

USA TODAY bestselling author

CHRISTINE RIVER

Rumors of his death
had been greatly
exaggerated....



the
Man
Behind
the Mask

Mills & Boon M&B

Christine Rimmer

The Man Behind the Mask

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He had been in hiding for years, but the sight of Dulcie Samples, with her girl-next-door appeal, was enough to finally draw Prince Valbrand into the light. Yet Valbrand, whose face—not to mention spirit—had taken a serious hit from the assassination attempt that had driven him underground, was sworn to spend all the rest of his days hunting down the enemies who had done this to him. And even if he had the time for love, who could see past his scarred face to the man inside? Certainly not the beautiful Dulcie....Or so Valbrand thought. But despite the darkness and mystery that surrounded him, Dulcie knew that the half-masked man before her was her destiny. Now, if only she could convince him that she held both the key to his heart and his kingdom in her trembling hands....

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I was a madman no longer.

I was, once again, a prince. Once again, I was bound by all the dragging obligations and careful courtesies that being a prince entailed.

But still I dared to look at the American again. She gazed at me as if all that she was, all that she had been, or ever would be, was mine. It stunned me how powerfully I wanted to take what she offered. I longed, if not for the refuge of madness, at least for the mask. For the comfort of shadows.

Or I had until that moment.

Until the redheaded American with the wide, honest eyes.

And so in a moment of purest insanity, I held out my hand. I knew she would trust her hand to me, without hesitation. With no coyness.

And she did.

The Man Behind the Mask

Christine Rimmer



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For my guys: Steve, Matt and Jess.

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Chapter 1

For me, it was love at first sight.

Okay, okay. Nobody believes in love at first sight anymore. It's like disco. Or the dickey. Went out decades ago, isn't coming back, no matter how many brave fools try to resurrect it.

And, you may ask, how would I, Dulcinea Samples, a semi dewy-eyed young thing of twenty-four, even know about a dickey?

My mom used to wear them. She's wearing one, in fact, in the family portrait that sits on our mantel back home in Bakersfield. The outline of it is just visible beneath her V-neck sweater.

My mom's a true romantic. She's always claimed she fell in love with Dad at first sight.

As I said, like the dickey. People don't do that anymore.

But my mom did. And there's more. Witness my name. How many people get named after the purer-than-pure alter ego of the barmaid whore heroine in *Man of La Mancha*? With a last name like Samples? Hel-lo?

Just call me Dulcie. Please.

And back to my mom. Yeah. Romantic. Capital R. And I know some of it rubbed off on me, though I swear I always tried my best to keep my romantic impulses strictly under control. They're about as useful as a dickey if you're a single girl living in East Hollywood. Not to mention a lot more dangerous. Get too romantic in East Hollywood—really, in any part of L.A.—and there's no telling what could happen to you. Did you see Mulholland Drive? Enough said.

And maybe that was part of it—why I fell in love with this certain guy at first sight. Because that first sight didn't happen in L.A., where I understood the hazards and would have had my guard up. Not in L.A. but in a ballroom in a palace in a tiny island country called Gullandria.

He was a prince—did I mention that?

And not just as in “a prince of a guy.” No. I mean a real, bona fide, son-of-a-king type of prince. A Gullandrian prince. That's right, Gullandria. Remember? That island country I mentioned?

Gullandria is a story in itself. Picture the Shetland Islands. Get an image of Norway. And then, midway between the two, a little to the north, put a heart-shaped island maybe a hundred and fifty miles across at the widest part—you know, ventricle to ventricle? Lots of dramatic, jewel-blue fjords. Mountains to the north and rolling lowlands in the south. A capital city named Lysgard. “Lys” means light. And the king's palace, which stands on a hilltop just outside the capital? Isenhalla: Ice-hall. Oh, I love that.

Now, the deal about Gullandria is the people there never completely gave up their Norse heritage. That would be Norse as in Vikings. Dragon-prowed longships; Odin and Thor and the gang? You're following, I hope.

Because I truly am getting to the part about the prince and me.

On the evening in question, there I stood in the aforementioned ballroom. I was wearing one of the two dresses I owned that was even marginally suited to such a strictly white-tie event—a midnight-blue strapless ankle-length A-line Jessica McClintock, a dress I bought in a moment of wild spending abandon. At Nordstrom. Yes, on sale. After-Christmas, if you just have to know. At the time of the purchase, I felt positively giddy about wasting money I didn't really have, a giddiness compounded by a burning awareness of my own foolishness. I knew I'd never find a place to actually wear such a dress, proms and senior balls and the like being pretty much a thing of the past for me by then.

But see? Wild spending abandon and utter foolishness are good things—now and then. You might get invited to a palace ball in some fascinating northern island state. I did.

So you understand. The dress was fine. It showed off my best features: breasts. And skimmed forgivingly over my worst: a not-concave stomach and hips I liked to think of as generous on days when I wasn't consumed with body-image issues. I'd been in Gullandria since the day before when

the royal jet flew me in from L.A. Picture it. Just the pilot, a flight attendant and me, the passenger-of-honor, on my way to attend the wedding of my best friend, Brit Thorson.

That night I stood a little off to the side in my pretty blue Jessica McClintock, heart beating too fast with nerves and excitement, hoping I wouldn't end up doing something really gauche that would remind everyone of the basic truth that I was, after all, a bright but ordinary girl from Bakersfield who dreamt of someday actually selling one of the novels she'd written; a girl who, until the day before, had never set foot in a royal palace in her life.

I'd had an escort when the evening started, a dapper prince who appeared at the door to my room and brought me to the ballroom. I'd lost track of him early on.

That was okay with me. It wasn't like I even knew the guy. And I wasn't left dangling. Brit kept dropping by to check on me, to whisper funny comments in my ear on the whole Norse-based culture thing—Gullandrians, remember, were Vikings at heart—and to introduce me to a stunning array of friends and relatives whose names I forgot as soon as they were told to me.

Brit was not your average best friend. For starters, she was a princess. A princess born in Gullandria, one of three fraternal-triplet princesses. When Brit was still a baby, her mom the queen left her dad the king, and took the girls to Sacramento, where they grew up blond and beautiful and rich—and about as American as anybody can get.

And beyond the princess angle, Brit was not a person you messed with. She had a high pain threshold and a scary kind of fearlessness. Once, two years before the night in the ballroom, I watched her go after a guy who'd displayed the bad judgment to try to stick up a coffee shop while Brit and I were standing at the register, waiting to pay after a little serious pigging out on chili dogs and fries. The guy ordered us—and everyone else in the place—to hit the floor. We all did as we were told. Except for Brit. She dived for the guy's knees. Took him down, too—though he put a couple of rounds in the ceiling before the cooks lurched to life and gave her a hand.

As I said, fearless. A fearless tall, blond California-girl princess. And my best friend in the world.

About the fifth time she came by, she edged good and close and murmured in my ear, "Note the redhead." I noted. Drop-dead gorgeous, in petal-pink satin—which I would never dare to wear—the redhead whirled by in the arms of some prince or other.

We were up to the ears in princes at that palace. From what I understood, every male noble, or jarl as they called themselves, was a prince. And they were all eligible to someday become king.

But I wasn't really thinking about the rules of Gullandrian succession at that moment. Right then, I was wondering why I couldn't be that kind of redhead—the kind like the woman waltzing past Brit and me. The sleek kind, you know? The kind with a waterfall of red silk for hair, with porcelain skin, a cameo-perfect face and a Halle Berry body.

"The Lady Kaarin Karlsmon," Brit whispered, as I reminded myself to get a grip and be at peace with being me. "So very well-bred. And nice, I guess—in her own oh-so-aristocratic way. Always laughs at the right places. But just a little too cagey, if you know what I mean."

I gave my friend a look. "So and?" Grinning, blue eyes agleam, Brit wiggled her eyebrows. I leaned a little closer. "Tell."

"Tell what?" asked a male voice behind us.

It was Prince Eric Greyfell, Brit's fiancé. He wrapped his arms loosely around his bride-to-be and nuzzled her hair.

Brit leaned into his embrace with a happy sigh, the black chiffon overlay of her gown—Vera Wang, no doubt about it—shimmering against the matte black of his tux. "Just girl talk." She turned her head and whispered to him, only a few words. Something that would have been meaningless to me, I'd bet. Something intimate.

