

Fier Royal Protégé



Tamelia Tumlin

Red Rose Publish-

Her Royal Protégé

By

Tamela Tumlin

Dedication

*To my family for their
unwavering support: my mom,
my dad and my son, Jacob, who
is my own little “prince.”*



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Her Royal Protégé' by Tamelia Tumlin

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Her Royal Protégé

By

Jamelia Jumlin

Chapter One

Jada McGuire pulled the no-nonsense rent-a-car into the parking lot of Charlie's Tavern, kicking up gravel and sending dust billowing up over the row of motorcycles and pickup trucks lining the rundown building. She pushed her glasses up on her nose and studied the address given to her by the gas station attendant a few miles back.

Charlie's Tavern. 115 Yellow Rose Drive.

She shot an uneasy look toward the weathered facade. The crooked sign hanging somewhat precariously above the door definitely read, *Charlie's Tavern*.

She turned off the motor, then reached into the glove box and pulled out the thin yellow envelope. After several months of careful research, she'd finally found a name and a city. Luke Hansen. Uncertain, Texas.

There must be some mistake.

Her nose itched.

And not just your average everyday allergic reaction, scratch-it-and-get-it-over-with kind of itch, either. It was The Itch. *Her gift*, as her mother used to call it, inherited from her mother's Irish ancestors. She gave her treacherous nose a quick rub, and purposely ignored the persistent telltale twitch. She came from a long line

of itchy noses, and they usually meant one thing. Trouble.

She didn't need trouble. She needed to find Luke Hansen. ASAP.

Her nose tingled again. There could be some other explanation for her itchy nose, couldn't there be? Allergies? Sinus? The dust still swirling around the parking lot? Maybe it was the name of the town that was sending her nose into a tailspin. Uncertain, Texas. It was certainly fitting. Uncertain was exactly how she felt. Uncertain could also describe the fate of the Androvian monarchy right now as the throne sat empty awaiting the missing heir.

Jada sighed. Three weeks. She just has three short weeks to find the heir or her beloved kingdom would fall into the hands of the one family she despised the most. Those wretched Vanderbilts, second cousins to the late King.

Wielding the envelope like a Samurai sword against the dust, Jada slid out of the car, closed the door behind her, and then carefully smoothed the seven-hour-flight wrinkles out of her gray skirt. Finally satisfied that she was as presentable as she was going to be after her long trip, she squared her shoulders and pushed her glasses up on her nose. She was ready to find her prince. Well, not *her* prince. The Crown Prince of Androvia.

Gravel crunched under her black high heels as she made her way toward the entrance of the shoddy dive. She looked at her watch. Five thirty-two. Good, her timing should be about right. According to the gas station attendant, Luke Hanson

would have finished his construction job for the day around five o'clock and then come down to Charlie's for a beer. That should put him in the tavern right about now.

She shot a quick glance toward the dusty row of motorcycles and pickup trucks along the edge of the building. Which one looked like it belonged to a prince?

Her steps faltered, one high heel digging into the gravel in protest, but she forced her feet to keep moving across the parking lot and gritted her teeth, ignoring the tiny voice of reason in her head. She hadn't been in a bar in years. Not since the one time she had chosen to ignore her itchy nose and it had cost her the one person who truly understood her. Her brother, Jack. She tried to focus on the assignment at hand. Reliving the past would not bring her brother back. It was the future she had to concentrate on. The future of Androvia.

She took a couple more steps toward the door. Tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood straight up. She could feel the dark cloud of trouble stalking her, waiting in the shadows.

Go! Go Now! Before it's too late! The warning bounced through her mind as she reached to wooden door of the bar. She didn't want to be reminded of Jack. She didn't want to remember any details of the horrible night that took her brother's life. But most of all, she didn't want to remember that she could have stopped it. If

only...

If only... The two little words that altered her life forever.

She drew in a deep breath and opened the tavern door.

A country song blared out at her, sending vibrations through her entire body. A plume of smoke wafted her way and nearly choked her. She coughed, and then sputtered. Then coughed again.

Several people turned to stare at her. She squinted through the haze of smoke into the dimly lit room, and immediately felt out of place. She could only make out a handful of people, mostly rough looking men in jeans and tee shirts, with a couple of cowgirls thrown in for good measure. No one even resembled a prince. Or even a respectable citizen, for that matter.

“Can I help you?” The bartender, wearing a lewd t-shirt and sporting a red bandana around his head, shouted over the mournful country lyrics. Someone had lost his wife and his dog, or so the song went. Jada knew all about loss, and the baleful sound struck a chord deep in her heart, squeezing it so tight she thought it would explode. She inhaled sharply to control the sudden urge to tear up.

The bartender continued pouring drinks, clearly believing she was beyond help. He squirted one more a shot of whiskey into a glass then filled it with coke before handing it to the waitress.

Jada lifted her chin and looked the bartender squarely in the eye. “I’m

looking for Luke Hansen.”

The bartender raised his eyebrows, his hand stilling on the liquor dispenser, then he nodded toward the end of the bar. “Hey, Luke!”

Jada’s gaze followed the bartender’s nod. Through the smoke, she saw a figure in a black motorcycle jacket seated at the end of the bar. He sat alone with his head down. She couldn’t tell much about him, except that he most definitely didn’t look like a prince.

“Luke!” the bartender shouted again squirting two more shots of something into a glass. The man seated at the end of the bar looked up.

Jada pulled a sharp breath. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Apparently, her itchy nose had been right on the money. This man was trouble with a capital T.

There was no way he could be the heir to the Androvian throne. There wasn’t a royal bone in his body. With dark hair cut short on the sides and pulled into a small shoulder-length ponytail in the back, he looked about as regal as a snake — bronze skin, black leather jacket with studs on the cuffs, and a thick silver necklace with a cross pendant.

He arched his eyebrow and lifted his beer in salutation. Jada’s cheeks flamed as she realized that she was staring.

“That’s him.” The bartender nodded once again toward the man.

That's what I was afraid of. Jada took another deep breath and walked to the other end of the bar, determined to get this over with as quickly as possible.

"Mr. Hansen?" she shouted over the music when she reached the end of the bar. Oh, dear heavens! Was that an earring in his left ear? Good lord, it was! A dangling silver dagger no less. She shivered involuntarily. What had she gotten herself into?

The man continued nursing his beer. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm Jada McGuire. I'm a public relations specialist for Androvia. Is there somewhere we could go to talk?" Every mournful beat of the song seemed to shake her senseless. She hated bars. She hated the rancid smell of beer, the stench of cigarette smoke, and the loud obnoxious jeers that drunkenness seemed to produce. She hated everything that reminded her of Jack.

Luke arched another brow. A slow suggestive smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. His blue eyes seemed to bore into her. Sexy, royal blue eyes. Her heart fluttered ever so lightly.

Finally, something royal about the man, she thought ruefully. Except that bedroom eyes didn't mean he had royal blood flowing through his veins.

"Where did you have in mind?" A lazy smile tugged at the corners of his full, sensual lips and stopped her heart. Until she realized what his body language was suggesting. He thought she was here to pick him up.

Her cheeks lit up like a furnace once again at the implication, but she drew herself up to her full five foot seven. Five nine in heels.

He grinned devilishly, setting the empty bottle on the bar. He grabbed a handful of peanuts from the bowl, and then popped them into his mouth.

“Well... uh...” Good heavens, she was at a loss for words. She was *never* at a loss for words. It was her job to never be at a loss for words. She had smoothed over more potential scandals in Androvia than she could count.

She blinked and tried to focus on the reason she was here. She couldn’t even hear herself think, let alone carry on normal conversation. Not to mention the fact that she was on the verge of a panic attack for just being inside. Unpleasant memories, carefully stored in the back of her mind, seemed to be dying to resurface. Memories she didn’t ever want to think about again.

He was staring at her expectantly, amusement evident in his eyes. A smile played around the corners of his mouth.

“Mr. Hansen. Please, I really need to talk to you. It’s important.”

As if sensing her panic, he finally nodded. “Outside.”

He abruptly stood up, towering over her by a good three or four inches. Startled, she took a step backward. If she had known what she was getting into, she would have thought twice about meeting him alone. But she’d expected someone different. Someone—well, quite frankly—someone more respectable.

He held out his arm and motioned for her to lead the way. She practically bolted toward the door. A couple of men leered as she past by their table, but she ignored the catcalls and suggestive remarks. Her cheeks flamed deeper.

“Enough!” Luke barked, silencing the men with one piercing look.

Jada burst through the front door and welcomed the bright rays of the hot Texas sun. Even the squelching July heat was more welcome than the bar scene. She took a couple of quick breaths to clear her lungs from the smoke. There, that was better. She could breathe now. Or she could until she turned to look at the man she had come all the way from the Mediterranean Sea to find.

Broad shoulders beneath the open black leather jacket. A white t-shirt stretched taut across his chest, doing very little to conceal the flexing muscles underneath. Snug, faded jeans with a small tear in the right knee. He may not look like a prince, but he was burning with sex appeal.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The question jolted her suddenly heightened senses, but she composed herself quickly. “I’m a public relations specialist for Androvia. I was sent here to find you.”

“Why?” Amusement still lurked in his eyes. He probably thought this was the most elaborate pick-up line ever.

“Because your name is Luke Hansen. After careful research, we feel we’ve

finally found the right man.”

He arched a dark eyebrow. “Right man?”

“We believe that you might be the Luke Hansen that...” She took a deep breath. “That we’ve been looking for.”

Brilliant. She sounded like a babbling idiot.

“And why are you looking for this Luke Hansen?”

“Well, you see...” Oh bother, this was harder than she had anticipated. She should have practiced her speech. Or at least planned how she would explain herself once she found him. Finally, she settled for the direct approach. “Luke Hansen is the heir apparent to the Androvian throne.”

Disbelief, quickly followed by impatience, crossed his hawk-like features. He didn’t say anything. Instead he stared at her as if she had suddenly grown two heads and a tail.

“You might be the heir to the Androvian throne.” She shoved the yellow envelope into his hand. “It’s all in here. See for yourself.”

His lips thinned, and he flung the envelope back at her. “The only thing I can see is that you’re off your rocker. I don’t have time for this hogwash.”

“Please, Mr. Hansen. Just read it.”

A scowl formed between his dark brows. “Look lady, I don’t know who you are or what your game is, but I have things to do. What is it you really want?”

“I want you to listen to me. We have every reason to believe that you’re...”
How do you tell someone that you think they’re a bastard? Even if it’s the royal bastard of a deceased King?

“I’m what?” He set his jaw, his eyes narrowing into slits of arctic ice.

Think, Jada. This is what you get paid to do. She drew herself up to her full height and slipped her face into its professional, emotionless mask. “We have every reason to believe that you’re the son of the late King Barnabus McDaniels.”

“Lady, I don’t know any Barnabus McDaniels.”

“I realize that, but we have...”

“Who is this *we*, you keep rambling on about?” His eyes darkened, warning her that she was treading on thin ice.

“Androvia. The Androvian Parliament to be precise. After the death of Prince Stefan, we were made aware that King Barnabus had another son. A... secret son, born to an American woman.” She lowered her lashes. “We believe that son is you.”

This man couldn’t possibly be Lucy Hansen’s son. He was too barbaric. But she didn’t want him to know that. Not yet anyway.

“Well, it’s not. So you can take your magical fairy-tale, fifty-cent words and high-tail your pretty butt back to fantasyland.”

Pretty butt? She flushed with pleasure at the backhanded compliment. She

had never considered herself pretty, not with her plain brown eyes, mousy hair, and freckles splattered across her cheeks. Not to mention her *gift*.

He turned toward the motorcycles, and her eyes swept over him once more. No, he couldn't be the right man. There was no need to take this any further.

"I must have made a mistake," she said. "It's quite clear you're not..."

He turned back toward her, his face hardening. "I'm not what?"

Jada swallowed hard.

He took a step closer, teasing her nostrils with the scent of spice mingled with sweat. She resisted the urge to back up. He looked menacing, but she instinctively knew he wouldn't hurt her. For all his dark, edgy appearance, she saw gentleness in his eyes. A softer side that he tried to keep well hidden beneath his tough exterior.

She stood her ground. "A prince."

Luke threw back his head and laughed harshly. "Lady, I have been accused of a lot of things in my life. Some even had a ring of truth to them. But I can assure you that no one has ever mistaken me for a prince."

She bristled at his mocking tone. "I didn't just pick you out of the blue. I did my homework." After the unexpected death of King Barnabus and Prince Stefan six months earlier, she had dug through everything she could get her hands on, and had learned about Barnabus' other son, the American child who was never

supposed to learn of his Androvian heritage. But with Prince Stephan dead along with his father, the monarchy's very existence depended on the child of Lucy Hansen, the American woman who had stolen King Baranabus's heart.

Her duty was clear. Either find the King's true son, or the next in line of succession would inherit the crown: Edward Vanderbilt, the dictator who planned to set her country back many, many years with a reversal of their democratic nation to one of oppression and tyranny.

"I'm no knight in shining armor either, if that's your next question."

She studied him through her glasses, and then said softly, "I don't suppose you are."

"No prince. No knight. No duke. No nothing." The amusement was back. "Can I help you with anything else, my lady?"

