job?” she says to me.

I nod. “It’s an inside job for sure. Sebastian was a pawn. M was a pawn. Sten is a pawn. I can’t believe I was so blind,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused once again.

“The emails...I went through them, ran encryption. They aren’t the ones behind this. Someone hacked Sebastian’s email. Someone re-routed IP addresses to Sten and Uncle Eddie’s house, and M...well, according to those emails, M was ‘taken care of.’ So, that leaves our security, staff, and the rest of us,” she says, looking up at me.

“OK, so we’ve decided who it can’t be, who can it be?” I ask her frowning.

She pulls her arms back to the computer and hits a few keys, her fingers trembling as she does so. I place a hand on her shoulder, trying to reassure her. Emails start popping up, and I read them.

She points to one in particular. “It’s not just one person. It’s four people. And I know who they are,” she says as she pulls up four separate emails.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I look at the emails from over her shoulder. They are all talking about details that no

one would know except our families and inner circle of staff and security. So, that narrows it down, but I'm missing something because although I can tell these emails are to three separate people, no three people pop out at me.

"What am I missing?" I ask.

She points to the first one. "Who knows all the whereabouts of my father and your father?" she asks.

I frown again. "Well, I guess their security and secretaries," I muse.

"Marcus, Victor, Fredrik, and Gregor," she says. "Your father recently switched security detail. He does this on a regular basis. You'll learn. It's a thing in your country, rotating the guard. Anyhow, if you wanted to always know the whereabouts over time, you'd have to be with the king all the time. Fredrik has only been privy to that information for a short time."

"Gregor," I say dryly.

"Yes. But for us, there are two possibilities. Because of my mother's death, my father kept Victor in place. Therefore, Marcus and Victor worked in conjunction with each other," she says.

"But then, who's the fourth person?" I ask.

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She takes a deep breath and pulls up the fourth email. “No one else in the family has the same protection setup as my father. I...don’t want to believe this, but the words, the phrases even...Hans,” she says, looking back at me, tears in her eyes.

“What? No,” I say.

“It makes sense though, Logan. Hans owns a company, a company that would benefit if our countries had no monarchies. I just...I can’t reconcile it. I don’t want it to be him,” she says.

“Maybe it’s not, maybe, it’s someone setting him up, like Sten? Maybe Sten wants it to look like Hans?” I ponder.

She shakes her head. “No, because Sten wasn’t at a café, at least not while he’s been here. But the café is in the building that Hans owns. It’s his company’s building,” she says.

“Are you sure?” I ask her.

She nods. “I don’t want it to be,” she says, her lip trembling.

I pull her into my arms, trying desperately to wrap my head around all of this. I still don’t understand how Anna is jumping to these conclusions so quickly. And second, I don’t want it to be Hans either, for Anna’s sake.

“Anna, show me what you are seeing. Walk me through all of it,” I say to her, still staring at the screen over her head in complete confusion.

She takes a breath and pulls out of my embrace, looking back at the screen. For the next fifteen minutes, she carefully walks me through the dark web, the email accounts she's hacked, and the encrypted messages that she's found. Then she sighs and pulls up a message that is talking about Hans's plane that was bombed.

"This is how I know for sure," she says, pointing to a line on the screen.

The bomb needs to be placed in the back cargo hold. There's a secret compartment I had built there. Move the blue side panel over and you'll find a hidden door. The combination is 3-3-2-8. Make sure to secure the panel back over the door once the bomb is in place.

"That's my aunt's and uncle's birthday. Only my uncle would know that there was a secret compartment on his jet. My aunt hadn't flown on that jet yet. He had bought it while she was doing charity work," Anna says quietly.

This time, I believe her. She's right. There is no confusion. Even though that email was sent from Sebastian's email account, Anna has shown me that the account was indeed hacked and the messages deleted, only they weren't deleted because whoever did it hadn't yet wiped a backup cloud linked to the email, probably because hacking the email company's server was a whole lot harder than hacking one email account.

"Uh, why didn't you start with this?" I ask, looking back at her.

She shakes her head. "I...I don't know. I...Jesus, Aunt Lara..." She trails off and turns back to the screen.

"He can't be alone with Aunt Lara!" she suddenly exclaims, jumping off the bed. I get up, following her as she sprints across the room and throws open the door.

"Anna?" I hear Lucas ask.

“Where’s Pete?” she asks him.