I looked at the silver disc that hung from a heavy chain around her neck. It was an intricate design, like a thousand coiling snakes. Fascinating.

But even more interesting to me was the red burst of angry-looking scar tissue about six inches from it, at the soft, incurving spot where Brit's left shoulder met her torso. The fresh scar kept peeking out from beneath the halter top of her fabulous dress. I wondered, as I'd been wondering since I first spotted it, where it had come from.

Some stick-up guy who'd shot my friend instead of the ceiling? I was keeping myself from asking her about it. I wanted details—hey, I'm a writer. I always want details—and I knew I wouldn't get them that night. Brit was in serious mingle mode, dropping by, flitting off. You can bet I planned to pry the whole story out of her if we ever got a little time to ourselves. I had a lot of questions to ask her once I got her alone. It had been six months or so since she'd left L.A. We had some catching up to do.

Eric spared a glance for me. "Dulcie, forgive my intrusion."

I smiled. "Nothing to forgive." What can I say about Eric? It's all good. Tall and lean and...intense. Brown hair, grayish green eyes in which you could see compassion and considerable intelligence. This was the second time I'd met him, the first being the day before, when Brit introduced us. I knew right away that he was like Brit. Not to be messed with. But so honorable it made you want to hug him.

Brit eased herself around so she could face him. She gazed up at him and he looked back at her and—whoa. Call it heat, call it lust, call it passion...call it love.

I want that, I thought. I want what they have....

Little did I know.

Eric looked at me again. "May I steal her away?"

I had to stifle a dizzy giggle. It made me feel giddy as buying my blue Jessica McClintock, just to be around all that love and passion. "I'd say you already have."

"Don't imagine it was an easy task." He was faking a frown.

"Oh, I don't. Not for a second." I laughed then. And Eric and I shared a moment of perfect understanding. We both knew Brit.

Brit gave my arm a squeeze. "I'll be back."

I grinned and nodded and off they went. I stared after them for a moment or two, no doubt looking wide-eyed and dreamy. Then I caught myself and jerked my gaze up—way up—toward the arching vaulted ceiling. When in doubt, especially at Isenhalla where there's no shortage of awesome things to look at, study the architecture.

The grand ballroom had plenty for a girl from Bakersfield to ogle. For instance: a musician's balcony about thirty feet up, extending the length of the wall opposite the one where I stood. There was an entire orchestra up there, I swear. The sound of their music was achingly beautiful, big enough to fill every last apse of that ballroom, big enough to swell and soar between the thick stone columns that marched along the sides of the room, and farther, into the shadowed spaces on the other side of those columns, and even farther than that—through the arching oak doors, out to the gallery, on past the high leaded windows and into the icy early-December darkness beyond.

Overhead, massive iron chandeliers, blazing bright, hung from thick black chains. On the side walls trefoil stained-glass windows glittered, four-panel lancet windows below, also of stained glass. On one side, the windows held out the night. On the other, they stood between the ballroom and the gallery.

At my end of the rectangular room: a two story-high fireplace. I swear to you, that fireplace was big enough to roast a couple of reindeer and a wild boar or two and still have plenty of room to spare. The fireplace led the eye up again, to arch upon arch, all very Gothic-looking, only somehow more opulent. The sheer complexity of it could make you dizzy.

I stared up at all those interlocking arches until my neck got a slight crick in it. About then, it occurred to me that I'd lurked near that giant fireplace for too long, alternately gazing at the ceiling and into the fire where three whole tree trunks burned. Not that anyone was looking at me, or would

even have cared if they were. But still. I had my pride and a firm determination not to sink too deeply into wallflower mode.

I began working my way to the other end of the ballroom, smiling brightly at faces I'd never seen before—and a few I'd been introduced to but whose names were already lost somewhere in the unattended recesses of my mind. As a rule, I'm pretty good with names. But not that night. I guess I was kind of on overload. Mountains of new data coming my way, no time to process.

Eventually I reached the other end of the room and just kept going, beneath the balcony on which the full-size orchestra was now playing something very Strauss. I finally came to a stop about four feet from a wall on which hung a huge, obviously antique tapestry. And I am not kidding when I say huge. The gorgeous thing started just below the balcony above and ended about a foot from the inlaid hardwood floor. It stretched a good ten feet in either direction. I stepped back a little and tried to take it all in.

And I know what you're thinking. There I was, a guest at the ball, surrounded by handsome Nordic types with "prince" in their names, and I was studying the ceiling and gapping at a rug.

What can I say? It's how I am. Two summers before, Brit and I had done Route 66—you know the song right? We did it backward. From San Bernardino all the way to St. Louis. We stopped in a lot of small towns, each complete with its own très atmospheric seedy bar. Brit would be hanging out with the locals in the main room, doing shots and getting hit on. And me? I'm in the back, copying the graffiti off the ladies' room walls. You'd be amazed the bits of life-wisdom and philosophy, the stories of love and loss, you can find on the walls of a toilet stall, stuff I knew I'd use later, in some book or other.

Also, in my defense that night in the ballroom, let me say that you would have to see the rug. We are talking intricate. At first glance, it seemed just swirls of muted color. And then there was that moment when it all spun into focus and I saw that it was a huge, gnarled tree with roots running everywhere and some kind of serpent-creature wrapped through those roots, defining the center of a series of circles, one on top of the other. In the branches perched an eagle, with some other smaller bird woven inside the eagle's head. There were elves, dwarves, men or maybe gods armed with shields and swords, a dragon, deer—four bucks, with huge racks—women in long gowns with twining golden hair, crone-like figures leering with what I felt certain must be evil intent. I saw a squirrel that seemed to zip along the curve of a root and fountains that shimmered, as if truly wet...

I found it enchanting and wondrous and I shamelessly stared.

Someone behind my left shoulder said, "That tapestry is to represent Yggdrasil, what we call the world tree, or the guardian tree." The voice was male—low and with a ring of authority, yet faintly thready, as with age.

I turned to find a gaunt old man with long silver hair and a wispy beard to match. He had one of those faces that are all sharp bone and shadow, as if his flesh had melted away over the years, leaving the vulnerable shape of his skull revealed beneath the papery skin. His silver-gray eyes were sunken way down in their sockets. And they seemed, somehow, to glow there in the pools of darkness surrounding them. Eerie.

But not scary. He looked otherworldly and infinitely wise. As if he could not only read your mind but also accept absolutely anything he found in there, no matter how evil or petty or banal. He also looked vaguely familiar, though I was certain I would have remembered if I'd met him before.

"Yggdrasil," I repeated, enchanted. The ygg was pronounced ig—short i—and the rest of the vowels were short as well, the same as the way you would say, Clearasil, with ig substituted for the first syllable. "I've never heard it pronounced before."

"The world tree—some sources say an ash tree, some a yew—links and shelters the nine worlds of Norse cosmology," the old man intoned. He gestured with a graceful, skeletal hand. "Within the roots, you see the three levels of the worlds." He looked at me again, one grizzled brow lifting. "Ah, but you know this, do you not?"

“I have a...general understanding, I guess you could say.” Back when I wrote my epic fantasy—no snickering, please. Every budding writer should try her hand at epic fantasy—I did a little studying up on the major myth systems. Including the Norse one.

The old man chuckled then, a dry but friendly sound. “A general understanding is quite enough, for a pretty young American. May I call you Dulcinea? It is a name as sweet as its meaning, a name that suits you well.”

Anyone else would have gotten an automatic, “Please don’t.” I really do prefer Dulcie. But somehow, Dulcinea sounded just right when this magical old guy said it. Plus, he’d said I was sweet to match my name. From him, that sounded like high praise. “Thank you. Dulcinea is fine. And you’re...?”

“Prince Medwyn Greyfell.”

The metaphorical lightbulb went on over my head. No wonder he knew who I was. “You’re Eric’s father.”

“And there you have it.” He gave me a small smile. Brit had mentioned him more than once. Besides being Eric’s father, Prince Medwyn was also the second most powerful man in Gullandria, the king’s top advisor, the one they called the grand counselor.

Prince Medwyn held out that pale, veined hand. I gave him mine. He brought my hand close and brushed his thin, dry lips—so lightly, the whisper of dragonfly wings—against my knuckles.