She raised her chin a notch. "I don't think so." She primly smoothed another wrinkle from her skirt. Now what? If he wasn't Luciano Daniel Hansen, then who was? All of her careful research pointed to this man. Just the thought of the greedy, ruthless Vanderbilts, who'd wrought pain and suffering on her family for so many years, caused her stomach to spasm. She couldn't let them inherit the throne. She owed it to her father—God rest his soul—to keep the monarchy out their hands. And she owed it to Jack. No, she owed it to Androvia. She would go to her grave protecting the crown.

“Well, my lady,” Luke drawled again, “if there’s nothing else I can do for you, then I better get a move on. Us peasants have to work for a living.” He shrugged out of his leather jacket, revealing a white muscle shirt stretched taught across rock hard abs.

“Thank you for your time,” Jada said automatically, slightly mesmerized by his tanned biceps.

He turned away from her once again, then walked toward one of the Harleys parked in the front of the building. He laid the jacket on the seat and leaned down to check the tire.

That’s when she saw it. The tattoo darkening his left shoulder. It wasn’t especially huge or noticeable, but it was there nonetheless.

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed without thinking. She crunched over the gravel to get a better look. A shield with a two-headed lion, facing opposite directions, above two crossed swords. Blood rushed into her ears, leaving her slightly light-headed.

Luke turned back toward her. Swearing softly, he took three quick strides then reached for her just as she swayed

Strong arms encircled her waist, hauling her toward him. She could feel his heart beating rhythmically against his chest. The scent of spice and light musk consumed her senses. She swayed once more. His arm tightened around her, giving

her strength. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if he noticed her hips were a couple of inches too wide. She had been meaning to try that new diet she had read about, but...

Closing her eyes to regain control of her equilibrium and her crazy racing thoughts, she rested her head against his chest. His heartbeat increased in rhythm and speed. The lulling thump, thump, thump calmed her brittle nerves. Some.

“Lady, are you okay?” he asked gruffly, his breath gently stirring her hair.

She nodded into his shirt. What was wrong with her? He must think she has gone over the deep end this time for sure. She splayed her hands across his chest, still clutching the envelope, and took an unsteady step backward. He slowly released his hold on her waist as she steadied herself.

“Your tattoo,” she whispered hoarsely.

“What about it? You have something against tattoos, too?”

She shook her head vehemently, the roaring sound in her head minimizing somewhat. “Where did you get it?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Don’t remember. I’ve had it for years. Why?”

“No, I mean the design.” Her heart pounded wildly in her chest.

A shadow passed across his face before he shrugged again. “I had a ring with it once. It was supposed to have been my father’s. I lost the damn thing in a poker game when I was sixteen.”

“Who was your father?” Jada held her breath. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t be.

“Don’t know. My mother said he died before I was born. He was supposed to have been her high school sweetheart or something. The ring was the only thing I had from him, and I guess at the time, I thought I wanted a connection of some sort. So after I lost the ring, I got the tattoo. Why?” His voice took on a deadly note, his blue eyes boring into hers.

Jada slowly expelled the breath she was holding. “That design is the Androvian crest.”

Chapter Two

The woman was crazy. Certifiably nuts.

Luke leaned the Harley into the curve taking it on with more speed than necessary, then eased it back up as the road straightened. The wind fiercely whipped underneath his helmet, stinging his cheeks as he accelerated. He should have had her committed. Claiming he was a prince. Hogwash! Pure hogwash!

If he was so royal, then why had he spent the past ten years working his butt off to get his construction business off the ground? Hansen Contractors may not be the biggest name in the industry, but he had damn well made sure he could give the big-bugs a run for their money. With blood, sweat, and pure hard manual labor, he had built the company from the ground up and was proud of it. He made a decent living and he was free to come and go as he pleased. Just the way he liked it. Putting down roots and settling down in one place was not for him. And never would be.

No sir. He liked his life just the way it was.

Now some crazy woman was trying to convince him he was some long lost prince?

He slowed the bike and turned down the unpaved road toward home. It was

hogwash all right, and he'd told Miss Prim and Proper as much. He didn't care if he had the whole damn kingdom tattooed across his back. He was not the son of some King. He wasn't anyone's son, anymore. Not since his mother's fatal aneurysm three weeks before his high school graduation. He'd been on his own ever since, and he preferred to keep it that way.

The pain hit him fast and hard. Right in the gut, as it always did when he thought of his kind-hearted, but strong-willed mother. She hadn't lived to see him accomplish anything in life, other than becoming well acquainted with the law. His rebellious youth had caused her more grief than he cared to remember. She hadn't lived long enough to see him accomplish the one thing that would have made her proud, and he'd spent the last nineteen years trying to make up for it, knowing full well he never could.

Luke parked the bike, kicked the metal stand down, and took off his helmet. Shaking the road grit from his hair, he tucked the helmet under his arm and went inside the rustic log cabin he had built himself. He pulled off his jacket and flung it across the arm of the olive green recliner. Something fluttered out of the pocket onto the floor. He bent down and picked it up. The damn woman had managed to stuff the yellow envelope in his pocket after all.

He settled onto the worn, matching couch and fumbled for the TV remote. He finally found it, along with various pens, some loose change, and old receipts,

buried in the cushions. Before he turned on the TV, he glanced down at the envelope. He should just toss it in the trash. There really wasn't any reason to read it. Fairytales and a prissy woman with a pretty butt were not his thing. A cold beer, a fast bike and freedom was.

He balled up the envelope and threw it on the coffee table, then turned on the Discovery channel. A few minutes later, in the middle of a program on space exploration, he picked the envelope back up, took out the paper, and unfolded it. There at the top, in silver foil, was the shield with the two-headed lion, just like the one on his arm.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”



Jada packed the rest of her blazers into the suitcase, and then zipped it up. Everything was ready. Her return flight to Androvia was scheduled for later that evening, the rent-a-car would be returned to the airport and she would soon be on her way home. Without the prince.

She really couldn't blame him. It did seem like a stretch even to her. Even the Androvian crest tattooed on his shoulder seemed somehow unconvincing. Still, she just didn't understand where it had gone wrong. How could she have made such a catastrophic mistake? The research she had done had been thorough. And extensive. But she had been wrong.

The shrill ring of the telephone seemed to echo throughout her hotel room. She started, and then reached for the receiver. The light blinked, indicating it was the front desk.

“Yes?”

“We need to talk. I’m in the lobby.” The line went dead.

Jada set the receiver down and sat on the bed. Luke was in the lobby! He must have read the bio she had slipped into his jacket pocket. Did that mean that Lucy Hansen was his mother after all?

Oh, dear heavens! If so, then that meant the Harley-riding Neanderthal was really the heir to the throne of Androvia.

The room seemed to swirl slowly in front of her. It took a moment for her to get her bearings. If this man really was the prince, then she had her work cut out for her.

She tentatively stood up, and then walked into the small bathroom, her heart pounding like rhythmical African drums in her chest. She took off her glasses, splashed cold water on her pale face, and smoothed her hair down with her hand. Could this—biker—really be the prince? She pulled a face. There was only one way to find out.

Grimacing, she left her room and headed toward the elevator. Watching the numbers light up in descending order, she tried once again to ignore her tingling

nose, even though she felt as if she were being lowered into the pits of hell.

She saw him the minute the elevator door opened. He appeared completely out of place in the four-star hotel lobby. Somehow, his ponytail and earring didn't quite mingle in with the elegant décor. A huge chandelier hung several feet above him from the vaulted ceiling, burnished-orange, almost ginger, colored wallpaper with flecks of mustard-gold displayed the chandelier sconces along the walls. No, somehow the biker holding his black motorcycle helmet under his left arm and standing on gold marble tile didn't quite fit in. That was proven by the curious stares he received from other guests. Quite frankly, he stuck out like a sore thumb.

"I want to know where you got this information." He took the yellow envelope out of his jacket and waived in her face. "How did you know who my mother was?"

Jada squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "I told you. I did the research. Lucy Hansen was King Barnabus's mistress. I don't know all the details of their tryst, but I do know that if Lucy was your mother, then you are most definitely King Barnabus's son."

A couple of guests brushed past them looking on anxiously at their raised voices. Jada knitted her brow. Making a spectacle of themselves wouldn't solve anything. She grabbed his arm and practically pulled him toward a settee in the corner of the lobby.

She caught a whiff of exotic spices blended with fragrant woods and just a hint of fresh soap the minute they sat down.

She caught her breath. Good heavens, he smelled absolutely divine! He had apparently showered and changed before coming to find her. He had even shaved. She wondered if it was for her benefit or if this was his normal routine. She had a sudden urge to touch his smooth tanned jaw line. For a man that was all wrong for—well, quite frankly, everything—he certainly was causing her body to stir in ways that she had never experienced before.

“My mother wasn’t anyone’s mistress,” he said tightly.

His defensive tone pulled on her heart. “Maybe, mistress wasn’t quite the right word,” she said softly. “I’m sure King Barnabus cared very deeply for your mother. It’s just that he was already married when they met.”

“My mother would have never been involved with a married man. Hell, she was never involved with anyone the whole time I was growing up. All she did was work and take care of me.”

Jada didn’t miss the shadow that passed across his face or the look of regret that darkened his blue eyes. Her heartstrings pulled tighter. This had to be hard for him. She had been so caught up in trying to find the heir to the throne, that she really hadn’t given any thought as to how it would affect him when she finally did find him. A band of guilt tightened around her stomach. She hadn’t intended on

disrupting anyone's life. But she had. She could see the raw anguish in his eyes. The stubborn set of his jaw. He may appear hard as nails on the outside, but on the inside he was very human. And right now very vulnerable. Without thinking, she reached over and put her hand on his.

"Mr. Hansen, I don't know what happened between your mother and the king, but it sounds like she loved you very much and possibly King Barnabus too. Come back to Androvia with me. I'm sure you will find the answers you are looking for there."

He started at her touch, his blue eyes staring into hers, clearly torn between wanting to know the truth and wanting to put it all behind him. "I'm going to Eagle Rock, New Mexico. To find out exactly who my father really was so I can put a stop to this non-sense once and for all."

"Is that where you grew up?" Jada could tell by the stubborn gleam in his eyes that he meant business.

"Yes." His mouth thinned into a rigid line. Apparently, going back to his childhood home was not going to be a pleasurable experience.

"I see. Well, then, I'm coming with you." She reached in her blazer pocket and pulled out her cell phone.

"Lady, I don't need you tagging along. You can haul your pretty butt back to Magic Kingdom for all I care." He stood to leave. "I'm done here."

Jada pursed her full lips, looked pointedly at him, and dialed the airline. “Yes, I’d like to cancel a flight to Androvia.” She stood up, then followed him out of the hotel while giving the customer service rep her confirmation number to cancel her flight.

“Lady, I said...”

“Jada.”

He stopped midway through the parking lot and turned back toward her. A deep wrinkle forming between his brows. “What?”

“My name is Jada. Not Lady. Not Pretty Butt.” Her cheeks reddened at that one, but she continued anyway. “It’s Jada. Jada McGuire.” She flipped the top of the phone down, and then slipped it back in her pocket. “And since we’ll be traveling together, I would like to call you Luke if you don’t mind.”

He continued walking, but she caught up with him.

He stopped by the Harley and threw his leg over the side. “I told you. I travel alone. Always.” With one foot on the stand, he revved up the motor. “Always.”

“Until now.” She nodded smoothly. “I know this is difficult for you, but I also have a stake in this. I need to know who your father was just as much as you do. If you are indeed Prince Luciano, then you will need my help to take your place on the throne.” She hoped the doubt she was feeling wasn’t mirrored in her eyes. Although it seemed highly unlikely, she was beginning to hope that Luke was the

missing heir after all.

“Lady, you’re crazy. How do you know you can trust me? Do you make a habit of picking up strange men to travel the world with? How do you know that I won’t knock you in the head and leave you in a ditch somewhere?” His brows drew together emphasizing his disapproval.

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. “I just know.”

Although her itchy nose had warned her that he was trouble, she instinctively knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he wouldn’t hurt a flea, much less her. Looking into his clear blue eyes, she saw kindness and a gentle nature. She also saw fleeting glimpses of raw pain. At some time in his life he had been hurt deeply. Just like her.

Her heart constricted at the sudden kinship she felt with this stranger, and she immediately wanted to shield him from any more pain. Instead, she was about to cause him more. She would have given her eyetooth if she could stop it, but the entire Androvian monarchy depended on her. Androvia had worked too hard to establish democracy. Her own father had even fought in the revolution. But under the Vanderbilt’s rule, tyranny would surely follow.

And there was no way she was about to let the Kingdom fall into the hands of the very family that had been responsible for her brother’s death.

“You’re one crazy broad!” He shouted over the motor while he slowly

backed up the bike.

“I’ll be ready to leave by eight in the morning. You may pick me up in the lobby.” She stepped away from the moving bike and hoped he realized she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Don’t count on it, Lady.” He laughed harshly, revved up the motor once more, and drove away.



By six-forty the next morning, he had circled the hotel parking lot three times. Not counting the two times he had driven by, fully determined to start his trip without her. He didn’t bother to acknowledge that her hotel was almost an hour away from his house. Uncertain, Texas didn’t even have a motel, much less a four star luxury suite she had found it necessary to stay in. Nope, prissy women were not his thing.

“Crazy woman. She must be insane if she thinks I’m going to take her with me,” he muttered to himself.

