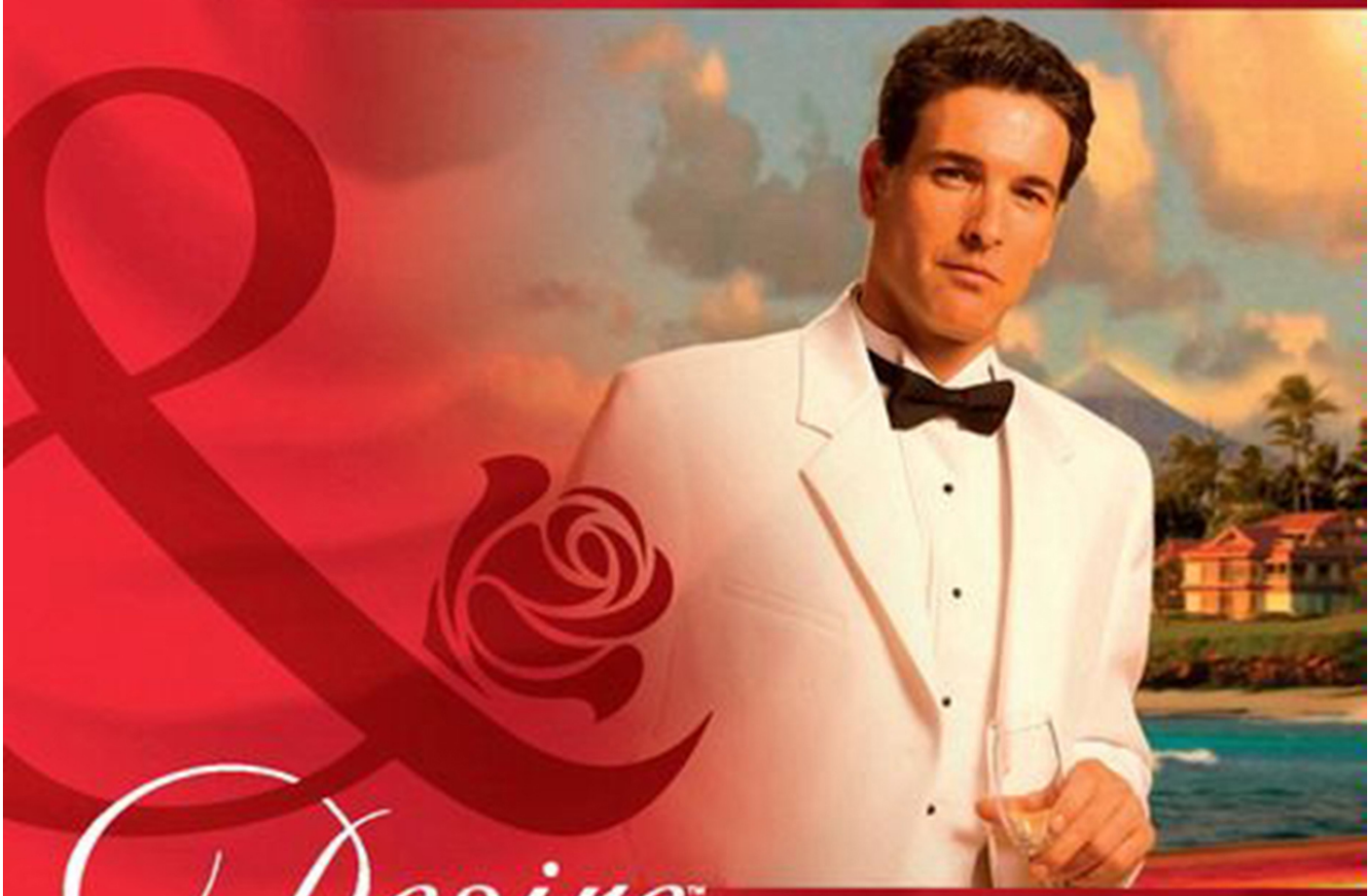
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Christmas with the Prince She was just there to do a job…not fall in love! But Olivia Montgomery was having a difficult time remembering that when sexy Prince Aaron kept pursuing her. How could an ordinary woman hope to resist such a seduction? She couldn't stop wishing she'd find an engagement ring under the Christmas tree.Reserved for the TycoonWorking in the elegant hotel on the lush Hawaiian island of Maui meant Vanessa could take the revenge she had planned for Brock Tyler, the resort's ruthless owner. But was this devastatingly handsome – and dangerously charming – man beginning to suspect his new "right-hand woman"? And was that the reason for the sizzling seduction that was making it hard to keep her mind on sabotage…?

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Christmas with the Prince

by

Michelle Celmer
Reserved for the Tycoon

by

Charlene Sands



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“Liv,” he called softly, but she didn’t budge.

Apparently she was more tired than she’d realized. He found a spare blanket in the closet, and walked back to the bed to cover her. For reasons he couldn’t begin to understand, he felt compelled to just look at her.

She’s not your type, he reminded himself.

If he was going to be honest with himself, his “type” had plenty to offer physically, but intellectually, he was usually left feeling bored and unfulfilled. Maybe it was time for a change of pace.

Seducing a woman like Liv might be just what he needed to spice things up.

About the Author

Bestselling author **MICHELLE CELMER** lives in southeastern Michigan with her husband, their three children, two dogs and two cats. When she's not writing or busy being a mom, you can find her in the garden or curled up with a romance novel. And if you twist her arm real hard you can usually persuade her into a day of power shopping. Michelle loves to hear from readers. Visit her website at *www.michellecelmer.com*, or write her at PO Box 300, Clawson, MI 48017, USA.

To my mom, Who has been not only my teacher, my confidante, and my most dedicated fan, but one of my best friends. Love you!

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the next installment of my ROYAL SEDUCTIONS series. I can hardly believe we're already on book six, the story of Prince Aaron Felix Gastel Alexander and genetic botanist Olivia Montgomery. A royal heir and an orphan abandoned at the age of three.

Can you say, opposites attract?

These two were definitely a handful! How do you take two independent, headstrong people and make them bend to your creative will? The truth is, you don't. As a writer, all you can really do is sit back and let them lead you on their journey. And with Aaron and Liv, there was never a dull moment. Especially when these two very different people suddenly realized maybe they weren't so different after all. And when all is said and done, family isn't about bloodlines and pedigrees and fitting in, but instead the people you hold most dear in your heart.

Don't forget to look for the next book in the ROYAL SEDUCTIONS series, the story of Princess Louisa and millionaire mogul Garrett Sutherland.

Best,

Michelle

Chapter One

Olivia Montgomery was attractive for a scientist.

Attractive in a brainy, geeky sort of way. From a distance, at least. And not at all what Prince Aaron had expected.

He watched her gaze up at the castle from his office window, a look of awe on her heart-shaped face, her bow mouth formed into a perfect *O* beneath eyes as large as dinner plates.

He supposed it wasn't every day that a woman was asked to uproot her entire life, stay at a royal castle for an indeterminable period and use her vast knowledge to save an entire country from potential absolute financial devastation.

Of course, from what he'd read of their new guest, her life to date had been anything but typical. Most kids didn't graduate from high school at fifteen, receive their Ph.D. at twenty-two and earn a reputation as a pioneer in the field of botanical genetics at twenty-four. He would swear she didn't look a day over eighteen, due in part to the long, blondish-brown hair she wore pulled back in a ponytail and the backpack she carried slung over one shoulder.

He watched as Derek, his personal assistant, led her into the castle, then he took a seat at his desk to wait for them, feeling uncharacteristically anxious. He had been assured that in the field of genetic botany, she was the best. Meaning she could very well be their last hope.

Specialist after specialist had been unable to diagnose or effectively treat the blight plaguing their crops. A disease that had begun in the east fields, and spread to affect not only a good portion of the royal family's land, but had recently been reported in surrounding farms, as well. Unchecked, the effects could be financially devastating to their agriculturally based economy.

His family—hell, the entire country—was counting on him to find a way to fix it.

Talk about pressure. He used to believe that his older brother, Christian, the crown prince, had it rough, carrying the burden of one day taking over as ruler, and the responsibility of marrying and producing a royal heir. But to Aaron's surprise, after a slightly rocky start, Chris seemed to be embracing his new title as husband.

For Aaron, the thought of tying himself down to one woman for the rest of his life gave him cold chills. Not that he didn't love women. He just loved lots of different women. And when the novelty of one wore thin, he liked having the option of moving on to something new. Although, now that Chris was blissfully married off, their mother, the queen, had taken an active and unsettling interest in Aaron's love life. He never knew there were so many eligible young women with royal blood, and his mother seemed hell-bent on setting him up with every single one of them.

She would figure out eventually that all the meddling in the world wouldn't bring him any closer to the altar. At least, he hoped she would. She could instead focus on marrying off his twin sisters, Anne and Louisa.

Several minutes passed before there was a rap at Aaron's office door. Undoubtedly Derek had been explaining policy for meeting members of the royal family to their guest. What she should and shouldn't do or say. It could be a bit overwhelming. Especially for someone who had never been in the presence of royalty before.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened and Derek appeared, followed closely by Miss Montgomery. Aaron rose from his chair to greet her, noticing right away her height. He was just over six feet tall, and in flat-heeled, conservative loafers she stood nearly eye level. It was difficult to see her figure under the loose khaki pants and baggy, cable-knit sweater, although she gave the impression of being quite slim. *Too* slim, even. All sharp and angular.

Missing was the lab coat, pocket protector and cola-bottle glasses one might expect from a scientist. She wore no makeup or jewelry, and was for all accounts quite plain, yet she was undeniably

female. Attractive in a simple way. Cute and girlish. Although at twenty-five, she was definitely a woman.

"Your Highness," Derek said, "May I introduce Miss Olivia Montgomery, of the United States." He turned to Miss Montgomery. "Miss Montgomery, may I present Prince Aaron Felix Gastel Alexander of Thomas Isle."

Miss Montgomery stuck her hand out to shake his, then, realizing her error, snatched it back and dipped into an awkward, slightly wobbly curtsy instead, her cheeks coloring an enchanting shade of pink. "It's an honor to be here, sir—I mean, Your Highness."

Her voice was softer than he'd expected. Low and breathy, and dare he say a little sexy. He'd always found an American accent undeniably appealing.

"The honor is mine," he said, reaching out for a shake. She hesitated a second, then accepted his hand. Her hands were slender and fine-boned, with long fingers that wrapped around his with a surprisingly firm grip. Her skin was warm and soft, her nails short but neatly filed.

