



THE MILLIONAIRE'S  
ROYAL RESCUE

Jennifer Faye

 Cherish

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**The Millionaire's Royal Rescue**

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Tempted by the rebellious royal...Billionaire Grayson Landers has fled the papparazzi back home – only to find himself in another media storm: rescuing the king's neice from a thief!Lady Annabelle DiSalvo is no pampered princess – she's come to the Mediterranean island of Mirraccino to solve the mystery of her mother's death. Grayson can't help but want to help her. Plagued by guilt over not being able to save his ex, this is his chance for redemption. Only he absolutely cannot fall for her and risk his heart again...unless it's already too late!

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Lady Annabelle DiSalvo is no pampered princess—she's come to the Mediterranean island of Mirraccino to solve the mystery of her mother's death. Grayson can't help but want to assist her. Plagued by guilt over not being able to save his ex, this is his chance for redemption. Only he absolutely cannot fall for her and risk his heart again...unless it's already too late!

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by Jennifer Faye

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The Millionaire's Royal Rescue

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Jennifer Faye



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For Mona and Louie

Thanks for the smiles and the reminder that there's more to life than work.

I hope your dreams come true.

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ANOTHER DISASTROUS DATE.

Lady Annabelle DiSalvo's back teeth ground together as memories from the night before came rushing over her. It was tough enough finding a decent guy who liked her for herself and not for her position as the daughter of the Duke of Halencia, but then to expect him to put up with her overzealous security team was another thing altogether.

And so when her date had tried to slip away with her for a stroll beneath the stars, her bodyguard had stopped them. Heat rushed to Annabelle's face as she recalled how the evening had ended in a heated confrontation between her, him and her unbending bodyguard. It had been awful. Needless to say, there'd be no second date.

The backs of Annabelle's eyes stung with tears of frustration. She couldn't stand to live like this any longer. Her friends were all starting to get married, but she was single with no hope of that changing as long as her every move was monitored. She just wanted a normal life—like her life had been before her mother's murder.

If only her mother were here, she could talk some sense into Annabelle's overprotective father. She missed her mother so much. And the fact that her father rarely spoke of her mother only made the hole in Annabelle's heart ache more.

She clutched her mother's journal close to her chest. Maybe she shouldn't have been snooping through her mother's things, but her father had left her no other choice. How else would she ever really get to know her mother?

Annabelle slipped the journal into her oversized purse and rushed down the sweeping staircase of her father's vast estate in Halencia. At the bottom of the steps her ever-vigilant bodyguard, Berto, waited for her. There was actually a whole team of them, all taking turns to protect Annabelle.

Ever since her mother had died during a mugging, Annabelle had been watched, night and day. And since her mother's murderer had never been caught, Annabelle had understood her father's concerns at the time. But now, eleven years later, the protective detail assigned to her felt claustrophobic and unnecessary.

She'd thought by moving to Mirraccino, her mother's home country, that things would change, but with the king of Mirraccino being her uncle, she was still under armed guard. But Annabelle had a plan to change all of that. And she was just about to put that plan in motion.

"Berto, I'm ready to go."

The man with short, dark hair and muscles that were obvious even with his suit jacket on, got to his feet. He was the quiet sort and could intimidate people with just a look. Annabelle was the exception.

She'd known him since she was a teenager. He was a gentle giant unless provoked. She thought of him as an overprotective big brother. They moved to the door. Annabelle was anxious to get back to Mirraccino for a pivotal business meeting—

"Not so fast," the rumble of her father's voice put a pause in her steps. The Duke of Halencia strode into the spacious foyer. His black dress shoes sounded as they struck the marble floor. "I didn't know you were leaving so soon." He arched a brow. "Any reason for your quick departure?"

"Something came up." Her unwavering gaze met her father's.

He tugged on the sleeves of his suit, adjusting them. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I have responsibilities in Mirraccino. Not that you would understand." Her voice rose with emotion as memories of last night's date flashed in her mind.

"Annabelle, I don't understand where this hostility is coming from. It's not like you."

"Maybe it's because I'm twenty-four years old and you will not let me live a normal life."

"Of course I do—"

"Then why do you refuse to remove my bodyguards? They're ruining my chances of ever being happy. Momma's been gone a long time. There is no threat. All of that died with her."

"You don't know that." Her father's dark bushy brows drew together and his face aged almost instantly.

Her patience was quickly reaching the breaking point. "You're right, I don't. But that's nothing new. I've been asking you repeatedly over the years to tell me—to tell both myself and Luca why you're worried about us—but you refuse."

Her father sighed. "I've told you, the police said it was a mugging gone wrong."

"Why would a mugger come after us?"

"He wouldn't."

"But?" He couldn't just stop there.

"But something never felt right."

At last some pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. "Because her jewelry and wallet were taken, the police wrote it off as a mugging, but you know something different, don't you?"

Her father's lips pressed together as his dark brows gathered. "I don't know any more than the police."

"But you suspect something. Don't you?" When he didn't respond, she refused to give up. This was too important. "Poppa, you owe me an explanation."

He sighed. "I found it strange that your mother phoned me from the palace to say something was not as it seemed, but she wouldn't go into details on the phone. And two days later, she...she's killed in a mugging."

"What wasn't as it seemed?"

"That's it. I don't know. It might have been nothing. That's what the police said when I told them. All of the evidence said it was a mugging."

"But you never believed it?"

He shook his head. "When the king didn't know what your mother had been referring to, I hired a private investigator. He combed through your mother's items and talked with the palace staff. He didn't come up with anything that would have gotten her killed."

"Maybe the police were right."

Her father shook his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“Even though you don’t have any evidence?”

“It’s a feeling.” His face seemed to age right before her. “And I’m not taking any chances with you and your brother. You two are all I have left.”

“I know you’re worried but you can’t continue to have us followed around and spied upon like we’re criminals. It’s so bad Luca never comes home anymore. And—” She thought of admitting that was why she still lived in Mirraccino, but the pain reflected in her father’s eyes stopped her.

“And what? You just want to go about as though nothing happened? There’s a murderer still on the loose.”

Annabelle had placated him most of her life because she felt sorry for him as he continued to grieve for her mother. However, living in Mirraccino for these past couple of years had given her a different perspective. If she didn’t stand up for herself, she would never gain her freedom. She would never be able to experience a lot of her dreams. She would forever live under her father’s thumb and that was not truly living.

Many people were put off by her security detail. She ended up refraining from doing things just because it was easier than following security protocol and having people send her strange looks, not to mention the whispered comments. Most guys she might have a chance with quietly backed off after meeting Berto. The ones that persisted, she’d learned the hard way, were trouble, one way or the other. And so her dating life was sporadic at best.

“I’m not backing down, Poppa. I’m twenty-four now. I deserve to have my own life—”

“You have a life.”

“No, I don’t. My every move is analyzed before I do it. And then it is reported back to you. That is not a life.”

Her father sighed. “I’m sorry you feel that way, but I’m just doing what I must to protect you and your brother. I don’t hear him complaining.”

“That’s because Luca doesn’t care what you or anyone says. He does exactly what he wants.”

Her father ran a hand over his clean-shaven jaw. “I know. I know.”