I realized I adored him. Who wouldn’t? “Tell me more.”

“Concerning?”

“Oh, anything. The Norse myths. Who wove this tapestry and how old it is...”

“In 1640, it was presented as a gift from the King of Bohemia to King Velief Danelaw, in appreciation of Gullandria’s support in convincing the Swedes to withdraw from Bohemian soil. The creator, more likely than not a woman, as women are the weavers in our lands, is not known.”

I turned to the tapestry again. “Artist unknown...” A heated flush crept up my cheeks. “I hate that. Someone labored for months, or even years, creating something so beautiful. And in the end, who remembers her name?”

“Alas, Dulcinea. You do speak true.”

“It’s as if the artist never even existed. It’s just not...” Turning, I saw that the place where the old man had stood was empty. I blinked and glanced around. Nothing. He was gone.

It was pretty bizarre, how fast he’d vanished. And right in the middle of my sentence, too. Yet strangely, I felt neither dissed nor deserted. There was something about him. You just knew the everyday rules of conduct didn’t apply in his case. Like he was above them, or beyond them...

With a sigh, I turned to the tapestry again. By then, I’d forgotten all about my firm intention to avoid acting the wallflower. I was thinking of Medwyn, getting that hungry feeling I get when I meet someone interesting, hoping I’d see him again, planning to have a list of questions ready next time.

When I went back home to L.A., I wanted to have loads of Gullandrian background material. I tried to do that wherever I went, to take lots of notes, to get my questions about the place answered and to keep a computer journal of my impressions. I planned to write a lot of books in my life. Every location was a potential setting for a novel. Up till then, the farthest I’d been from California was a trip to New York City, in the spring, right after 9/11. I’d seen Ground Zero, walked down Park Avenue, visited SoHo and the Village. I’d come home deeply moved, full to bursting with ideas and possibilities. I hadn’t written my New York novel yet. Give me time. Same thing with Gullandria. I would take it all in, and take notes, as well. And someday...

“Dulce?” It was Brit, jerking me out of my authorly delusions of grandeur and back to the here and now. I was still facing the tapestry and away from her, but from the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a black tux: a man, standing beside her. More cheerful greetings, another name for me to instantly forget...

I turned with a big, hello-and-nice-to-meet-you smile.

And there he was.

My prince.

What can I tell you? That the world stopped? That the stars went supernova?

It was nothing like that.

It was everything like that.

“My brother, Prince Valbrand.” Brit’s voice seemed to come from somewhere down at the other end of a very long tunnel. She was so far away, she almost wasn’t there. Not to me.

The music, the glittering lights, the rise and fall of laughter and conversation around us... everything was overshadowed. Eclipsed.

By him.

He filled up the world. He had dark brown hair and eyes to match. A tender mouth—half of one, anyway. He was tall. Lean. Too lean, really, but with strong, wide shoulders.

And all that is...only fact. The full reality was so much grander, so much more complete. He was the handsomest man I’d ever seen—and the most terrifying.

How can I tell you?

How can I make you see?

Half of his face appeared to have melted. Remember that old Mel Gibson movie, *The Man Without a Face*? That was Valbrand. It happened, I’d been told, in an accident at sea that almost killed him. An accident that included second- and third-degree burns from temple to jaw on the left side—burns never treated, that healed on their own.

Brit had prepared me, or at least she’d tried to. We’d had a few minutes alone the day before and she’d told me of his injuries, so I wouldn’t make a fool of myself, gaping like an idiot the first time I saw him, so that I wouldn’t pile any more hurt on all that had already been done to him.

So much for Brit’s thoughtful preparations. I saw him and the world spun away and I flat-out gaped. Rudely. Blatantly.

There was a sudden, welling pressure at the back of my throat. I was so busy staring, I didn’t make myself swallow the emotion. My eyes brimmed and two fat tears escaped. They slid over the dam of my lower lids and trailed down my cheeks.

They felt hot. Scalding. Should I have swiped them away? Probably. Tried to hide them? I suppose.

But I didn’t. I only tipped my face to him, higher, as if to display both my face—and those tears.

Somewhere, in some part of me, I realized that Brit had to be thinking she couldn’t take me anywhere.

But it wasn’t something I could control. It was love like a thunderbolt. And it was my heart breaking.

For him.

For what I saw in his lightless eyes.

What he was once. What he had become.

For all that was lost.

Chapter 2

I gazed down at the redheaded American in the blue gown, at the wide eyes that were some gleaming color, green and gold and brown all mixed, at the tears sliding over those soft, smooth cheeks, leaving a glittering trail.

First one and then the other, the tears dropped. They fell to the front of her dress, just below where her fine, full breasts swelled from their prison of fabric. I watched them fall, watched dark blue turn darker: twin small stains. I wanted to lower my head, stick out my tongue and taste them: the salt of her tears.

That was when I looked away—for a second or two only, long enough to collect my suddenly scattered wits, long enough to remind myself that, while a madman might bend close and lick the tearstains from a woman's breast, I must not.

I was a madman no longer. I was, once again, a prince. Once again, I was bound by all the strictures, all the dragging obligations and careful courtesies that being a prince—and the only surviving son of a king—entailed. This servitude to princely sanity was necessary. I had goals. Sworn. Sacred. And murderous. Goals the madman in me was too disorganized to achieve.

I dared to look at the American again. Her expression had not changed. She gazed at me as if all that she was, all she had been or would ever be, was mine. It stunned me how powerfully I wanted to take what she offered—right there. On the polished, inlaid hardwood of the ballroom floor.

I had to look away again. I glanced toward the dancers in the center of the floor. Once I had loved nights like that one, in the ballroom, all the lights blazing, fine music, the laughter of flirtatious women...

And the absolute assurance that I was where I belonged.

But that was before the horror. Before the madness. By that night, the night I met my sister's friend, it was all too difficult, too hurtful—the pity in such large doses, the expressions of shock followed instantly by broad counterfeit smiles.

I longed, if not for the refuge of madness, at least for the mask. For the comfort of shadows.

Or I had, until that moment.

Until the redheaded American with the wide, honest eyes.

I looked at her again and found she had waited for my gaze to find her once more—waited with her head tipped up, the tear-tracks drying on her velvet skin. I did not smile at her. My smile, after all, had become an exercise in the grotesque. Flesh and muscle pulling in the most bizarre ways.

I was thinking, A few words only: Hello. How are you? So pleased to meet my little sister's dearest friend, at last.

A few words, and then farewell. I would turn and walk away.

But no words came.

Instead, in a moment of purest insanity, I held out my hand. I knew she would trust her hand to me, without hesitation. With no coyness.

And she did.

Somewhere a thousand miles away, my brave and cheeky little sister said, "Well, um, okay. Looks like I can leave you two on your own for a while..."

Neither I nor the woman with her hand in mine answered her. Brit was far away right then. Everything was far away and I was glad it was. Everything but the American, everything but her soft hand in mine, her honest eyes, the truth in her tears, shed for me.

The music right then was slow in rhythm. No longer a waltz, but a foxtrot. An American classic: "I've Got You Under My Skin." Suddenly I was ridiculously smug, as if the orchestra had played this perfect song at my command. I saw I had the excuse a sane man needs to take a woman he's only just met into his arms: a dance.

I guided her to me, put my left arm at the curve of her back, felt the slightly stiff fabric of her dress—and the warm softness waiting beneath it.

Her flesh, I thought and heat shot up my arm to break at my shoulder into arrows of need. The arrows flew on, cutting all through me. My body responded like the starved thing it was.

I knew shame.

Loss of control was a thing I greatly despised since my slow return from the horror and the madness. I might be hideous now. But I was well-behaved. And in perfect control.

I hadn't thought to worry about my penis betraying me. Since the horror, it kept...a low profile. At times I might imagine the joys of bedding a woman, but those thoughts were like faint echoes from a safer, happier time; not real to me anymore, vague bittersweet fantasies that always remained strictly above the neck.

Or they had until that night, at the first in a gala series of balls honoring the imminent union of my sister and my bloodbound lifelong friend—that night, when I made the mistake of pulling the American I'd just met into my arms for a dance. That night, when I saw something I wanted beyond the triumph of my revenge and knew that it was something I would never have.