She gazed at him with eyes an intriguing shade—not quite brown, and not quite green—and so large and inquisitive they seemed to take up half her face. Everything about her was a little overexaggerated and…unexpected.

But she couldn't be any less his type. He preferred his women small and soft in all the right places, and the more beautiful the better. Not particularly smart, either, because frankly, he wasn't in it for the conversation. The fewer brains, the less likely he was to become attached. As long as she could navigate a golf course or squash court, or rock a pair of crosscountry skis. Sailing experience was a plus, as well, and if she could climb a rock wall, he would be in sheer heaven.

Somehow he didn't see Miss Montgomery as the athletic type.

"I'll be in my office if you need me, sir," Derek told him, then slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him. As it snapped shut, he could swear he saw Miss Montgomery flinch.

He gestured to the chair opposite his desk. "Miss Montgomery, make yourself comfortable."

She set her backpack on the floor beside her and sat awkwardly on the very edge of the cushion. She folded her hands in her lap, then unfolded them. Then she tucked them around the sides of her thighs and under her legs. She looked very uncomfortable.

"I apologize for being so late," she said.

He perched on the corner of his desk. "I hear you hit some bad weather on the way over."

She nodded. "It was a bumpy flight. And I'm not real crazy about flying to begin with. In fact, I might look into taking a ship home."

"Can I offer you a drink, Miss Montgomery?"

"No, thank you. And please, call me Liv. Everyone does."

"All right, Liv. And because we'll be spending quite some time together, you should call me Aaron."

She hesitated, then asked, "Is that…allowed?"

He grinned. "I assure you, it's perfectly acceptable."

She nodded, her head a little wobbly on the end of a very long and slender neck. She had the kind of throat made for stroking and nibbling. But somehow he didn't see her as the nibbling type. She had shy and repressed written all over her. No doubt, he could teach her a thing or two. Not that he intended to. Or even possessed the desire.

Well, maybe just a little, but purely out of curiosity.

"My family apologizes that they couldn't be here to greet you," he told her. "They're in England to see my father's cardiologist. They'll be back Friday."

"I look forward to meeting them," she said, although she sounded more wary than enthusiastic. She had no reason to be apprehensive. In the history of his father's reign as king, her visit might very well be the most anticipated and appreciated. Not that she was offering her services for free. They had

agreed to make a handsome donation to fund her research. Personally she hadn't asked for anything more than room and board. No special amenities, or even a personal maid to tend to her care.

"I'm told that you looked at the disease samples we sent you," he said.

She nodded, not so wobbly this time. "I did. As well as the data from the other specialists."

"And what conclusion have you drawn?"

"You have yourself a very unusual, very resistant strain of disease that I've never seen before. And trust me when I say I've pretty much seen them all."

"Your references are quite impressive. I've been assured that if anyone can diagnose the problem, it's you."

"There is no *if."* She looked him directly in the eye and said firmly, "It's simply a matter of *when."*

Her confidence, and the forceful tone with which she spoke, nearly knocked him backward.

Well, he hadn't seen that coming. It was almost as though someone flipped a switch inside of her and a completely different woman emerged. She sat a little straighter and her voice sounded stronger. Just like that, he gained an entirely new level of respect for her.

"Have you thought about my suggestion to stop all agricultural exports?" she asked.

That was *all* he'd been thinking about. "Even the unaffected crops?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Is that really necessary?"

"For all we know, it could be lying dormant in the soil of areas that *appear* unaffected. And until we know what this thing is, we don't want it to get off the island."

He knew she was right, but the financial repercussions would sting. "That means we have only until the next season, less than five months, to identify the disease and find an environmentally friendly cure."

Environmentally friendly so that they could maintain their reputation as a totally organic, green island. Millions had been spent to radically alter the way every farmer grew his crops. It was what set them apart from other distributors and made them a valuable commodity.

"Can it be done in that time frame?" he asked.

"The truth is, I don't know. These things can take time."

It wasn't what he wanted to hear, but he appreciated her honesty. He'd wanted her to fly in, have the problem solved in a week or two, then be on her way, making him look like a hero in not only his family, but also his country's eyes.

So much for that delusion of grandeur.

"Once I get set up in the lab and have a few days to study the rest of the data, I may be able to give you some sort of time frame," she said.

"We have a student from the university on standby, should you need an assistant."

"I'll need someone to take samples, but in the lab I prefer to work alone. You have all the equipment I need?"

"Everything on your list." He rose to his feet. "I can show you to your room and give you time to settle in."

She stood, as well, smoothing the front of her slacks with her palms. He couldn't help wondering what she was hiding behind that bulky sweater. Were those breasts he saw? And hips? Maybe she wasn't as sharp and angular as he'd first thought.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I'd rather get right to work."

He gestured to the door. "Of course. I'll take you right to the lab."

She certainly didn't waste any time, did she? And he was relieved to know that she seemed determined to help.

The sooner they cured this blight, the sooner they could all breathe easy again.

Chapter Two

Liv followed her host through the castle, heart thumping like mad, praying she didn't do something stupid like trip over her own feet and fall flat on her face.

Prince Aaron was, by far, the most beautiful man she had ever laid eyes on. His hair so dark and soft-looking, his eyes a striking, mesmerizing shade of green, his full lips always turned up in a sexy smile.

He had the deep and smoky voice of a radio DJ and a body to die for. A muscular backside under dark tailored slacks. Wide shoulders and bulging pecs encased in midnight-blue cashmere. As she followed him through the castle she felt hypnotized by the fluid grace with which he moved.

He was…perfect. An eleven on a scale of one to ten. And the antithesis of the scientists and geeks she was used to keeping company with. Like William, her fiancé—or at least he would be her fiancé if she decided to accept the proposal of marriage he had stunned her with just last night in the lab.

Fifteen years her senior and her mentor since college, Will wasn't especially handsome, and he was more studious than sexy, but he was kind and sweet and generous. The truth was, his proposal had come so far out of left field that it had nearly given her whiplash. They had never so much as kissed, other than a friendly peck on the cheek on holidays or special occasions. But she respected him immensely and loved him as a friend. So she had promised to give his proposal serious thought while she was away. Even though, when he'd kissed her goodbye at the airport—a real kiss with lips and tongue—she hadn't exactly seen fireworks. But sexual attraction was overrated and fleeting at best. They had respect and a deep sense of friendship.

Although she couldn't help wondering if she would be settling.

Yeah, right. Like she had a mob of other men pounding down her door. She couldn't even recall the last time she'd been on a date. And sex, well, it had been so long she wasn't sure she even remembered how. Not that it had been smoking hot anyhow. The one man she'd slept with in college had been a budding nuclear physicist, and more concerned with mathematical equations than figuring out sexual complexities. She bet Prince Aaron knew his way around a woman's body.

Right, Liv, and I suppose the prince is going to show you.

The thought was so ridiculous she nearly laughed out loud. What would a gorgeous, sexy prince see in a nerdy, totally *unsexy* woman like her?

"So, what do you think of our island?" Aaron asked as they descended the stairs together.

"What I've seen of it is beautiful. And the castle isn't at all what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Honestly, I thought it would be kind of dark and dank." In reality, it was light and airy and beautifully decorated. And so enormous! A person could get hopelessly lost wandering the long, carpeted halls. She could hardly believe she would be spending weeks, maybe even months, there. "I expected stone walls and suits of armor in the halls."

The prince chuckled, a deep, throaty sound. "We're a bit more modern than that. You'll find the guest rooms have all the amenities and distinction you would expect from a five-star hotel."

Not that she would know the difference, seeing as how she'd never been in anything more luxurious than a Days Inn.

"Although…" He paused and looked over at her. "The only feasible place for the lab, short of building a new facility on the grounds, was the basement."

She shrugged. It wouldn't be the first time she'd worked in a basement lab. "That's fine with me."

"It used to be a dungeon."

Her interest piqued. "Seriously?"

He nodded. “Very dark and dank at one time, complete with chains on the wall and torture devices.”

She gazed at him skeptically. “You’re joking, right?”

“Completely serious. It’s been updated since then of course. We use it for food and dry storage, and the wine cellar. The laundry facilities are down there, as well. I think you’ll be impressed with the lab. Not dark or dank at all.”

Because the majority of her time would be spent staring in a microscope or at a computer screen, what the lab looked like didn’t matter all that much to her. As long as it was functional.

He led her through an enormous kitchen bustling with activity and rich with the scents of fresh baked bread and scintillating spices. Her stomach rumbled and she tried to recall the last time she’d eaten. She’d been way too nervous to eat the meal offered on the plane.

There would be time for food later.

Aaron stopped in front of a large wood door that she assumed led to the basement. “There’s a separate employee entrance that the laundry staff use. It leads outside, to the back of the castle. But as a guest, you’ll use the family entrance.”

“Okay.”

He reached for the handle but didn’t open the door. “There is one thing I should probably warn you about.”

Warn her? That didn’t sound good. “Yes?”

“As I said, the basement has been updated.”

“But…?”

“It did used to be a dungeon.”

She wasn’t getting his point. “Okay.”

“A lot of people died down there.”

Was she going to trip over bodies on her way to the lab or something? “Recently?”

He laughed. “No, of course not.”

Then she wasn’t seeing the problem. “So…?”

“That bothers some people. And the staff is convinced it’s haunted.”

Liv looked at him as though he’d gone completely off his rocker.

“I take it you don’t believe in ghosts,” Aaron said.

“The existence of spirits, or an afterlife, have never been proven scientifically.”

He should have expected as much from a scientist. “Well, then, I guess you have nothing to fear.”

“Do you?” she asked.

“Believe in ghosts?” Truthfully, he’d never felt so much as a cold draft down there, but people had sworn to hearing disembodied voices and seeing ghostly emanations. There were some members of the staff who refused to even set foot on the stairs. Also there was an unusually high turnover rate among the laundry workers. But he was convinced that it was more likely overactive imaginations than anything otherworldly. “I guess you could say I try to keep an open mind.”

He opened the door and gestured her down. The stairwell was narrow and steep, the wood steps creaky under their feet as they descended.

“It is a little spooky,” she admitted.

At the bottom was a series of passageways that led to several different wings. The walls down here were still fashioned out of stone and mortar, although well lit, ventilated and clean.

“Storage and the wine cellar are that way,” he said, pointing to the passages on the left. “Laundry is straight ahead down the center passage, and the lab is this way.”