“He’s—”

“I’m right here,” Pete says, running up from around the corner. “What’s wrong?”

“Did Hans leave to go back to the hospital, yet?” she says, her breathing coming harder with each word.

“He just left, maybe two minutes ago. Why?” he asks.

“Jesus, we need to go, now!” she exclaims, grabbing his hand and dragging him down the corridor. Lucas and I follow them.

“I don’t understand, Anna. What the hell is going on?” Pete says, coming to an abrupt stop at the top of the staircase.

He grabs Anna’s arm to stop her from tumbling headfirst down the staircase. “It’s him, Pete. It’s him!” she exclaims, tears flooding her eyes as she practically screams the words.

“Calm down. How do you know this, Anna?” he asks her. His grip on her tightens slightly, and I take a step forward.

“Pete, let her go,” I say to him. He looks over at me but releases Anna.

“I have to be sure of this, Logan. What she’s saying...it’s treasonous,” he says.

Anna grabs Pete by his collar with both hands. “Pete, I swear to god. No, I swear on my mother’s grave. It’s him. I ran a search. I found an email. Only he would know what was in that email. There are others. We have to go, now! I’ll explain everything

on the way to the hospital,” she cries out as she releases Pete and starts down the stairs.

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“Pete reaches for his earpiece, and although sensing it, Anna spins around. “You cannot tell Victor or Marcus or Gregor! They are in on this. There may be others. You can tell Jack, but that’s it, for now,” she says as she turns and heads back down the stairs.

As if a switch has been flipped, Pete looks at a wide-eyed Lucas, nods, and starts down after Anna. Lucas looks at me. “You heard her. Let’s go,” I say to him as he follows Pete with me right behind him. We all bolt to a tinted-window SUV parked and jump in, it’s like a scene out of a movie as Pete radios the front gate. The gate flies open as we speed down the drive. Two guards clear traffic as we pull out and start making our way toward the hospital.

Pete has Jack on speakerphone as he winds around the narrow streets of the city center.

“Ross,” Jack answers.

“Jack, you need to get to the hospital, now,” Pete says.

“What’s wrong?” Jack answers, his voice taking a serious tone.

“Jack, it’s Hans. I ran the search. I found emails. It’s him,” Anna says loudly, almost too loudly for the small confined space of the vehicle.

“Anna, that’s a pretty major accusation. Are you sure?” Jack responds.

“Damn it! I am one hundred percent positive,” she yells. “Will you just believe me?”

“Jack, she’s right. I read the email. He gave instructions to M about his plane. No one else would know that information,” I say as I grip Anna’s hand in mine and squeeze it.

“Shit. OK, I’m on my way. Don’t do anything until I get there, understood?” Jack barks.

“Jack? Victor, Gregor, and Marcus are all part of this,” Anna says.

“Anna, we’re already investigating those three. But Hans...” He trails off.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have believed it myself, but there’s no way it was Sebastian or Sten. Not with the information he gave M. I’ll show you everything later, right now, we have to get to the hospital. As of yesterday, Hans thought Aunt Lara was going to die. He had no reason to do anything else with her, but now...we have to get there,” she says.

“Pete, are you alone?” Jack asks.

“No, Lucas is with me,” he says.

“I’m sending men to the hospital now. Don’t go up until they get there. Use the back way,” Jack instructs. “I’ll be there soon.” And with that he hangs up, leaving the vehicle in utter silence as Pete steers us through the back streets toward the parking garage of the hospital. We manage to sneak in alongside some other cars. The fact that we arrive in just one vehicle doesn’t tip off the paparazzi like we did when we rolled up in a caravan.

Once inside, Pete pulls us into a back hallway. “We’ll wait here,” he says.

“No, we are going up now!” Anna demands.

“Your Highness, it is not safe. You heard Jack,” Lucas says.

“And Jack isn’t your fucking princess, I am, and I demand that we go see my aunt, right now!” she yells and stamps her foot. If we weren’t in such a fucking messed-up situation, I would say she looks downright adorable and sexy as hell all at the same time. But the look on her face tells me now is not the time to mention this.

“Anna, you heard Jack. We wait here,” Pete says.

“Fine,” she says. “I have to use the bathroom.”

Pete sighs.

“I’ll come with you,” I say to her. She gives me a look, but I’m not sure why. Pete follows us down the hall, and as we approach the elevators, the doors open and she pops inside. I manage to get in before they close, but Pete does not. The last thing I see is his shocked face.