I longed to yank her closer—and at the same time, to shove her away, turn on my heel and run.

I didn't fear that anyone would see the way my body shamed me. My trousers, like every other man's in the room, were black. Black is effective at masking unwelcome bulges. And while I held the woman in my arms, no one would be glancing there anyway. And even if they had, I would not have cared.

The shame was not that someone might see. The shame was that I had let my guard down so far and so fast that it had happened at all. One would think I would have learned better, after all I'd allowed to be done to me—and more important, to those who followed me—as a result of failing to stay in control and on guard.

I held the American lightly, enough away that I knew she couldn't feel my physical response to her. And I kept my wreck of a face carefully composed.

As I led her across the floor, I saw in her sweet and dreamy expression that she had no clue of my sudden shame. I began to relax. Soon enough, the front of my trousers lay smooth once more.

The song ended. I led her back to the place I had met her, near the World Tree tapestry. My sister, by then, had moved on to other guests, other introductions.

I let go of the American's hand. She stepped back—at the same time as her body seemed to lift and sway toward me, like a flower seeking the sun.

Didn't she realize? What she sought was not in me. No light. No warmth. In me, there was only darkness and a determination to root out and destroy what had so very nearly destroyed me, what had been responsible for the deaths of good men who had trusted me.

I nodded. She bit her soft lower lip and nodded in response, clasping her hands low in front of her, knuckles toward the floor. Demure—and yet so very eager.

Her soft lips parted.

I put up a hand before she could speak.

She closed her mouth, seemed to settle back into herself. She nodded again. Brave. Disappointed.

I turned and left her there.

Neither of us had said a single word.

Chapter 3

Sunday, December 8, 11:02 pm; the king's palace, Gullandria. Snowing.

Before I drew the heavy window curtains and climbed into bed, I stood for a moment at the tall mullioned windows, watching the white flakes coming out of the blackness to hit the diamond-shaped panes.

Things I learned today

Offshore oil drilling: major Gullandrian industry since the 1970s. Country was poor before its discovery; now, prosperous.

kingmaking: the election ceremony in which the jarl elect the next king.

Gullandrian slate: all of Isenhalla's outer walls are faced in this silvery gray and semireflecting stone.

bloodsworn: a vow of

I looked up and groaned, then bent my head again to the mini word processor in my lap....

Trouble concentrating. Keep thinking of last night, of V. Know I shouldn't. Clearly a case of inbred romantic impulses spiraling scarily out of control. Must keep firmly in mind that it was only a dance. One dance. He didn't speak. Neither did I. He shushed me. Now that should tell me something—that he was shushing me when I hadn't said a word.

No sign of him today, or this evening at dinner. I might have asked Brit about him, but, as usual since I arrived here, we hardly had a moment to ourselves.

I can't help believing that he

I looked up again, blinking, shaking my head.

Oh, lovely. Obsessing over Valbrand. Again. Filling up my AlphaSmart with lovesick babble.

A few minutes on the dance floor with Brit's long-lost brother and there I was, a slave to love. I'd stayed awake all night the night before, typing like mad, filling four whole files with V., V., V. Had to dump most of it. Drivel anyway and the Alphie only had so much space. Until I got home to my PC, I'd have no place to download it. And the point was to pack it with facts and observations about Gullandria—not endless yada-yada about a man I hardly knew.

That morning I had made a firm resolution: if I couldn't keep myself from starting in about him, I would at least switch to longhand. Maybe longhand would stop me. I swear, at the rate I was going, if I put it all in longhand, I'd be sure to get writer's cramp, end up with a hand like a twisted claw.

Which would serve me right. I mean, how could I have spent all night pounding the keys on the subject of a guy with whom I had not exchanged one word?

Don't answer that.

And it wasn't like the two of us were on the brink of something grand. I knew very well that the next time I saw him, it was going to be Hello, how are you? and walk on by. He'd as good as told me so—and I know what you're thinking. How could he have told me if he didn't even speak?

Well, he didn't need to say it. I saw it in those beautiful haunted eyes of his: There was not, and never would be, an us.

And no, it didn't help that I knew those haunted eyes were right. I mean, what were a recently-back-from-the-dead Gullandrian prince and Dulcie Samples, wannabe writer from Bakersfield, gonna have in common anyway? Couldn't be all that much, even if we ever did get around to actually speaking to each other.

It was hopeless. I knew it.

And I didn't care. That's the way it is with love at first sight.

Sitting there, propped against the carved headboard of that antique bed, amid all the lush featherbedding, I let out a long, sad sigh. I was debating with myself. Would I get back on task with

my “what I learned” list? Or was I on another Valbrand roll? If so, it was time to keep my promise to myself and switch to a pen and a notebook and—

What was that?

A flicker of movement. In my side vision, to my right. I glanced that way.

The doors to a heavy, dark armoire, shut the last time I looked, gaped open. My clothes were moving, a head emerging from between my winter coat and a little black dress.

I shrieked. The AlphaSmart went flying. I hovered on the verge of my first coronary.

About then, I realized that the head was Brit's. “Sheesh,” she said. “Calm down. It's only me.” She emerged in a crouch and turned to shut the armoire doors.

“Holy freaking kamolie.” Freaking was not the word I was thinking. It just proves what a model of self-restraint I am that I didn't say that other word. “I coulda died of fright.”

“Sorry.” She didn't look particularly contrite.

And that bugged me. I adore horror movies, but when it comes to real life—don't scare me, you know? I have three prank-loving brothers and a devilish dad. They know I'm excitable. When I was growing up, they were always popping out of doorways, shouting, “Hah!” They found my squeals of terror hilarious.

Making ungracious grumbling noises, I kicked off the covers, flung my torso over the side of the bed and retrieved my Alphie, after which I dragged myself back up to the mattress and settled against the pillows again. I tapped a few keys. “At least it's not broken.” I shot her a thoroughly sour look. “No thanks to you.”

She tried flattery. “Hey. Love your pajamas.”

I grunted. We both favored cartoon-character PJs. That night, mine were liberally dotted with widely smiling SpongeBobs. “How long have you been hiding in there?”

Brit dropped to a wing chair and raked her hair back out of her eyes. “I wasn't hiding. There's a door at the back of it.”

I blinked. “Oh, come on...”

She crossed her heart. “Hope to die.”

“A door. As in...to a secret passageway?” I was thoroughly intrigued. It's hard to keep pouting when you're intrigued.

She jumped up again and held out her hand. “Come look.”

I peered at her sideways, scowling. “Don't be cranky. I really am sorry I freaked you out.”

“I'm not cranky,” I insisted. Crankily. “I just don't see why you couldn't come in through the door.”

She made an impatient noise in her throat. “Hel-lo, I'm a princess, remember? Around here, I have an image to maintain.” She opened her pink robe to display her own cartoon-character pajamas—Wile E. Coyote, as a matter of fact—then lifted a foot with a fluffy pink slipper on it and wiggled it at me. “I prefer not to go running through the halls once I'm dressed for bed.”

The reminder of her royal status put me right back into pouting mode. “You always used to say that being a princess didn't mean a thing to you.”

We shared a long look. She said, softly, “I'm learning that it means quite a bit. That it's an important part of who I am.”

Did those words surprise me? Not really. I could sense big changes in her. A whole lot had happened since she'd boarded the royal jet in L.A., back in June, for her first visit to her father's land. In June, Valbrand had been missing and considered dead for almost a year; King Osrik, the father she now called “Dad” was a stranger to her—and she'd yet to meet the man she now planned to marry.

“Well?” she demanded, after a too-long pause. “D'you want to see the passageway or not?”

I shoved my AlphaSmart off my lap, jumped from the bed and padded to her side. Brit opened the armoire door and slid my clothes out of the way.

The whole back of the armoire was another door—it opened onto a narrow hallway of the same silver-gray slate as the palace facade. An electric lantern—Brit’s, no doubt—sat on the passageway floor just beyond the armoire, casting a golden glow, making strange, shimmery light patterns on the glossy stone. I could see straight ahead maybe a hundred feet. Then a dead end, a shadowed blackness to the right. A turn in the passageway, I guessed. “Amazing.”

