



Chapter One

I can't wait to wrap my hands around your neck and squeeze. To watch you struggle, and see the fear in your eyes.

With a sniff, Princess Sofia of Caldova crumpled the note in her hands.

Her stalker wasn't particularly creative.

She leaned back in the plush seat of the private jet and threw the ball of paper like a mini basketball. It hit the rim of her empty water glass, bounced off the table, and rolled to the floor.

She looked out the window. San Francisco lay in the distance. They'd be landing soon. It had been a long flight from Caldova, with a stopover in New York to refuel. She'd be happy to get off the jet and stretch her legs.

She'd hoped to escape her stalker for the week and a half that she'd be in San Francisco. Unfortunately, the bastard had slipped a note into her bag. He was proving very industrious, and extremely annoying.

She rubbed her temple. She'd been born royal. She'd grown up in the spotlight and was used to people being interested in her life, talking about her, and prying into her private affairs. But her stalker was starting to give her the creeps.

Her parents were worried, so they'd saddled her with extra security for this trip. She eyed the

two Palace security guards at the front of the jet. It was their job to deliver her to her new bodyguard—Rome Nash.

Sofia's belly did a fluttering, sickening roll. Why, of all the men on the planet, did it have to be him?

Embarrassment filled her like hot, sticky goo. She'd first met Rome four months before, when he'd provided her security for a ball she'd attended in New York with her parents. He was former military, and worked for a private security firm in San Francisco.

The moment she'd first laid eyes on him, her body had malfunctioned. Even now, she remembered the hot ripple that had passed through her when he'd introduced himself.

She pressed her head back against the headrest. It took no effort to remember what he looked like, probably because she'd thought of him every day since. He was big. Tall, broad shoulders, long, powerful legs.

His dark hair was shaved close to his scalp, and his skin was a beautiful dark brown. Strong brows sat low over eyes that were a startling pale green.

He'd been with her the entire night, and when a crazed gunman had stormed the ballroom, Rome had carried her out, locked them in an office, and kept her safe.

Then she'd ruined it all by kissing him.

Embarrassment was a hot rope around her throat.

He hadn't kissed her back.

Sofia closed her eyes. After that, the police had arrived and she'd been swept away by her father's security team. She'd flown back to Caldova the next day. She remembered acutely the impassive, cool look on Rome's handsome face when she'd kissed him.

Not a flicker of interest.

So, he wasn't attracted to her. She got it. She wasn't attracted to every handsome man she saw.

She swallowed a groan. She hated that she'd humiliated herself, and no doubt embarrassed him.

Well, she was a princess, and pretty used to dealing with uncomfortable situations. She'd survive spending almost two weeks with Rome. She just needed to be professional and polite.

Besides, she had a very important job to do in San Francisco. She wasn't about to let anything, or anyone, distract her from it.

Her laptop resting on the table in front of her chimed. She opened it.

Her best friend's face filled the screen.

"Caroline!"

Her friend smiled and waved. Caro's golden hair was pulled up in a messy bun, and she looked tired. They'd met at university years ago, and after a spilled latte in the campus coffee shop, become fast friends.

"Sofie, you look wonderful," Caro said.

"As do you."

"Liar," Caro replied with a laugh.

"Are my godsons asleep?" Sofie asked.

"You mean your god-monsters? Hans is getting them settled. No doubt they're asking him to read story number ten."

Caro had adorable, energetic, two-year-old sons. Sofie spent as much time with them as she could.

"I'd prefer to be with you." Caro waved her hand in the air. "Wearing glamorous dresses,

attending galas to celebrate exquisite jewelry collections, and having hot flings with sexy Americans.”

Rome’s rugged face filled Sofie’s mind before she squashed the image. She smiled. She’d give her favorite tiara to have Caro’s life. Hans was often away on business, but he loved his wife and sons. They had a gorgeous, sprawling home on the outskirts of the Caldovan capital.

And freedom. To be who they were, act as they pleased, and show their love.

Sofie shook off the burn in her stomach. She was healthy, wealthy, and privileged. She had nothing to be sad about.

She also had purpose.

Their other best friend from university, Victoria, had none of those options anymore.

Sofie’s jaw tightened. Three years ago, after a vicious robbery and attack, Victoria had committed suicide. In the blink of an eye, a bright, wonderful woman had been gone.

“You’re thinking of Tori.”

At Caro’s comment, Sofie blinked at the screen. Her friend was staring at her intently. Caro had always had the uncanny ability to read Sofie, even when she had on her best, expressionless, “princess” face.

“I miss her.”

“Me, too,” Caro said quietly.

Tori had been the outgoing, funny, life of the party in their trio.