“What the fuck are you thinking?” I yell at her.

“Save it. I’m not waiting for Jack and his minions to arrive. We don’t have time,” she says as the elevator stops and the doors open. I follow her as she strides down the hall to the guards standing outside Lara’s room.

The guard puts out a hand. “You can’t go in there,” he says.

“Well, I’m Princess Susanna of Norddale, and I will go in there,” she says to him. He doesn’t lower his arm.

“Fuck it,” I say as I push past him and open the door for Anna. The guard looks at us with wide eyes.

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Hans is standing by Lara's bed. He looks startled when we enter.

Anna stops abruptly, causing me to run into the back of her. She flies forward and catches herself on Lara's bed.

"Anna?" Hans says.

"Oh...uh...hi," she stammers as she straightens herself, smoothing her shirt.

"Why are you back here?" he demands.

"I...I wanted to see Auntie Lara again," she says, her words coming out quickly.

"Well, as you can see, she's perfectly fine. Now, you should head back," he tells her. I can see the strain on his face as he struggles to control his temper.

"Anna, why don't you give Hans a few minutes? We can wait outside," I say, trying to keep her away from Hans.

"I think I'll wait right here," she says as she walks over to a chair in the corner of the room and plops down on it, crossing her arms like a petulant child. My badass princess doesn't like to be bossed around.

"Suit yourself," Hans says. His eyes dart from me to Anna.

"Fine," Anna says. "Take your time."

Hans suddenly walks out of the room. Anna quickly walks up to her aunt, surveying her from head to toe.

“She’s fine,” I say to her. “See?” I point to the monitors which beep steadily.

All of a sudden, her hand flies to her mouth. “Hans!” she yells and darts out of the room. She’s back in the elevator before I can catch her. I see her cell phone lying on the ground, and I realize she took off her tracking bracelet before we came back here. There’s no way to find her.

“Where the fuck is she going now?!” Pete yells as he runs out of a stairwell door.

“Fuck!” Lucas yells simultaneously from behind Pete.

I shake my head.

“Let’s split up,” I yell to them. “She can’t get far. Any idea where Hans just went?” I ask.

They shake their heads.

“I’ll go downstairs,” Pete says. “Hans might have gone out back. Lucas, try the doctor’s cafeteria. I’m radioing Jack.”

“I’ll look on the roof,” I say. They both give me a look and I realize it was one of my father’s guards with me that day with my father. “There’s a sitting area up there.”

“Logan, you should stay here,” Pete says.

“Yeah, well, I should do a lot of things, Pete. But I guess I like to break the rules,” I reply as I throw open an exit door and run up the stairs.

I open the door to the rooftop garden. Again, it's empty, devoid of everyone but two people, Anna and Hans.

My heart leaps as I see that Hans has Anna cornered. But it's not his proximity to her that makes me stop breathing, it's the Colt 45 in his hand.

Hans looks over at me. "Christ, another one," he snarls.

"Put down the gun, Hans," I say as calmly as I can.

"We both know that's not going to happen," he says.

"You'll be caught if you use the gun," Anna says.

"Who says I'm firing it," he replies, an evil smirk on his face. "You know, out of everyone, I never thought you two would be the ones to figure it out. That's why I had you sent so far away. I figured I'd deal with you later."

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“Well, I never thought my own uncle would try to kill me,” Anna snarls.

Hans shrugs. “Your families are a means to an end. Trust me, I had to put up with a lot of your royal bullshit for way too many years. I tried to take care of you brats when you were little, but you weren’t where you were supposed to be. You know it was me who suggested you go to that camp once I learned that Logan here was going. I’m sorry, or is it still ‘Eddie’?” he asks, looking at me.

A chill runs down my spine. The kids that were killed at our camp...that was supposed to be us.

“After that, I had to lie low for a while. But when I had the chance to take out your mother, that was an easy call. I was hoping you were in the car, but my intel was bad,” he says to me. I’m trying to wrap my head around the fact that he just admitted to killing my mother when I see him turn toward Anna.

“Your mother was much easier to take out. She shouldn’t have pried into my affairs so much. But she was getting too close, too close to Sebastian. She suspected he was stirring the anti-monarchist movement over in Montelandia. She would have figured out it was me sooner or later. So, I had her removed,” he says, nonchalantly, as though Anna’s mother was nothing more than a weed that needed to be pulled out of the garden.