Brit beamed. “Isenhalla is riddled with hidden hallways. They were included in the original construction, back in the mid-sixteenth century, when King Thorlak the Liberator built the current palace on the ruins of an earlier one destroyed by the Danes. It was a dangerous time. Poor King Thorlak. He never knew when he might need to duck inside a curio cabinet and get the hell outta Dodge. And there’s more...”

I loved this kind of stuff and Brit knew it. “Tell.”

“In the mid-nineteenth century, King Solmund Gudmond took the throne. King Solmund was, shall we say, more than a little bit eccentric—enough so that by the end of his reign he was known as Mad King Solmund. In the final years before his death, he would wash his hands a hundred times a day and wander the great halls at night wearing nothing but a look of total confusion.”

“And King Solmund had exactly what to do with the passageways?”

“Before he lost his grip on reality, he had them modernized, adding more hidden entrances and exits, improving the internal mechanisms within the secret doors.”

“Fascinating,” I said, and meant it.

“Yeah. It’s become a minor hobby of mine, to hunt down all the secret hallways and follow them wherever they lead.” Her face was flushed, excited. I’d never seen her look happier.

Or more at home.

“You love it here.” There was a tightness in my chest.

She quirked an eyebrow at me. “Is that an accusation?”

I shook my head. “I guess it just hit me all over again. You’re really never coming home.”

“This is my home.” She spoke gently, with only the faintest note of reproach.

I scrunched up my eyes. Hard. No way I was letting the waterworks get started. “I’ll miss you, that’s all.”

Her mouth kind of twisted. She patted my arm. “Don’t forget the royal jet. Flies both ways. And the phone. And what about e-mail? You know we’ll be in touch.”

“I know,” I said and gave her a big smile. I didn’t want to be a downer, but I was thinking that visits and phone calls and e-mails could never stack up with her living directly across the walkway from me in our charmingly derelict courtyard-style apartment building. In the months she’d been gone, I’d come to realize how much I counted on her friendship.

East Hollywood with no Brit. Could it really be happening?

She grabbed my hand. “I know I’ve been neglecting you.”

Wrong. Yes, I missed her. Yes, I hated that I was going to have to accept that her life was different now and our friendship would change. But I did not feel neglected. “Oh, come on. You’ve knocked yourself out checking on me every chance you get. You’ve been crazy busy....”

“Still. We’ve hardly had a moment to ourselves since you got here. I’m fixing that. Now. Let’s go to my rooms. We’ll talk till our tongues go numb. Do the mutual pedicure thing. You can mess with my hair.”

I had a way with hair. Other people’s, anyway. Mine was wild and curly and I pretty much left it alone. I fluffed the sides of her blond mop with my fingers. The cut was fine, really. But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t try to improve on it. “Hmm. Maybe just a trim. Reemphasize the feathering around your face...”

“Who knows when we’ll get the chance again?”

I didn’t want to think about that. Hair, I thought. Hair is the question. “Do you have some decent scissors?”

“I’m sure I can dig up a pair.”

I bargained shamelessly. “You’ll have to tell me all your exploits since June. I get the sense it’s been action-packed.”

“One death-defying challenge after another.” She said it dryly, but something in her voice told me it wasn’t a joke. I thought of the scar on her shoulder.

Finally I confessed softly, “As if I’m going to turn you down, whatever we do.”

She caught my hand again. “Come on.”

“Let me grab my robe and slippers.”

It was cold in the passageway—all that stone, with no heat source, I guess. I shivered and pulled my robe closer as we hustled along.

Her rooms were in a different wing than mine, on the next floor up. At one point, we emerged onto a landing in a back stairwell. Brit shut the section of wall that had opened for us, leaving the wall looking as if the doorway we’d come through had never been. We climbed the narrow stairs. She opened a door—a real one, with a porcelain knob. On the other side was a main hallway.

She shot glances both ways, then turned a wide grin on me. “Let’s go for it.”

Giggling, we took off, racing along the thick Turkish runner as fast as our flapping slippers would allow. Around the next corner, with nobody else in sight to witness Her Royal Highness behaving in such an undignified manner, she led me through a door onto another back stairwell. We stood on a landing. She pushed a place on the wall—and yet another door opened up. We went through. She pushed another spot and the section of wall swung silently shut. I stared. The “door” was gone. All I saw was solid wall. It really was amazing.

Brit had already turned and headed off down the gleaming secret passage. I rushed to catch up.

Two more hallways, and she stopped to open another section of wall. She pressed a latch and the wall swung toward us. On the other side, a full-length mirror gleamed. Beyond the hole it left in the wall, I could see a bedroom even bigger and more luxurious than the one assigned to me.

We went through. She pushed a spot on the heavy gold-leafed mirror frame and the mirror swung silently back into place. “Wait here,” she commanded, and went out through a set of high, carved double doors.

I stood by the mirror and gaped at her gorgeous room. The heavy velvet drapes were drawn across the windows. Her bed was bigger than mine—could that be possible?—up on a dais, so much carving on the bedposts and finials, you could sit there staring forever, picking out the moons and suns, the longboats and dragons and mermaids with long, twining hair. Her bedding was crimson velvet, the sheets snowy white against the red. I mounted the dais and sat on the bed, pulling a round red velvet pillow into my lap. I was stroking the thick, soft pile when she returned.

“We’re alone,” she announced. “And look what I found?” She held up a pair of scissors, snicked them open and shut. “Also, my rooms are undisturbed.” I must have looked puzzled. She explained, “It’s my dad.”

I’d met King Osrik just that evening, at dinner. He was tall and lean. Good-looking, for an older guy. Distinguished, I guess you’d say. Dark hair going gray. Dark eyes—Valbrand’s eyes. Upon being introduced, I performed the Gullandrian bow Brit had taught me—fisted hand to heart, a dip of the head—and said how thrilled I was to meet His Majesty.

He gave me a regal nod. “It is my hope that you enjoy your brief stay in my daughter’s homeland.”

End of conversation. My sense was of a man very few people really knew.

The way she spoke of him, with such affection and humor, I guessed that Brit felt she knew him just fine. She went on, “You know I adore him, but he drives me nuts sometimes. He keeps tabs on me. He’s actually bugged my rooms more than once. Which means I’ve learned to seek out and neutralize all electronic surveillance devices on a regular basis. That leaves only my personal maid and cook and the ongoing fiction that the servants don’t spy for my father. Them, I give errands. Lots

and lots of errands. Tonight is no exception. I've sent them off to do my bidding. No way they'll be back before dawn. And since we came through the secret passageway, the guards at the main door to the suite don't even know you're in here. We have total privacy, a luxury I appreciate a lot more than I used to. It's so rare these days."

I was stuck on the part about the guards. "You have guards at your door?"

She nodded. "All the members of the royal family do."

"You need guards?"

"Let me put it this way. The guards are there because it's palace protocol. Of course, they'll protect me, if a sticky situation arises—which it never has so far. In the meantime, they're in a perfect position to report all my comings and goings to His Royal Majesty—" she grinned "—at least when I leave through the main doors." I tossed the pillow back into the giant pile at the head of the bed. She added, "The life of a princess does have its little challenges."

"No kidding." I got up and took the scissors from her. "Fine-tooth comb?"

She held up her other hand and I saw she had the comb, too. "Let's go in my dressing room," she said. "It's got better light, a good mirror and a swivel vanity chair."

As soon as she'd got her hair wet and I had her in the chair, I asked about the scar on her shoulder.

"From a renegade's poisoned arrow," she said—renegades being seriously delinquent teenage boys who terrorized the Vildelund, the wild country to the north. She said she'd barely survived. She was delirious, near death for days, while her body fought off the poison.

I snipped away and she sucked a few peanut M&M's—she'd always had a thing for them—and told me all about her quest to find Valbrand.

"They all swore he was dead." She met my eyes in the wide mirror over the marble counter. "But he wasn't dead. I knew it." She put her hand over her heart. "I knew it here." I'd never seen her so intense and passionate—well, except maybe when she looked at Eric. "So, since no one would believe me, I took a guide and flew to the Vildelund to find the mysterious Eric Greyfell, who had gone looking for Valbrand after he disappeared at sea."

"And this was when—that you went to the Vildelund?"

"Didn't I say in my letters?"

I shook my head. They were postcards, actually. There had been three of them. What can you write on a postcard? Hello, how are you? I'm fine. Wish you were here...