Then what are you doing circling her hotel like a vulture?

He didn’t have an answer for that one. He knew he should get back on that highway and hightail it out of here as fast as he could. In less than twenty-four hours, that woman had turned his life upside down. And now she expected him to take her with him.

He wasn't, he assured himself heading out of the parking lot. He was just...

Oh, hell. He did a donut in the parking lot. If she was so determined to tag along, then it would be on his terms. No more four-star hotels. No more fancy clothes. Just him and the open road. Like it had always been. If she didn't like it, then she could carry her pretty butt back where she came from.

He drove back to the front of the hotel and parked, then glanced at his watch. Almost seven. If she was going with him, then she had better be ready. He wasn't waiting around for her to doll herself up. He strode into the lobby, stopped by the front desk, then asked for her room number.

"I'm sorry sir. I'm not allowed to give out that kind of information." The clerk informed him smugly.

Luke thinned his lips. The clerk didn't look sorry. He looked arrogant. It took all of his willpower not to deck him. "Then ring her room."

The clerk hesitated for a moment.

"Now." Luke clenched his jaw. He didn't like being treated like riff-raff. He'd had enough of that growing up and certainly wasn't about to stand for it now. Briefly, he wondered how the clerk would react if he knew he was supposed to be a prince. He had to bite back a grin at the thought.

"Certainly." The clerk nodded, reaching for the phone. His eyes darted to Luke once more as if trying to decide whether or not he was worth the effort.

Luke arched an eyebrow and stubbornly stared the man down. The clerk's smug expression turned nervous, but he dialed her room anyway.

"Miss McGuire, there's a... uh... gentleman here to see you." The clerk put the phone down and looked at Luke. "She'll be right down."

Luke wasted one more glare on him then stepped away from the desk. He paced the lobby. A couple of minutes later, he looked at his watch again. Six fifty-seven. She had three minutes or he was leaving without her. Six fifty-eight. Two minutes. So why was he standing here in the snooty hotel waiting for Miss Prim and Proper?

He knew why. He didn't want to go alone. Not that he wasn't used to being on his own. He was. He'd spent most of his life taking care of himself with no family to speak of, but going back to New Mexico—to the little town he grew up in—wasn't something he cared to do. And he was one hundred percent sure that no one there cared to see him again, either.

Six fifty-nine. Luke glared toward the elevator. He knew Miss Prim and Proper wouldn't be ready on time. He stopped pacing and headed for the hotel entrance. He didn't really want her tagging along anyway.

"Going somewhere?"

The soft voice from behind him stopped him short. He turned around slowly and nearly did a double take. Gone was the prissy woman in her business suit and

make-up. Instead she wore a pink t-shirt and a pair of faded jeans, jeans that emphasized every curve of her voluptuous hips. She certainly wasn't one of those stick women who was scared to eat a piece of lettuce. This woman had meat on her bones and curves in all the right places. Curves a man could get lost in.

His gaze strayed to the pink t-shirt stretched taut across her full bosom then moved slowly up to her freshly scrubbed face, still rosy and soft and devoid of any make-up. She looked young and carefree. Her honey-colored hair was pulled into a bouncy ponytail, and she was standing in front of him with a cheery smile and a small, tan backpack.

"You weren't planning on leaving without me, were you?" She grinned, her brown eyes twinkling mischievously.

"I didn't think you would be ready on time."

"Actually, I'm an hour early. I told you to pick me up at eight." Her grin widened. "But I figured you were a morning person. Have you had breakfast?"

He nodded, still dumbfounded. She may not be classically beautiful, but she certainly had an effervescent charm and a natural beauty that no bottle of make-up could hold a candle to. He suddenly found himself wanting kiss the light line of freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. The thought surprised him. He wasn't one to be bowled over by a woman, but there was just something about her. Something natural and honest. Something pure.

The corners of his mouth tugged upwards. Yep, the good old folks of Eagle Rock would be shocked to see their very own felon drive up with the likes of her.

The thought helped take the edge off. He would rather be beat with a tire iron than face those goody-two-shoe gossipmongers again, but if he wanted to know the truth about his father, then he really had no choice. But maybe, just maybe, taking Jada along would help ease the pain.

Jada.

Just bouncing her name around in his mind made their acquaintance seem more personal. More intimate. And *that* was something he wasn't ready for. For now, he'd better stick to thinking of her as *Lady*.

"Then I guess we had better get going." She shifted the backpack on her shoulders.

"Is that all you're taking?" He found it hard to believe that the woman he had met yesterday in a business suit and glasses carried her clothing in a backpack.

"It's all I'm taking with me. The rest of my clothes have been boxed and mailed back to the palace. I don't think they were appropriate for a road trip."

"Hmm." So Miss Prim and Proper had some sense after all. Staring into her mocha brown eyes, he realized something was missing. "Where are your glasses?"

"In the backpack. I have my contacts in now." She tapped her foot impatiently. "If you're through with the inquisition, then we should get going."

Her smile took the sting out her words.

“Good idea.” He moved toward the hotel entrance. “You do know that we won’t be staying in any luxury hotels. Fancy is not my thing.”

“No problem.” She exited the building and sauntered over to the Harley. He couldn’t help but notice the gentle sway of her hips as she walked. And he couldn’t ignore the sudden rush of desire searing through his veins. He swallowed hard. Maybe taking her along wasn’t such a good idea after all.

Adjusting her backpack, she slid one long leg over the seat of the bike and straddled it like a pro. She put the extra black helmet on her head, and then waited for him to join her. Apparently, Miss Prim and Proper wasn’t a stranger to motorcycles.

The lady was definitely full of surprises. Unfortunately, he wasn’t fond of surprises, but it was too late to back out now. There was nothing left to do, except join her. He bit back a grimace and mounted the Harley. As her arms circled his waist, his body became acutely aware of hers pressing against him. And for the first time in his life all felt right with the world.



Jada held onto his waist as the highway stretched on before them. With her breasts pressed against his back and her hands clasped tightly around his abdomen she could feel the six-pack of muscles tightening under her touch. Her

fingers tingled and she clasped them tighter, ignoring the sudden urge to caress the firmness of his stomach.

Instead, she concentrated on keeping her head down and the wind out of her face as they raced along the highway. She had only been fifteen when Jack had proudly brought home his first motorcycle. She had been wary of it at first, but the minute she felt the pulsating motor underneath her body, she was hooked. And from that moment on, she had ridden and driven many a motorcycle.

Jack had been the best. He had never considered her a pesky little sister but had protected her like a mother bear and had included her in many of his own activities. And any boy that had dared look her way had to pass his scrutiny first.

Jada stiffened. Her brother had been wonderful and she had killed him. And she had to live with that knowledge every waking moment of every waking day.

She blinked several times to dry the moisture collected in her eyes. Crying wouldn't do any good. Jack was gone and it was her fault. Hers and Paulo Vanderbilt's.

Her arms tightened around Luke's waist, squeezing him so hard that he turned to give her a puzzled look. She gave him a tight smile and loosened her grip. Some of the tension drained from her arms. Squeezing the life out of the next heir to the throne wouldn't bring her brother back. Nothing would. She sniffed back a tear and prayed that he would blame the dampness in her eyes on the wind. She

certainly didn't want him to know about her family tragedy or her role in it. She had kept it a secret for the last five years, and she intended to keep it that way until she drew her last breath.

Chapter Three

“Hungry?” Luke asked. He parked the motorcycle beside the gas pump and slid off.

He had expected her to slow him down, to complain about the heat, or whine about needing to stop every few minutes, but she had held her own. If it hadn't been for her arms around his waist for the past few hours, he wouldn't have even known she was there. For a prissy woman, she sure was one tough broad. No fuss. No muss. No nothing.

“Famished.” Jada grinned and removed her helmet. Beads of sweat had formed above her brow and her cheeks were pink with sunburn. He should have thought to tell her to put on sunscreen. He was used to the heat and his skin tanned, rather than burned, but hers was creamy ivory and would be easily scorched in the Texas heat.

He finished pumping the gas, then hooked the hose back on the pump and went inside to pay. She would be hurting by nighttime. That was certain.

Within minutes he returned and handed her a small brown bag. “Before we get back on the road, put it on.”

A look of curiosity crossed her face as she opened the bag and pulled out the

tube of sun block with an SPF of 45. She raised a honey-blonde eyebrow in question.

“You’re getting sunburned. That should help, but you will still probably be hurting later. We’ll stop somewhere and pick up an aloe plant later this evening.”

“A plant?”

“Yep.” He mounted the bike, and then rolled it away from the pumps. “The juice from the aloe vera will heal anything that ails you.” Then, at her look of utter astonishment, his mouth turned up at one corner. “Don’t worry. It’s perfectly safe.”

“Thanks.” Her dubious expression told him she wasn’t as thrilled with the prospect of spreading cactus juice all over face as he was. “I’m sure there’s no need. I’ll be fine.”

“We’ll see about that later. I see a restaurant over there if that’s all right with you.” He pointed to a small orange, yellow, and green building with a huge sombrero on top.

“Sounds great. I love Mexican.” She flashed him another smile as they rode toward the parking lot.

Again he was amazed at how easy she seemed to please. She reminded him a lot of his mother. Practical and natural. Giving and nurturing. Maybe she wasn’t as prissy as he had first thought.

The hostess quickly seated them in a booth, and their waiter immediately

placed a basket of warm, fresh-baked tortilla chips and a large bowl of salsa between them. He could practically smell the hot spices.

Jada didn't waste any time. She grabbed a chip, took a deep dip of salsa, and popped it into her mouth. Immediately, her eyes widened. She coughed and reached for the ice water.

Luke handed her a napkin and laughed heartily. "Sugar, this is West Texas. We have real Mexican food out here. Jalapenos and all."

"You could have warned me." Her brown eyes flashed angrily. She took another big swig of water, nearly draining the glass.

He chuckled again and handed her his own glass. She practically yanked it from his hand and took another long sip. With her eyes, the color of melted chocolate, shooting daggers at him, she was even more beautiful, if that were possible. Within minutes their food arrived. This time Jada took cautious, tentative bites, testing each one before diving in to her chalupa.

"Tell me about your family," she said.

The question caught him off guard and he stiffened, all humor draining from his eyes. "Not much to tell. They're dead."

"I'm so sorry to hear that." Her eyes softened and he knew she meant it. But he didn't want her pity. He didn't want anything from her except to be left alone. But she didn't take the hint. Instead she reached across the booth and laid her

hand on his arm. A simple gesture. Innocent and kind. “Tell me about them,” she said, squeezing his arm lightly. “What was your mother like?”

He puckered his brow and stabbed his fork into the burrito. “She was a lot like you.”

The words were out of his mouth before he realized it. He pulled his lips into a straight line. That was *not* something that she needed to know. His mother’s kind and gentle nature patiently nurturing him throughout his rebellious youth was a blatant reminder of how much he had failed her. Now, Jada was staring at him with that same gentle patience and he knew that somehow he would fail her too.

He took a bite of the steak and tortilla. She thought he was a prince, for Pete’s sake. What the devil would she think when she found out he was accused of a horrendous crime? And she would find out. The good people of Eagle Rock would make sure of it. Suddenly, the steak lost all flavor and bitterness replaced the warm spiciness in his mouth.

“How was she like me?” Jada’s soft question jolted him out of his trip down memory lane.

“Stubborn as a mule.”

Instead of taking offense as he had anticipated, Jada’s mouth split into a wide, white-toothed grin. “That so?”

In that instant, he almost let his guard down. He almost told her about his wild youthful antics. The unfounded accusations. The feelings of regret that he now lived with day in and day out. He almost let his guard down, but he didn't. "Yep. She had a stubborn streak a mile long. Once she set her mind to something, the devil himself couldn't have changed it."

"She sounds like a strong woman."

He pushed the rice around on his plate and nodded. "She was. She worked two jobs just to make sure we had everything we needed. She died three weeks before I graduated high school."

"Oh, Luke!" Jada's hand flew to her mouth. "How awful for you."

He abruptly pushed his plate away. He didn't want her pity. He didn't want her compassion. He didn't deserve any of it. He was exactly what the people of Eagle Rock thought. A no-good, smart-mouth piece of garbage, and the only person who would have begged to differ was dead. "I survived."

"What about brothers or sisters?"

"I was an only child."

"Stepfather?" Her voice took on a hopeful note.

"Nope." He took a sip of his tea and hoped that she didn't notice his hands trembling. He looked forward to going back to Eagle Rock about as much as he did about having a root canal. And soon his kind-hearted companion would know

exactly what kind of man her prince really was.



The sunset illuminated the burnt-gold rocky terrain as they passed the city limit sign. Eagle Rock. Population 562.

Tiny flecks of light danced across desert dunes on both sides of the highway as if issuing a warm, friendly greeting. Tall cactuses sporadically dotted the magnificent landscape.

The town, and she used that term loosely, came into view within minutes—one street with a handful of stores, a gas station, a small school, and two bars with flashing neon signs. Two streets branched off from the main street leading to a handful of neighborhoods. Several open outdoor vegetable stands also took their place among the Native American décor in the middle of the town. One bed and breakfast served as Eagle Rock’s only lodging. Although the town was small, it offered a warm, friendly atmosphere.