“Is that what you want me to do?”

“No!” Her father’s raised voice reverberated off the walls.

“Then maybe you need to back off. I’m not wild like Luca, but if that’s what you want—”

“Don’t you dare. I have enough problems with your brother, but that’s going to come to an end. If he wants to inherit my title, he has to earn it.”

She couldn’t help her brother, not that Luca would want or accept her help, but they were getting sidetracked. “My brother can fight his own battles. This is about you and me. I need you to back off or...”

Her father’s gaze narrowed. “Or what?”

She didn’t have an answer to that question. Or did she? There was something that had come to mind more than once when she’d felt smothered.

“Or else you’ll leave me no choice. I’ll leave Halencia and Mirraccino.” She saw the surprise reflected in her father’s eyes. She hated to do this to him, but perhaps that’s what it would take to get her father to understand that she meant business.

He didn’t say anything for a moment. And when he did speak, his voice was low and rumbled with agitation. “Your threats won’t work.”

“Poppa, this isn’t a threat. It’s a promise. And it’s not something that I take lightly.”

Her father stared at her as though gauging her sincerity. “Why don’t you and your brother understand that I just want to protect you?”

“I know you are worried about our safety after...after what happened to Momma, but that was a long time ago. It was just a mugging—there’s no threat to us. You can relax. We’ll be safe.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know that. I can’t remove your security detail. I...I have to be sure that you’re mature enough—competent enough—to take care of yourself.”

The knowledge that her father thought so little of her stabbed at her. But she refused to give in to the pain. This was her chance to forge ahead. “I will prove to you that I’m fully capable of taking care of myself and making good decisions.”

Business was something her father understood and respected. She told her father how she’d taken over the South Shore Project. With the crown prince now occupied with his new family and assuming more and more of the king’s duties, he didn’t have time to personally oversee the project. And Annabelle had happily stepped up. And she almost had the entire piazza occupied. There was just one more pivotal vacancy that needed to be filled. And not just by anyone, but a business that would draw the twentysomething crowd—the people with plenty of disposable cash that would keep the South Shore thriving long into the future.

“And you think you can do this all on your own?” There was a note of doubt in her father’s voice.

Her back teeth ground together. Her father was so old-fashioned. If it were up to him, she’d be married off to some successful businessman who could help sustain her father’s citrus business.

Annabelle lifted her chin as her gaze met his. “Yes, I can do this. I’ll show you. And once I do, you’ll remove the bodyguards.”

Their gazes met and neither wanted to turn away. A battle of wills ensued. Obviously her father hadn’t realized that he’d raised a daughter who was as stubborn as him.

All the while, she wondered if there was any truth to her father’s suspicions about her mother’s death. Or was he just grasping for something more meaningful than her mother had died over some measly money and jewelry?

## CHAPTER ONE

THIS DAY WAS the beginning of a new chapter...

Lady Annabelle DiSalvo smiled as she walked down the crowded sidewalk of Bellacitta, the capital of Mirraccino. Though the day hadn’t started off the way she’d hoped, she had high hopes for the afternoon.

With a few minutes to spare before her big meeting, she planned to swing by Princess Zoe’s suite of offices. They had become good friends since Zoe and the crown prince had reconciled their marriage. Annabelle admired the way Zoe insisted on being a modern-day princess and continued with her interior design business—although her hours had to be drastically reduced to accommodate her royal duties as well as being a wife and mother. If Zoe could make it all work, so could Annabelle. She just had to gain her freedom from her father’s overzealous security.

It wasn’t until then that Annabelle recalled the email Zoe had sent her. Zoe had left town with her husband on an extended diplomatic trip. And with the other prince in America, visiting with his wife’s family, the palace was bound to be very quiet.

Someone slammed into her shoulder. Annabelle struggled not to fall over. As she waved her arms about, the strap of her purse was yanked from her shoulder. Once her balance was restored, her hand clenched the strap.

No way was this guy going to get away with her purse—with her mother’s final words in a journal lying at the bottom of the bag. For the first time ever, Annabelle regretted forcing Berto to walk at least ten paces behind her. This was all going down too fast for him to help.

Knowing the fate of the journal was at stake, she held on with all of her might. But the short lanky kid with a black ball cap was moving fast. His momentum practically yanked her arm out of its socket.

Pain zinged down her arm. The intense discomfort had her fingers instinctively loosening their grip. And then they were gone—the purse, the journal and the thief.

“Hey! Stop!” Annabelle gripped her sore shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Berto asked.

“No. I’m not. Please get my purse! Quick!”

The man hesitated. She knew his instructions were to stay with her no matter what, but this was different. That thief had her last connection to her mother. Not wasting another moment while the culprit got away, Annabelle took off with Berto close on her heels.

“Lady Annabelle, stop!” Berto called out.

No way! She couldn’t. She wasn’t about to let another piece of her past be stolen from her. The hole in her heart caused by her mother’s death was still there. It had scar tissue built up around it, but on those occasions when a mother’s presence was noticeably lacking, the pain could be felt with each beat of her heart.

Annabelle’s feet pounded the sidewalk harder and faster. “Stop him! Thief!”

Adrenaline flooded her veins as she threaded her way through the crowd of confused pedestrians. Some had been knocked aside by the thief. Others had stopped to take in the unfolding scene.

It soon became apparent that she wasn’t going to catch him. And yet she kept moving, catching glimpses of the kid’s black ball cap in the crowd. She wouldn’t stop until all hope was gone.

“Stop him! Thief!” she yelled at the top of her lungs.

Frustration and anger powered her onward. Berto remained at her side. She understood that his priority was her, but for once, she wished he would break the rules. He had no idea what she was about to lose.

Annabelle’s only hope was that a Good Samaritan would step forward and help. Please, oh, please, let me catch him.

“Stop! Thief!”

\* \* \*

So this was Mirraccino.

Grayson Landers adjusted his dark sunglasses. He strolled down the sidewalk of Bellacitta, admiring how the historical architecture with its distinctive ornate appearance was butted up against more modern buildings with their smooth and seamless style. And what he liked even more was that no one on this crowded sidewalk seemed to notice him much less recognize him as...what did the tabloids dub him? Oh, yes, the slippery fat cat.

Of course, they weren’t entirely off the mark with that name. A frown pulled at his lips. He jerked his thoughts to a halt. He refused to get lost on that dark, miserable path into the past.

He scratched at the scruff on his face. It itched and he longed to shave it off, but he really didn’t want to be recognized. He didn’t want the questions to begin again. The minor irritation of a short beard and mustache was worth his anonymity. Here in sunny Mirraccino he could just be plain old Grayson Landers.

In fact, in less than a half hour, he had a meeting for a potential business deal—a chance to expand his gaming cafés that were all the rage in the United States. Now, it was time to expand into the Mediterranean region.

And Mirraccino offered some perks that had him inclined to give it a closer look. He couldn’t imagine that it’d be hard to attract new employees to the sunny island. This island nation was large enough to offer them a choice between city life or a more rural existence. And there was plenty of room on the South Shore for a sizable facility.

His board would love the revenue growth from the international venture. Adding Mirraccino as the hub would give them diversification. It could be the beginning of great things.