He led her to the right, around a corner to a shiny metal door with a thick glass window that to him looked completely out of place with its surroundings. He punched in his security code to unlock it, pulled it open and hit the light switch. The instant the lights flickered on he heard a soft gasp

behind him, and turned to see Liv looking in wide-eyed awe at all the equipment they'd gotten on loan from various facilities on the island and mainland. The way one might view priceless art. Or a natural disaster.

She brushed past him into the room. "This is perfect," she said in that soft, breathy voice, running her hands along pieces of equipment whose purpose he couldn't begin to imagine. Slow and tender, as if she were stroking a lover's flesh.

Damn. He could get turned on watching her do that, imagining those hands roaming over him.

If she were his type at all, which she wasn't. Besides, he wasn't lacking for female companionship.

"It's small," he said.

"No, it's perfect." She turned to him and smiled, a dreamy look on her face. "I wish my lab back home were this complete."

He was surprised that it wasn't. "I was under the impression that you were doing some groundbreaking research."

"Yes, but funding is an issue no matter what kind of work you're doing. Especially when you're an independent, like me."

"There must be someone willing to fund your research."

"Many, but there's *way* too much bureaucracy in the private sector. I prefer to do things my way."

"Then our donation should go far."

She nodded eagerly. "The truth is, a few more weeks and I might have been homeless. You called in the nick of time."

She crossed the room to the metal shipping containers that had preceded her arrival by several days. "I see my things made it safely."

"Do you need help unpacking?"

She vigorously shook her head. "There are sensitive materials and equipment in here. I'd rather do it myself."

That seemed like an awful lot of work for one person. "The offer for the assistant is still good. I can have someone here Friday morning."

She looked at her watch, her face scrunching with confusion. "And what's today? The time change from the U.S. has me totally screwed up."

"It's Tuesday. Five o'clock."

"P.M.?"

"Yes. In fact, dinner is at seven."

She nodded, but still looked slightly confused.

"Out of curiosity, when was the last time you slept?"

She scrunched her face again, studied her watch for a second, then shrugged and said, "I'm not sure. Twenty hours at least. Probably more."

"You must be exhausted."

"I'm used to it. I keep long hours in the lab."

Twenty hours was an awfully long time, even for a workaholic, and he'd traveled often enough to know what jet lag could do to a person. Especially someone unaccustomed to long plane trips. "Maybe before you tackle unpacking the lab you should at least take a nap."

"I'm fine, really. Although, I guess I wouldn't mind a quick change of clothes."

"Why don't I show you to your room."

She looked longingly at all of the shiny new equipment, then nodded and said, "All right."

He switched off the lights and shut the door, hearing it lock automatically behind him.

"Will I get my own code?" she asked.

"Of course. You'll have full access to whatever and wherever you need."

He led Liv back through the kitchen and up the stairs to the third floor, to the guest rooms. She looked a bit lost when they finally reached her door.

"The castle is so big and confusing," she said.

"It's not so bad once you learn your way around."

"I don't exactly have a great sense of direction. Don't be surprised if you find me aimlessly wandering the halls."

"I'll have Derek print you up a map." He opened her door and gestured her in.

"It's beautiful," she said in that soft, breathy voice. "So pretty."

Far too feminine and fluffy for his taste, with its flowered walls and frilly drapes, but their female guests seemed to appreciate it. Although he never would have pegged Liv as the girly-girl type. She was just too…analytical. Too practical. On the surface anyhow.

"The bathroom and closet are that way," he said, gesturing to the door across the room. But Liv's attention was on the bed.

"It looks so comfortable." She crossed the room to it and ran one hand over the flowered duvet. "So soft."

She was a tactile sort of woman. Always stroking and touching things. And he couldn't help but wonder how those hands would feel touching him.

"Why don't you take it for a spin," he said. "The lab can wait."

"Oh, I shouldn't," she protested, but she was already kicking off her shoes and crawling on top of the covers. She settled back against the pillows and sighed blissfully. Her eyes slipped closed. "Oh, this is heavenly."

He hadn't actually meant right that second. The average guest would have waited until he'd left the room, not flop down into bed right in front of him. But he could see that there was nothing average about Olivia Montgomery.

At least she hadn't undressed first. Not that he wasn't curious to see what she was hiding under those clothes. He was beginning to think there was much more to Liv than she let show.

"You'll find your bags in the closet. Are you sure you wouldn't like a maid to unpack for you?"

"I can do it," she said, her voice soft and sleepy.

"If you change your mind, let me know. Other than that, you should have everything you need. There are fresh towels and linens in the bathroom. As well as toiletries. If you need anything else, day or night, just pick up the phone. The kitchen is always open. You're also welcome to use the exercise room or game room, day or night. We want you to feel completely comfortable here."

He walked to the window and pushed the curtain aside, letting in a shaft of late-afternoon sunshine. "You have quite a lovely view of the ocean and the gardens from here. Although there isn't much to see in the gardens this time of year. We could take a walk out there tomorrow."

Or not, he thought, when she didn't answer him. Then he heard a soft rumbling sound from the vicinity of the bed.

She had turned on her side and lay all curled up in a ball, hugging the pillow. He walked over to the bed and realized that she was sound asleep.

"Liv," he called softly, but she didn't budge. Apparently she was more tired than she'd realized.

He found a spare blanket in the closet, noticing her luggage while he was in there, and the conspicuously small amount of it. Just two average-size bags that had seen better days. The typical female guest, especially one there for an extended stay, brought a whole slew of bags.

He reminded himself once again that Liv was not the typical royal guest. And, he was a little surprised to realize, he liked that about her. It might very well be a refreshing change.

He walked back to the bed and covered her with the blanket, then, for reasons he couldn't begin to understand, felt compelled to just look at her for a moment. The angles of her face softened when she slept, making her appear young and vulnerable.

She's not your type, he reminded himself.

If he was going to be honest with himself, his “type” had plenty to offer physically, but intellectually, he was usually left feeling bored and unfulfilled. Maybe it was time for a change of pace.

Seducing a woman like Liv might be just what he needed to spice things up.

Chapter Three

It was official. Liv was lost.

She stood in an unfamiliar hallway on what she was pretty sure was the second floor, looking for the staircase that would lead her down to the kitchen. She'd been up and down two separate sets of stairs already this morning, and had wandered through a dozen different hallways. Either there were two identical paintings of the same stodgy-looking old man in a military uniform, or she'd been in this particular hallway more than once.

She looked up one end to the other, hopelessly turned around, wondering which direction she should take. She felt limp with hunger, and the backpack full of books and papers hung like a dead weight off one shoulder. If she didn't eat soon, her blood sugar was going to dip into the critical zone.

She did a very scientific, eenie-meenie-minie-moe, then went left around the corner and plowed face-first into a petite, red-haired maid carrying a pile of clean linens. The force of the collision knocked her off balance and the linens fell to the carpet.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry!" Liv crouched down to pick them up. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"It's no problem, miss," the maid said in a charming Irish brogue, kneeling down to help. "You must be our scientist from the States. Miss Montgomery?"

Liv piled the last slightly disheveled sheet in her arms and they both stood. "Yes, I am."

The maid looked her up and down. "Well, you don't much look like a scientist."

"Yeah, I hear that a lot." And she was always tempted to ask what she did look like, but she was a little afraid of the answer she might get.

"I'm Elise," the maid said. "If you need anything at all, I'm the one to be asking."

"Could you tell me where to find the kitchen? I'm starving."

"Of course, miss. Follow this hallway down and make a left. The stairs will be on your right, about halfway down the hall. Take them down one flight, then turn right. The kitchen is just down the way."

"A left and two rights. Got it."

Elise smiled. "Enjoy your stay, miss."

She disappeared in the direction Liv had just come from. Liv followed her directions and actually found the kitchen, running into—although not literally this time—Prince Aaron's assistant just outside the door.

"Off to work already?" he asked.

"Looking for food actually. I missed dinner last night."

"Why don't you join the prince in the family dining room."

"Okay." She could spend another twenty minutes or so looking for the dining room, and possibly collapse from hunger, or ask for directions. "Could you show me where it is?"

He smiled and gestured in the opposite direction from the kitchen. "Right this way."

It was just around the corner. A surprisingly small but luxurious space with French doors overlooking the grounds. A thick blanket of leaves in brilliant red, orange and yellow carpeted the expansive lawn and the sky was a striking shade of pink as the sun rose above the horizon.

At one end of a long, rectangular cherry table, leaning casually in a chair with a newspaper propped beside him, sat Prince Aaron. He looked up when they entered the room, then rose to his feet.

"Well, good morning," he said with a smile, and her stomach suddenly bound up into a nervous knot.

"Shall I take your bag?" Derek asked her.

Liv shook her head. That backpack had all of her research. She never trusted it to anyone else. "I've got it, thanks."

"Well, then, enjoy your breakfast," Derek said, leaving her alone with the prince. Just the two of them.

Only then did it occur to her that she might have been better off eating alone. What would they say to each other? What could they possibly have in common? A prince and an orphan?

The prince, on the other hand, looked completely at ease. In jeans and a flannel shirt he was dressed much more casually than the day before. He looked so…*normal.* Almost out of place in the elegant room.

He pulled out the chair beside his own. "Have a seat."

As she sat, she found herself enveloped in the subtle, spicy scent of his aftershave. She tried to recall if William, her possibly-soon-to-be fiancé, wore aftershave or cologne. If he had, she'd never noticed.

The prince's fingers brushed the backs of her shoulders as he eased her chair in and she nearly jolted against the sudden and intense zing of awareness.

He was *touching* her.

Get a grip, Liv. It wasn't like he was coming on to her. He was being *polite* and she was acting like a schoolgirl with a crush. Even when she *was* a schoolgirl she had never acted this way. She'd been above the temptation that had gotten so many other girls from high school in trouble. Or as her last foster mom, Marsha, used to put it, *in the family way.*

Then the prince placed both hands on her shoulders and her breath caught in her lungs.

His hands felt big and solid and warm. You are not going to blush, she told herself, but already she could feel a rush of color searing her cheeks, which only multiplied her embarrassment.

It was nothing more than a friendly gesture, and here she was having a hot flash. Could this be any more humiliating?

"Do you prefer coffee or tea?" he asked.

"Coffee, please," she said, but it came out high and squeaky.

He leaned past her to reach for the carafe on the table, and as he did, the back of her head bumped the wall of his chest. She was sure it was just her imagination, but she swore she felt his body heat, heard the steady thump of his heart beating. Her own heart was hammering so hard that it felt as though it would beat its way out of her chest.