Luke pulled the motorcycle into Eagle Rock Bed and Breakfast. “We’ll have to stay here tonight.”

Jada’s head snapped up. Oh, bother. She hadn’t given any thought to sleeping arrangements. Surely, Luke intended on getting them separate rooms. Did the small building even *have* two rooms? By the looks of it, she wasn’t so sure.

Luke slid off the bike and, then unfastened his helmet. Jada followed suit.

After the long ride, she was grateful to be able to stretch her legs. She unhooked her backpack from the Harley and followed him inside.

“May I help you?” A small, withered woman greeted them with a smile the minute they entered the parlor.

“We’d like a room,” Luke said gruffly.

“Two rooms,” Jada interjected sweetly causing Luke to send her a sharp look. She continued smiling, although her eyes held a certain stubborn gleam.

“Two rooms.” He agreed with a curt nod.

“Certainly.” The woman slowly made her way behind the desk and took out a form. “Please fill this out. How long will you be staying with us?”

“A couple of days.” Luke filled out the information and handed it to the woman.

“You’re new around here, aren’t you? We don’t get...” Her voice trailed off and all the color drained from her face as she read the form. “I... uh. I’m not sure if we have any rooms available after all. I...” The woman’s hands twisted the form agitatedly, her old gray eyes not meeting theirs.

“Mrs. Walker, I know that you have rooms available. Eagle Rock isn’t exactly a tourist’s town, now is it?” Luke’s voice was soft, but held an edge that Jada didn’t quite understand. But she did notice that the woman was clearly upset about something.

“I... uh... We didn’t expect to ever see you again, Luke.” Mrs. Walker finally whispered.

“I’m sure you didn’t. But I’m here now and we need a room.” His face hardened, but his tone was quiet.

“I suppose it will be all right, although I don’t know what Sheriff Johnson will say.” She hesitated a moment longer then reached under the counter and pulled out two keys. She shot Jada a nervous glance before handing them to Luke. “Here’s the keys. Rooms 3 and 4. They’re upstairs.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Walker. And I don’t really care what the sheriff says. I’m free to go wherever I want.” He took the keys from the woman’s trembling hands and handed Jada the key to room 4. “Let’s get settled in first.”

“Okay.” Jada gave him a small smile. Something was wrong. Why should the sheriff care if Luke was back in his sleepy little hometown? And what was with the little old lady? She was suddenly as nervous as a cat on a tight wire.

“Breakfast is at seven,” Mrs. Walker called out as they made their way up the stairs. Rooms 3 and 4 were on the second level.

Luke didn’t offer her an explanation when they reached their rooms. He simply went into his and closed the door, leaving Jada gawking after him.

Deciding that he wasn’t going to bother to explain why Mrs. Walker was so upset to see him, Jada went inside her own room and closed the door. A bath was

in order. She was ready to wash off the road grime and relax for a while.

The deep bear-claw tub was just what she needed. She found small packets of lavender bath oils on the vanity and poured a generous amount into the steamy water. After quickly shedding her clothes, she let out a long luxurious sigh and settled into the tub. The light scent of lavender and the warm bubbles teasing her ivory skin lulled her into a relaxed sleep.

Somewhere in her dreams of a tall, dark, and very sexy prince, someone was building something. Pounding louder and louder. Even in her dream state, she wished they would stop. Just as the charismatic prince bent his head to kiss her, she could hear someone calling her name.

Go away!

In her dream, she pulled his dark head toward hers and her hand caught the ponytail at the nape of his neck. Her fingers played with the dark coarse hair. It felt so...

“Jada!”

There it was again, that irritating shout. But the prince was holding her, stroking her. She wanted more. She wanted to feel his arms around her.

“Jada! Open the door or I’m coming in.”

She sat up quickly. The bubbles were gone and the water was now tepid. How long had she been asleep?

Jada scrambled to her feet, pulled the stopper, and then stepped out of the tub. She quickly reached for the pink towel and wrapped it around her middle, and then padded across the hardwood floor to the door, leaving a trail of water behind her.

“What is it?” She flung open the door and glared at Luke. He stood there with a deep scowl on his face, barely resembling the sexy man from her dream.

Oh, God! She had been dreaming about Luke. About touching him. Kissing him. Her cheeks flamed at the thought. God, she hoped he couldn’t read her thoughts. How humiliating!

“I thought you might need this.” He held out a green prickly plant. His eyes swept the length of her. She caught a gleam of appreciation in their dark blue depths.

The color in her cheeks deepened.

“You were going to beat my door down for *this*?”

“I thought you might be hurting. Your cheeks are pretty red.”

Not just from the sunburn, you big oaf. She pulled the towel tighter around her. “Thanks, but I’m fine.” She stared at the cactus as if it were a poisonous snake. Cactus juice? Yuck!

“Trust me.” He said it softly, but the words struck a chord in her heart.

Trust me.

Jada's breath caught in her throat. She knew he was referring to the cactus, but for a brief second she wondered if she could trust him. She didn't really know him, but something in his eyes, something raw and gentle told her that she could. This was Luke. Prince Luke. King Barnabus's illegitimate son. And for the first time since meeting him, she knew. He really was the prince. In spite of the earring, the tattoo, and the leather jacket. In spite of the Harley and the rough edges. In spite of the tough exterior he presented to the world. It was just a mask, hiding the real man beneath. A man of noble blood. A man he didn't even know he was.

With renewed determination, she vowed then and there that she would do whatever it took to make him see that he was indeed Prince Luciano Daniel Hansen. And then she would transform the hard-as-nails biker into a real prince. One worthy of her beloved Androvian throne.

Jada nodded numbly and moved aside so he could enter. She did trust him.

"If you want to change first, I'll help you put this on." He was still holding the disgusting green plant.

She quickly found a pair of yellow shorts and a t-shirt. She returned from the bathroom to find him sitting on her bed.

"Are you sure this is necessary?" She eyed the plant dubiously, and then sat down on the beige bedspread beside him.

"It'll help." He broke the tip of the long pointed leaf. A slimy, lightly tinted

goo dripped from the plant onto his thumb. He shot her a grin. “Relax.”

Relax? With slime about to be slathered across her face? She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

His thumb touched her cheek, sending a sudden prickle of electricity through her skin. The hot white spark immediately cooled with the soothing sensation of the sticky juice. The rhythmic circles his thumb was making on her skin made her throat constrict and go dry. She swallowed hard.

After carefully applying the juice to one side, he started on the other. Jada could feel her heart pounding in her chest. It was so loud, she was sure Mrs. Walker could hear it downstairs.

“There.” Her eyes flew open when he removed his hand. “All done.”

“Th-thanks. I think.” She offered him a small smile which was difficult since the juice was now drying on her face and tightening her skin.

Her body was suddenly aware that his lips—those sensuous, full lips were only inches from her own. He was so close now. She could feel his breath on her cheek, heating her body like a furnace. The scent of exotic spices and male pheromones tantalized her nostrils driving her senses to near madness. God, he was so... so male. She closed her eyes and briefly wondered what it would be like to have those velvety lips on hers. What it would be like to feel her body pressed against his. The sheer thought of it was enough to take her breath away.

“Jada.” Her name sounded like sandpaper coming from his throat. Raw and coarse. As if he were murmuring her name against his will.

Her eyes snapped open. Oh, dear heavens! Had she spoken her fantasies aloud? No matter. She was positive her emotions were as transparent as a bridal veil. Every thought, every desire, every dark fantasy was probably etched into her face for him to see. She couldn’t hide it. She couldn’t fight it. She wanted to feel his lips on hers. To taste the sweetness of his mouth. To feel his body close. She wanted him, pure and simple.

“Jada.” This time the sound was low and guttural, no more than a mere whisper. Like the wind blowing on a soft, summer night.

His head bent toward hers

Her eyes fluttered shut as his head drew near. The minute his lips touched hers, electricity charged the air around them. White-hot sparks of desire shot through her veins, flooding her body with emotions she didn’t even know she had. His hand cupped her face while his lips claimed hers. Softly. Then harder. More urgently.

She responded in kind, greedily, hungrily, her arms snaking around his neck. Just like in her dream, her hand caught the ponytail at the nape of his neck. The coarseness pricked her fingertips with tingles of pleasure.

His lips trailed along her chin, then teased her neck. Her stomach flipped.

Then flopped. Her lips found his temple. She kissed him softly, her tongue tasting a hint of salt and maleness.

“Luke.” His name slipped from her lips like satin.

His hands stilled on her. He lifted his head and stared into her eyes, his own dark and stormy. Drawing a ragged breath, he uttered the two words no woman ever wanted to hear at a time like this. “I’m sorry.”

He pulled a hand through his hair, and then stood up abruptly. The movement jarred her back to reality. He was apologizing? For kissing her?

“Luke?” She knew the question on her lips was mirrored in her eyes. Why had he shut down on her?

“Look, lady. Forget this ever happened. It shouldn’t have. I’m sorry.”

Great. She was back to Lady? Not two minutes ago he was kissing her and setting her senses ablaze. Then like Jekyll and Hyde, he did a complete one-eighty on her. What had she done wrong?

When he didn’t say anything more, she whispered again, “Luke?”

“Just forget the whole thing ever happened. I’m no good for you.” His eyes became haunted and distant. Then he muttered, “Just forget about it.” With that he strode across the room and disappeared into the hall, closing the door behind him with a bang.

Jada sat on the bed, still reeling from his kiss and stunned by his rejection.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror across the room. Swollen, thoroughly kissed lips, honey-blond hair damp and in disarray, and pale skin, still sticky with aloe.

A hysterical bubble of laughter erupted from deep inside. She put her hand to her face. The aloe vera had dried leaving her skin feeling slightly rough. No wonder he didn't want me, she thought dazedly. But even as she whispered the words in her mind, she knew that wasn't it. Something else had stopped him cold. Something in that tortured look in his eyes, those haunted blue eyes that spoke straight to her heart.

I'm no good for you. The words had been said with self-reproach and disgust, and he'd meant every word. In that instant, another wall had gone up around the man that she was trying desperately to get to know. A man that she thought was a prince. Her prince. And another obstacle presented itself in her quest to avenge her brother's death and preserve the Androvian Monarchy.

Chapter Four

Luke was waiting for her the next morning in the breakfast room. Jada settled into the chair beside him as Mrs. Walker spooned scrambled eggs onto her plate.

She offered the woman a smile, but Mrs. Walker carefully avoided her eyes.

“Where are we going today?” Jada cradled her coffee cup cautiously and blew on the smooth, cream-lightened liquid. The steaming rich aroma tempted her already ravenous appetite.

“To the courthouse. I want to see my birth certificate.” Luke took a bite of toast and washed it down with a large swig of orange juice.

Mrs. Walker shot him a quick glance, and her wrinkled hands trembled slightly as she refilled his glass.

“That sounds like a good place to start.” Jada spread a thick dollop of strawberry jam onto her toast. “At least we can find out who your mother listed under ‘father.’”

“You’re looking for your father?” Mrs. Walker asked sharply.

Luke gazed up at her a moment, as if considering his words. “My mother told me he’d been her high school sweetheart. Just trying to find out more about

him.”

Mrs. Walker’s eyes softened a bit. “Lucy was such a dear sweet girl. She worked for me a couple of summers during her youth. Always full of romantic notions.” Her lips thinned disapprovingly. “But even years later, everyone admired her for being such a hardworking single mother. She did the best she could by you. It couldn’t have been easy for her.”

Luke set fork down with more force than necessary. “What you really mean, is that I gave her a hard time.”

Mrs. Walker looked away.

The screen door banged open. A tall, lanky man in his fifties swaggered into the dining room. His uniform was pressed into unyielding ridges down his chest and there was no mistaking the badge on his shirtfront. He removed his hat and set it on the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

“Mornin’, Milly. What smells so good in here?”

Immediately, Jada’s nose started itching. Great. More trouble. Just what she needed.

“Sheriff Johnson. I’ll get you a plate.” Mrs. Walker hurried to the kitchen.

Jada could almost see the relief in her face. Why was she so jumpy around Luke?

The sheriff sat down in the vacant chair across from them. “How long you

plan on staying in Eagle Rock, Luke?” His tone was anything but welcoming.

“Couple of days.”

The sheriff nodded curtly. “Don’t overstay your welcome.”

Jada bristled.

Luke took a sip of his coffee. “I don’t plan on settling down and starting a family if that’s what you’re worried about.” The steel in his voice spoke volumes. Luke clenched his jaw, then set his cup down and sat back in his chair.

“See that you don’t.”

Jada pulled a sharp breath. “Is there a law against visiting Eagle Rock?” she asked sweetly.

The sheriff looked taken aback, but quickly recovered. “Not for most folk.”

Mrs. Walker returned with the sheriff’s plate. Although the food smelled delicious, Jada realized that she had lost her own appetite.

“I was just wondering.” She knew her smile did not meet her eyes. “Where I come from, we treat our guests with respect and dignity.”

“And where’s that, miss?”

“Androvia. It’s a small kingdom near the Mediterranean Sea.”

“So what brings you to our neck of the woods?” The sheriff took a bite of his eggs. “Delicious as usual, Milly.” He grinned.

Mrs. Walker beamed. “Thanks, Henry.”