Then, a gang of ruthless international thieves had targeted her. She was from a wealthy, aristocratic family, and Tori had owned an impressive collection of family jewels. The thieves had taken the gems, and two of them had brutally raped her.

Tori had been...shattered.

On top of that, her family had blamed her for the loss of the family heirlooms. Despite her boyfriend's support, she'd sunk into a dark depression, and Caroline and Sofie hadn't been able to pull her out of it. Several months after the attack, Tori had swallowed an entire bottle of sleeping pills.

"I wish..." Sofie wished a lot of things were different. Tori's absence had left a gnawing ache in Sofie's chest.

"I know," Caro said. "But Sofie, to honor her, we have to live."

Sofie nodded.

"I'm going to go hug my babies. And I want you to find a hot, American Hollywood star to have a fling with."

Sofie laughed.

"You're attending a star-studded gala, and of course, wearing some of my best jewelry designs. I'm sure you'll find a square-jawed hunk to give you wonderful orgasms."

Caro was a successful, highly-sought-after jewelry designer all across Europe. Sofie's collection of jewelry was arriving separately under heavy guard.

"For a happily married woman, you sure have sex on the brain," Sofie noted dryly.

"When was the last time you had sex?" Caro demanded.

"Quit obsessing over my sex life. You know it's...difficult."

She had constant security, and the eyes of the press on her. The last time she'd had a man in her bed was when she'd dated a German diplomat. Martin had been...handsome, with impeccable manners. And very boring in bed.

Before that was her almost-fiancé, Prince Not-So-Charming. The self-absorbed, spoiled ass had cheated on her. Multiple times.

“Darling, I have twin toddlers,” Caro said. “My sex life is nonexistent, so I’m hoping to live vicariously through yours.”

Sofie rolled her eyes.

“Have a good time, that’s all,” Caro continued. “You’re stalker-free for the next week and a half.”

Sofie wrinkled her nose. “He slipped a note into my things.”

Caro cursed.

“Don’t fret, my parents organized additional security.” Sofie wrinkled her nose again. “I’m picking up a big, stoic local bodyguard here in San Francisco.”

“Good.” Caro pressed her fingers to the screen. “Stay safe, look gorgeous, and have some hot sex.”

“Off you go, you sex fiend.”

Laughing, they ended the call.

The plane started descending and Sofie looked out the window. She had a perfect view of the city of San Francisco, the waters of the Bay, and the Golden Gate Bridge.

She had almost two weeks of interviews and photo shoots to help promote the Glittering Court: A Royal Jewelry Exhibition and Gala starting in just over a week. The exhibition would donate a large sum to her charity. She was also fitting in some work to support her charity.

In just a few moments, she’d have to put on her “princess” face. She’d smile, be polite, gracious.

The copilot appeared from the cockpit. “Your Highness, we’ll be landing momentarily.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

With a sigh, Sofie picked up the note she’d tossed on the floor earlier and stuck it in her bag.

No doubt someone would want to see it.

She clicked her belt on, and focused herself to be ready for the onslaught. For the most part, she liked it. When little girls handed her flowers and asked about being a princess, it was fun. When she got the chance to talk about her charity and the work they did, she appreciated the attention.

But the paparazzi, hoping for topless shots of her, or catching her in a clinch, made her shudder. She sighed.

She had fairly thick skin. The tabloid stories could get pretty ridiculous. She was pretty sure that over the last year alone, she'd been secretly married to a sixty-eight-year-old Italian count, had a famous model's love child, and had been in a secret conspiracy with aliens.

She leaned back in her seat. What no one knew was her real reason for being in San Francisco.

She'd gotten information that the same jewelry gang—known to Interpol as the Black Fox gang—responsible for stealing Victoria's jewelry and raping her was planning to target the exhibition.

Or more specifically, they were planning to steal the Sapphire Wave Tiara. A long-lost tiara that had recently resurfaced, and had once belonged to the Romanovs of Russia. Sofie would be wearing it to the gala.

She tapped her nails on the armrests.

They wouldn't get the tiara. She planned to stop them.

Along with some help from the international jewel thief known as Robin Hood.

She smiled.

So, she'd do her royal duties, and when required, slip out from under the watchful eye of

Rome Nash to get her real objective achieved.

The jet landed. Sofie pulled out a mirror and checked that her strawberry-blonde hair was tucked neatly into its French roll. She freshened her makeup, running some pink gloss across her lips. She flew so much that she knew all the tricks for looking fresh, even after a long flight.

Outside the window, she saw a crowd waiting for the plane. There were people with cameras, others holding flowers and signs.

Welcome to San Francisco, Princess Sofia.

There were also some giant, black SUVs, along with a long, black limo, and several men in suits. Rome would be there, somewhere.

A tiny tingle ran through her.

Stop it, Sofie.