Shouldn't a servant be doing that? she wondered as he poured her a cup and slid it in front of her. Then he *finally* backed away and returned to his chair, resuming the same casual, relaxed stance —and she took her first full breath since she'd sat down.

"Would you care for breakfast?" he asked.

"Please," she said, though her throat was so tight, she could barely get air to pass through, much less food. But if she didn't eat something soon, she would go into hypoglycemic shock. She just hoped she didn't humiliate herself further. She was so used to eating at her desk in the lab, or in a rush over the kitchen sink, she was a little rusty when it came to the rules of etiquette. What if she used the wrong fork, or chewed with her mouth open?

He rang a bell, and within seconds a man dressed in characteristic butler apparel seemed to materialize from thin air.

"Breakfast for our guest, Geoffrey," he said.

Geoffrey nodded and slipped away as stealthily as he'd emerged.

Liv folded her hands in her lap and, because most of her time was spent huddled over her laptop or a microscope, reminded herself to sit up straight.

"I trust you slept well," the prince said.

She nodded. "I woke at seven thinking it was last night, then I looked outside and noticed that the sun was on the wrong side of the horizon."

"I guess you were more tired than you thought."

"I guess so. But I'm anxious to get down to the lab. You said I'll get a password for the door?"

"Yes, in fact…" He pulled a slip of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. As she took it, she felt lingering traces of heat from his body and her cheeks flushed deeper red.

She unfolded the paper and looked at the code—a simple seven-digit number—then handed it back to him.

"Don't you want to memorize it?" he asked.

"I just did."

His eyes widened with surprise, and he folded the paper and put it back in his pocket. "Your ID badge will be ready this morning. You'll want to wear it all the time, so you're not stopped by security. It will grant you full access to the castle, with the exception of the royal family's quarters of course, and any of our agricultural facilities or fields."

"You mentioned something about a map of the castle," she said, too embarrassed to admit that she'd actually gotten lost on her way to breakfast.

"Of course. I'll have Derek print one up for you."

"Thank you."

"So," Prince Aaron said, lounging back in his chair and folding his hands in his lap. "Tell me about yourself. About your family."

"Oh, I don't have any family."

Confusion wrinkled his brow. "Everyone has family."

"I'm an orphan. I was raised in the New York foster care system."

His expression sobered. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

She shrugged. "No reason to be sorry. It's not your fault."

"Do you mind my asking what happened to your parents?"

It's not like her past was some big secret. She had always embraced who she was, and where she came from. "No, I don't mind. My mom died a long time ago. She was a drug addict. Social services took me away from her when I was three."

"What about your father?"

"I don't have one."

At the subtle lift of his brow, she realized how odd that sounded, like she was the product of a virgin birth or something. When the more likely scenario was that her mother had been turning tricks for drug money, and whoever the man was, he probably had no idea he'd fathered a child. And probably wouldn't care if he did know.

She told the prince, "Of course *someone* was my father. He just wasn't listed on my birth certificate."

"No grandparents? Aunts or uncles?"

She shrugged again. "Maybe. Somewhere. No one ever came forward to claim me."

"Have you ever tried to find them?"

"I figure if they didn't want me back then, they wouldn't want me now, either."

He frowned, as though he found the idea disturbing.

"It's really not a big deal," she assured him. "I mean, it's just the way it's always been. I learned to fend for myself."

"But you did have a foster family."

"Families," she corrected. "I had twelve of them."

His eyes widened. "Twelve? Why so many?"

"I was…difficult."

A grin ticked at the corner of his mouth. *"Difficult?"*

"I was very independent." And maybe a little arrogant. None of her foster parents seemed to appreciate a child who was smarter than them and not afraid to say so, and one who had little interest in following their *rules.* "I was emancipated when I was fifteen."

"You were on your own *at fifteen?"*

She nodded. “Right after I graduated from high school.”

He frowned and shook his head, as if it was a difficult concept for him to grasp. “Forgive me for asking, but how does an orphan become a botanical geneticist?”

“A *lot* of hard work. I had some awesome teachers who really encouraged me in high school. Then I got college scholarships and grants. And I had a mentor.” One she might actually be marrying, but she left that part out. And that was a big *might.* William had never given her this breathless, squishy-kneed feeling when he touched her. She never felt much of anything beyond comfortable companionship.

But wasn’t that more important than sexual attraction? Although if she really wanted to marry William, would she be spending so much time talking herself into it?

The butler reappeared with a plate that was all but overflowing with food. Plump sausages and eggs over easy, waffles topped with cream and fresh fruit and flaky croissants with a dish of fresh jam. The scents had her stomach rumbling and her mouth watering. “It looks delicious. Thank you.”

He nodded and left. Not a very talkative fellow.

“Aren’t you eating?” she asked Prince Aaron.

“I already ate, but please, go ahead. You must be famished.”

Starving. And oddly enough, the prince had managed to put her totally at ease, just as he’d done the night before. He was just so laid-back and casual. So…*nice.* Unlike most men, he didn’t seem to be put off or intimidated by her intelligence. And when he asked a question, he wasn’t just asking to be polite. He really listened, his eyes never straying from hers while she spoke. She wasn’t used to talking about herself, but he seemed genuinely interested in learning more about her. Unlike the scientists and scholars who were usually too wrapped up in their research to show any interest in learning about who she was as a person.

It was a nice change of pace.

The prince’s cell phone rang and he unclipped it from his belt to look at the display. Concern flashed across his face. “I’m sorry. I have to take this,” he said, rising to his feet. “Please excuse me.”

She watched him walk briskly from the room and realized she was actually sorry to see him go. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d had a conversation with a man who hadn’t revolved in some way around her research, or funding. Not even William engaged in social dialogue very often. It was nice to just talk to someone for a change. Someone who really listened. Or maybe spending time with the prince was a bad idea. She’d been here less than a day and already she was nursing a pretty serious crush.

Chapter Four

"Any news?" Aaron asked when he answered his brother's call.

"We have results back from Father's heart function test," Christian told him.

Aaron's own heart seemed to seize in his chest. Their father, the king, had been hooked to a portable heart pump four months ago after the last of a series of damaging attacks. The procedure was still in the experimental stages and carried risks, but the doctors were hopeful that it would give his heart a chance to heal from years of heart disease damage.

It was their last hope.

Aaron had wanted to accompany his family to England, but his father had insisted he stay behind to greet Miss Montgomery. *For the good of the country,* he'd said. Knowing he'd been right, Aaron hadn't argued.

Duty first, that was their motto.

"Has there been any improvement?" Aaron asked his brother, not sure if he was ready to hear the answer.

"He's gone from twenty percent heart capacity to thirty-five percent."

"So it's working?"

"Even better than they expected. The doctors are cautiously optimistic."

"That's fantastic!" Aaron felt as though every muscle in his body simultaneously sighed with relief. As a child he had been labeled the easygoing one. Nothing ever bothered Aaron, his parents liked to brag. He was like Teflon. Trouble hit the surface, then slid off without sticking. But he wasn't nearly as impervious to stress as everyone liked to believe. He internalized everything, let it eat away at him. Especially lately, with not only their father's health, but also the diseased crops, and the mysterious, threatening e-mails that had been sporadically showing up in his and his siblings' in-boxes from a fellow who referred to himself, of all things, as the Gingerbread Man. He had not only harassed them through e-mail, but also managed to breach security and trespass on the castle grounds, slipping in and out like a ghost despite added security.

There had been times lately when Aaron felt he was days away from a mandatory trip to the rubber room.

But his father's health was now one concern he could safely, if only temporarily, put aside.

"How much longer do they think he'll be on the pump?" he asked his brother.

"At least another four months. Although probably longer. They'll retest him in the spring."

Aaron had been hoping sooner. On the pump he was susceptible to blood clots and strokes and in rare cases, life-threatening infections. "How is he doing?"

"They had to remove the pump to test his heart and there were minor complications when they reinserted it. Something about scar tissue. He's fine now, but he's still in recovery. They want to keep him here an extra few days. Probably middle of next week. Just to be safe."

As much as Aaron wanted to see his father home, the hospital was the best place for him now. "Is Mother staying with him?"

"Of course. She hasn't left his side. Melissa, the girls and I will be returning Friday as planned."

The girls being Louisa and Anne, their twin sisters, and Melissa, Chris's wife of only four months. In fact, it was on their wedding night that the king had the attack that necessitated the immediate intervention of the heart pump. Though it was in no way Chris and Melissa's fault, they still felt responsible for his sudden downturn.

"Now that Father is improving, maybe it's time you and Melissa rescheduled your honeymoon," Aaron told him.

"Not until he's off the pump altogether," Chris insisted, which didn't surprise Aaron. Chris had always been the responsible sibling. Of course, as crown prince, slacking off had never been an

option. But while some people may have resented having their entire life dictated for them, Chris embraced his position. If he felt restricted by his duties, he never said so.

Aaron wished he could say the same.

"Did Miss Montgomery arrive safely?" Chris asked.

"She did. Although her flight was delayed by weather."

"What was your first impression of her?"

He almost told his brother that she was very cute. And despite what she'd told him, he couldn't imagine her as ever being difficult. She was so quiet and unassuming. But he didn't think that was the sort of *impression* Chris was asking for. "She seems very capable."

"Her references all checked out? Her background investigation was clean?"

Did he honestly think Aaron would have hired her otherwise? But he bit back the snarky comment on the tip of his tongue. Until their father was well, Chris was in charge, and that position deserved the same respect Aaron would have shown the king.

"Squeaky-clean," Aaron assured his brother. "And after meeting her, I feel confident she'll find a cure."

"Everyone will be relieved to hear that. I think we should—" There was commotion in the background, then Aaron heard his sister-in-law's voice, followed by a short, muted conversation, as though his brother had put a hand over the phone.

"Is everything okay, Chris?"

"Yes, sorry," Chris said, coming back on the line. "I have to go. They're wheeling Father back to his room. I'll call you later."

"Send everyone my love," Aaron told him, then disconnected, wishing he could be there with his family. But someone needed to stay behind and hold the fort.

He hooked his phone on his belt and walked back to the dining room. Liv was still there eating her breakfast. She had wiped out everything but half of a croissant, which she was slathering with jam. He didn't think he'd ever seen a woman polish off such a hearty meal. Especially a woman so slim and fit.

For a minute he just stood there watching her. She had dressed in jeans and a sweater and wore her hair pulled back into a ponytail again. He couldn't help grinning when he recalled the way she seized up as he put his hands on her shoulders, and the deep blush in her cheeks. He knew he wasn't exactly playing fair, and it was wrong to toy with her, but he'd never met a woman who wore her emotions so blatantly on her sleeve. There was little doubt that she was attracted to him.