“I’m here to bring back our king.” Jada said. Her eyes met Luke’s and she saw the warning in them. Unfortunately, she had no intention of heeding it. She’d had enough of this small-minded town. It was her job as a Public Relations Specialist to protect the throne from scandal and slander. And she had every intention of doing so.

When the sheriff finished chewing, he asked almost humorously, “Your king? What king?”

“Luke.” Jada thoroughly enjoyed watching the sheriff sputter and nearly choke on his eggs.



“What did you tell Sheriff Johnson that for?” Luke muttered, flipping through the folder. The county clerk had been more than happy to find the information Luke had requested. She must not have realized that who he was, Jada mused. From Mrs. Walker to the gas station attendant, almost everybody in Eagle Rock made it clear they didn’t approve of Luke’s arrival.

“Because it’s true.”

Luke’s hand stilled on the folder. “Here it is.”

Jada noted that his hands were trembling as he pulled the yellowed, worn certificate from the file. “I’m not the man you’re looking for.”

“What does it say?” she whispered, standing on her tiptoes to peer over his

shoulder.

“It’s blank.” He flung the paper back into the folder, tossed the folder on the desk, and stormed out of the courthouse.

Jada finally caught up with him on the street corner. “What do you mean, *blank*?”

“I mean there is no one listed under ‘father.’” he bit out. “Nada. Nothing. I guess I was hatched from an egg.”

“Oh, Luke. I’m so sorry. I’m sure your mother had a good reason for not listing your father on the birth certificate.” Like he was the king of a small Mediterranean country. “Who was her high school sweetheart? Maybe we could talk to some of her old classmates. Surely someone would remember something.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“I do.” Jada’s heart split at the misery in his voice. She touched Luke’s arm and looked him straight in the eye. “We’ll start with Mrs. Walker. She said you’re mother worked for her for a couple of summers. I’m sure she knows something about her life back then.”

“I doubt it.” Luke jerked his arm away from her and mounted the motorcycle. “Sheriff Johnson is right about one thing. It was a mistake for me to come back here. We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

Jada slid onto the seat behind him. The answers to his past were here. They

just had to find a way to unravel them. And she would start with Mrs. Walker. Even if Luke didn't want to.



"Mrs. Walker, please, if you can remember anything about Lucy's life, it would be most helpful," Jada implored a few hours later in the sitting room of Eagle Rock Bed and Breakfast. Luke had dropped her off and had sped away on the bike. Jada had let him go. This was the perfect time to corner Mrs. Walker.

Mrs. Walker wrung her hands anxiously. "Oh, dear. I really don't know much. She never brought any of her friends around while she was working." She drew her brows together thoughtfully. "Although, there was this one boy who kept coming by to see her right after they graduated. William Drake, I believe. Yes. Yes, that was it. He was the grocer's son. Anyway, they had apparently dated in high school, but she wouldn't have anything to do with him that summer. Kept saying they were just friends."

"William Drake." Jada repeated. "Does he still live around here?"

Mrs. Walker shook her head. "When Lucy refused to marry him, he enlisted in the army. He was killed a few years later during an accident on the base. The whole town mourned his death," she finished sadly.

"Was Lucy pregnant when he left?" Jada held her breath. If she had been, there was a very good chance that William Drake was indeed Luke's father.

“No. Lucy worked for me for the rest of the summer. She wasn’t pregnant then.”

“What did Lucy do after the summer?”

Mrs. Walker pulled a mauve afghan from the top of the couch and wrapped it around her legs. “The old circulation isn’t what it used to be,” she explained ruefully. “Lucy went to work for the Eagle Rock Café’ as a waitress. She worked there for many years. She was such a sweet girl. Even helped me out when I was in a pinch once.”

Jada sighed. None of this was really helping her find out who Luke’s father was. “How was that?”

“One winter I came down with the nastiest cold. Bedridden for almost a week. And wouldn’t you know it, that would be the week I was the busiest.” She frowned slightly. “Come to think of it, I never did know exactly why we were so busy that week. Eagle Rock doesn’t get many tourists, you know.”

Not with the welcome wagon this town sends out, Jada thought.

“Anyway, I was laid up with fever and such, and we suddenly had all six rooms filled. Although everything was kept hush-hush.” She lowered her voice. “I knew it was somebody important that was staying here. He had bodyguards. I thought he may have been a movie star, but he wasn’t one I recognized.”

Jada’s stomach dropped. Bodyguards?

“Lucy, God rest her soul, came to help out that week. Every chance she could she was here. Cooking, cleaning, tidying up. Whatever needed to be done, she did it. I couldn’t have made it without her that winter.” Mrs. Walker’s eyes smarted. She dabbed them with her handkerchief. “Such a dear, sweet girl.”

“Do you remember who the man was?” Jada’s voice hit a high note, excitement bubbling in her stomach.

Mrs. Walker shook her head. “No, but I probably still have the guest book around here somewhere. I keep all of them, you know. My husband used to say I was a pack rat.”

“That would be great.” Jada patted her hand. “Please, let me know the minute you find it.”

Mrs. Walker smiled. “You remind me a lot of Lucy, dear. Why are you with that Luke? You could do so much better than the likes of him.”

Jada grinned. “Because there’s a very good chance that he’s my country’s future king.” She gave the surprised woman a quick hug and headed upstairs. Now, all she had to do was transform him from the rough and tough biker into her prince.

Jada stopped mid-way up the stairs. *Her prince?* Shocked, she realized that she could indeed see Luke as her very own prince. He may be rough around the edges, but on the inside he was exactly as he should be. Honorable, kind, and

worthy of the throne. And quite possibly her heart. If she wasn't careful.



Luke skidded to a stop in front of the old white house. He hadn't been back here in over eighteen years. He wasn't quite sure why he was here now.

The house barely resembled his childhood home with its chipped paint, broken windows, a screen door that was hanging on its last hinge and an abundance of weeds creeping up the siding. But if he closed his eyes, he could picture it as it had been many years ago. A neatly trimmed yard, fresh white paint — his mother had insisted that he paint the house every two years after he hit puberty. He hadn't particular cared for that, but now he could see why she'd been so insistent. It was a mess. Just like his life.

But if he tried really hard, he could almost smell the fresh-baked chocolate-chip cookies she had waiting for him every Tuesday after school, the only day of the week that she was ever off from both jobs. The only day of the week she seemed genuinely happy. Yep, he could almost see the house the way it had been, full of life and love.

Luke scowled. Why was he here now? Reliving his past when he wanted to be as far away from Eagle Rock as possible? He knew why. *Her*.

He'd been doing just fine until *she* waltzed into his life, spinning her fairytales about kingdoms and princes and such. Hell, he'd been more than fine. He

had his own business, he was finally financially stable, and he was perfectly content living on his own. Now *she* had him thinking about who he really was. Not that he thought that he was actually the man she was looking for. He was no prince. Not even close. But now, he wanted to know *who* he really was. Was he the no-good troublemaker everyone claimed him to be, or was he someone else? Someone who might really be worthy of love one day.

Jada reminded him so much of his mother that it was uncanny. She had the same stubborn streak, the same determination, and the same ability to look beyond the surface and find the good in almost everything. Jada could also see behind his mask of pain to the man he really was. He just wished he knew who that man was.

“So, this is where you grew up.” Her soft voice slid over him like a warm blanket, comforting and safe.

Without turning around he answered, “It didn’t look this bad back then. My mom may not have had much money, but she kept us presentable.” He turned toward her then. “How did you know where to find me?”

Jada arched an eyebrow. “It’s not a big town, Luke. I didn’t exactly have to hire a P.I.”

“I suppose not.” His lips turned up at the corners. He *should* be angry with her for intruding on his private moment. He *should* be angry with her for sending

him back to the one place he never wanted to return. But he wasn't. For the first time in his life, he was glad to have someone to share his pain with. Someone who wasn't judging him.

Not yet, anyway. Not until she found out the real reason he was run out of Eagle Rock on a rail.

Dread settled in his stomach and his shoulders slumped. He didn't want to see the disappointment in her eyes when she learned the truth. Or at least Eagle Rock's version of the truth.

"Your mother must have loved you very much." Jada shaded her eyes with her hand and studied the dilapidated surroundings.

"She always believed in me. Even when..." he hesitated for a moment.

"We have all had a checkered past, Luke. It's part of being a teenager. Not something to be ashamed of."

He didn't miss the shadow of doubt that crossed her features.

"*You* have a checkered past? What did you do? Wear white after Labor Day?"

Jada lowered her hand and looked him straight in the eye. "Believe it or not, I was a normal teenager, too."

"I'm sure your hometown won't be in an uproar when you return," he muttered irritably. Still, she did seem to know her way around a Harley. Maybe, she wasn't quite so innocent after all. But no matter what she had done, it was

nothing compared to his own youthful antics. Gambling, drinking, outright teenage rebellion—the kind that gave his mother many a sleepless night. No, he never had been one to follow the rules and he may have sowed a wild oat or two, but, he sure as hell hadn't committed the crime this town had condemned him for eighteen years ago. Not that anyone had believed him. Nor ever would.

Just thinking about that cold winter night made his blood boil. The way Sheriff Johnson had all but left him in jail to rot. And if hadn't been for the hung jury and the lack of solid evidence, he'd probably still be there. Yep, the sooner he got out of Eagle Rock, the better it would be. For everybody.

"You have no idea what my people think of me." The catch in her voice caught his attention.

He frowned at the sudden pallor in her cheeks. Well, well, well, it appeared that Miss Prim and Proper had a secret of her own. But, he'd bet his last dollar that it wasn't as dirty as his. He wanted to ask her about it, but somehow he didn't think she was ready to bare all to him. Not yet, anyway. Instead he changed the subject.

"Did you find out anything from Mrs. Walker?" He knew she would have cornered the woman the minute he drove off.

Jada shook her head. "Nothing concrete." Then she shrugged. "Who knows? Something may turn up before we leave."

“I doubt it. We’re heading out now.”

Jada’s eyes widened. “Give it another day, Luke. We’ve come all this way. It would be a shame to leave without knowing the truth.”

Luke narrowed his eyes. She knew something. “Spit it out, Jada. What did you find out?”

Her lashes lowered to her suddenly pink-stained cheeks. “I told you. Nothing definite. I just think we should wait another day or so.”

A chip of ice melted away from Luke’s heart. She was trying to protect him from more heartache. Just as his mother had always done.

A pang of regret stabbed him in the gut. For the millionth time in the last eighteen years, he wished that he hadn’t given his mother such a hard time. She really had been doing the best she could for him. And despite his rebellious nature, he had loved her. He just hadn’t ever had a male role model in his life to guide him. So he guided himself. Right to hell.

Luke lifted her chin with his knuckle and searched her gentle brown eyes for the truth. “You may as well tell me. I’m going to find out sooner or later anyway.”

Jada’s lip trembled. “Mrs. Walker had a guest many years ago that required body guards. Lucy—your mother—helped her tend to them.”

“Who was the guest?” Luke’s heart pounded in his chest. He wanted to

know, yet he didn't. He was so close to finding out who his father was he could almost taste it. And that scared the hell out of him, too.

"She didn't remember, but she's going to check her guest books. I'm sure we'll find out soon. Please, Luke. Give it another day or so. Just until Mrs. Walker can tell us something concrete." Her eyes were wide and luminous, pleading with him. As he lowered his gaze to her trembling lower lip, he suddenly remembered kissing her last night. She had tasted like sunshine. Pure and sweet. Something he knew that he would never deserve.

"All right. One more day. Then we're hitting the road."

"Thank you." Jada smiled and took his hand in hers. "I don't think you'll regret it."

She was wrong. He was already regretting it. That, and the way her soft small hand seemed to fit naturally in his, as if it belonged.

Chapter Five

“You’ve got a loose board.” Luke stepped into the sitting room the next day, shrugged out of his leather jacket, and slung it across his arm. “Where’s your hammer?”

Jada’s breath hitched. His red muscle shirt emphasized bulging biceps and strong arms. For a wild moment she wondered what it would feel like to have those arms around her again.

“In the kitchen.” Mrs. Walker pushed the guest book she had been flipping through aside. She eased herself up from the loveseat, her knees popping in the quietness of the room. “I’ve been meaning to get someone out here to fix the porch and the roof, but it just keeps slipping my mind. Old age does that to folks, you know.”

Mrs. Walker slowly made her way to the kitchen. At sixty-plus, she obviously didn’t move as quickly as she used to.

“What’s wrong with the roof?” Luke’s clear blue eyes focused on Jada.

Her heart skipped a beat. Or two. His piercing stare was almost mesmerizing.

“There’s a small leak over the front bedroom,” Mrs. Walker called from the

kitchen, her voice barely audible over the opening and closing of drawers.

“You’d better get that taken care of. You don’t want the wood to rot.”

Another drawer slammed shut. “I’ll see if that Parsons boy might be able to do it this weekend. My Hugh used to take care of all of that, but since he passed, it’s been hard keeping the place up.” Mrs. Walker’s feet shuffled back toward the sitting room.

Jada busied herself with studying the names in the guest books, though most of them seemed to blur before her eyes now that Luke was here. Seeing those tanned biceps was doing strange things to her stomach. It was better to focus on the task at hand rather than how scrumptious Luke looked in his snug faded jeans, muscle shirt, and that adorable little ponytail that she had grown to love. Somehow, she didn’t think the crown prince should be sporting a ponytail, but she’d deal with that when the time came.