Brit said, "I went to the Vildelund in early September."

"And at that point you still hadn't met Eric?" "Nope. He was a hard man to meet. When he returned from his quest to find Valbrand, he came to Isenhalla just long enough to report to my dad that he was certain Valbrand was dead—and then he rushed off to the Vildelund, where he'd been hanging out ever since. I wanted to hear the story of what happened to my brother from Eric himself."

"So you flew there and..."

"The plane crashed."

I stopped snipping to stare. "With you in it?"

"That's right. My guide was killed." Her blue eyes, right then, looked nearly as haunted as Valbrand's. "I was knocked out when we went down. I came to in the wrecked plane. The guide didn't. The crash broke his neck."

I sighed. "Bad, huh?"

"Yeah. Real bad. I crawled from the wreckage to find the renegade waiting. He shot me. Eric found me and took me to the village where his sweet aunt Asta lived. Asta took care of me until I got well. And eventually, I found my brother—right there, in the Vildelund."

"With Eric?"

“That’s right. For a long time, Valbrand wasn’t...ready yet, I guess you could say, to come back here and deal with everything he’s dealing with now. He’d made Eric promise to stay with him in the north until he could bring himself to come home....”

Our eyes were locked in the mirror.

It was a good opening. The right place to ask a few questions about her brother—and maybe even to tell her the way I felt. But she looked away and the moment got by me.

I finished trimming. I’d taken some off the sides, in layers, to give it more lift. I worked in a little styling gel, then grabbed the blow dryer she’d set on the counter for me.

“I love it,” she announced when I turned the dryer off. She fluffed with her fingers and turned her head this way and that. “It always looks fuller when you do it—now for the pedicures.” She dragged me into the enormous marble bathroom, where we soaked our feet in the sunken tub and then took turns in a paraffin bath.

She did me, then I did her, long sessions with a pumice stone and deep foot massage. We yakked the whole time. For polish, she had a rack full of Urban Decay, great colors with Goth names: Asphyxia. Freakshow. Gash. I chose Pipe Dream, a nice barely-there shade. Brit went for Toxin, a sort of Easter-egg purple that didn’t fit the name at all.

We wandered back to the bedroom, dropped our robes and stretched out on the bed, where we continued to whisper to each other.

Brit said she doubted she’d ever finish any of her novels now. That was how we’d met—a shared interest in writing. She’d started nine or ten books. About halfway through, she’d always get tired of them. She’d start something else or real life would beckon.

She grinned. “There’s a lot going on here in Gullandria. No time for scribbling, if you know what I mean.”

“Maybe later, huh? It’s not like you don’t have plenty of years ahead of you to get back to it.”

She made a noise of agreement, but her eyes had doubts in them. Whether the doubts were about her ever writing again or the number of years ahead of her, I couldn’t have said. I almost asked.

But she’d already begun the story of her adventures in the north. She’d stopped a rape and met a cousin she hadn’t even known she had. And she’d lived among the Mystics. Eric’s aunt, the one who had nursed her back to health, was a Mystic. The Mystics lived simply, by the old Norse ways. Eric was at home among them; Medwyn had been born a Mystic and Eric’s mother had, too.

She pulled a heavy silver chain out from under her pajama top and showed me the disc-shaped serpent pendant I had noticed the night of the ball. “My marriage medallion,” she said. “Among the Mystics, for each newborn son, they create a different medallion. This one was made for Eric. He wore it as a child. He gave it to Medwyn when he turned eighteen. And Medwyn gave it to me—as Eric’s chosen bride...”

I knew she wasn’t telling me everything. There were those moments when she’d get going on some part of the story and, out of nowhere, her voice would trail off. Her eyes would shift away.

I didn’t push her. I figured what she didn’t say was probably none of my business.

She wanted to know how my writing was going.

I told her I’d finished my fourth novel—a murder mystery with a female bounty hunter heroine. I was already thinking series. “And lately, I’ve been raking in the rejections.”

We both chuckled. It was a private joke with us. The more rejections, the closer to that first sale. She asked about my job in a boiler room, selling office supplies—toner, pens, inkjet paper, you name it—on the phone.

I groaned. “That was so last summer. I’m on to bigger and better things now. A Mexican restaurant on Pico.” Actually I wasn’t a hundred percent sure the job would be there when I got back. But such is the life of a struggling artiste. “Early shift,” I added. “Try not to be too jealous.”

“I am doing my very best.” She was grinning. And then she wasn’t grinning. “Dulce...” I knew by her sudden change of tone, by the shadows in her eyes, that something bleak was coming. “Last night, at the ball, I noticed you and Valbrand really hit it off.”

I made a sound that could have meant anything. “Um?”

“Well, I, um...” She was having real trouble getting around to it. I kept my mouth shut. Though I loved nothing so much as finishing other people’s sentences, right then, I made no attempt to fill in the blanks. She tried again. “That’s the first time I’ve seen my brother dance, did you know that?” I shook my head. She looked so sad. “They say he used to love to dance....”

At that moment, I was absolutely certain that she knew how I felt—and that she was going to warn me off him. It was all there, in her worried blue eyes.

And yes, I’m aware that reading minds is not dependable, that you’re just too damn likely to get it all wrong. A girl should have sense enough to go ahead and ask.

But I didn’t want to ask. I didn’t want to hear her tell me how he was not the man for me.

It wasn’t as if I didn’t already know.

“I’m so grateful,” she said quietly, “that he’s back with us. But how can I tell you? Dulce, he’s... damaged, you know, by what happened to him? And I don’t just mean his poor face. He’s never going to be like your average guy.”

“What, exactly, happened to him?”

She was frowning. “I told you. A storm at sea. A fire. He was washed overboard....”

Yes, she had told me.

When Valbrand went missing, Brit’s mother had phoned her with the news that the brother she’d never known was lost at sea and presumed dead. Brit had just moved in across the courtyard from me. She came over to my place and we drank strong coffee and talked all night.

It was really hard for her, to think that he was gone. She hated it so much—that she’d lost him when she hadn’t even met him yet. There had always been all those family issues that had kept her from ever getting to know him. Since her father and her mother split—when Brit and her sisters were ten months old—there had been zero communication between the two halves of the family. I say two halves because it was some kind of trade-off, I think. Daughters to Ingrid. Sons—Valbrand and Kylan—to King Osrik.

Kylan was dead within a year or two after the split, killed in a stable fire at the age of five. Which made Valbrand the only son left—and then he was gone, too.

I’d assumed at first that Valbrand must have been on some kind of cruise when he disappeared. That night in my apartment, sipping coffee, trying not to cry, Brit had set me straight.

In Gullandria it was tradition that any young prince who hoped to someday be king must accomplish a Viking Voyage. I instantly pictured wild men in horned helmets burning down picturesque villages and having their way with terrified women.

But I had it all wrong. There was no raping or pillaging involved, just a sea voyage in an authentic reproduction of a Viking longship. It was a symbolic trip, Brit said. A nod to Gullandrian history, to the time when kings went a-Viking and were unlikely to live all that long.

Valbrand had set off from Lysgard Harbor with a trusted crew of thirty. He made it to the Faeroes and set sail for Iceland. They’d heard nothing from him after that, though it was only a matter of days to Iceland and he had agreed to check in with his father when the ship made land there.

The rest we’d learned later, after Eric went looking for him and returned to report that he’d found the few survivors, all of whom told the same story about a storm at sea.

“The bit about the fire is new,” I said. “You never mentioned that until the other day.”

Brit pursed up her mouth. “It’s not a bit, Dulce. It’s what happened to him.”

“It’s vague. You know it is. Who started the fire? And what about these survivors? Who were they? Why did Eric have to track them down, if they were part of a trusted crew? I mean, why didn’t they come back on their own and report what had happened, if they were so trustworthy?”

She gave me another long look. “Dulce...”

I waited. She didn’t say anything else—I mean, beyond my name, in a weary sort of tone. Finally I said, “You’re my best friend. I know you. And I know when you’re not being straight with me.”

“I’m being straight.”

“Right.”

“I am.” She lifted up, punched her pillow, dropped back down. “There’s just...things I can’t talk about, that’s all.”

“Getting that. Loud and clear.”