She looked up, saw him standing there and smiled. A sweet, genuine smile that encompassed her entire face. She wasn't what he would consider beautiful or stunning, but she had a wholesome, natural prettiness about her that he found undeniably appealing.

"Sorry about that," he told her, walking to the table.

"S'okay," she said with a shrug, polishing off the last of her croissant and chasing it down with a swallow of coffee. "I think that was the most delicious breakfast I've ever eaten."

"I'll pass your compliments on to the chef." Instead of sitting down, he rested his arms on the back of his chair. "I'm sorry to say you won't be meeting my parents until next week."

Her smile vanished. "Oh. Is everything all right?"

"My father's doctors want to keep him a few days longer. Just in case."

"It's his heart?" she asked, and at his questioning look, added, "When I was offered the position, I looked up your family on the Internet. A ton of stuff came back about your father's health."

He should have figured as much. The king's health had been big news after he collapsed at Chris's wedding reception. But other than to say he had a heart "problem," no specific information had been disclosed about his condition.

"He has advanced heart disease," Aaron told her.

Concern creased her brow. "If you don't mind my asking, what's the prognosis?"

"Actually, he's in an experimental program and we're hopeful that he'll make a full recovery."

"He's getting a transplant?"

"He has a rare blood type. The odds of finding a donor are astronomical." He explained the portable heart pump and how it would take over all heart function so the tissue would have time to heal. "He's very fortunate. Less than a dozen people worldwide are part of the study."

"Heart disease is genetic. I'll bet you and your siblings are very health-conscious."

"Probably not as much as we should be, but the queen sees to it that we eat a proper diet. You know how mothers are." Only after the words were out did he realize that no, she probably didn't know, because she'd never had a real mother. He felt a slash of guilt for the thoughtless comment. But if it bothered her, she didn't let it show.

She dabbed her lips with her napkin, then set it on the table beside her plate. Glancing at the watch on her slender wrist, she said, "I should get down to the lab. I have a lot of unpacking to do."

He stepped behind her to pull her chair out, and could swear he saw her tense the slightest bit when his fingers brushed her shoulders. She rose to her feet and edged swiftly out of his reach.

He suppressed a smile. "You're sure you don't need help unpacking?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

"Well, then, lunch is at one."

"Oh, I don't eat lunch. I'm usually too busy."

"All right, then, dinner is at seven sharp. You do eat dinner?"

She smiled. "On occasion, yes."

He returned the smile. "Then I'll see you at seven."

She walked to the door, then stopped for a second, looking one way, then the other, as though she wasn't sure which direction to take.

"Left," he reminded her.

She turned to him and smiled. "Thanks."

"I'll remind Derek to get you that map."

"Thank you." She stood there another second, and he thought she might say something else, then she shook her head and disappeared from view.

The woman was a puzzle. Thoughtful and confident one minute, then shy and awkward the next. And he realized, not for the first time, that she was one puzzle he'd like to solve.

After a long morning in the fields and an afternoon in the largest of their greenhouse facilities, Aaron looked forward to a quiet dinner and an evening spent with their guest. Even though normally he would arrange some sort of physical, recreational activity like squash or tennis or even just a walk in the gardens, he was more interested in just talking to Liv. Learning more about her life, her past. She was the first woman in a long time whom he'd found both attractive and intellectually stimulating. And after a few drinks to loosen her up a bit, who knew where the conversation might lead.

He changed from his work clothes and stopped by her room on his way downstairs to escort her to the dining room, but she wasn't there. Expecting her to already be at the table waiting for him, he headed down, but found all of the chairs empty.

Geoffrey stepped in from the pantry.

"Have you seen Miss Montgomery?" Aaron asked.

"As far as I know she's still in the lab, Your Highness."

Aaron looked at his watch. It was already two minutes past seven. Maybe she'd lost track of the time. "Will you wait to serve the first course?"

Geoffrey gave him a stiff nod. "Of course, Your Highness."

A servant of the royal family as long as Aaron could remember, Geoffrey prided himself on keeping them on a strict and efficient schedule. Tardiness was not appreciated or tolerated.

"I'll go get her," Aaron said. He headed through the kitchen, savoring the tantalizing scent of spicy grilled chicken and peppers, and down the stairs to the lab. Through the door window he could see Liv, sitting in front of a laptop computer, typing furiously, papers scattered around her.

He punched in his code and the door swung open, but as he stepped into the room, Liv didn't so much as glance his way.

Her sweater was draped over the back of her chair and she wore a simple, white, long-sleeved T-shirt with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. Her pony-tail had drooped over the course of the day and hung slightly askew down her back.

"It's past seven," he said softly, so as not to startle her, but got no response. "Liv?" he said, a little louder his time, and still she didn't acknowledge that he was there.

"Olivia," he said, louder this time, and she jolted in her chair, head whipping around. For a second she looked completely lost, as though she had no clue where she was, or who *he* was.

She blinked several times, then awareness slid slowly across her face. "Sorry, did you say something?"

"It's past seven."

She stared at him blankly.

"Dinner," he reminded her.

"Oh…right." She looked down at her watch, then up to her computer screen. "I guess I lost track of time."

"Are you ready?"

She glanced up at him distractedly. "Ready?"

"For *dinner."*

"Oh, right. Sorry."

He gestured to the door. "After you."

"Oh…I think I'll pass."

"Pass?"

"Yeah. I'm right in the middle of something."

"Aren't you hungry?"

She shrugged. "I'll pop into the kitchen later and grab something."

"I can have a plate sent down for you," he said, even though he knew Geoffrey wouldn't be happy about it.

"That would be great, thanks," she said. "By the way, were you down here earlier?"

He shook his head. "I've been in the field all day."

"Does anyone else know the code for the door?"

"No, why?"

"A while ago I looked over and the door was ajar."

"Maybe you didn't close it all the way."

"I'm pretty sure I did."

"I'll have maintenance take a look at it."

"Thanks," she said, her eyes already straying back to the computer screen, fingers poised over the keys.

Geoffrey wouldn't consider it proper etiquette for a guest of the royal family to refuse a dinner invitation and then dine alone at a desk, but even he couldn't argue that Liv was not the typical royal guest.

She could eat in the bathtub for all Aaron cared, as long as she found a cure for the diseased crops.

"I'll have Geoffrey bring something right down."

She nodded vaguely, her attention back on her computer. He opened his mouth to say something else, but realized it would be a waste of breath. Liv was a million miles away, completely engrossed in whatever she was doing.

Doing her job, he reminded himself. They hadn't flown her in and paid good money so that she could spend her time amusing him.

He wondered if this was a foreshadow of what her time here would amount to. And if it was, it was going to be a challenge to seduce a woman who was never around.

Chapter Five

Liv studied the data that had been compiled so far regarding the diseased crops and compared the characteristics with other documented cases from all over the world. There were similarities, but no definitive matches yet. She wouldn't know for sure until she compared live samples from other parts of the world, which she would have to order and have shipped with expedited delivery.

She yawned and stretched, thinking maybe it was time for a short break, and heard the door click open.

She dropped her arms and turned to see Prince Aaron walking toward her. At least this time there was actually someone there. Despite a thorough check from a maintenance man, she'd found the door open several times, and once she could swear she'd seen someone peering at her through the window.

"Dinner not to your liking?" he asked.

Dinner? She vaguely remembered Geoffery coming by a while ago.

She followed the direction of his gaze to the table beside her desk and realized a plate had been left for her. Come to think of it, she was a little hungry. "Oh, I'm sure it's delicious. I was just wrapped up in what I was working on."

"I guess you were. You haven't slept, have you?"

"Slept?" She looked at her watch. "It's only ten."

"Ten *a.m."* he said. "You've been down here all night."

"Have I?" It wouldn't be the first time she'd been so engrossed in her work that she forgot to sleep. Being in a lab with no windows probably didn't help. Unless she looked at her computer clock, which she rarely did, it was difficult to keep track of the time, to know if it was day or night. She'd been known to work for days on end, taking catnaps on her desk, and emerge from the lab with no idea what day it was, or the last time she'd eaten.

And now that she'd stopped working long enough to think about it, she realized that her neck ached and her eyes burned with exhaustion. A good sign that it was time for a break.

"When we hired you, we didn't expect you to work 24/7," he said, but the playful smile said he was just teasing her.

"It's just the way I work." She reached back to knead the ache that was now spreading from her neck into the slope of her shoulders.

"Neck ache?" he asked, and she nodded. "I'm not surprised. Although gripping the muscles like that is only going to make it hurt more."

"It's stiff," she said.

He expelled an exasperated sigh and shook his head. "Why don't you let me do that."

Him?

She didn't think he was serious…until he stepped behind her chair. He was actually going to do it. He was going to rub her neck. He pushed her hands out of the way, then draped her ponytail over her left shoulder.

"Really," she said. "You don't have to—"

The words died in her throat as his hands settled on her shoulders.

The warmth of his skin began to seep through the cotton of her shirt and her cheeks exploded with heat. And as if that wasn't mortifyingly embarrassing and awkward enough, he slipped his fingers underneath the collar of her shirt. She sucked in a surprised breath as his hands touched her bare skin.

"The trick to relax the muscle," he told her, "is not to pinch the tension out, but to instead apply even pressure."

Yeah, right. Like there was any way she was going to be able to relax now, with his hands touching her. His skin against her skin.

He pressed his thumbs into the muscle at the base of her neck and, against her will, a sigh of pleasure slipped from her lips. He slid his thumbs slowly upward, applying steady pressure. When he reached the base of her skull, he repeated the motion, until she felt the muscles going limp and soft.

"Feel good?" he asked.

"Mmm." Good didn't even begin to describe the way he was making her feel. Her head lolled forward and her eyes drifted shut.

"It would be better with oil," he said. "Unfortunately I don't have any handy."

The sudden image of Prince Aaron rubbing massage oil onto her naked body flashed through her brain.

Oh, no. Don't even go there, Liv. This was not a sexual come-on. He was just being polite. Although at that moment she would give anything to know what it would feel like. His oily hands sliding across her bare skin…

As if that would ever happen.

He sank his thumbs into the crevice beside her shoulder blades and a gust of breath hissed through her teeth.

"You have a knot here," he said, gently working it loose with his thumbs.

"You're really good at this," she said. "Did you take a class or something?"

"Human anatomy."

"Why would a prince in an agriculturally based field need a human anatomy class?"

"It might surprise you to learn that there was a time when I was seriously considering medical school."