“Stop! Thief!” screamed a female above the murmur of voices.

The next thing Grayson knew a young lanky guy bumped into him as he ran up the walk. Grayson reached out, grabbing him as he passed.

The kid yanked, trying to escape the solid hold Grayson had on his upper arm. Between his grip on him and the fact that Grayson had almost a foot on the guy and at least thirty pounds, the kid wasn't going anywhere.

"Thief! Stop him!" again came the female voice and it was growing closer.

Could this guy be the person in question? Grayson gave the teenager a quick once-over. "I'm guessing that's not yours." Grayson gestured to the purse in the kid's hand.

"Yes, it is."

"It's not exactly your color." The purse was brown with pink trim and a pink strap.

The guy continued to struggle, obviously not smart enough to realize that he wasn't going anywhere until the cops showed up. "Let me go!"

Grayson narrowed his gaze on the guy. "If you don't stand still, you won't like what I do next."

"Dude, you don't understand." The kid glanced over his shoulder. "They're after me."

"Probably because you stole," Grayson snatched the purse while the guy wasn't paying attention, "this."

The kid with a few scrawny hairs on his chin turned to him. "Hey, give that back." He glanced over his shoulder again as a crowd formed around them. "Never mind. You keep it. Just let me go."

"I'll keep it and you."

"I called the cops," someone in the crowd called out.

Inwardly, Grayson cringed. The very last thing he wanted to do now was deal with more cops. A little more than a year ago, he'd answered enough questions to last him a lifetime. He was really tempted to let the kid get away and then Grayson could quietly slip into the thickening crowd.

Before he could make up his mind whether to do the right thing for some stranger or protect himself from yet another interrogation, the whoop-whoop of a police car blasted into the air. Then there was the slamming of a car door.

The suspect in Grayson's hold fought for his freedom with amazing force for someone so slight. The punch that landed in Grayson's gut made him grunt. Anger pumped in his veins. No matter what it cost him personally, this guy needed to learn a lesson.

The crowd parted, allowing the police officer to make his way over to them. Thankfully the officer immediately took custody of the feisty young man and restrained him.

"Move aside." A deep gruff voice shouted. "Let the lady pass."

Grayson glanced up to find the most beautiful young woman standing at the edge of the crowd. Immediately he could see that there was something special about her. Maybe it was her big brown eyes. Or perhaps it was the way her long flowing dark brown hair framed her face. Whatever it was, she was definitely a looker.

It was only then that Grayson noticed the big burly man at her side. Her boyfriend? Most likely. The stab of disappointment assailed him.

Not that he was interested in starting anything romantic. He'd learned his lesson about affairs of the heart—they made you do things you wouldn't normally do and in the end, you got your heart broken, or in his case ripped from his chest. No, he was better on his own.

He was about to turn away when he realized the young woman looked familiar. And then it came to him. She was Lady Annabelle DiSalvo—the very woman he was here to meet with.

The police officer turned to the crowd. "There's nothing here to see. Everyone, please, move on."

Lady DiSalvo didn't move. Was she that fascinated? Or could she be the victim in this case?

This was not the way he'd planned for their relationship to start—their business relationship that was. And then her gaze moved to him. He waited, wondering if she recognized him. Nothing appeared to register in her eyes. And then she turned to talk to the man at her side.

A camera flash momentarily blinded Grayson.

Seriously? Could this day get any worse?

\* \* \*

Where is it?

It has to be here.

Annabelle craned her neck. Her gaze frantically searched for her purse. Oh, please, let this be the right person. Let him still have my purse. And then she realized that during the foot chase he could have ditched it anywhere along the way. Her elation waned.

Her gaze latched on to the tall, dark and sexy man standing in the center of the scene. She'd sensed him staring at her earlier. But with those dark sunglasses, she couldn't make out his eyes. He was tall with an athletic build. Her gaze took in the heavy layer of scruff trailing down his jaw, and she couldn't help wondering what he'd look like without it. The thought intrigued her, but right now she had more pressing matters on her mind.

She was about to glance away when she noticed that he was holding her purse. Her gut said he wasn't the thief. The young man next to him giving the policeman a hard time was wearing a dark ball cap. That had to be the culprit. The kid had the right build as well as a smart mouth.

"Hey you! That's my purse!" Annabelle called out, hoping the stranger would hear her. "I need it back."

A reporter positioned himself between them. The man with her purse began backing away and turning his face away from the camera. What was up with that?

She had to get to the man with her purse. And it'd probably go better if she didn't have Berto in tow. Even though she knew he was a gentle giant, strangers found his mammoth size and quiet ways a bit off-putting.

While Berto glanced over the crowd for a new threat, she quietly slipped away. She threaded her way through the lingering crowd. There was a lot of pardon me and excuse me. But finally she made her way over to the man with her purse in his hand just as the officer was escorting the thief to the police car.

Annabelle had to crane her neck to gaze into the man's face.

"Thank you so much. I didn't think I'd ever see my purse again. You're quite a hero."

The man looked uncomfortable with her praise. "I'm glad I could help."

"Well, I really appreciate it."

"No big deal."

It was a huge deal, but she didn't want to get into any of that right now. "If you'll just give me my purse, I'll be going."

Even standing this close to the man, she couldn't make out his eyes through the large, dark sunglasses. His brows rose in surprise, but he didn't make any motion to give it back.

"Is there a problem?"

"I can't hand it over." The man's voice was deep and smooth like a fine gourmet coffee.

He couldn't be serious. She pressed her hands to her hips. "I don't think you understand. That's my purse. He," she gestured to the thief, who was struggling with the police officer, "stole it from me."

"And it's evidence. You'll have to take it up with the police."

Really? He was going to be a stickler for the law. "Listen, I don't have time for this. I have a meeting—"

"I have to give this to the police. I'm sorry." There was a finality to his tone.

What was it with this day? First, there was the scene with her father. Then she missed her flight. And if that wasn't enough, she'd nearly lost her mother's journal. And now, this man refused to return her belongings.

Maybe she just needed to take a different approach. "If it's a reward you want, I'll need my purse back in order to do that."

The man frowned. "I don't need your money."

This couldn't be happening. There had to be something she could say to change his mind before the policeman turned his attention their way. At last, she decided to do something that she'd never done before. She was about to play the royalty card. After all, desperate times called for desperate measures. And right now, she was most definitely desperate.

But then she had a thought. "If I don't file charges, it's not evidence."

"You'll have to take it up with the officer."

Seriously. Why was the man so stubborn?

"Do you know who I am?"

Before the man could respond, the policeman strode over to them. "I'll be taking that."

The mystery man readily handed over her purse. She glared at him, but she didn't have time to say anything. Her focus needed to remain on getting the journal back.

"That's my purse. I need it back," Annabelle pleaded with the officer. "All of my important things are in there."

"Sorry, miss. Afraid it's evidence now." When the young officer glanced at her, the color drained from his face. "Lady Annabelle, I didn't know it was you. I... I'm sorry."

She smiled hoping to put him at ease. "It's all right. You're just doing your duty. As for my purse, could I have it back now?"