“Have you found anything?” He strode over to the coffee table where Jada sat pouring over the two stacks of guest books.

“Not yet, but we’ve only looked through a couple.” She motioned toward the remaining pile. “It may take a while.”

Luke leaned over her shoulder to get a better look, his arms resting on the back of her chair. His warm breath on the back of her neck sent tingles down her spine. His spicy aftershave mingled with his own masculine scent and did even

stranger things to her stomach. He smelled delicious.

A shiver of awareness slid over her.

“Here it is.” Mrs. Walker returned with the hammer. “You really don’t have to do this, I can get someone to come out and fix it tomorrow.”

Luke stood up straight. “It’s a hazard. I’ll fix it now.” He took the hammer from Mrs. Walker’s hands and left. The screen door banged shut behind him.

Jada breathed a sigh of relief. Now, she might be able to focus again.

Mrs. Walker settled back onto the love seat. “He’s changed. He doesn’t seem to be so...” She waved a hand in front of her agitatedly.

Jada’s finger stilled on the list she was checking. “Mrs. Walker, most teenagers go through a rebellious period. I don’t understand why everyone is so hard on Luke. Surely, he wasn’t the only teenager in Eagle Rock that gave his mother a hard time.”

Mrs. Walker inhaled sharply. “Of course not, but not every teenager goes and ...” Her eyes widened and she swallowed hard.

“Not every teenager does what?” Jada puzzled at the nervous catch in Mrs. Walker’s voice.

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear indeed. I thought you knew.” Mrs. Walker twisted her thumbs in her lap. “I really don’t want to spread gossip. And it was such a long time ago.” She paused. “No, no, Luke will have to tell you about it himself. I just

thought you already knew what he did.” She twisted her hands harder clearly upset.

Mrs. Walker appeared so flustered that Jada worried the old woman might actually faint. Her nose started itching again. She had no idea what the woman was talking about, but she knew it couldn’t be good. Although she was dying to know what all the fuss was about, she didn’t press Mrs. Walker.

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that.” Jada offered her a smile then patted her hand reassuringly.

“Oh, yes it is, dear. Yes it is.”

Jada’s smile faltered as her nose tingled even harder. Whatever it was, it *was* as bad as all of that.

“Let’s just finish looking through these books.” Jada suggested, giving the older woman’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

Two hours later, they had almost finished looking through every book and so far there was no indication that Barnabas McDaniels had ever been in Eagle Rock.

A loud bang and several choice words brought Jada to her feet. What in the world was going on outside?

She walked to the screen door, but saw no sign of Luke. Opening it, she stepped onto the porch. The loose board was fixed. But there was no sign of Luke.

“Damn!”

Jada frowned and hurried down the porch steps. The crown prince simply could not go around spouting curse words. Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked up to see Luke standing on top of the roof.

Bare-chested.

Her stomach fluttered. Good lord! He looked even more delicious shirtless, all tanned abs and dark chest hair.

“What are you doing?” she called up.

“Flagging airplanes. What does it look like?” He kicked a loose shingle out of his way. “My ladder fell.”

Jada walked around to the side of the house. The ladder was indeed lying on the ground. “Looks like you’re stranded.”

Luke scowled then brushed his bare arm across his brow. “Are you going to stand down there and make observations, or are you going to help me?”

She suppressed a grin. “I might leave you up there for a while. At least until you learn your lesson.”

“What lesson?”

“To curb your colorful language. It’s either that, or I’m going to wash your mouth out with soap like my grandma used to do.”

“You got something against the way I talk?” He sat down on his haunches

and glared down at her.

“A king really shouldn’t curse,” she said primly.

“I’m not your king.”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“I’m sure you’ve been through all the books by now. Did you find what you were looking for?”

Jada shook her head. A small seed of anxiety planted itself in her mind. What if she had made a mistake? What if he really wasn’t the future king? She couldn’t live with herself if she let her father down. The Vanderbilts just *couldn’t* reign. They just couldn’t.

Jada frowned. How odd. Her nose wasn’t itching. If she had made a mistake and he wasn’t the Crown Prince, wouldn’t her nose be itching?

“My point exactly. Now, just get me the da—”

“Tsk, ts. Language,” she interrupted, pointedly narrowing her eyes.

Luke rocked back on his haunches with a scowl. “Just get me the ladder.”

When she didn’t move, he finally added a grudging, “Please.”

Jada grinned. “As you wish, my king.” She curtsied dramatically before dragging the ladder to the side of the house. She struggled with it a few minutes then triumphantly leaned it against the house with a thud.

Hammer in hand, Luke climbed down the ladder, pulled a dirt-stained

handkerchief out of his jeans pocket and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. Sunlight glistened on his dark hair, giving it an almost silver sheen. But it was the Androvian crest tattooed across his arm that caught her eye. Luke had to be the prince. He just *had* to.

He picked up a glass of water from the ground. He leaned back and poured it over his head, and water dribbled down his face and neck to his chest.

Jada swallowed hard. His bare chest was only inches from her. She had to resist the urge to trace the trail of water into the dark, wiry curls.

“It’s hot as blazes up there.” He gave his head a shake, spaying tiny drops of water on Jada.

She took a step back. “Why are you fixing the roof? Mrs. Walker said she was going to get someone to do it this weekend.”

“It needed to be done.” Luke pulled the ladder down. He expertly folded it up before taking it back to the shed behind the house. He returned a few minutes later, picked up his shirt, which was lying on the ground and shrugged into it.

Jada immediately felt a bit disappointed. She rather enjoyed seeing him without it.

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway momentarily distracted her from her disappointment. Jada turned to see a brown and white sheriff’s car coming to a halt beside Luke’s bike.

“Damn.”

Jada swiveled her head back around and shot Luke a glare.

“Sorry,” he muttered running hand through his hair. “Force of habit.”

“Let’s try to break that habit, shall we?” Jada said, pursing her lips. She turned her attention back to the car and felt her nose twitch. “What does he want?”

Luke stiffened beside her. “Nothing good, I’m sure.”

Sheriff Johnson slid out of the car and strode toward them. The look on his face was not welcoming.

“Afternoon, miss. Luke.” He took off his hat and nodded curtly. “I figured you’d be gone by now.”

“Luke was fixing Mrs. Walker’s roof.” Jada’s face slid into the cool professional mask she wore as a P.R. Specialist. She was not about to let the sheriff intimidate them again.

“I see.” The sheriff looked around at the broken shingles lying on the ground. “I’m sure Mrs. Walker appreciated it, but folks are starting to talk. Your being here is making some of the town folk nervous.” Sheriff Johnson cleared his throat. “I’m sure you understand.”

Luke clenched his fist and a muscle twitched in his jaw, but he didn’t say anything.

Jada's stomach tightened. With as much professionalism as she could muster she said, "No, Sheriff, I'm afraid we don't understand."

Sheriff Johnson started and placed the hat back on his head. "It would be best if you left."

"Why is that?" Jada arched a brow.

The sheriff narrowed his eyes. "The town folk aren't too keen on having a murderer back in town."

Jada gasped. Murderer? She shot Luke a quick look. His features hardened into granite, but he didn't deny the accusation.

"I'm sure you're mistaken. Luke could not have committed such an awful crime." Adrenaline rushed through her veins. The sudden rush made her lightheaded. He couldn't have done this. Could he?

"There's no mistake, miss. Luke robbed and killed a man almost eighteen years ago." The sheriff's words were cold and directed toward Luke.

Jada gulped. Luke remained silent beside her, steadily clenching and unclenching his fist.

Jada could feel the professional mask slipping and her emotions taking over. She forced herself to remain calm

Gut instinct told her that he was innocent. Not to mention the fact her nose wasn't itching. And if there was one thing that she had learned from the past, it

was to trust her gift. There wasn't one day in last eight years that she hadn't wished she had trusted her instincts on that fateful night. If she had, then her brother would still be alive today.

She couldn't bring her brother back, but she *could* use her gift to help Luke.

"How do you know it was him?"

"There was an eyewitness. She saw him." The sheriff looked at Luke, daring him to deny it.

"Then why isn't he in prison?" Jada demanded.

Sheriff Johnson turned his attention back to her. "There wasn't enough evidence to convict him and the eyewitness was too scared to testify. Luke walked." He turned back to Luke and said coldly. "We never expected to see him again."

"This witness." Jada placed one hand on her hip. "What exactly did she see?"

Luke stared at Sheriff Johnson, never wavering, never dropping his eyes. Then he promptly turned on his heel and walked up the porch steps. He disappeared into the house, though Jada could almost feel the anger simmering inside him.

Jada expected her telltale nose to begin an itching frenzy. It didn't which surprised her more than the sheriff's accusations.

The sheriff stared after Luke for a moment, then turned back to Jada once

again. “She saw Luke Hansen stab an old man to death, that’s what she saw.”

Jada took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Sheriff. I just can’t see Luke doing something like that.”

“You can’t? Well Sara Ford did. She saw Luke wearing a ski mask and dark clothing, lurking around her grand dad’s place. She saw Luke jump old Lenny Ford as he was getting out of his car one night. Lenny tried to fight back, but Luke stabbed him to death. He died before they could get him to the hospital.”

Jada drew her brows together. “If he was wearing dark clothing and a ski mask, how could the witness be sure it was Luke?”

“The witness was Lenny’s granddaughter. She was also in the car, but Luke didn’t see her. She hid on the backseat. But she saw his ring.”

“His ring?”

The sheriff nodded. “Sarah went to school with Luke all her life. She remembered him wearing a ring with a two-headed lion on it. Everyone else in their class remembered it, too. Nobody but Luke Hansen ever had a ring like that.”

Jada’s brain muddled through the information. It sounded like Luke, but something in the back of her mind refused to believe it. What was it Luke had said about the ring?

“How old was he when the crime was committed?”

The sheriff scratched his chin thoughtfully. “About nineteen or so I guess.”

Jada bit the inside of her lip. There was something about the ring that just didn't quite fit.

Her brain tried to focus, but the thought kept evading her. Something wasn't right. What was it?

Her head snapped up as the light bulb went off in her mind. "Sheriff Johnson, Luke couldn't have possibly committed that crime."

"And why is that?"

Because her nose wasn't itching? She wasn't about to tell the good Sheriff that. Instead, she said, "Luke didn't have the ring at the time of the murder. He lost the ring in a poker game when he was sixteen."

The sheriff blinked. "I'm afraid you've been taken in by good ole' Luke here, miss. He gave us the same 'lost ring' story he gave you. And that's how he got off. We never did find that ring."

"I found it!" Mrs. Walker stuck her head out the screen door.

Jada sucked in a sharp breath. She'd found Luke's ring? Did that mean it wasn't stolen? Had she been wrong about him, after all?

Mrs. Walker stepped out onto the porch with a leather-bound book in her hands. "I found that guestbook we were looking for. The guest that stayed with us that winter was a gentleman named Barnabus McDaniels. It doesn't say where he's from."

Jada's heart pounded in her chest, blood rushed to her ears and her legs turned to Jell-o. She knew where he was from. Androvia.

Luke Hanson really was King Barnabus's illegitimate son. And the Crown Prince of Androvia.

But he was not a murderer. Jada straightened her shoulders and stood tall. "I suggest you start reviewing your evidence, Sheriff. You can start with the tattoo parlor. Luke got a tattoo on his arm with same two-headed lion right after he lost the ring. I'm sure if you look hard enough, you can track down the artist."

A deep flush crept over the sheriff's face. "Ma'am, I'd suggest you—"

"I'd suggest *you* start clearing Luke's name. That ring had been the only thing Luke had from the father he never knew. Barnabus McDaniels. The late king of Androvia." She pinned him with her best don't- mess-with-me-look. "The country of Androvia would not wish to make an international incident out of the wrongful arrest, and subsequent defamation of character, of their king. But we will."

The sheriff glared at her, looking as if he had swallowed a bucket of sour lemons.



"I have no intention of going to Magic Kingdom with you, so you can quit talking about it," Luke told her a few hours later while she packed to leave.

Jada stopped putting toiletries in her bag and stared at him in disbelief.

“Luke, you have to. You heard Mrs. Walker. King Barnabus was here. He really was your father.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Of course he was. Look at you. You have the Androvian crest tattooed across your arm, for Pete’s sake. Short of a blood test, what else do you want?”

Luke reached across the bed and grabbed the TV remote then flicked through the channels. “Jada, I can’t just pack up and run off to fairytale land. I have a company to run. One that I worked my butt off to build. I’m not going to just throw it all away.”

Jada pursed her lips and dropped her toothpaste into the bag. “Don’t you have a foreman or something?”

“Of course.”

She stopped packing for a moment and glared at him. “Is he capable of running the company?”

“Absolutely. But—”

“Then put him in charge. You have to come to Androvia.” Her blue eyes begged him to understand. “You just have to.”

“Maybe I’ll check it out one day, but right now—”

“You don’t have one day. We’re almost out of time.”

“What do you mean?”

Her shoulders slumped and she sat down on the bed. “If you don’t take over the throne within the next two and half weeks...” Her voice caught and her lower lip trembled.

“Then what?” Luke turned off the TV and flung the remote back on the bed. He stood and stretched his legs.

“Then the throne will go to Edward Vanderbilt. I can’t let that happen. I just can’t.”

“Maybe this Edward would know more about running the country than I ever would.”