Actually that didn't surprise her at all. She had the feeling there was a lot more to Prince Aaron than he let people see. "What changed your mind?" she asked.

"My family changed it for me. They needed me in the family business, so I majored in agriculture instead. End of story."

Somehow she doubted it was that simple. There was a tense quality to his voice that belied his true feelings.

"I guess that's the benefit of not having parents," she said. "No one to tell you what to do."

"I guess" was all he said, and she had the distinct impression she'd broached a subject he preferred not to explore. He gave her shoulders one last squeeze, then backed away and asked, "Feel better?"

"Much," she said, turning toward him. "Thank you."

"Sure," he said, but the usual, cheery smile was absent from his face. In fact, he looked almost… sad. Then she realized the inference in what she'd just said. His father was *dying,* his only hope a risky experimental procedure, and here she was suggesting that not having parents was a good thing.

Here he was being nice to her, and she was probably making him feel terrible.

Way to go, Liv. Open mouth, insert foot.

"Aaron, what I said just then, about not having parents—"

"Forget it," he said with a shrug.

In other words, *drop it.*

The lack of sleep, especially after that relaxing massage, was obviously taking its toll on her. She was saying stupid and inappropriate things to a man she knew practically nothing about. A virtual stranger.

A stranger who had the authority to fire her on a whim if it suited him.

"You should get some rest," he said.

He was right. She was long overdue for a power nap. "Now, if I can just find my way back to my room," she joked.

"Didn't Derek bring you a map?"

She looked down at her desk, papers strewn everywhere. "It's here. Somewhere."

He smiled and gestured to the door. “Come on, I’ll walk you up.”

“Thank you.” She slipped her laptop in her backpack and slung it over her shoulder, grabbing the plate of uneaten food on her way out.

Even though he was silent, the tension between them seemed to ease as she followed the prince out of the lab and up the stairs. She left the plate in the kitchen and received a distinct look of disapproval from the butler.

“Sorry,” she said lamely, and he answered with a stiff nod. That on top of what she’d said to the prince filled her with a nagging sense of guilt as they walked up to her room. She was obviously way out of her league here. This was going to take a lot of getting used to.

When they reached her door, she turned to him and said, “Thanks for walking me up.”

He smiled. “My pleasure. Get some rest.”

He started to turn away.

“Aaron, wait!”

He stopped and turned back to her.

“Before you go, I wanted to apologize.”

His brow furrowed. “For what?”

“What I said in the lab.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t. It was really…thoughtless. And I’m sorry if I made you feel bad.”

“Liv, don’t worry about it.”

“I mean, I basically suggested you would be better off without parents, which, considering your father’s health, was totally insensitive of me. My verbal filter must be on the fritz.”

He leaned casually against the doorjamb, a look of amused curiosity on his face. “Verbal filter?”

“Yeah. People’s thoughts go through, and the really dumb and inappropriate stuff gets tossed out before they can become words. Lack of sleep must have mine working at minimum capacity. I know it’s a pretty lame excuse. But I’m really, *really* sorry. I’m just an employee. I have no right asking you personal questions or talking about your family, anyway.”

For several long, excruciating seconds he just looked at her, and she began to worry that maybe he really was thinking about firing her. Then he asked, “Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

Huh?

She insulted him, and he invited her to share dinner with him? She might have thought he was extending a formal invitation just to be polite, but he looked sincere. Like he really *wanted* to have dinner with her.

“Um, sure,” she said, more than a touch puzzled.

“Seven sharp.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll warn you that Geoffrey loathes tardiness.”

“I’ll be on time,” she assured him.

He flashed her one last smile, then walked away.

She stepped into her room and shut the door, still not exactly sure what just happened, but way too tired to try to sort it out. She would think about it later, after she’d had some sleep.

As inviting as the bed looked, the draw of a steaming shower was too appealing to resist. The sensation of the hot water jetting against her skin was almost as enjoyable as Aaron’s neck massage had been. After her shower she curled up under the covers, planning to sleep an hour or two before heading back down to the lab.

She let her tired, burning eyes drift shut, and when she opened them again to check the clock on the bedside table, it was six forty-five.

Liv had been so wracked with guilt when Aaron walked her to her room this morning, she hadn’t been paying attention to how they got there. And of course her handy map was in the lab,

buried under her research. Which was why, four minutes before she was supposed to be in the dinning room, she was frantically wandering the halls, looking for a familiar landmark. The castle was just so big and quiet. If only she would run into someone who could help. She was going to be late, and she had the feeling she was already in hot water with Geoffrey the butler.

She rounded a corner and ran—literally—into someone.

Plowed into was more like it. But this time it wasn't a petite maid. This time it was a hulk of man, built like a tank, who stood at least a foot taller than her own five-foot-ten-inch frame. If he hadn't caught her by the arms, the force of the collision probably would have knocked her on her butt.

He righted and swiftly released her.

"Sorry," she apologized, wondering how many more royal employees she would collide with while she was here. "It was my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Miss Montgomery, I presume?" he said in a slightly annoyed tone, looking, of all places, at her chest. Then she looked down and realized she'd forgotten to pin on her ID badge. She pulled it from the outer pocket of her backpack and handed it to him. "Yeah, sorry."

His badge identified him as Flynn, and she couldn't help thinking that he looked more like a *Bruno* or a *Bruiser.*

He looked at the photo on her badge, then back at her, one brow raised slightly higher than the other. He didn't say, *You don't look like a scientist,* but she could tell he was thinking it.

He handed it back to her. "You should wear this at all times."

"I know. I forgot." She hooked it on her sweater, managing not to skewer her skin as she had yesterday. "Maybe you can help me. I'm trying to get to the dining room," she told him. "I've lost my way."

"Would you like me to show you the way?"

She sighed with relief. "That would be wonderful. I'm about three minutes from being late for dinner, and I'm already in the doghouse with Geoffrey."

"We can't have that," he said, gesturing in the direction she'd just come from. "This way, miss."

This time she paid attention as he led her downstairs to the dining room and she was pretty sure that she would be able to find her way back to her room. But she would keep the map with her at all times, just in case.

Prince Aaron was sitting in the dining room waiting for her, nursing a drink, when they walked in.

"I found her, Your Highness," Flynn told him.

"Thank you, Flynn," the prince said.

He nodded and left, and Liv realized it was no accident that she'd encountered him in the hallway.

"How did you know I would get lost?" she asked him.

He grinned. "Call it a hunch."

He rose from his chair and pulled out the adjacent chair for her, and as she sat, his fingers brushed the backs of her shoulders. Was he doing it on purpose? And if so, why did he feel the need to touch her all the time? Did he get some morbid kick out of making her nervous?

The only other time she'd had an experience with a touchy-feely person was back in graduate school. Professor Green had had a serious case of inappropriately wandering hands that, on a scale of one to ten, had an ick factor of fifteen. All of his female students fell victim to his occasional groping.

But unlike her professor, when Aaron touched her, she *liked* the way it felt. The shiver of awareness and swift zing of sexual attraction. She just wished she knew what it meant.

He eased her chair in and sat back down, lounging casually, drink in hand. "Would you like a drink? A glass of wine?"

"No, thank you. I have to stay sharp."

"What for?"

"Work."
He frowned. "You're working tonight?"
"Of course."
"But by the time we finish dinner, it will be after eight o'clock."
She shrugged. "So?"
"So, I have an idea. Why don't you take a night off?"
"Take a night off?"
"Instead of locking yourself in the lab, why don't you spend the evening with me?"

Chapter Six

The confused look on Liv's face was as amusing as it was endearing. She was as far from his type as a woman could be, yet Aaron wanted inside her head, wanted to know what made her tick.

Geoffrey appeared with the first course of their dinner, a mouthwatering lobster bisque. He knew this because he'd managed to sneak a taste before the chef had chased him out of the kitchen.

"How about that drink?" he asked Liv.

"Just water, please. Bottled, if you have it."

Geoffrey nodded and left to fetch it.

"You never answered my question," he said.

She fidgeted with her napkin. "I'm here to work, Your Highness."

"Aaron," he reminded her. "And you just worked a twenty-four-hour shift. Everyone needs a break every now and then."

"I had a break. I slept all day."

He could see he was getting nowhere, so he tried a different angle: the guilt card. He frowned and said, "Is the idea of spending time with me really so repulsive?"

Her eyes widened and she vigorously shook her head. "No! Of course not! I didn't mean to imply…" She frowned and bit her lip.

He could see that she was this close to giving in, so he made the decision for her. "It's settled, then. You'll spend the evening with me."

She looked hesitant, but seemed to realize that she had little choice in the matter. "I guess one night off wouldn't kill me."

"Excellent. What do you do for fun?"

She stared blankly.

"You do have fun occasionally, right?"

"When I'm not working I read a lot to catch up on the latest scientific discoveries and theories."

He shot her a skeptical look.

"That's fun."

"I'm talking social interaction. Being with other human beings."

He got a blank look from Liv.

"What about sports?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I'm not exactly athletic."

A person would never know it by her figure. She looked very fit. He knew women who spent hours in the gym to look like Liv, and would kill to have a figure like that naturally.

"Do you go to movies?" he asked. "Watch television?"

"I don't get to the movies very often, and I don't own a television."

This time his eyes widened. "How can you not own a television?"

"What's the point? I'm never home to watch it."

"Music? Theater?"

She shook her head.

"There must be *something* you like to do besides work and read about work."

She thought about it for a moment, chewing her lip in concentration, then she finally said, "There is *one* thing I've always wanted to try."

"What's that?"

"Billiards."

Her answer surprised him. "Seriously?"

She nodded. "It's actually very scientific."

He grinned. “Well, then, you’re in luck. We have a billiards table in the game room, and I happen to be an excellent teacher.”

Ten minutes into her first billiards lesson, Liv began to suspect that choosing this particular game had been a bad idea. Right about the time that Aaron handed her a cue and then proceeded to stand behind her, leaning her over the edge of the table, his body pressed to hers, and demonstrating the appropriate way to hold it.

Hard as she tried to concentrate on his instructions, as he took her through several practice shots, she kept getting distracted by the feel of his wide, muscular chest against her back. His big, bulky arms guiding her. His body heat penetrating her clothes and warming her skin. And oh, did he smell good. Whatever aftershave or cologne he’d used that morning had long since faded and his natural, unique scent enveloped her.

It’s just chemical, she reminded herself. And wholly one-sided. He wasn’t holding her like this for pleasure, or as some sort of come-on. He was giving her a billiards lesson. Granted, she’d never had one before, but it stood to reason this was the way one would do it. Although the feel of him guiding the cue, sliding it back and forth between her thumb and forefinger, was ridiculously erotic.