Color rose in the officer's face. His gaze lowered to the purse in his hand. "The thing is, ma'am, regulations say I have to turn this in as evidence. My captain is always telling us to follow the regs. But seeing as it's you, I guess I could make an exception—"

"No." The word was out of her mouth before she realized what she was saying—or maybe she did realize it. She didn't want this young man getting in trouble with his captain because she had him break the rules. "You do what you need to do and I'll come by the police station to pick it up later."

The officer's eyes widened in surprise. "Much appreciated, ma'am, especially seeing as you're the victim. I'll need you to file a complaint against the suspect."

"I...I'm not filing charges."

The officer frowned at her. "That would be a mistake."

He went on to list the reasons that letting the kid get away with this crime would be a bad idea. And he had some good points. In the end, she had to agree with him.

"Okay. I'll need you and the man who caught the thief to make statements down at the station." The officer glanced around. "Where did he go?"

She glanced around for her hero, but there was no sign of him. How could he vanish so quickly?

"I didn't get a chance to catch his name much less take a statement." The officer shook his head as he noted something on the pad of paper in his hand.

Why had the man disappeared without giving his statement? Was he afraid of cops? Or was it something else? Something that had him hiding behind dark sunglasses and a shaggy beard?

Or perhaps she'd watched one too many cop shows. She'd probably never know the truth about him. But that didn't stop her from imagining that he was a bad boy, maybe a wrongly accused fugitive or a spy. Someone as mysterious as him had to have an interesting background. What could it be?

## CHAPTER TWO

### AT LAST SHE'D ARRIVED.

Annabelle checked the time on her cell phone. Luckily, she'd had it in her pocket or it would have been confiscated with her purse. She had two minutes to spare before her meeting with an executive of the Fo Shizzle Cafés. Her name was Mary and they'd corresponded for the past few weeks. It seemed Grayson Landers, the CEO and mastermind behind the hip cafés, was only hands-on once a site had been vetted by a trusted member of his team.

Annabelle took a seat at one of the umbrella tables off to the side of the historic piazza in the South Shore. She glanced around, but there weren't any professional young women lurking about.

Annabelle looked down at the screen of her phone. Her social media popped up. There were already numerous posts about the incident with her purse. There were photos of her, but no photos of her hero's face. Too bad.

And then a thought came to her. Perhaps a phone call to the police station would hurry along the return of her possessions. Her finger moved over the screen, beginning the search for the phone number—

“You’re seriously not going to let me through?”

The disgruntled male voice drew Annabelle's attention. She glanced up as Berto blocked a man from getting any closer. She swallowed hard. It didn't matter how many times it happened, she was still uncomfortable having security scrutinize everyone that came within twenty meters of her.

Berto stood there like a big mountain of muscle with his bulky arms crossed and his legs slightly spread. Annabelle had no doubt he was ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation. He'd done it before with some overly enthusiastic admirers. Okay, so having him around wasn't all bad, but she did take self-defense classes and knew how to protect herself.

“You'll have to go around. The lady does not want to be disturbed.” There was no waver in Berto's voice.

“I'd like to speak to the lady.”

“That's not happening.”

Annabelle couldn't see Berto's face, but she could imagine his dark frown. He didn't like anyone messing with his orders and that included keeping strangers at a distance.

Annabelle's gaze moved to the stranger. She immediately recognized him. He was the man who'd rescued her purse from that thief. What was he doing here?

He was a tall man, taller than Berto, but not quite as bulky. The man's dark hair was short and wavy, just begging for someone to run their fingers through it. And those broad shoulders were just perfect to lean against during a slow dance.

He was certainly handsome enough to be a model. She could imagine him on the cover of a glossy magazine. He didn't appear threatening. Perhaps he was interested in her. What would it hurt to speak to him?

Annabelle slipped her phone in her pocket. “Berto, is that any way to treat a hero? Let him through.”

There was a twitch of a muscle in Berto's jaw, letting her know he wasn't comfortable with her decision. If it were up to him, her father or even the king, she'd never have a social life. It was getting old. And if this man was bold enough to stand up to Berto, she was intrigued.

Without another word, Berto stepped aside.

The man approached her table. He didn't smile at her. She couldn't blame him. Berto could put people on edge.

“I'm sorry about Berto. He can be overprotective. I'd like to thank you again. You're my hero—”

“Stop saying that. I'm no one's hero.”

“But you stopped that thief and without you, I probably wouldn't have gotten my purse back.” Or more importantly, the journal.

“I was just in the right place at the right time. That doesn't make me anything special.”

“Well, don't argue with me. It's all over social media.” She withdrew her phone. She pulled up the feed with all of the posts that included photos of this man holding her purse, but his head was lowered, shielding his face.

She noticed how the muscles of his jaw tensed. He took modesty to a whole new level. What was up with that? She was definitely intrigued by this man.

“I'm guessing you didn't track me down to claim a reward.”

The man in a pair of navy dress shorts and a white polo shirt lowered himself into a seat across the table from her. “You don't recognize me, do you?”

Was this man for real? “Of course I do.”

He shook his head. “I meant, do you know my name?”

She was definitely missing something here, but what? “I take it you know me.”

“Of course. You are Lady Annabelle DiSalvo, daughter of the Duke of Halencia and niece of the king. Also, you are in charge of the South Shore Project.”

If he was hoping to impress her, he’d succeeded. Now, she had no choice but to ask. “And your name would be?”

“Grayson Landers.”

Wait. What? He was the genius multimillionaire?

Surely she couldn’t have heard him correctly. He removed his sunglasses and it all came together. Those striking cerulean blue eyes were unforgettable—even from an online photo. At the time, she’d thought they’d been Photoshopped. They hadn’t been. His piercing eyes were just as striking in person—maybe even more so.

Somehow, somehow she’d missed a voice mail or an email because the last she knew she was supposed to be meeting Mary. She swallowed hard. She should be happy about this change of events, but her stomach was aflutter with nerves. She resisted the urge to run a hand over her hair, wishing that she’d taken the time to freshen up before this meeting.

“Mr. Landers, it’s so nice to meet you.” She stretched her hand across the table.

His handshake was firm but brief. She had no idea if that was a bad sign or not.

“I, uh, wasn’t expecting you.”

“I know. You were expecting Mary, but my plans changed at the last minute, making it possible for me to attend this meeting.”

“I see. I...I mean that’s great.” She sent him a smile, hoping to lighten the mood.

There was just something about this man that made her nervous, which was odd. Considering who her uncle and her father were, she was used to being around powerful men.

But most of the men in her life wore their power like they wore their suits. It was out there for people to see, maybe not flaunting it, but they certainly didn’t waste their time trying to hide who and what they were. But this man, he looked like an American tourist, not a man who could buy a small country. And that beard and mustache hadn’t been in any of the photos online.

His brows rose. “Is there something wrong with my appearance?”

Drat. She’d let her gaze linger too long. “No. No. Not at all. In fact, you look quite comfortable.”

Her words did nothing to smooth the frown lines marring his handsome face. “Do I need to change for today’s meeting?”

“Um, not at all.” She jumped to her feet. “Shall we go?”