Anna’s mouth drops open as a total look of horror takes over her face. “Why? Why would you even marry Aunt Lara?” she says.

“Because, I got more security, all the intel, plus I could easily persuade your father on

matters like where to send you to camp, or to let you go to the Bahamas and use my house and my jet, or to let your mother go by herself to the gala. Your fathers are both the most gullible men ever. I've spent almost twenty years of my life orchestrating every little thing. And it's all led up to this." He looks down at his watch. "I had hoped you would all be at the palace for the big fireworks display in about ten minutes, but I guess you two will have a little accident up here. Six stories is a long way down," he says, motioning toward the railing next to Anna. She looks over it, and I can see her swallow.

"You can jump yourself, or Logan here will shoot you," he says. I realize at that moment, he's going to shoot Anna, and then me and make it look like he acted in self-defense. I'm not sure what comes over me, but before I can think further, I'm jumping in front of Anna as I hear his gun go off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

They say death is peaceful. But I don't feel peaceful. I fall in front of Anna, and I feel the pain immediately. I hear Anna scream and fall down, pressing her hands to my chest.

A split second later, I hear another "pop" of a gun. I close my eyes as a sense of tiredness I've never known overtakes me.

"Logan! No! Stay with me!! Please!" I hear Anna's screams, and I fight to open my eyes.

"Please! I can't lose you too!" she cries. I grip her hand with the little strength I have left.

"I'm here," I manage to croak out as I give up fighting with my heavy eyelids.

I can hear Anna's sobs. And I hear more voices.

"He's been shot," she cries. "Pete! Help him! I'm fine!"

"Stay with us, Logan," Pete's voice says, but it's like it's getting further away, a tunnel between us.

"Over here," someone says, and that's the last thing I remember.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It's Anna's hand that I feel as my mind stirs toward consciousness. I don't know how I can tell it's her hand, but I know it is. I try to move my finger, but it feels so heavy. My eyelids are also too heavy to open. I try to will them to move but nothing. I slowly drift back into sleep.

The next time I wake, I hear so many voices. This time I can smell the hospital smell, disinfectants, and stale body fluids. I feel nauseous. There's something heavy on my arm, not Anna's hand, but I can smell her, not her perfume or her shampoo, but her. I know she's nearby. I try to move my finger again, but I can't. The heavy thing on my arm moves. I hear more voices. They sound like a jumble of sounds, and I can't pinpoint one from the other, there's too many. I try to speak but I can't. I drift back to sleep.

The third time I wake, it's the pain I feel. My body is sore, my chest hurts. The heaviness is back on my arm. I use all my strength to open my eyes. I feel my lids move, and I'm blinded by the light. I close them again and squint. It takes me a few long moments to adjust to the brightness and then another few moments to focus. I look down and discover the heaviness on my arm is Anna's head. She's fallen asleep, her hand on mine, and her head on top of her hand. She's sitting in a chair. She looks so uncomfortable. Her hair's a wild mess, and there are dark circles under her eyes,

but she still looks beautiful.

I look around the room as I try to remember everything that happened. That's when I remember the gun. I glance down and see my chest is wrapped in bandages. I was shot.

I move my finger, and Anna stirs. Her eyes blink several times and go wide as she looks into my eyes. It's the sweetest thing I've ever seen. Her face lights up.

"You're awake," she whispers in a groggy voice as she clears her throat. I start to try to speak but realize my throat is dry and hurts.

"Wait, don't speak. Let me get the doctor," she says, fumbling with a remote on the bed and pressing a call button. "He's awake," is all she says. Then her gaze comes back to me. I feel her squeeze my hand, and I squeeze back. Her eyes brim with tears.

I want to tell her not to cry. That I'm alright. I use what little strength I have to reach for her cheek, brushing away a stray tear. She clasps my hand in both of hers and brings it to her lips, peppering it with kisses.

A moment later, the door flies open. A doctor, my father, my grandparents, and King Michael all come barreling into the room.

My grandmother rushes to my side.

"Logan," she manages before a sob escapes her lips. I grab her hand, and she squeezes mine.

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“Hi, Logan. I’m Dr. Lasson. I think we met before. I’m going to examine you, and then Nurse Hilda will get you some water. Try not to speak yet. We had to intubate you when you arrived, so your throat is going to be sore,” the doctor explains as he begins to check me over. After a thorough checking, he hands me water. “Slow sips,” he urges.

I take a sip, and it’s like heaven. The liquid is cool and takes away some of the stinging in my throat.