“No!” Her eyes snapped with the same fear in her voice. “Edward would not make a better king. I won’t allow it.”

“Jada,” he said gently. “I’m no prince.” Standing in front of her he lifted her chin with his knuckle. “I’ve lived a hard life. I won’t be any use to Androvia.”

“Of course you will. You’re the king’s son. That’s enough for now. The rest you can learn.”

“I’m no prince.” He shook his head in exasperation, his resolve melting. He didn’t want to let her down. She was the first person in a very long time who believed in him. She stood up and stuffed the last of her shirts into the backpack. “We’re going to fix that.”

Sitting on the edge of her bed, Luke grimaced. “What does that mean?”

“I’m going to transform you into a real prince before the coronation ball. It’s my job as Androvia’s P.R., you know.” She reached over and fingered his ponytail. “Starting with this.”

“I don’t think so.” He jerked his head to the left so that the ponytail fell away from her fingers. “I happen to like my hair.”

Jada eyed the ponytail mournfully. “It is quite adorable, but it has to go. Along with a few other things.” She walked to the dresser and opened a drawer. She pulled out flashes of white and began stuffing them into the bag. Luke couldn’t help but sneak a peek. Was she white cotton or black lace? Jada closed the bag before he could find out.

Damn. It would have been nice to know. Luke stifled a grin, then immediately sobered. Black lace or not, she was planning to change him into her version of a king.

Nope. He didn’t like the sound of any of it. He never had been one to conform to rules and he sure as hell didn’t plan to start now. Androvia would have to take him just the way he was or they wouldn’t take him at all. “I don’t plan on doing much changing.”

“We’ll see.”

Jada walked back to the bed. Something slipped out of her bag. Luke reached down and picked it up. Holding up the brief scrap of white lace between

his thumb and index finger, he arched a dark eyebrow suggestively. “So this is what’s hiding under those shorts?” A slow smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “What other secrets are you hiding?”

Jada eyed the incriminating lace panties and turned a bright red. “Give me those.” She snatched them from his hand and quickly shoved them into the bag. With a yank, she zipped up the bag.

“You didn’t answer my question.” He grinned.

“What question?” She slung the backpack over her shoulders.

“What other secrets are you hiding?”

“Nothing,” she mumbled before walking to the door.

Luke didn’t miss the shadow that crossed her features. She *was* hiding something. Something that probably had to do with this Edward Vanderbilt. And he intended to find out just what that something was.

Chapter Six

“Quit fidgeting,” Jada said, adjusting Luke’s tie for the third time that evening.

“Is this really necessary?” Luke scowled into the floor-length mirror hanging on the wall of his new bedroom. A bedroom that was so big, it could house a family of four back home.

“Of course it’s necessary. You will have a simple dinner with parliament, and then Matthew—think of him as your right hand man—will explain your duties.” Jada stepped back to admire her handiwork.

Her breath hitched. Oh, yes, Luke Hansen definitely cleaned up very nicely. Very nicely indeed.

“I just don’t see why I have to be stuffed into this suit to eat dinner,” Luke grumbled, stepping to the side. “What’s wrong with jeans?”

Jada laughed, buttoning the top button his dark navy Armani suit. Her eyes met his clear blue ones and she swallowed hard. Oh yes. The man definitely cleaned up nicely. Not that she’d had any complaints before, but now... oh, my! A spark of excitement slid over her.

Short, sexy dark hair rested just above his collar, replacing the adorable

ponytail. The result was an air of regal authority, and Jada had a strong urge to run her fingers through it. The doubled-breasted jacket stretched across his wide, solid chest and portrayed massive strength. Though he no longer sported an earring, power rolled off him in waves.

With her hands splayed across his chest, Jada gave him a cheeky grin. “Just think of it as protocol. The crown prince is expected to look like a prince, not a handyman.”

“Do I look like a prince?” Luke caught her hands with his, holding them close to his heart, his blue eyes seeking hers.

The corner of Jada’s mouth turned up. “Oh, yes. You most definitely look like a prince, now.” Her own heart picked up a beat. His hands covering hers sent warm tingles through her arms.

“So I meet with your approval?” He whispered softly, his lips only inches from hers.

Jada licked her lips. “Y-yes.”

“Good.” He bent his head and brushed his lips against hers gently before expertly taking them with his own.

Blood pounded in her temples, making her lightheaded. She closed her eyes and leaned in hungrily toward Luke’s lips. He tasted of coffee and cream and everything wonderful. She sighed softly. Luke really was a prince. Her prince.

Jada's eyes flew open. Oh, dear heavens. She was kissing the prince. A simple P.R. for the Androvian palace was kissing the crown prince.

That simply wasn't done.

Jada steadied her breath and pushed him away.

"What's wrong?" His voice was husky and strained.

"I can't kiss you."

"I disagree. You seemed to be doing a bang-up job so far." He grinned reaching for her once more.

"No, I mean I shouldn't." She took a step back, wringing her hands in front of her.

Luke's grin faded. "Why not?"

"You're the crown prince."

"I thought we established that a few minutes ago."

Jada licked her lips nervously. "What I mean is, the future king can't go around kissing commoners. It's simply not done."

"Hogwash!"

Startled, Jada repeated, "Hogwash?"

"Yep. Hogwash. Pure and simple." He looked at his watch and sighed irritably. "I don't have time to get into this with you right now, but we will discuss this nonsense soon."

He planted a quick kiss on her surprised lips before disappearing out the door.



Dinner with parliament was exactly as he had expected. Stiff and boring. They were seated at a long dining table in the formal dining hall, surrounded by exquisite dinnerware and mouthwatering dishes specially prepared by the cooks. He would have just as soon had a hamburger and been stretched out on his couch in jeans and a t-shirt.

Luke forced himself not to look at his watch as the head of parliament droned on and on about the history of Androvia. He never had been one to enjoy history. Come to think of it, that was one of the classes he skipped regularly in high school. Now, he could see why. He really did try to listen as they explained the basics of how their parliament worked, but his heart just wasn't in it. He didn't give a damn about rules and protocol. He probably wouldn't follow them anyway. Especially, if said rule meant not getting involved with a certain P.R. with a pretty butt.

Hell—no, heck—gotta curb that language, he thought ruefully. Heck, she was the sole reason he was here. He didn't have any real interest in being a king. The idea was still so farfetched that he nearly laughed out loud, but for some reason, it was important to Jada. And that meant it was important to him.

“Your Highness, would you care for anything else?”

Luke nearly choked on his tea. Your Highness? Was she for real? One quick glance confirmed that the young servant was indeed serious.

“No, thank you.” He smiled and set his fork down. “I’m quite finished.”

The young woman took his plate and silverware. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

The corner of Luke’s mouth turned up. Jada would have been proud of his manners.

The thought sent a tingle of pleasure through his veins. For some reason, he wanted to make her proud of him. Maybe it was because she reminded him so much of his mother, and he had always been such a disappointment to her. Or maybe it was something else.

The thought startled him. He had never been the putting-down-roots kind of guy. Yet, here he was, about to become the king of a small Mediterranean country, and he was worried about what a woman actually thought of him. That was a first.

“If you’re finished, Your Highness, there’s something I would like to show you.” Matthew pushed his glasses up on his nose. Luke nodded and stood up. He followed the short balding man out of the room and down a corridor. The palace itself sprawled over several acres. He almost needed a map to find his way around.

Matthew stopped outside of one of the rooms. “This was your father’s room. I thought you might want to see it.”

Luke’s stomach took a nosedive. *His father’s room.* Matthew opened the door and stepped aside.

Luke took a deep breath and stepped onto the lush maroon carpet. Everything about the room shouted “king,” from the maroon and gold drapes to the crystal chandelier hanging from the vaulted ceiling. A large portrait hung above the king-sized bed. Luke recognized the royal blue eyes of the gray-haired man wearing the crown. He saw them every time he looked in the mirror.

His father.

Luke walked across the room and stared at the portrait. This was the man he had been longing to know for the past thirty-six years.

“You look a lot like him when he was younger.” Matthew cleared his throat. “King Barnabus was a good man. And a good king. He loved his country and would have done anything to protect it. Even sacrificing his own needs to put Androvia first.”

Luke turned from the portrait. “What do you mean?”

Matthew looked uncomfortable for a moment. “He knew about you, but he couldn’t do anything about it. He had an obligation to put Androvia first. He couldn’t risk what such a scandal would do to his country.”

Luke's lips thinned into a straight line.

"But I do know that he wanted to meet you, and regardless of what you might think, he loved you and your mother very much. His marriage to Queen Laila was arranged. Neither loved the other, but he was bound by vows and honor to remain in the marriage. Then he met your mother and fell in love." Matthew shrugged. "His hands were tied. He had to put Androvia first." Matthew's eyes misted for a moment. "I was the only other person who knew about you."

Luke swallowed hard. "He knew?"

Matthew nodded. "Even though you're mother never asked for a dime, King Barnabus faithfully sent her a check each month to help her with expenses. The checks were never cashed. Then, right after her death, a letter arrived. In it she told the King all about your childhood and what a wonderful young man you had turned out to be. She never once blamed him for being loyal to his country. She just thanked him for giving her a wonderful son."

Luke's eyes widened.

Matthew smiled a little then. "She was very proud of you."

"She was?"

"Absolutely. She admitted you had a bit of a wild streak, but she knew you were going to make something of yourself one day. She loved you very much, Your Highness." Matthew reached in his breast pocket and handed him a letter. "You

were her pride and joy.”

Luke’s heart split. His mother hadn’t thought he was a screw-up after all? The revelation tightened his chest. Maybe he wasn’t that no-good smart-mouthed Hansen boy after all. Maybe, just maybe, he was really a prince.

His heart constricted. His father hadn’t abandoned him after all. He’d tried to do right by him even if his mother was too proud to accept it. Luke’s hands shook as he read the letter. His mother’s familiar handwriting blurred before his eyes. Even from beyond the grave, his mother still believed in him. He pulled a sharp breath.

Luke straightened his shoulders and looked Matthew dead in the eye. “I’m ready to take my father’s place as king.”



There was something different about him, Jada decided a week later, watching him make his way toward her through the carefully landscaped, green-scrubbed maze. Not just the sharp suits and short hair, but something else. Something about the way he carried himself.

“There you are,” Luke said, settling down on the concrete bench beside her. “I thought you may have been lost.”

“Lost? Never,” Jada scoffed admiring the way the afternoon sunlight highlighted his dark hair with mirages of copper. “I could find my way out of here

blindfolded.”

“Really?” Luke blew out a breath and looked around at the vast expanse of perfectly trimmed hedges. “That’s impressive.”

“Well, maybe not blindfolded, but at least in a reasonable length of time,” she admitted ruefully. “This is where I come to think.”

“A lot on your mind, eh?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Sure you don’t need a shoulder to lean on?” He arched a dark brow. His blue eyes took on a concerned light.

Jada’s heart stopped momentarily. For one brief fleeting second, she wanted to tell him exactly why she was in the maze. Let it all out. The whole sordid truth about her brother and Paulo Vanderbilt. But she couldn’t. It was much too painful to talk about, and she wasn’t ready. She probably never would be.

“It’s nothing.” She shook her head. Then, forcing lightness in her voice, she added, “The coronation is only two days away. Are you ready to rule Androvia?”

Luke’s eyes held her gaze steady. “I am.”

A tingle fluttered in her stomach at the conviction in his voice. That was what was different about him. He’d become a prince. Inside and out.

“Matthew showed you Barnabus’s room?” She asked the question even though she already knew the answer.

Luke nodded. "Everyone here seems to have respected him."

"We did. King Barnabus was loved by everyone. He was a fair and honest king."

"I'm starting to see that." Luke leaned back and stretched his legs out in front of him. "I just wish I could have known him."

Jada gave him a small smile. "I'm sure he would have wanted to know you too, but he always put Androvia first. He wore the crown with honor."

"My mother must have loved him. She never had anyone else." Luke's brows drew together. "I can't even remember her dating. And she never asked my father for anything. Ever."

"She should have allowed him to help her."

"I guess she was too proud." Luke shifted and leaned forward. "It doesn't matter; we did all right. She made sure of it."

"I'm sure she did." Jada nodded touching his arm lightly. "I wish I could have met her."

"She would have liked you."

Jada's eyes widened. "You think so?"

"Absolutely. You're exactly the type of woman she would have picked for me." His eyes met hers teasingly. "Strong and stubborn."

Jada flushed and lowered her eyes. "I'm not that stubborn."

Luke laughed and lifted her chin with his knuckle. “No more than a mule,” he agreed. “Which reminds me. I believe we have some business to discuss.”

“Business?” she said, puzzled, still reeling from his comment about his mother picking her out for him.

“Yep, business.”

“What kind of business?” Her nose tingled a little.

“Kissing.”

“Kissing?” She licked her lips nervously as her nose twinged a little harder.

Luke nodded. “Right. We never did establish a reason that you couldn’t kiss me.”

Her eyes widened at the huskiness in his voice. She caught her bottom lip with her teeth. “I told you, commoners can’t just go around kissing the king.”

“I see. Is that a rule here in Androvia?”

She puckered her brow. “I’m sure there’s some kind of law about it”

“Commoners.” He chuckled. “No one could ever mistake you for common.” His eyes darkened to a deep shade of blue. “Besides, I never have been one to follow the rules.” He slipped his arm around her and drew her close. His lips touched hers lightly, sending warmth through her body.