He didn’t say anything at first. And then he returned his sunglasses to the bridge of his nose as he got to his feet. There was something disconcerting about not being able to look into his eyes when they spoke.

The sooner she got this presentation under way, the sooner it’d be over. “Would you like a tour of the South Shore?”

“Yes.”

Short and to the point. She wondered if he was always so reserved. She started to walk, thinking about where she should begin. Of course, she’d given this tour a number of times before to other potential business owners, but somehow it all felt different where Mr. Landers was concerned. Everything about him felt different.

Annabelle straightened her shoulders as she turned to the small piazza where an historic fountain adorned the center. “I thought we would start the tour here. The South Shore is a historic neighborhood.”

“I see that. Which makes me wonder why you think one of my cafés would fit in?”

“This area has had its better days.” She’d hoped her presentation would make the answer to his question evident, but she hadn’t even started yet. She laced her fingers together and turned to him. “Where buildings had once been left for nature to reduce them to rubble, there is now a growing and thriving community.”

“That’s nice, but you haven’t answered my question.”

She moved closer to the ancient fountain where four cherubs in short togas held up a basin while water spouts from the edge of the fountain shot into the basin. At night, spotlights lit up the fountain, capturing the droplets of water and making them twinkle like diamonds. Too bad she couldn’t show him. It was a beautiful sight.

“If you will give me a chance, I’m getting to it.”

He nodded. “Proceed.”

She turned to the fountain. “This is as old as the South Shore. The famous sculptor Michele Vincenzo Valentini created it. It is said that he visited Mirraccino and fell in love with the island. Wanting to put his mark upon the land he loved, he sculpted this fountain as a gift to its people. The sad thing is that not long after the project was completed, he passed on.”

“Interesting.” Grayson glanced over his shoulder at Berto. “Will he be coming with us?”

“Yes.” Without any explanation about Berto’s presence, Annabelle moved toward one of her favorite shops lining the piazza, the bakery. She inhaled deeply. The aroma of fresh-baked rolls and cinnamon greeted her, making her mouth water. Perhaps they should go inside for a sampling. Surely something so delicious that melts in your mouth would put a smile on her companion’s handsome face.

“This bakery is another place that’s been around for years. In fact, this family bakery has been handed down through the generations. And let me tell you, their baked goods can’t be surpassed. Would you care to go inside?”

He didn’t say anything at first and she was starting to wonder if he’d even heard her. And then he said, “If that’s what you’d like.”

Not exactly the ringing endorsement that she’d been hoping for, but it was good enough. And the only excuse she needed to latch on to one of those cinnamon rolls. She yanked open the door and stepped inside. The sweet, mouthwatering aromas wrapped around her, making her stomach rumble with approval. It was only then she realized that due to her flight delay not only had she missed an opportunity to freshen up but she’d also missed her lunch.

After Grayson had enjoyed a cannoli and some black coffee and she’d savored chocolate-and-pistachio biscotti with her latte, they continued the tour. They took in the new senior facility that was housed in a fully refurbished and modernized historic mansion. They walked along the waterfront and visited many of the shops and businesses where Annabelle was friends with most everyone.

“This place must be very special to you,” Grayson said.

At last, he was finally starting to loosen up around her. She knew fresh pastries and caffeine could win over just about everyone. “Sure. I’ve been working on the project for two years now. It’s given me a purpose in life that I hadn’t realized before.”

“A purpose?”

She nodded. “I like helping people. I know from the outside it might seem like I’m doing the crown’s bidding, but it’s a lot more than that. I’ve been able to help people find new homes here in the South Shore. We created that new seniors’ residence. Wasn’t that seashore mural in the ballroom stunning?”

“Yes. It was quite remarkable. And it’s very impressive how you’ve taken on this project and found a deeper meaning in it than just selling parcels of land. But I meant you personally—you seem to have a strong link to this place. When you talk about it, your face lights up.”

“It does?” Was this his way of flirting with her? If so, she liked it.

“Did you spend a lot of time here as a child? The way you describe everything is way more personal than any sales pitch I’ve ever heard. And trust me, I’ve heard a lot of them.”

“Well, thank you, I think.” She smiled at him, still not quite sure how to take him or the things that he said. “But I didn’t spend much time here as a kid. I grew up in Halencia. It’s a small island not too far from here.” But he was right, this place did have a very familiar vibe to it. She’d noticed it before when she was working but had brushed off the sensation. “My mother grew up here. When she talked about her homeland, it always seemed as though she regretted having to leave here. But as for me, until recently, I only came here for the occasional visit.”

“Really? Hmm... I must have been mistaken.”

“I think it must just be from me working so closely on this project.”

“Of course. Mirraccino seems like it would be a great place for a young family. And that fountain, I can imagine kids wanting to make wishes there. And that bakery, it was fantastic...”

Grayson’s voice faded into the background as Annabelle latched on to a fuzzy memory of her mother. They’d been here, in this very piazza the day before her mother was murdered. The memory was so vague that she was having a hard time focusing on it. But she did recall her mother had been upset. She definitely hadn’t been her usual happy, smiling self.

“Annabelle? Are you okay?”

Grayson’s voice jarred her back to reality. Heat rushed up her neck and settled in her cheeks. She was embarrassed that in the middle of this very important meeting she’d zoned out and gotten lost in her memories. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I can see something is bothering you.” He led her over to one of the benches surrounding the fountain and they sat down. “I know we barely know each other, but maybe that’s a good thing. Sometimes I find it easier to talk to a stranger about my troubles.”

What did she say? That she had some vague flashback? And why did she have it? What did it even mean?

It was best to deflect the question. “What troubles do you have?”

He glanced away. “We...um, aren’t talking about me right now. You’re the one who looked as though you saw a ghost.”

So he did have a skeleton or two in his closet. Was it bad that she took some sort of strange comfort in knowing that he wasn’t as perfect as she imagined him to be, not that she’d done any digging into his past. When she’d done her research on Fo Shizzle, she’d been more interested in his company’s financial history and their projections for the future—all of which consisted of glowing reports.

“Annabelle?”

“Okay. It’s not that big of a deal. I was just remembering being here with my mother.”

His brows drew together. “I don’t understand. Why would that upset you?”

She’d told him this much; she might as well tell him the rest. After all, it wasn’t like the memory was any big deal. “It’s just that the memory is from a long time ago and it’s vague. I remember that day my mother wasn’t acting like herself. She was quiet and short-tempered. Quite unlike her.”

“Was your father with you?”

Annabelle shook her head. “I don’t know where he was. I’m assuming back home in Halencia with my brother.”

“You have a brother?”

She nodded. “He’s six years older than me. But what I don’t get is why I’d forgotten this.”

“It’s natural to forget things that don’t seem important at the time. Do you think the memory is important now?”

“I have no idea.”

“Why not just ask your mother about it?”

“I can’t.” Though Annabelle wished with all of her heart that she could speak with her mother.

“You don’t get along with her?”

In barely more than a whisper, Annabelle said, “She died.”

“Oh. Sorry. If you don’t mind me asking, how old were you at the time?”

“I was thirteen. So I wasn’t really paying my mother a whole lot of attention.”