We lay there, on our separate pillows, looking in each other’s eyes, both of us frowning. Finally she sighed. “I’ve said all I can say about what happened to my brother. So will you just please let it go?”

I could see there was no point in keeping at her. She’d made it painfully clear she wouldn’t say any more. “Yeah,” I whispered. “I’ll let it go.” For now, anyway, I added silently. I strove for a lighter tone. “Hey.”

“What?”

“You said that Valbrand was never going to be your average guy.”

“Yeah?” She was looking at me narrow-eyed—probably anticipating the next question she would have to evade.

“So. Was he ever your average guy?”

The corner of her mouth twitched. In relief, I was certain. Here was something she could be honest about. “No. No, he wasn’t. Once he was...everything this country needs in its next king.”

“And now?”

“Now...” She paused, considering. “Now, I don’t think he’s really sure who he is.”

I rolled to my back and stared up at the sculptured ceiling. “Maybe, over time, he’ll...get better.”

“I have a lot of hope for that. We all do. He’s come a long way already. You cannot imagine...”

I guess I couldn’t. And by her silence, I knew she wasn’t going to tell me. I rolled to my side again and propped up on an elbow. “Look. I think we’d better get it out there, much as it makes me cringe to do it. You’re telling me not to get interested in him, right? That there’s zero hope for any kind of...future between him and me.”

She shut her eyes and let out a groan. “Yes.” She looked at me again. “That’s what I’m telling you— Oh, Dulce. I’m so—”

I cut her off. “Do not,” I instructed, “say you’re sorry.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “I won’t.”

“And don’t look so worried. As of now, there is nothing going on between your brother and me. And nothing will be going on—or at least, I’m about ninety percent sure nothing will.”

“Only ninety percent?” She looked so irritatingly hopeful. She wanted my guarantee that nothing had, was, or ever would, happen between Valbrand and me.

I couldn’t give her that. “See, this is the deal. If your brother would give me half a chance, I would be on it. No hesitation. No looking back. Crazy as it probably sounds to you, considering I’ve spent a total of ten minutes in his presence, I have that strong a feeling for him. But as of now, things look seriously unpromising.”

She sat up. “What if I were to ask you right out to stay away from him?”

I held my ground. “Sorry. Won’t do it. I’m not going to avoid him.”

She flopped back down hard on her back and stared ceilingward. “Terrific.”

“Hey. Relax. I have the distinct feeling that he will be avoiding me.”

She rolled her head to look at me. “He’s right to avoid you. It can’t go anywhere.”

I said, with what I considered admirable tact, “I think we’re getting into repetition mode, don’t you?”

She rolled to her side and faced me again, reaching to brush my shoulder—a tentative touch, quickly withdrawn. “Bad move on my part, huh? To make such a big deal out of this...”

I caught her hand and only let go after I'd given it a good, firm squeeze. "See, that's where you're wrong. You're my best friend in the whole wide world. You cannot make a bad move when it comes to me."

Her wide mouth quivered. "God, Dulce. I have missed you."

"Double back at ya."

"There's just so much going on...."

"Hey, I'm picking it up."

"So much I really can't talk about."

"You said that before."

"Well, I feel like you're not hearing me."

"I'm hearing. I just don't like it."

"You have to know. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd be thrilled to see you and Valbrand hook up. But things are far from ordinary here. My father has big plans for my brother. Please don't be offended, but they don't include—"

"Brit."

She stifled a yawn. "Um?"

"At this point what His Majesty would think about your brother and me getting together is seriously moot."

"I'm only warning you that the rules are different here, that a king's son is not going to—"

"Got it." I was yawning, too. "We should get some sleep."

She yawned again, this time full out. "You know, you're right." She closed her eyes.

I swear she was deep in dreamland instantly. I could have been, too. But you ought to try sleeping with Brit. Restless is too mild a word. She tossed and turned and groaned and kicked me repeatedly—all while utterly dead to the world.

Eventually, clinging to my pillow at the far edge of the bed, I drifted off, too.

Someone was shaking me. "Go 'way..." I grumbled, batting at the hand that clutched my shoulder.

"Dulce..." Brit's voice.

I opened one eye. "Huh?"

"Gotta go. Back soon." She was already halfway out of the bed.

I sat up, swiping a swatch of tangled curls back from my face, blinking against the bedside light that we'd never bothered to turn off. "What time is it?" The clock beneath the lamp said 3:10. "Ugh." I fell back to the pillows. "You're nuts, you know that?"

"I just... I have to see Eric." Her face was positively glowing. "What can I say? It's love, you know? I didn't want you to wake up and worry when you saw I was gone...."

I grumbled something unintelligible, turned on my side and shut my eyes again. I was asleep so fast, I didn't even hear her leave.

The hidden door through the mirror in my sister's room began to move. I doused my palm-size flashlight and stepped back into the shadows.

Brit came through, wearing a pink robe and absurd fat pink bedroom slippers. She shut the secret door, turned and saw me there. I was all in black, including the smooth mask of perfectly tanned karavik skin that covered my face.

She gasped, then shone her light hard in my eyes. "Valbrand. What are you doing here?"

"Keeping watch." I had my arm across my eyes, guarding my night vision. "Shine the light away."

She did as I asked, then reached out a tentative hand to me. Trusting her as I did few others, I allowed her to brush the side of the mask, which fit my face like another skin—one both flawless and without expression.

"Is this really necessary?" She meant the mask. In her eyes there was great sadness.

I saw no reason to answer her. “What brings you into the passageway at this early hour?” I knew what, of course. “Eric?”

“I miss him. Love’s like that.”

“Ah.” They were happy, my youngest sister and my bloodbound lifelong friend. This pleased me. Behind the mask, I smiled.

She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering a little at the chill in the passageway, and sent me a look of dawning suspicion. “It’s Dulcie, right?”

I did not so much as blink. “I fail to grasp your meaning.”

“You’re here in the passageway, by the secret entrance to my room, because Dulcie’s in there.”

I hadn’t known. But my foolish heart beat faster to hear it. “Dulcie. Your friend...”

“Yeah, duh. Like you have trouble remembering who she is.”

“You are angry with me.”

Her eyes grew tender again. “No. Never. I just... I saw the way you looked at her the other night. And the way she looked at you. Valbrand, you do have to ask yourself, where can it go?”

Nowhere, I silently replied. It was a truth I fully accepted. “We shared a dance.” I sketched the most casual of shrugs. “It means nothing.” And it didn’t, not in the greater scheme of things. I had felt something powerful when I looked in Dulcie’s eyes, and experienced a thoroughly shaming physical response to her. But it was of no consequence, I kept telling myself. And I would hardly have occasion to see her again. I asked my sister gently, “You object to my dancing with your friend?”

“No. No, of course not. It’s only...she doesn’t have an inkling of what we’re up against here. I don’t want her involved. I want her to enjoy her visit to Gullandria and I want her to fly home safe and sound the day after the wedding.”

“And so she shall. As for tonight... I knew a strange foreboding. It caused a restlessness within me. I looked in on Eric. And then, unbeknownst to him, on our father. I checked on Elli and Hauk.” Elli was our sister and Hauk was Elli’s husband. “Hauk woke, of course. He saw it was I and rose to speak with me briefly, vowing that all was well with them and their unborn babe. After that, I came here to assure myself that you, like the others, were undisturbed.”

“I’m fine. Honestly.”

“Good, then.”

“Eric’s awake?”

I chuckled. “Go to him. Find out for yourself.”

She came closer, laid her hand on my arm and brushed a quick kiss against the mask. “Don’t hang around in the passageways all night. Please?”

“You mustn’t concern yourself with me.” I touched the device on my belt. “I’ll signal if I require your aide in repulsing intruders.”

She made a scoffing sound. “Valbrand, you’re a little overboard on this, don’t you think? Nothing suspicious has happened in months.” Her pretty lips curved down in a scowl. “Not since that SOB Sorenson escaped us.” My sister had a special enmity toward the traitor, Jorund Sorenson. Before we found him out, Sorenson had pretended to be her friend in order to get close enough to try to kill her. “There’s no reason for you to—”

I put a gloved finger to her chattering mouth. “Go. Remind my friend what a fortunate man he is.”

“Will you go back to your rooms? Get some sleep? Nothing’s going to happen here, in the palace, in the middle of the night.”