“How’s that?” he asks.

“Good,” I barely croak.

“It’ll take a few days for your voice to get back to normal. Try whispering until then. Do you remember what happened?” he asks me. I look around the room. Everyone looks so worried.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“You were lucky. The bullet didn’t hit your heart. We did have to do some artery work, but you’re fortunate because your Uncle Sten was a perfect match to donate blood for you,” he says. “You lost quite a bit of blood. We managed to repair all the internal damage. You’ll have a nice scar there, but after a few weeks of physical therapy, I think you’ll be as good as new.”

“Thank you,” I murmur. He nods.

“Well, if you need anything, you just press that call button,” he urges me. I nod as he turns with Nurse Hilda and heads out, leaving me alone with everyone.

“What happened?” I ask no one in particular, looking from person to person.

My father sits down on the edge of my bed. “What do you remember?” he asks me.

“Hans was on the roof. He had a gun. Anna was cornered. I went to block her from him. I remember hearing a gun go off, and then another shot...I don’t remember anything after that,” I say as I try to remember, but nothing comes to mind.

“Hans fired the gun. Pete came through the door and fired at Hans. He was able to radio for help immediately. You probably would have bled out if you hadn’t been at the hospital already,” my father explains with a pained look on his face. He reaches out and puts his hand on mine.

“Hans?” I ask.

My father shakes his head. “It was a kill shot,” my father says.

I feel a splash on my other hand and look over to see tears streaking down Anna’s face. I reach up and brush them away.

“I-it’s my f-fault,” she stammers as she lets the tears fall down her cheeks. “I should have stayed put in Lara’s room. I shouldn’t have gone after him. I’m so sorry, Logan,” she says. King Michael puts a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

“This is not your fault, sweet pea,” her father says.

“I agree with your father,” I say to her.

“What day is it?” I ask, realizing that I have no idea how long I’ve been unconscious.

“It’s Thursday. It’s been three days,” my father says.

“Lara?” I ask.

“She’s breathing on her own and continuing to show signs of improvement. She’s fighting to regain full consciousness. The doctors are hopeful that she’ll regain it in the coming days. She’s opened her eyes and moved her limbs on command. She’s struggled with speaking though, but we’ll see how she progresses in the coming day,” King Michael explains.

“Does she know?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “We haven’t told her yet,” he says, his voice laced with pain. I can’t blame him. I wouldn’t want to explain to my sibling that their husband had been shot and killed and was responsible for trying to kill their whole family.

Slowly, the events of that day start to come back to me as we talk. “The palace? Hans said there was a bomb or something,” I say, remembering Hans’s words on the roof.

“Jack was able to call in a bomb squad. It was dismantled just in time. No one was injured,” King Michael says.

“The others?” I ask.

My father puts a hand on my shoulder. “Everything is fine. The others involved were arrested. Anna shared all of her findings with Jack, who worked with her to find a few more players in this plot. Various staff and security members, who have all been arrested and charged with treason and attempted murder, among other things,” my father says.

“It’s who we thought it was. Victor was the one who moved my computer but he heard me coming and didn’t get another chance to get it,” Anna adds quietly, affirming our suspicions of Marcus, Gregor, and Victor.

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I relax a little in the bed, looking around at the people in the room. It's odd, having my grandparents here with my father. I stare at them.

"You came all the way here?" I ask my grandparents. Pops leans down and kisses my forehead, something he hasn't done since I was a kid.

"Of course, we did, kiddo. We'll always come to you when you need us," Pops says.

"We're so glad you are alright, Eddie," my grandmother says, her eyes filling with tears again.

"Nana, I'm OK," I reassure her.

She nods and wipes a tear from beneath her eye. I look back to Anna. My princess. I smile at her, and she smiles back through her tears.

"We should let you rest," she says quietly.

I nod, realizing just how very tired this short conversation has made me. King Michael leans forward.

"You saved my daughter, Logan. And for that, I will be eternally grateful," he says.

I look over at Anna. "Sir, I would die a thousand deaths to save your daughter because I love her with all my heart," I admit out loud. There's complete and utter silence in the room after I finish speaking. My eyes don't leave Anna's as tears well up in them again.

“I love you too, Logan,” she says to me. “I love you so very much.” And with that, she leans down, careful not to put her weight on me, and kisses me. The feel of her lips against mine is heaven.

“Get a room,” I hear from the doorway.