“I remember what it was like to be a kid. Although I spent most of my time holed up in my bedroom, messing around on my computer.”

“So that’s how you became so successful. You worked toward it your whole life.”

He leaned back on the bench and stretched his legs out in front of him. “I never set out to be a success. I was just having fun. I guess you could say I stumbled into success.”

“From what I’ve read, you learned to do quite a bit as far as computers are concerned.”

“Coding is like a puzzle for me. I just have to find the right connections to make the programs do what I want.” He glanced at her. “It’s similar to the way you have snippets of a memory of your mother. You need to find the missing parts for the snippets to fit together and give you a whole picture.”

Annabelle shrugged and glanced away. “I’m sure the memory isn’t important.”

“Perhaps. Or maybe it is and that’s why you’ve started to remember it.”

“It’s not worth dwelling on.” Who was she kidding? This was probably all she’d think of tonight when she was supposed to be sleeping. Was there some hidden significance to the memory?

Just then she recalled her mother raising her voice. Her mother never shouted. Born a princess, her mother prided herself in always using her manners.

“You remembered something else.”

Annabelle’s gaze met his. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Read my mind.”

“Because it’s written all over your face. And just now, you went suddenly pale. I take it whatever you recalled wasn’t good.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Maybe it would help if you remembered a little more. Perhaps it’s not as bad as you’re thinking.”

“Or maybe it’s worse.” She pressed her lips together. She hadn’t meant to utter those words, but the little voice in her head was warning her to tread lightly.

“Close your eyes,” Grayson said in a gentle tone.

“What?”

“Trust me.”

“How can I trust you when I hardly even know you?”

“You have a point. But think of it this way, we’re out here in the open and your bodyguard is not more than twenty feet away. If that isn’t enough security, there are people passing by and people in the nearby shops. All you have to do is call out and they’ll come running.”

“Okay. I get the point.”

“So do it.”

She crossed her arms and then closed her eyes, not sure what good this was going to do.

“Relax. This won’t work otherwise.”

She opened her eyes. “You sound like you know what you’re doing. Are you some kind of therapist or something?”

“No. But I’ve been through this process before.”

“You mean to retrieve fragmented memories?”

“Something like that. Now close your eyes again.” When she complied, he said, “Recall that memory of your mother. Do you have it?”

Annabelle nodded. All that she could see was the frown marring her mother’s flawless complexion and the worry reflected in her eyes.

“Now, was it sunny out?”

What kind of question was that? Who cared about the weather? “How would I know?”

“Relax. Let the memories come back to you. Do you recall perhaps the smell of the bakery?”

“I’ve heard it said that smell is one of the strongest senses—”

“Annabelle, you’re supposed to be focusing.”

And she was dodging the memories, but why? Was there something there that she was afraid to recall?

She took a deep breath and blew it out. She tried to focus on any detail that she could summon. Together they sat there for countless minutes as she rummaged through the cobwebs in her mind. Grayson was surprisingly patient as he prompted her from time to time with a somewhat innocuous question. These questions weren’t about her mother but rather about sensory details—she recalled the scent of cinnamon and how her mother had bought her a cinnamon roll. The sun had been shining and it had taken the chill out of the air, which meant that it was morning.

“And I remember, my mother said she had to speak to someone. She told me to wait on a bench like this one and she would be right back.”

“She left you alone?” There was surprise in his voice.

“No. She stayed here in the piazza, but she moved out of hearing range. There was a man that she met.”

“Someone you know?”

“I’m not sure. I never saw his face. I just know their conversation was short and he left immediately after they spoke.”

“What did your mother say to you?”

Annabelle opened her eyes. “I don’t know anymore. I don’t think she said much of anything, which was unusual for her. She was always good at making casual conversation. I guess that’s something you learn when you’re born into royalty—the art of talking about absolutely nothing of relevance.”

“At least nothing bad happened.”

“Thanks for helping me to remember.”

“I wonder what it was about that day that the memory stuck in your mind.”

“I’m not sure.”

The truth was, it happened a day or two before her mother died. Could it mean something? Had the police been wrong? Was her mother’s death more than a mugging? Or was she just letting herself get caught up in her father’s suspicions?

Annabelle didn’t want to get into details of the murder with Grayson. As it was, she’d exposed more of herself to this stranger than she’d ever intended. It would be best to stop things right here.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### GRAYSON HAD RESERVATIONS.

The site for Fo Shizzle was not what he’d been envisioning.

Sure, what he’d seen so far of Mirraccino was beautiful. Maybe not as striking as Annabelle, but it definitely came in a close second. The South Shore was a mix of history and modernization. The view of the blue waters of the Mediterranean was stunning. But it just didn’t seem like the right fit for one of his Fo Shizzle Cafés.

“So what did you think?” Annabelle’s voice drew him from his thoughts.

“I think you’ve done a commendable job with this revitalization project. I think it’s going to be a huge success.” Now how did he word this so as not to hurt her feelings? After all, she’d been a wonderful hostess. And to be honest, he didn’t want this to end. This was the most relaxed he’d felt in more than a year...ever since the accident and the ensuing scandal.

“But...?”

“What?” He’d let his mind wonder and hadn’t heard what she’d been saying.

“You like the South Shore, however I detect there’s a but coming. So out with it. What isn’t working for you?”

He paused, struggling to find the right words. “I was under the impression that the site of the café would be in the heart of the city. This area is nothing like the locations of the other cafés. The way the South Shore was described in the proposal was that it was an up-and-coming area. This,” he outstretched his arms at the varying shops, “is very reserved. It’s an area that would be frequented by a more mature clientele.”

“We are in the process of revitalizing the area—the proposal was a projection. I was certain if I could get a representative of Fo Shizzle here that they would see the potential. I’m sure your café will be a huge draw. I’ve spoken with the tourism department and they can insert photos and captions prominently in their promo.”

His brow arched. He had not expected this bit of news. He couldn’t deny that free advertising would help, but would it be enough? “The thing is, my cafés are designed for younger people, high school, college and young adults. The cafés do not cater to a more mature audience. They can be a bit loud at times, especially during an online tournament. The decor is a bit dark with prints of our most popular avatars. Do you know much about our games?”

She shook her head. “Since you can only play on a closed circuit within one of your cafés, I’ve never had the opportunity. But the research looks intriguing. And I think it would be a hit here with the young crowd.”

“To be a success, this area would have to be heavily frequented by young people—”

“And that’s what we want.” She smiled at him as though she had all of the answers. “I have research studies broken out by demographic.”

He liked numbers and charts. “Could I take a look at them?”

She nodded. “Most definitely. I had a copy in my purse, but I also have them at the palace along with an investment package with detailed figures and projections. I wanted you to have a feel for the area before we dove into the numbers.”

He glanced around the piazza. “I’m just not sure about this setting. Don’t get me wrong—it’s beautiful, but it’s not quite as urban as our other locations.”

“In the reviews I’ve read about Fo Shizzle, they say young people come from miles away just to hang out and take part in the high-stakes gaming tournaments. You’ve definitely latched on to a great idea. And I hear the coffee’s not so bad either.”