I took her by the shoulders and turned her gently toward the waiting corridor. “Go.”

She sent me one last fond, exasperated glance over her shoulder before she hurried off down the gleaming stone hallway.

I watched until she’d turned the corner, and then continued watching, until the light from her lantern faded to nothing.

Utter blackness. It was good. Soothing to the formless anxieties I'd been experiencing that night.

I ducked back into the alcove a few feet from the now-invisible entrance to my sister's rooms and, for a while, I simply stood there, arms crossed over my chest, surrounded by darkness, lulled by the gift of blindness, velvet black all around me...

Yes. I confess. I was thinking of the redhead on the other side of the looking glass. Thinking how simple it would be: to press the spot that would open the wall, to step through the glass.

I pictured her sleeping, wild coils of red hair poured over white pillows. Myself, the handsome prince I once was, bending close for the kiss that would wake her from her dreams...

It was but a fantasy.

In the world of reality, it never could have been—and it would never be.

Once, as a man who dedicated his life to his country and to the sacred duty to someday earn the throne, I could not have allowed myself a dalliance with a commoner from California. Not such a commoner as she, in any case—one with stars in her eyes and true love on her mind.

That would have been wrong. Cruel.

In the months since my return home, I had come to realize that the man I was on leaving had been vain, one who preened in pleasure at his handsome face and lean form, at his very goodness. And yet, all vanity aside, I did strive, in those earlier days, to be a better man. If I gave love casually, it was only to women who gave it back in kind.

Now, since the horror, I gave no love of any kind.

Everything was changed. Without and within.

My father insisted we could simply continue at the point where we had left off, that I should resume pursuing my former goal. That I would still one day be king.

I knew differently. I would never be king. I lived on for one purpose only. To root out and destroy the threat to my family.

Thus, when it came to the redhead from California, nothing was changed. The reasons might be different, but the truth remained the same: I had nothing to offer her. I might dream of her a little. But in practice, I would leave her—and the emotions she stirred in me—strictly alone.

How long did I stand there, in the dark, thinking of honest eyes and Titian hair, tormenting myself with what I wouldn't do?

Too long.

At last I bestirred myself. My little sister was right. Lurking in the secret passageways was a senseless waste of time, time that would be better spent in slumber. There was no danger here. Only empty shadows and a futile longing for a tender touch I would never know.

I slid my thumb to the switch of my flashlight.

In that fraction of a second before light spilled out in front of me, I saw a glow—another light, moving toward me down the passageway.

Another light, and the sounds of stealthy footfalls approaching.

Chapter 4

In my sleep, I heard the strangest sounds: heavy grunts, the thuds of fists on flesh.

“Wha—?” My eyes popped open.

For about a half a second, I was sure I must be having a really vivid nightmare. But then something fell against the bed.

A man’s voice growled low, “I’ll cut yer balls off, fitzhead.” The bed shook again. There was another volley of thudding blows.

I let out a disgustingly wimpy little yelp. Scooting fast, kicking with my feet, I scuttled to a sitting position—up hard against the headboard. Cowering there, trying to blink the last traces of sleep from my eyes, I had a clear view of what was going on.

Three masked men. Brawling. I blinked some more and shook my head. But blinking didn’t help. They were all three still there, below the dais at the foot of the bed, two in ski masks, one in black leather.

One of the ski masks had drawn a gun. The guy in leather threw up a lean leg and kicked. The gun went flying. I watched it come spinning toward me.

Plop. It landed on the bed, a few feet from my Pipe-Dream pink toes. I gaped at it, gulped—then shifted my gaze to the fight again.

The guy in leather was still kicking. Some major kung fu moves, I kid you not. His boot connected with the other guy’s head. That guy went down.

But now the second ski mask had his gun out. The one in leather ducked as the gun went off. It made an odd ping, airy sound. Silencer? I guess.

The shot hit an armoire over in the corner, splitting the gorgeous dark wood. The guy in leather dived for the guy with the gun. The shooter toppled, his second shot going into the ceiling, sending plaster trickling down. The fall broke his grip and the second gun went spinning under a bureau.

Ski mask number one was rallying, crouched now on hands and knees in a corner, shaking his head, moaning a little. I looked at the gun by my feet.

Better get that, I thought.

In the meantime, the one in leather and the second guy were up again and trading blows. The guy in leather delivered a right hook that sent ski mask number two lurching back. He hit the wall and steadied himself, then leapt on the guy in leather, who reeled back and bumped a chair, which hit a side table. A china lamp tottered and hit the rug, not shattering, but cracking neatly in half with a sound like a big eggshell splitting.

I whimpered some more and reached out my foot toward the gun.

The guy in leather slithered free of the one who’d just jumped him. He landed a punch—a good one, hard in the belly.

“Whoof,” said the guy in the ski mask, a sound halfway between a hard grunt and a big dog’s low bark. The one in the leather mask hit him again, a lightning fast karate-type chop to the back of the neck.

The guy crumpled to the fabulous antique rug and lay still beside the split-open lamp. Ski mask number two was down for good, it looked like to me.

I had my pink toes curled over the gun. Wincing, sure any second I would shoot myself in the foot, I inched the gun toward me over the crimson velvet. When it was close enough to grab by just reaching down, I got it in my shaking hands and aimed it, my quivering index finger on the trigger.

“Stop,” I said in a terrified croak. “Freeze.”

As if anybody cared. Ski mask number one was through shaking his head. He lurched upright and launched himself at the one in leather, taking them both to the floor. They rolled, punching at each other, grunting as each blow connected.

“No,” I said, in a tiny squeak. “Uh, ooh, ah, ga...” I held the gun out at them with both trembling hands and jerked and twitched in terror and sympathetic pain as each blow landed.

No, I was not particularly helpful.

But think about it.

Whose side should I have been on, anyway? Who should I be shooting? Like I had a clue. Like I had any idea why this was even happening—and then, all of a sudden, before I could even begin to make up my mind what to do next...

It was over.

The guy in leather was still standing, the other two sprawled at his feet, neither one moving. The expressionless black mask turned my way. “Are you injured?”

I held the quivering gun on him and slowly shook my head.

He extended a hand. “Bring the gun to me.” He said each word with great care—as if addressing a total hysteric. And you know what? At that moment, that’s pretty much what I was.

“No,” I managed to get out in a wimpy little whisper. “I don’t think so.”

That gave him pause. For about a half a second.

And then he simply ignored me. I braced against the headboard, the gun still pointed—and still quivering—in his general direction. He went about tying up the guys in the ski masks.

He did it with lamp cords. Just ripped them from the wall and the bases of the lamps and crouched over the men he’d beaten, yanking their lax hands together at their backs and whipping the cords around their pressed-together wrists.

It was all very smooth, accomplished in maybe sixty seconds, tops. Once he’d tied them both, he tore off their masks, one and then the other, grabbing each by the hair to get a good look at his face, then letting go with a shove, so their heads thudded hard against the rug.

Did he recognize them? I didn’t ask.

As he stood from unmasking the second guy, it came to me very clearly that now he would be dealing with me. I didn’t think I wanted that.

“Stop,” I croaked. “Stop, or I’ll shoot.”

He took a step toward me.

“I mean it. I am going to shoot.”

Another step.

About then, I realized...

I couldn’t do it. I could not pull that trigger. Not for the life of me—and it seemed at the time that the life of me was precisely the issue. He took another step.

The guards!

The words exploded in my brain. Why the hell hadn’t I thought of the guards before? Maybe they were too far off—beyond at least two sets of doors, who knew how many hallways between—to have heard the fight. But by golly they were close enough to hear me scream.

I did scream. “Guards! Help!” And then I just shut my eyes, threw back my head and let the pure sound rip.

It was amazing, the earsplitting perfection of that scream. Jamie Lee in Halloween could not hold a candle, you hear what I’m saying? I screamed again, piercing as the first time.

I heard doors flung back somewhere in the suite, booted feet pounding my way.

I stopped screaming and opened my eyes.

The man in the leather mask had vanished—escaped, no doubt, through the empty mirror frame into the secret passageway. There were only the split-open lamp and a couple of overturned chairs, the bound, unconscious men on the floor, and me—in my SpongeBob pajamas with a big black gun in my hand.

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