I pull back and look around to find Auggie and Chris at the door. Auggie’s grin is infectious and soon everyone is laughing and smiling. I can see Hendrick behind them in the doorway. I make eye contact with him. He nods at me and gives me a small smile before stepping to the side. I wonder for a moment if he’s been standing guard by my door this entire time.

My attention is drawn back into the room as King Michael looks over at my father. “I think instead of destroying our families, Hans’s plan ended up bringing them together,” he says as he shakes his head in disbelief.

“Our countries will be stronger for it too,” my father agrees.

I look back at Anna and lace my fingers through hers. She smiles down at me, the first look of happiness I’ve seen on her face in many days now.

She mouths “I love you, Eddie” to me as everyone starts to leave the room.

“I love you too, Suzy,” I say with a grin.

“Let’s leave the lovebirds alone,” I hear my nana say as the door shuts, leaving me alone with my princess. And for the first time in many weeks, I know in my heart that everything will be fine as long as she is by my side.

Epilogue

Susanna

I look at the photos of the summer palace that Shannon has left on my desk. My father didn't waste any time having it restored after the explosion. It's been four months since that fateful day.

I smile at how it is starting to look just as it did before the explosion. It's being set right, one stone at a time. I set the photos aside and look back at my laptop.

My secret laptop is no longer a secret. While I do still help to continue some of my mother's charity work, my father tasked me with a more important job. I helped him to vet a new security team. Pete is now our head of security. I oversee my father's intelligence briefings and act as a royal liaison with our intelligence offices for Norddale and also for Interpol. I'm even working on setting up a joint intelligence taskforce between Norddale and Montelandia. While I may on occasion do some light hacking work, like fixing Sonya's dating issue on her app recently, I don't spend much of my time scouring the dark web anymore. Jack does on occasion ask for my expertise on some of his cases, but we keep that between us, and Pete.

The only secret I have left is the room. I flip the lid down on my laptop and run my hand over the stickers. I smile at it. For years, I put stickers I collected from my travels all over the lid. It's filled with memories. I think about those trips as I make my way up through the tower and the secret bookcase door and finally into the secret room.

I run my fingers over carvings I discovered when I rearranged the room recently. Beneath a shelf, I found my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother's initials carved in the floor. I, of course, added my own. It makes me feel closer to her, in some small way.

I scan the books on the shelf and find one of my favorites, *The Secret Garden*, and I

decide to take it down to my mother's grave and read it. It's a nice day outside, and I want to feel the sun on my face.

I waltz down the steps and outside. The pebbles of the path rattle beneath my feet as I make my way through the maze of flowers and bushes until I reach her grave. I'm surprised to find Logan sitting there. He has a single rose in his hand.

"Hey," I say to him. He looks up at me and smiles. He looks good. It's taken him a few months to get back to his old self, but he's finally looking like he did when we first met, happy and carefree. He's remained here throughout his recovery. Although his father wanted him to come to Montelandia, he didn't want to go until he was stronger. We have a trip planned for next week.

It was formally announced that he is the son of King Edvard, and his mother was the secret queen. It's been a press field day. And I think that's why Uncle Eddie allowed him to stay here to recover. We haven't announced our relationship to the world yet. It's been nice, to keep something between us for now.

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“Come sit,” he says to me, patting the bench next to him. I sit, and we both look out at the grave and rose bushes.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Talking to your mother,” he says. “You know, we never found her crown.”

“I know,” I say. “Maybe I will someday, but you know what?”

“What?” he asks.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. It’s the first time I’ve thought about the crown in weeks. “If it’s meant to be found, then someday, I will find it.”

“But it means so much to you. You’ve spent most of your life searching for it,” he says.

I shrug. “True, but maybe all that searching was just leading me to you. The crown won’t bring her back. You know what?” I ask.

“What?” he replies.

“I think maybe, it was fate. Fate made me look for it, but really, it was bringing me to you,” I muse.

He turns to me, and he looks so serious that it makes me frown.

“I’ve talked to every other member of your family. I only thought it right to speak with her, wherever she may be because I know how important she was to you,” he says.

“Oh?” I say slowly, confused by what he’s saying.

He turns to me and grips my hands in his. His hand trembles slightly, and I wonder if he’s overworked his muscles at therapy. He’s been pushing himself hard every day. And while I will say he looks amazing, I worry that he overdoes it.