“The coffee is actually quite good.” He’d made sure of that. Being a coder, he lived on a steady stream of caffeine when he was on a roll. And he was picky about the flavor. He wouldn’t have anything less than the best for his cafés—just as he would only have the top-of-the-line games. The newest titles. And the best quality.

Annabelle gave him a speculative look as though figuring out his unshaven appearance and his longer-than-usual hair. It was not his standard appearance—not unless he was on a deadline for a new program rollout. When it came to business, all else came in a distant second, third or lower ranking.

When she didn’t vocalize her thoughts about his appearance, he added, “I’m usually a little more cleaned up.” Why was he making excuses for his appearance? It wasn’t like he was going to ask her out on a date or anything. Still, he heard himself say, “It’s just with the media and all, sometimes it’s easier to travel incognito.”

She nodded but still didn’t say anything.

He hated to admit it, but he really did want to know what she was thinking. Did he really look that bad? His hand moved to his jaw. His fingers stroked his beard. It was quickly filling in. Soon it would start to get bushy. He didn’t warm to the thought.

Beards were okay on some guys, but not him. It just wasn’t his thing. “Is it really that bad?”

She shrugged. “It’s okay.”

Definitely not a ringing endorsement for his new look.

“I guess it doesn’t matter much if I shave or not now that my picture is all over social media. And it’s not like I’m going to be here much longer—”

“What? You mean you’re leaving? Already?”

He nodded. “I have to keep scouting for a headquarters for my Mediterranean expansion.”

“But this is it. The South Shore will be perfect.”

Was that a glimmer of worry reflected in her eyes? Surely she couldn’t be that invested in doing business with him. And if she was, he had to ask himself why. What was driving her to close this deal?

He cleared his throat. “I’m not ready to make a decision of this magnitude. I have plans to visit Rome, Milan and Athens next.”

“And when will you be leaving?”

“In the morning—”

“But you can’t.” She pressed her lips together as though regretting the outburst.

“Why not?”

“Because you still have to file a report with the police. There’s the theft and...and you’re an eyewitness. They’ll probably want you to testify.”

She had a point. And as much as he would like to fly off into the sunset, he wouldn’t shirk his duty. “You know, the only reason I walked away is because you said you weren’t going to press charges so I figured there was no reason for me to stick around.”

“I was truly considering it, but the policeman convinced me it wouldn’t be in anyone’s best interest. So it looks like you’ll be hanging around Mirraccino a bit longer. And I would love to show you more of this beautiful land.”

How much more was there to see? And did she really think another day of playing tourist was really going to change his mind?

“I don’t know.” He glanced at his wristwatch. It was getting late. “Maybe I could swing by the police station now and give them my statement.”

“It’s Friday. And it’s late in the afternoon. I’m sure the people you’ll need to speak with will be gone for the weekend or at least have one foot out the door.”

“Can’t I just give my statement to an officer? Surely the whole police force doesn’t go home early for the weekend.”

Annabelle smiled. “Funny. But I meant you’ll probably have to speak with some of the clerical or legal people.”

He nodded. “I suppose they might do things a bit differently from what I’m accustomed to in the States.”

Annabelle nodded. “Now let’s see about getting you situated.”

“I have a room at the hotel in the city.”

“I was thinking of something different. How about being a guest at the royal palace?”

Had he heard her correctly? She was inviting him to stay in the palace with the king? “Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious. The king is my uncle.”

“And you live there—at the palace, that is?”

“At the moment, I do. I’ve been living there while working in Mirraccino for the past couple of years.”

There was a lot about Lady Annabelle that intrigued him. And honestly, what would it hurt if he took a few more days before moving on?

Annabelle was the first person to interest him in a long time—just not romantically. It wasn’t that he didn’t find her exceedingly attractive. He did. But he refused to get sucked into another relationship. He’d been through enough. His heart was still mending.

“Oh, please say that you’ll stay. I’ve already had a suite made up for you. And...and the King is expecting you at dinner tonight.”

“The king wants to meet me?”

Her cheeks bloomed with color and her gaze didn't quite meet his as she nodded.

He suspected she was just saying anything to get him to stay. He had to admit no one had ever dangled an invitation to meet a king before him in order to help with a business deal. What made this amazing woman feel as though she had to jump to such lengths to get him to close this deal?

“Tell the truth,” he said. “The king, he isn't expecting me at dinner, is he?”

Her gaze finally met his. “No, but I'm sure it won't be a problem. The suite truly is prepared and awaiting your arrival, as well as the financial projections. We can go over them together if you like.”

He couldn't help but smile at the eagerness reflected on her face. “You know, I've never stayed in a palace before.” When her eyes widened and her glossy lips lifted into a smile, he said, “We'll just need to pick up my luggage at the hotel and then I'd very much enjoy staying with you—erm, staying at the palace.”

A visit to a royal palace, what could possibly go wrong?

Security would be heavy and the paparazzi would be nonexistent. It would be a win-win.

But who would keep him from getting lost in Lady Annabelle's brown eyes?

\* \* \*

At last, Annabelle got through on the phone to the police department.

And without playing the royal card, she was able to speak with someone in authority. They told her to stop by in the morning and they'd see about getting some of her possessions back to her. She wasn't sure what some consisted of, but it was a start.

“Everything okay?” Grayson asked.

She nodded. “They'd like you to stop by tomorrow and give them a statement.”

He didn't say anything as he turned to stare out the window as they approached the palace gates. She chose to take his silence as a good sign, but she couldn't help but worry just a bit about the impression he'd gotten of Mirraccino. She could only hope the financial projections packet she'd put together would outweigh everything else.

Annabelle sat in the back of her sedan with Grayson as Berto ushered them past the security gates and onto the royal grounds. Annabelle had to admit that after living here for the past couple of years she'd begun to take the palace's beauty for granted.

She turned to Grayson to find him staring out the window. He seemed to be taking in the manicured lawns, the towering palm trees and the red-and-white border of flowers lining the long and winding drive.

“This place is remarkable.” Grayson said, drawing her from her thoughts. “We have nothing like this where I come from.”

“You're from California, right?”

He nodded, but he never took his gaze off the colorful scenery. “I couldn't even imagine what it must be like to live here.”

“You get used to it.” As strange as that might sound, this big place felt like home to her. “Is this your first visit to Mirraccino?”

“Yes.” He still didn't look at her.

The turrets of the palace were first to come into view. They were colorful with stripes of yellow, pink, aqua and gold. Annabelle found herself looking at them through new eyes.

And then the palace in its entirety loomed. It was enormous, even compared to her family's spacious mansion back in Halencia. While her home in Halencia was all white, the palace was created in warm shades of tan and coral with some accents done in aqua. It was simple and yet stunning.

And with the afternoon sun's rays, the palace practically gleamed. When she was a little girl, she'd thought the palace was magical. She'd always wanted to be a princess, but her mother assured her that she didn't need to be a princess to be special.

Being the daughter of the Duke of Halencia, she was addressed as Lady Annabelle. It gave her recognition in high society but not much else. Her father's estate would eventually revert to her older brother, the Earl of Halencia. She used to think it was unfair, but now she appreciated having choices in life.