“Luke, I—”

“My first act as king will be to banish that law, if there is indeed such a

ridiculous decree.” He deepened the kiss, his tongue teasing hers.

Jada wasn’t sure if there really was such a law, but it just didn’t seem right for her to be kissing the crown prince. Unfortunately, her body didn’t see anything wrong with kissing *Luke*.

He finally pulled away, reluctantly, and with a little smile playing on his lips. “See? That’s a law that needs to be dealt with immediately.”

Jada’s breath came in small gasps, but she managed to ask, “Even before feeding the hungry, organizing charity events and keeping Androvia out of financial ruin?”

Luke’s grin widened. “Absolutely. Or at least it’s in the top five. I’ll make sure it’s on my agenda.”

“You have an agenda?” She hoped she didn’t sound quite as surprised as she felt. Her brain was still a bit fuzzy from his kiss.

Luke’s face became serious. “I do. I may not have been convinced at first, but as king, I intend to rule Androvia with the same integrity and honor as my father. This kingdom will be my first priority, above anything else.”

His words, spoken with sincerity, touched her heart. Luke Hansen was exactly what Androvia needed. And exactly what she didn’t. “I know you will. I’ve always had faith in you.”

He hugged her close. “Which is exactly why kissing you is also a priority for

me.” His lips turned up once more, teasingly. “You’re what keeps me going.” A low chuckle followed. “Thinking about you is the only way I survive those boring dinners with parliament.”

Jada swallowed hard. He may think that now, but if he ever found out the truth about her, he would send her packing quicker than a fox in a henhouse. Which was precisely why she would have to make sure there was no more kissing. Period.

Chapter Seven

The day of the coronation ball, Jada awoke with a feeling of dread. Something wasn't right. She could feel it with every twitch and tingle in her nose.

"What now?" she grumbled getting out of bed and padding across the carpeted floor to the bathroom. She quickly brushed her teeth and dressed.

Her nose twitched even harder.

A ball of fear settled in her stomach. Something was dreadfully wrong.

Flinging open her bedroom door, she practically fled down the stairs to the dining hall. Matthew was alone at the table.

"Where's Luke?"

Matthew started, nearly dropping his spoon. "I think he went into town. He might not have left yet. Maybe you can catch him." He blew on the bowl of oatmeal. "Would you like some break—"

Jada didn't wait for the question. She hurried to the foyer and burst out the door into the early morning sun. Scanning the parking area, she spotted Luke sliding into the palace limousine.

"Luke!"

The driver shut the door behind him and stepped around to the front.

“Luke!” Jada nearly broke the sound barrier running toward the dark stretch limousine. She reached it just as it was backing out.

She balled up her fist and pounded on the tinted window. She couldn’t see in, but she knew he could see her. “Luke!”

The limo stopped and Luke’s window rolled down. “What’s wrong?” Immediately, concern filled his eyes. “Are you all right?”

Jada nodded, and then stood stock-still. What in the world was she going to tell him? That her nose was itching and she knew he was in danger?

Heat filled her cheeks. He would think she was crazy. Just like everyone else. But she couldn’t let him go. Not like she had let Jack go five years go. She couldn’t let history repeat itself.

“What is it, Jada?” Worry tinged his words.

“I... uh... where are you going?”

“To pick something up in town. Why?”

“Well, you can’t go. Matthew needs you to...” Her mind went blank. She couldn’t think of one darn reason that he shouldn’t be going into town. Not one.

Luke frowned. “Matthew knows where I’m going. I won’t be long.” He started to roll up the window.

“No! You can’t.”

She had to think. She had to give him a reason to stay. She couldn’t let him

leave. Not like Jack.

She closed her eyes to block out the painful memories. Images of her beloved brother swam before her eyes. Her brother and Paulo Vanderbilt.

Jada swayed.

Luke swore softly and flung open the door. His arms circled her waist as she started to fall. Her body went limp against him.

“Jada,” Luke whispered against her temple. “What is it? Tell me.”

Jada’s stomach knotted, sending a wave of nausea to her throat. She had to tell him. The whole horrible story. Or let him go like she had Jack. He was going to think she was either crazy, or a killer.

“Come on, baby. Tell me what’s got you so upset.”

Jada pulled away from him. She sat down on the ground and pulled her knees to her chest. No matter what she did, she was going to lose him.

Luke ran a hand through his hair, muttered another soft curse, and then went to the front of the limousine. He spoke softly to the driver then came back to sit down beside Jada.

She heard the low hum of the motor as the limo slowly backed out and left. Without the crown prince.

“Now, tell me what this is all about.” Luke put his arm around her shoulders and held her close.

Jada sniffled and swallowed hard. “My nose was itching.”

Luke raised an eyebrow. “Are you allergic to something?”

Jada shook her head, and another sob escaped her.

“You’re this upset because of an itchy nose?” Luke eyes flashed with the same incredulity of his voice. “I could’ve just picked you up some Benadryl in town. All you had to do was ask.”

“It’s not that.” She hiccupped. “I don’t have an allergy. I have a... curse.”

Luke sighed and scratched his chin. “I’m not following you. You’re going to have to fill me in.”

Jada’s lashes fluttered to her cheeks. “I can sense things.”

“Such as?”

“Bad things. Danger.” She chewed her bottom lip nervously. “When I woke up, my nose was itching. And I knew something bad was going to happen to you if you went into town.”

Luke wore the same disbelieving expression he had worn when she had first informed him that he might be the next heir to the Androvian throne. He was looking at her as if she had grown two heads and a tail. And she would rather have grown three heads and a thousand tails then to have to explain how she had killed her brother five years ago.

Her hand shook as she brushed a blonde tendril from her face and tucked it

behind her ear.

“I’m sure your itching nose had nothing to do with me going into town.”

“No, it’s true. I come from a long line of itchy noses.” She lifted her chin a notch and looked at him. “The women in my family have always had a sixth sense about these things. I was teased all during school because of it. That’s why... why...”

“Why what?”

She choked back a sob. “That’s why I killed my brother.”

Luke froze. “You killed your brother?”

Jada nodded miserably. “I knew something horrible was going to happen to him. I *knew* it, but I let him go out that night anyway.”

“You knew it because...” A muscle in Luke’s jaw twitched.

“My nose was itching and I could sense it.” Jada buried her face in her hands. “I should have stopped him. I should have warned him. But, I didn’t.”

Luke breathed a relieved sigh. “Jada, you didn’t kill your brother. Whatever happened to him, just happened. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes, it was.” She hiccupped again. “I wouldn’t tell him because Paulo Vanderbilt was at the house with him. And I didn’t want anyone to know about my gift. So I let them go, even though I *knew*.”

“What happened?”

“Paulo and I had dated once or twice.” She blushed furiously. “I guess I had a crush on him or something. He came to pick up Luke. They were going out one Saturday night to one of the clubs in town. After they left, I felt so bad about not warning Jack, that I went to find him. I was hoping to catch him alone.” Jada inhaled sharply. “I didn’t get there in time. Paulo and another man had had an argument. Jack tried to intervene, but the man had a gun.” Her voice cracked and she heard Luke’s sharply inhaled breath. “I got to the club just as the gun went off. The bullet hit Jack in the temple and he died instantly.” Her shoulders shook again. “I saw my brother die right before my eyes and I could have stopped it.”

“Jada, that wasn’t your fault.” Luke hugged her tight. “None of it. You have to forgive yourself.”

“I can’t. And I can’t forgive Paulo either. If he hadn’t been drinking so heavily, he wouldn’t have provoked the other man.” Jada screwed up her nose. “Then again, maybe he would have. The Vanderbilts all have a sense of entitlement. They expect the world to do their bidding, no matter what. I don’t know why I ever thought I had a crush on Paulo.” Jada choked. “If Edward Vanderbilt had inherited the throne, our whole country would be in turmoil and a tyrant would be in charge. I couldn’t let that happen. I just couldn’t. I owed it to my father and to Jack to keep the throne out of their hands.”

Luke’s hand massaged the tight ball of nerves at the base of her neck. “Baby,

you have to let it go, or else it will eat at your for the rest of your life. It wasn't your fault. Or Paulo's. It was just something that happened. A horrible accident."

"But I should have warned him. I shouldn't have let him go." Her eyes pleaded for him to understand. "That's why I couldn't let you go into town. I know something was going to happen to you. I just know it."

"I understand." He nodded, though he didn't look quite convinced. "Everything is all right, now. I'm right here with you."

Jada licked her lips. She waited for the ridicule. She waited for the humiliation. But it didn't come. Instead, he hugged her close.

"You don't think I'm nuts?"

Laughter slid into his eyes. "Well, the jury still out on that one." At her pursed lips he held up his hand and added with a chuckle. "No, I don't think you're crazy. If you think I was in danger, then I was in danger."

Jada nodded, her eyes seeking his. Instead, of derision, she thought she saw something else. An inner depth. And love?

Could Luke really love her?

He pushed himself up from the grass and reached for her hand.

"Your Highness!"

Jada turned to see Matthew running out of the palace.

"Thank goodness you didn't go into town!" He bent over to catch his breath

when he reached them.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s been—” Matthew gulped for air. “There’s been an accident, Your Highness.”

Luke’s hand stilled in hers. “What kind of accident?”

“Someone ran a red light and hit the limousine. Thank goodness you weren’t in it.” He panted again. “The driver suffered only minor injuries, but the paramedics said there was no way that anyone would have survived in the back.”

Luke swallowed hard and stole a look at Jada. She felt the color drain from her face and noticed that Luke was looking a bit green around the gills, too.

“I told you,” she whispered. “I told you my nose was itching.”

Luke steadied his breath and squeezed her hand. He tried to smile, but it came off as more of a grimace.

Jada had the distinct feeling that King Luciano Daniel Hansen would never doubt her itching nose again.



“His Highness would like to see you in the gardens,” Matthew informed her as she was getting ready for the coronation.

Jada slipped one foot into a black high heel sandal, then the other. “Thank you, Matthew. Tell him I’ll be right out.” She smiled, attaching the dangling

diamond earrings in her ears. She studied her reflection in the mirror. Blonde hair upswept into a chic bun, long black sequined strapless dress, and just a touch of makeup. She was ready to see Luke become king.

Five minutes later, she was in the gardens waiting for Luke. A light scent of jasmine filled the night air and she inhaled softly. The Royal Gardens were filled with a kaleidoscope of lush, bold flowers and exotic scents. Jada had always loved the landscaped richness.

“There you are.” Luke’s voice slid over her warmly from the shadows. He stepped into the moonlit patio, and Jada nearly did a double take. He was absolutely gorgeous and pure *male*. The dark navy suit, with its high, gold-trimmed collar and gold-trimmed shoulder patches made him look positively regal.

“You wanted to see me?” Jada licked her lips. She had the inane feeling that she should curtsy.

Luke walked to her and took her hand. “Jada, when I first met you, I thought you were one crazy broad, but as I got to know you, really know you, I realized that you had one of the purest hearts I had ever seen.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he put his finger on her lips. “Let me finish.” He grinned ruefully. “I’m about to take one of the most important oaths of my life and I want you to be right there by my side.”

“Of course I’ll be there to help you,” Jada nodded. “That’s my job.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What? My job?” Her heart raced. Was he going to fire her?

“I’m thinking a promotion might be in order.”

“What kind of promotion?” Her heart beat faster. She was sure he could hear it.

“To Queen.” His eyes held a twinkle.

“What?”

“Jada McGuire.” Luke bent down on one knee and looked her straight in the eye. He held out a diamond ring that had to be at least three karats and glittered brilliantly in the moonlight. “Will you marry this no good biker-turned-king?”

Jada gasped. “Luke, I—”

His hand shook in hers. “You have helped me see the man I really am, not what everyone else assumed I was. You have stood beside me through my anguish and stood up for me when I was accused of murder. You were there for me when I was just a no-good biker, and now that I am about to become king, I want you by my side forever. Little by little you have weaseled your way into my life.” His voice broke and his hand shook harder. “Jada McGuire, I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me?”

Jada’s eyes widened. “Yes. Oh, yes. I love you, Luke. I loved you when you were just a no-good biker.” She laughed and threw her arms around his neck. “And

I love you now.”

“Thank God!” Luke groaned, slipping the ring onto her finger. “This is what I was trying to get to town for this morning. Unfortunately, due to someone’s itchy nose...” He laughed, pulling her head down toward his. “I had to have it delivered.”

His lips met hers, and for the first time in a long time, Jada found peace. If this man could love her and believe in her, then maybe — just maybe — she could forgive herself for her brother’s death. And maybe even forgive Paulo Vanderbilt one day.

“Are you ready to become king?” she whispered against his lips.

“I am now.” The corners of his mouth turned up as they both stood. He held out his crooked arm and she placed her hand on it. “Let’s go face our people.”

As they moved toward the palace, Jada knew they were taking a step toward the future. Their future. As King and Queen of Androvia.

The End

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Author Bio-

As a teenager I always loved reading those ever so popular Harlequin Romances. Now, I enjoy creating my own flawed, but feisty heroines and tortured, but redeemable heroes. There's nothing better than throwing them together and finding out what happens next. I also teach third grade in my hometown.

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