“Anna, I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you.” He pauses. “Not in the Bahamas, but at camp, all those years ago. You are the most beautiful, bravest, smartest, kindest woman I’ve ever met. I don’t know if I would have made it through the last few months without you by my side.”

He pauses and draws a breath. “I don’t want to ever do anything again without you by my side.” He moves suddenly, and he’s on his knee in front of me, still holding my hands in his. “You may be the Princess of Norddale, but you’re also my princess, my Anna. But what I want more than anything, is for you to be my wife. I love you with all my heart, Anna. I want us to be together, forever. Will you do me the honor of being my wife?” he asks, as he pulls out a box from his pocket. It’s red, and he pops it up to reveal a sapphire surrounded by diamonds. It’s absolutely breathtaking.

“I was told that this was my mother’s engagement ring,” he says. “Only this time, it won’t be given in secret. I want to shout my love for you from the mountaintops.”

I’m speechless, completely and utterly speechless.

“So, will you...be my wife?” he asks again, his voice trembling a bit on the last word. I look from the ring to his eyes and back again.

I nod, the words not coming from my mouth.

“Is that a yes?” he confirms.

“Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!” I finally manage to squeal as I leap into his arms knocking us both down onto the ground. He laughs and so do I.

He pulls the ring from the box and I hold out my hand so he can slide it onto my finger. I’m lying on top of him, and we are both grinning like fools.

“I love you, Logan Edvard Winters Hansen,” I say to him.

“And I love you, Susanna Lisbet Louise Alexander,” he says as he leans up and kisses me.

Logan

Susanna grips my hand as we walk into the royal palace of Montelandia. It’s even larger than Norddale’s royal palace, and it’s on a hill overlooking the city. I can’t believe I’m here. It’s been two weeks since Anna agreed to marry me. Tomorrow, we will announce our engagement to the world, and we fully expect the chaos to begin.

Auggie suggested we just elope and tell everyone about it later. I won’t say I didn’t consider that for a good few minutes, but my fierce princess wants a real wedding, so a real wedding she will have.

My father greets us in the great hall, hugging us both.

“How was your trip?” he asks.

“Good,” I say.

“Hey, you made it,” my uncle calls out as he comes into the hall. We hug. I’ve spent a fair amount of time getting to know them both over the past few months. They are starting to feel like family to me.

I turn and Pete enters the great hall, pushing a wheelchair, a wheelchair containing Lara. Hendrick walks in behind him. I glance at him briefly as he scans the room. And then I let him do his job as I focus back on Lara. It’s her first time going anywhere. She’s still gaining her strength every day. Her speech is back, but she struggles for words on occasion. The doctors now believe she will be able to make a full recovery, but she still has several months of rehabilitation ahead of her. She’s struggled with the news of Hans’s involvement in the plot against our families. Sten stayed with her much of that time, reminiscing on their childhoods. It was at Anna’s insistence that Lara agreed to come with us.

“Lara?” Sten says, a smile forming on his lips.

“These two made me come,” she grumbles, but a smile threatens to break out on her face.

“Oh, did they?” he says with a laugh. “I’ve got her from here, Pete,” he says as he goes and takes over her wheelchair. “I’m going to show her to the guest quarters.”

Anna waves to her aunt who waves back and blows us a kiss. Somehow, I think my sneaky fiancée is playing matchmaker, but she and I will chat about that later.

“I have something to show you,” my father says to me. He seems excited, like a kid opening birthday gifts.

We follow him upstairs and down a hallway. We reach large oak double doors, with carvings of deer on them. He pushes them open, and I’m greeted by a nursery. I look at him puzzled.

“We aren’t...I mean...Anna’s not...” I flounder for the right words.

He chuckles. “No, I don’t think that. I wanted to show you your room,” he says as he waves a hand around. I walk in and look around. But it’s the photo on a shelf that draws my attention. It’s a photograph of my father, my mother, and me as a baby. I walk up to it and pick it up, studying it.

“That’s the only one of all of us,” he says sadly as he comes to stand next to me.

I look up at him. “We have a lot to catch up on, don’t we?” I ponder.

“We do, son, we do. But we have the rest of our lives to do it,” he says.

I turn back to Anna who’s watching us.

“Come here, Anna. I want to show you a photograph of my family,” I say to her. She walks over to me, and I wrap my arm around her. Standing between my father and my future bride, I suddenly feel overwhelmed by love. And I know whatever challenges we face in the future, we will face head-on because together we are fierce and valiant.