The car pulled to a stop outside the palace. Berto rushed to get the car door. Annabelle alighted from the car followed by Grayson.

Grayson turned to her. "Why is the South Shore so important to you that you'd go out of your way for me?"

She schooled her features, trying to hide any hint of her desperation. "The South Shore was a pet project of the crown prince. He brought me in on the project at the beginning. When his responsibilities drew him away, I promised to see that it was finished."

"So you're keeping a promise to the prince?" Grayson arched a brow.

"He's my friend as well as my cousin," she was quick to clarify.

"That's right. You did mention the king was your uncle. So this is a family favor of sorts?"

"Yes. You could put it that way." If that's what he wanted to believe, who was she to change his mind? Because in the beginning that's all it had been. Now it was her way to prove herself to her father. "But in the process, I've really come to care about the people of the South Shore and I want to see it flourish."

He smiled at her, making her stomach quiver with the sensation of butterflies. "In that case, lead the way."

She didn't normally enter through the main door, but Grayson was a special guest—pivotal to her future. It wouldn't hurt to give him the VIP treatment.

Berto swung open the enormous wooden door with the large brass handle. They stepped inside the palace and once again she consciously surveyed her surroundings from the marble floor of the grand entryway to the high ceiling with the crystal chandelier suspended in the center. As a little girl, when there was a royal ball, she'd sneak down here and dance around the table in the center of the floor. She'd pretend that she truly was a princess attending the ball. Oh, the silly things kids did.

Grayson took in the opulent room. "I couldn't even imagine what it must be like to live here."

She shrugged. "It has its protocols and a system that it's best not to tamper with, but other than that I imagine it's like most other homes."

Grayson laughed. "I don't think so."

Just then, Alfred, the butler, came rushing into the room. "Lady Annabelle, I'm sorry. I didn't hear you arrive."

"No problem. I was just showing Mr. Landers around."

The butler gave her guest a discerning once-over. "Yes, ma'am. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, thanks. I was just going to show Mr. Landers to his suite of rooms so he can freshen up. Could you let the kitchen know that there will be one more for dinner?"

"Yes, ma'am. Shall I inform the king?"

Normally, she would say yes, but seeing as Grayson was a special guest who could make such a difference to her future, she said, "I'll speak to my uncle. Thank you."

Annabelle showed Grayson to the sweeping steps to the upstairs. A comfortable silence engulfed them as Grayson continued to take in his surroundings. She had to admit the palace was a lot more like a museum than a home. There were so many priceless works of art and gifts from other nations.

But more than anything, she wondered what thoughts were going through Grayson's mind. There was so much she wanted to know about him. As her uncle said often, knowledge was power. And she needed the power to push through this business deal.

She tried to tell herself that was the only reason she wanted to know more about Grayson. After all, it had nothing to do with his good looks or the way he was able to connect with her back at the piazza.

No. It was none of those things. It was purely business.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

OKAY. SO MAYBE this isn't so bad.

A vacation in a Mediterranean palace.

In fact, the palace is the perfect inspiration for a new game for Fo Shizzle.

Grayson sat in the formal dining room at a very large table. Did they really eat here every day? He might be rich, but he'd come from a humble beginning. He didn't stand on airs and most of the time his dinner was eaten alone in front of his desktop computer.

Meeting the king had been a great honor. Thankfully Annabelle had instructed him on the proper protocol while they were in the car. He wondered how he should have greeted her considering she was the daughter of a duke. He'd hazard a guess it wasn't to argue about what to do with her purse after the theft.

And try as he might, he couldn't help but like Annabelle. Not that he would let her sunny smiles get to him. He'd learned his lesson about love, especially about loving someone in the spotlight. And Annabelle, with her constant bodyguard, was definitely someone who was used to living in the spotlight—a place where he felt uncomfortable.

"Mr. Landers, you picked an optimal time to visit Mirraccino," the king said as their dinner dishes were cleared from the table.

How exactly did one make small talk with a king? Grayson swallowed hard. "Please call me Grayson." When the man nodded, Grayson continued. "If you don't mind me asking, why is this an optimal time?"

The king turned to Annabelle. "You didn't tell him about the heritage festival?"

"It slipped my mind." Color rushed to her cheeks. "I mean, there was so much going on this afternoon. I apologize. You are most definitely welcome to stay and partake in the festivities."

"No apology is necessary." Grayson could understand that the theft had shaken her up.

"Annabelle," the king said, "you need to slow down. I think you're becoming a workaholic."

Feeling bad for Annabelle, Grayson intervened. "I'd love to hear more about this heritage festival."

The king leaned back in his chair as the wait staff supplied them with coffee and a dessert plate of finger foods. "The heritage festival is an annual event. It's held in Portolina, which is a small village within walking distance of the palace. The villagers get together—actually people from all over the nation make the pilgrimage to Portolina for the four-day celebration."

Grayson took a sip of his coffee and then gently set it back on the fine china saucer which had tiny blue flowers around the edge. He didn't think he'd ever used such delicate dishes. With his big hands, he was afraid of touching such fragile items. He had no doubt that they were antiques. And he didn't even want to imagine their value. He might be wealthy, but there was a vast difference between his wealth and that of the king.

Grayson pulled his dessert plate closer. "I actually don't know if I'll be here that long."

The king picked up a mini pecan tart. "You really don't want to miss the event. Maybe you could extend your vacation. You would be my guest, here at the palace."

"Thank you, sir. I...I'll see if I can adjust my schedule."

"Good. You'll enjoy all of the activities." The king acted as though Grayson had said yes. The king added some sugar to his coffee and stirred. "You are here to determine if the South Shore is appropriate for your business. I hope you found it as beautiful as we do."

"I did, sir." That was certainly not one of the reasons he was hesitant to put in one of his cafés. But he really didn't want to get into the details with the king. "I'd like a chance to check into a few

more locations before I commit my company. And as soon as this situation with Annabelle and the police is wrapped up—”

“Police?” The king sat up straight. A distinct frown marred his face as he turned to his niece. “Why is this the first I’m hearing of an incident with the police?”

Color flooded Annabelle’s face. “It’s not a big deal.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” The king turned back to Grayson. “What exactly happened?”

“Uncle, I’ll explain.” Annabelle sent Grayson a warning look. “There’s no need to drag Grayson into this.”

“It appears he’s already a part of it. He at least knows what happened, which is more than I do.” The King turned back to him and gestured for Grayson to spill the details.

Grayson swallowed hard. “It really isn’t that big of a deal.”

“If it involves my niece, it’s a very big deal.”

Grayson glanced down at the small plate filled with sweets. He suddenly lost his appetite. He launched into the details of his first meeting with Annabelle. He tried to downplay the events, realizing how much the king worried about her. And Grayson knew what happened when a high-profile person didn’t heed safety protocols.

When Grayson finished reciting the events as best as he could recall them, the king gestured for the phone. He announced that he was going to speak with the police.

“Uncle, I have everything under control.”

The man sent her a pointed look. “It doesn’t sound like it. You don’t have your purse and you don’t know what’s going to happen to that thief.” He shook his head as he accepted the phone that had already been dialed for him. “What is this world coming to when you can’t even walk down the street without being accosted?”

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