If he did have some other sort of lesson on his mind, one that had nothing to do with billiards, she was so far out of her league that she couldn’t even see her own league from here. Although, she had to admit, the view here was awfully nice.

“Have you got that?” Aaron asked.

She realized all this time he’d been explaining the game to her and she had completely zoned out. Which was absolutely unlike her. She turned her head toward him and he was so close her cheek collided with his chin. She could feel his breath shifting the wisps of hair that had escaped her ponytail.

She jerked her head back to look at the table, swallowing back a nervous giggle. Then she did something that she hardly ever did, at least, not since she was a rebellious teen. She *lied* and said, “I think I’ve got it.”

He stepped back, racked up the balls, then said, “Okay, give it a try.”

She lined the cue up to the white ball, just the way he’d shown her, but she was so nervous that when she took the shot she hit the green instead, leaving a chalky line on the surface. She cringed and said, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he assuredher. “Try it again, but this time get a little closer to the ball. Like this.” He demonstrated the motion with his own cue, then backed away.

She leaned back over, following his actions, and this time she managed to hit the ball, but the force only moved it about six inches to the left, completely missing the other balls, before it rolled to a stop. “Ugh.”

“No, that was good,” he assured her. “You just need to work on your aim and put a little weight behind it. Don’t be afraid to give it a good whack.”

“I’ll try.”

He set the cue ball back in place and she leaned over, lining it up, and this time she really whacked it. A little too hard, because the ball went airborne, banking to the left, right off the table. She cringed as it landed with a sharp crack on the tile floor. “Sorry!”

“It’s okay,” he said with a good-natured chuckle, rounding the table to fetch the ball. “Maybe not quite so hard next time.”

She frowned. “I’m terrible at this.”

“You just started. It takes practice.”

That was part of the problem. She didn’t have *time* to practice. Which was exactly why she was hesitant to try new things. Her motto had always been, If you can’t be the best at something, why bother?

“Watch me,” he said.

She stepped aside to give him room. He bent over and lined up the shot, but instead of keeping her eyes on his cue, where they were supposed to be, she found herself drawn to the perfect curve of his backside. His slacks hugged him just right.

She heard a loud crack, and lifted her gaze to see the balls scattering all over the table.

"Just like that," he said, and she nodded, despite the fact that, like before, she hadn't been paying attention. He backed up and gestured to the table. "Why don't you knock a few around. Work on your aim."

Despite her awkwardness, somehow Aaron always managed to make her feel less…inept. And after some practice and a couple of false starts, she was actually getting the hang of it. She even managed to keep all the balls on the table where they belonged and sink a few in the pockets. When they played a few actual games, she didn't do too badly, although she had the sneaking suspicion he was deliberately going easy on her.

After a while, despite having slept most of the day, she started yawning.

"Maybe we should call it a night," he said.

"What time is it?"

"Half past twelve."

"Already!" She had no idea they'd been playing that long.

"Past your bedtime?" he teased.

"Hardly." As if on cue, she yawned again, so deeply moisture filled her eyes. "I don't know why I'm so sleepy."

"Probably jet lag. It'll just take a few days for your system to adjust. Why don't you go to bed and get a good night's sleep, then start fresh in the morning."

As eager as she was to get back down to the lab, he was probably right. Besides, she really needed samples and her assistant wouldn't be here until the next morning. Maybe she could take some time to catch up on a bit of reading.

"I think maybe I will," she told him.

He took her cue and hung it, and his own, on a wall rack. "Maybe we can try this again, tomorrow night."

"Maybe," she said, and the weird thing was that she really wanted to. She was having fun. Maybe *too* much fun. She had a job to do here. That disease wasn't going to cure itself. It had been hours since she'd even thought about her research, and that wasn't at all like her.

"I'll walk you to your room," Aaron said.

"I think I can find my way." They were somewhere on the third floor, and if she took the nearest steps down one floor she was pretty sure she would be near the hallway her room was on.

"A gentleman always walks his date to the door," he said with a grin. "And if nothing else, I am *always* a gentleman."

Date? Surely he was using that word in the loosest of terms, because she and Aaron were definitely not *dating.* Not in the literal sense. He meant it casually, like when people said they had a *lunch date* with a friend. Or a *dinner date* with a work associate.

She picked up her backpack from where she'd left it by the door, slung it over her shoulder and followed him out into the hall and down the stairs. She wanted to remember how to get there, should she ever decide to come back and practice alone every now and then.

"By the way, do you play poker?" he asked as they walked side by side down the hall toward her room.

"Not in a long time."

"My brother, sister and I play every Friday night. You should join us."

"I don't know…"

"Come on, it'll be fun. I promise, it's much easier than billiards."

She wondered if that would be considered proper. The hired help playing cards with the family. Of course, since she'd arrived, he'd treated her more like a guest than an employee.

"If you claim you have to work," he said sternly, "I'll change the door code and lock you out of the lab."

She couldn't tell if he was just teasing her, or if he would really do it. And who knows, it might be fun. "They won't mind?"

"My brother and sister? Of course not. We always invite palace guests to join in."

"But I'm not technically a guest," she said as they stopped in front of her door. "I work for you."

He was silent for a moment as he seemed to digest her words, looking puzzled. Finally he said, "You don't have the slightest clue how valuable you are, do you?"

His words stunned her. Her? Valuable?

"What you've been through. What you've *overcome…*" He shook his head. "It makes me feel very insignificant."

"I make you feel that way?" she asked, flattening a hand to her chest. *"Me?"*

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

"You're royalty. Compared to you, I'm nobody."

"Why would you think you're nobody?"

"Because…I am. What have I ever done?"

"You've done a hell of a lot more than I ever have. And think of all that you still have the chance to do."

She could hardly believe that Aaron, a *prince,* could possibly hold someone like her in such high esteem. What was he seeing that no one else did?

"I'm sure you've done things, too," she said.

He shook his head. "All of my life I've had things handed to me. I've never had to work for *anything.* And look at the adversity you've overcome to get where you are."

She shrugged. "I just did what I had to do."

"And that's my point exactly. Most people would have given up. Your determination, your *ambition,* is astounding. And the thing I like most is that you don't put on airs. You don't try to be something that you're not." He took a step closer and his expression was so earnest, so honest, her breath caught. "I've never met a woman so confident. So comfortable in her own skin."

Confident? Was he serious? She was constantly second-guessing herself, questioning her own significance. Her worth.

"You're intelligent and interesting and kind," he said. "And fun. And I'm betting that you don't have a clue how beautiful you are."

Did the guy need glasses? She was so…plain. So unremarkable. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"I don't think you are. I *know* you are. And you wouldn't believe how much I've wanted to…" He sighed and shook his head. "Never mind."

She was dying to know what he was thinking, and at the same time scared to death of what it might be. But her insatiable curiosity got the best of her.

Before she could stop herself she asked, "You wanted to do what?"

For a long, excruciating moment he just looked at her and her heart hammered relentlessly in anticipation. Finally he grinned that sexy simmering smile and told her, "I wanted do this." Then he wrapped a hand around the back of her neck, pulled her to him and kissed her.

This was not the wishy-washy version of a kiss that Liv had gotten from William the day she left. Not even close. This kiss had heart. And soul. It had soft lips and caressing hands and breathless whimpers—mostly from her.

It was the kind of kiss that a girl remembered her entire life, the one she looked back on as her first *real* kiss. And she was kissing him back just as enthusiastically. Her arms went around Aaron's

neck, fingers tunneled through his hair. She was practically *attacking* him, but he didn't seem to mind. She felt as though she needed this, needed to feed off his energy, like a plant absorbing the sunlight.

She kept waiting for him to break the kiss, to laugh at her and say, *Just kidding* or *I can't believe you fell for that!* As if it was some sort of joke. What other reason would he have for kissing someone like her? But he didn't pull away. He pulled *her* closer. Her breasts crushed against the solid wall of his chest, tingling almost painfully, and just like that, she was hotter and more turned on than she'd ever been in her life.

But what about William?

William who ?

Aaron's hands were caressing her face, tangling through her hair, pulling the band free so it spilled out around her shoulders. He pulled her closer and she nearly gasped when she felt the length of his erection, long and stiff against her belly. Suddenly the reality of what she was doing, where this was leading and the eventual conclusion, penetrated the lusty haze that was clouding her otherwise-rational brain. In the back of her mind a guilty little voice asked, *Is this how you treat the man who asked you to marry him?*

She didn't want to think about that. She wanted to shut him out of her mind, pretend William didn't exist. But he *did* exist, and he was back in the States patiently awaiting an answer from her. Trusting that she was giving his proposal serious thought.

She broke the kiss and burrowed her head against Aaron's shoulder, feeling the deep rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, the rapid beat of his heart. Her own breath was coming in shallow bursts and her heart rate had climbed to what must have been a dangerously high level. Had anyone under the age of seventy ever actually died of heart failure brought on by extreme sexual arousal?

"What's wrong?" he asked, genuine concern in his voice.

She struggled to catch her breath, to slow her pounding heart. "We're moving too fast."

He chuckled. "Um, technically, we haven't actually done anything yet."

"And we shouldn't. We *can't."*

He was quiet for several seconds, then he asked, "Are you saying you don't want to? Because, love, that kiss was hot as hell."

He called her *love.* No one had ever used a term of endearment like that with her. Certainly not her foster parents. Not even William. It made her feel special. Which made what she had to do next that much harder.

"I want to," she said. "A lot."

He rubbed his hands softly up and down her back. "Are you…afraid?"

She shook her head against his shoulder. She was anything but frightened, although maybe she should have been, because nothing about this made any sense. It wasn't logical, and her entire life revolved around logic and science.

Maybe that was what made it so appealing.

"There's something I haven't told you," she said.

"What is it?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat and looked up at him. "I'm kind of…engaged."

Chapter Seven

"You're *engaged?"* Aaron backed away from Liv, wondering why this was the first time he'd heard this. Especially when he considered all of the blatant flirting that had been going both ways between them the past couple of days. Well, some of it went both ways, but in all fairness he was always the one to initiate it.

"Um…sort of," she said, looking uneasy.

Sort of? "Wait, how can a person be *sort of* engaged? And if you are engaged, why aren't you wearing a ring?"

"We kinda didn't get to that part yet."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "What part did you get to exactly?"

"He asked me, and I told him I would think about it."

There was this feeling, low in his gut. A surge of sensation that he didn't recognize. The he realized he was jealous. He envied a complete stranger. "Who is *he?"*

"His name is William. We work together."

"Another scientist?"

She nodded. "He's my mentor."

"Are you in love with him?" he asked.

She hesitated a moment, then said, "He's a good friend. I have an immense amount of respect for him."

Was that relief he'd just felt? "That isn't what I asked you."

She chewed her lip, as though she was giving it deep consideration, then she said, "Love is highly overrated."

Normally he would have agreed, but this was different. *She* was different. He couldn't imagine Liv being happy with a man she only *respected.* She deserved better. She'd fought all of her life to get exactly what she wanted. Why quit now?

And how did he know *what* she wanted when he barely knew her?

Somehow, he just did. And she was special. He couldn't even vocalize exactly why. It was just something he knew deep down.

"He must be a damned good shag, then," Aaron said, aware of how peevish he sounded.

He expected a snappy response, a firm, *Butt out, buster,* or *Mind your own business.* Instead Liv bit her lip and lowered her eyes. It didn't take him long to figure out what that meant.

He folded his arms across his chest and said, "You haven't slept with him, have you?"

"I didn't say that."

But she didn't deny it, either. "Out of curiosity, how long have you been dating this William fellow?"

Her gaze dropped to her feet again and in went the lip between her teeth. She didn't say a word. But her silence said it all.

"Are you telling me that you two have never even dated? Let me guess, you've never kissed him, either?"

She leveled her eyes on him. "I have so!"

He took a step toward her. "I'll bet he doesn't make you half as hot as I do."

He could tell by her expression, from the sudden rush of color to her cheeks, that he was right.

"I wasn't *that* hot," she said, but he knew it was a lie.

"You won't be happy," he said. "You're too passionate."

She looked at him like he was nuts. "I've been accused of a lot of things, but being passionate is not one of them."

He sighed. "There you go, selling yourself short again."

She shook her head in frustration. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. I hardly even know you.”

“I know. And that’s the bizarre part, because for some reason I feel as though I’ve known you forever.” He could see by her expression that she didn’t know how to respond to that, and she wasn’t sure what to make of him. And oddly enough, neither did he. This wasn’t at all like him.

She grabbed the knob and opened her door. “I should get to sleep.”

He nodded. “Promise me you’ll think about what I said.”

“Good night, Aaron.” She slipped inside her room and closed the door behind her.

He turned and walked in the direction of his own room. What he’d told her wasn’t a lie. He’d never met anyone quite like her. She sincerely had no idea how unique, how gifted she was.

At first he’d planned only to seduce Liv and show her a good time while she was here, but something had happened since then. Something he hadn’t expected. He really *liked* her. And the idea of her marrying this William person—a man she obviously didn’t love—disturbed him far more than it should have.

Liv closed the door and leaned against it, expelling a long, deep breath.

What the heck had just happened out there? What did he want from her? Was he just trying to seduce her? To soften her up with his sweet words? Or did he really mean what he said? Did he really think she was interesting and fun? And *beautiful.* And if she really was, why had no one told her until now?

Just because no man had said the words, it didn’t mean it wasn’t true. And although she would never admit it to his face, he was right about one thing, no man had ever made her even close to as hot as he just had. With barely more than a kiss. Had it gone any further, she may have become the first scientifically genuine victim of spontaneous human combustion.

And oh how she had wanted it to go further. But to what end? A brief, torrid affair? Yeah, so what if it was? What was so wrong with that? They were consenting adults.

Yeah, but what about William?

So what if William wasn’t an above-average kisser, and who cared that he didn’t get her all hot and bothered the way Aaron did. William was stable and secure, and he respected her, and she was sure that he thought she was beautiful, too. He just wasn’t the type of man to express his feelings. She was sure that once they were married he would open up.

But what if he didn’t? Was that enough for her?

She heard a muffled jingle coming from her backpack and realized her phone was ringing. She pulled it out and saw that it was, *speak of the devil,* William. She hadn’t spoken to him since she left the States. No doubt he was anxious for an answer.

She let it go to voice mail. She would call him back tomorrow once she’d had a night to think things through. When she’d had time to forget how Aaron’s lips felt against hers, and the taste of his mouth, and what it had been like to have his arms around her, his fingers tangling in her hair.

What if she never forgot? Could she go through life always wondering *what if?* Would it really be so awful, for once in her life, to do something just because she wanted to. Because it felt good. It wasn’t as if he would want a relationship, and frankly, neither would she. Just one quick roll in the hay. Or maybe two. Then she could go home to William, who would never be the wiser…and live the rest of her life in guilt for betraying him.

Ugh.

But if they weren’t technically engaged yet, could it really be counted as cheating?

As she was changing into her pajamas, her cell phone rang again. It was William. She considered letting it go to voice mail again, then decided she at least owed him a few words.

When she answered, his voice was filled with relief.

"I thought maybe you were avoiding me." He sounded so apprehensive and vulnerable. So unlike the confident, steadfast man she was used to, and the truth was, hearing him that way was just the slightest bit…off-putting. It knocked the pedestal she'd always kept him up on down a notch or two.

"Of course not," she said. "I've just been very busy."

"Is this a bad time? I could call back later."

"No, this is fine. I was just getting ready for bed. How have you been?"

"Swamped." He gave her a rundown on everything that had been going on in the lab since she left.

When he'd finished his dissertation, she asked him again. "How are *you,* William?"

"Me?" He sounded confused, probably because they never really talked about their personal lives.

"Yes, *you."*

Finally he said, "Good. I'm good."

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. Instead he asked, "How are *you?"*

Exhausted, but excited, and having more fun than I've ever had in my life, not to mention nursing a pretty serious crush, and considering an affair with, of all people, a prince.

But she couldn't tell him that. "I'm…good."

"The reason for my call," he said, getting right to the point—because William *always* had a point. "I was just wondering if you'd given any thought to my proposal."

He said it so drily, as though he were referring to a work proposal and not a lifetime commitment.

"I have," she said. "It's just…well, I've been so busy. I'd like a little more time to think it over. It's a huge decision."

"Of course. I don't mean to rush you. I realize that it probably came as something of a surprise."

"A little, yes. I never realized you had those kinds of feelings for me."

"You know that I deeply respect you. Both personally and professionally. We make a good team."

Yes, but a good professional relationship and a good marriage were two entirely different animals. Again she had to wonder, did she want to marry a man who respected her, or one who loved her? A man whom she worked well with, or one who found her so sexually appealing he couldn't keep his eyes, or hands, off her? One who made her feel all warm and breathless and squishy inside, the way Aaron did.

Don't even go there, she warned herself. Aaron had no place in this particular equation. Besides, for all she knew William would be fantastic in bed. She'd always considered good sex more of a perk than a necessity.

If that was true, why wasn't she jumping at his offer?

"Can I ask you a question, William?"

"Of course."

"Why now? What's changed from, say, two months ago?"

"Well, I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. I've always imagined that one day I would get married and have a family. And as you know, I'm not getting any younger. It seemed like a good time."

It sounded so logical, but that hadn't exactly been what she was hoping for.

"I guess what I want to know is, why me?"

"Why you?" he said, sounding puzzled. "Why not you?"

"What I mean is, was there a particular reason you asked me?"

"Who else would I ask?"

She was seriously fishing here, and he just didn't seem to get it. She wasn't desperate enough to beg for a kind word or two. Like, *You're beautiful* or *I love you.* That would come with time.

Then why, deep down, was a little voice telling her that this was all wrong?

"Things are just so crazy right now," she told him. "Can you give me a few weeks to think about it?"

"Of course," he said, his tone so patient and reasonable that it filled her with shame. "Take your time."

They made random and slightly awkward small talk for several minutes, and William seemed almost relieved when she said she had to go.

She hung up wondering what kind of marriage would they have if the only thing they ever talked about was work? And even worse, he didn't seem all that interested in getting to know her on a personal level. Would that just take time? Or should the years she had already known him have been time enough?

She thought of Aaron, who asked her questions and seemed genuinely interested in getting to know her. Why couldn't William be more like that?

Thoughts like that wouldn't get her anywhere. William would never be like Aaron—a rich, charming prince. Which was a good thing, because as she'd reminded herself so many times now, Aaron, and men like him, were out of her league. Granted, she had never actually had a relationship with a man like Aaron, but she wasn't so naive that she didn't know the way these things worked. Even if Aaron did find her interesting at first, see her as a novelty, it wouldn't take him long to grow bored with her, for him to realize that she wasn't as special as he thought. Then he would be back to pursuing a proper mate. A woman with the right family and the proper breeding. Yet she couldn't help but think of all the fun they could have in the meantime.

Chapter Eight

Liv was on her way to breakfast the following morning when she was greeted—more like accosted—by one of Aaron's sisters at the foot of the stairs on the main floor. Was it Friday already?

She was nowhere near as tall as her brother and had a slim, frail-looking build, and while they didn't exactly look alike, there was a strong family resemblance. She was dressed in a pale pink argyle sweater and cream-colored slacks and wore her hair pulled back in a low bun. In the crook of one arm she cradled a quivering ball of fur with bulging eyes. A dog, Liv realized. Probably a shih tzu.

The first impression that popped into Liv's head was sweet and demure. Until the princess opened her mouth.

She squealed excitedly when she saw Liv and said, "You must be Olivia! I'm Aaron's sister Louisa."

Liv was so stunned by her enthusiasm—weren't princesses supposed to be poised and reserved?—she nearly neglected protocol and offered a hand to shake.

"It's nice to meet you, Your Highness," she said, dipping into a slightly wobbly curtsy instead. She had barely recovered when Louisa grabbed her hand and pumped it enthusiastically.

"Call me Louisa." She scratched the canine behind its silky ears. "And this is Muffin. Say hello, Muffin."

Muffin just stared, his little pink tongue lolling out of his mouth.

"I can't tell you how excited we are to have you here," she said, smiling brightly. "Aaron has told us *wonderful* things about you."

Liv couldn't help but wonder exactly what he'd told them. She would be mortified if he'd said something about their kiss last night. Having had the entire night to think it over, she decided that it would definitely never happen again. At least, not until she'd decided what to do about William. Although, probably not then, either. What she needed to concentrate on was the job she had come here to do.

"Has my brother been a good host?" Louisa asked.

Good didn't even begin to describe the sort of host he'd been. "He has," Liv assured her. "He's made me feel very welcome."

"I'm so glad. I can't *wait* for you to meet the rest of the family! Everyone is so excited that you're here."

"I'm anxious to meet them, too."

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