The jet pulled to a stop. She rose and nodded at her father's security men.

"I'll see you back in Caldova."

They nodded. "Your Highness."

Sofia pulled her coat around her and fastened it. She pasted on her "princess" smile.

She heard the thud of heavy footsteps up the jet's stairs, and her belly contracted.

A man stepped into the jet.

Her heart stopped.

It seemed like he took up all the space.

Suddenly, the jet was gone, the guards were gone, the crowd outside was gone.

There was only *him*.

Rome wore a dark suit and he wore it well. It fitted him so that she could see the muscles in those strong thighs. She licked her lips and tasted her gloss. His white shirt strained over his

chest.

He lifted his head and those gorgeous, pale-green eyes focused on her. She already knew that he was a man who missed nothing, not the smallest detail. He'd know how many people were in the crowd outside, all the vehicle registrations, and the quickest routes out of the airport.

“Princess Sofia.” His voice was a deep rumble that she felt along every nerve, before sensation curled low in her belly.

The air rushed back into her lungs.

“Mr. Nash, a pleasure to see you again.” She slung her sleek bag with her laptop in it over her shoulder, not quite meeting his gaze. She kept her tone cool and professional. “Thank you for your assistance on my trip.” She stepped closer, willing him to move.

“I wanted—”

“I'm sure we can discuss security issues once we get to where I'm staying.” She shot him a cool, polite smile.

See, totally unaffected by you, and ignoring the fact that I threw myself at you and you didn't respond.

Her gaze met his for a second, and she forgot how to breathe.

Rome had a sense of strength. He was sure of himself, rock-solid. And he was devastating to a woman's senses.

She managed to shove past him and step into the sunshine.

Thank goodness. She could breathe again. The sun was shining, but the air was cool, and she was glad for her matching blue coat over her blue sheath dress.

Lifting a hand, she waved. She heard shouts and cheers from the crowd as she descended the steps.

She was careful to hold the railing. It paid to avoid the chance of an embarrassing tumble down the stairs.

Sofie had had more than enough self-induced embarrassment for one day.

Rome Nash followed Princess Sofia of Caldova off the jet.

She stopped halfway down the steps, waving regally to the crowd.

She was doing a damn good job of pretending he didn't exist.

He ground his teeth together. She was beautiful, but he'd already known that. Her creamy, golden skin glowed, and her brown eyes glittered with an inner light. The sunshine lit her hair, turning it a unique shade of pink-gold.

She had perfect bone structure. She was elegant and refined, except for the fact that she had full lips that looked like they were made for sin. She wore a blue dress and coat that outlined a slender frame that had just the right amount of gentle curves in the right places.

She was a shock to the senses.

When he'd first met her in New York, he'd thought her beautiful but cool, a little icy, and boring. The press loved to call her the Ice Princess. But he'd spent nine hours and thirty-seven minutes with her that night, and he'd soon learned that while she had her public "princess" mode, there was a woman under the gloss. He'd caught glimpses of the real Sofia when she'd let her guard down.

When she wasn't all cool smiles, elegant glides, and polite chitchat, there was a smiling, friendly, energetic woman under it all. He'd heard her laugh, mutter sarcastic comments, and roll her eyes. He'd also caught her sneaking a hamburger before the ball.

No, Princess Sofia hadn't been what he'd expected.

And when she'd kissed him...

Rome's fingers curled into his palm. *Fuck*. That night, he'd come close to breaking all the rules a bodyguard had to follow.

In front of them, reporters and fans were shouting, cameras clicking. Rome was used to that. He'd provided security for lots of famous people.

The princess continued down the stairs. At the bottom step, her heel caught.

Rome shot forward and grabbed her arm.

It pushed his body up against hers. He heard her suck in a breath and his damn fingers tingled from touching her.

She steadied herself. "Thank you, Mr. Nash." She had a slight, crisp accent, her tone slick like glass. The princess talking to the peasant.

She waved to the crowd again. She had long, delicate fingers, and wore two rings. One was a large diamond, and the other was a twisted, complicated design. Funkier than he'd imagined would suit royalty.

Rome nodded and let her go. "If you'll come with me, I'll take you to your accommodation."

"Thank you, but I'd like to greet my fans first." She stepped onto the tarmac.

"Princess, you are going to follow my orders over the next week and a half. I'm in charge of your safety."

She stiffened. "I follow no one's orders, Mr. Nash." Big, brown eyes locked with his. Her gaze was firm, with a faint spark in the depths of it. "I will, of course, consider all your expert opinions on security matters."

Hmm, there was the real woman.

"I assume you can stand behind me, looking hulking and intimidating, and keep me safe from

those little girls who have flowers to give me?”

He narrowed his gaze. Her tone was still polite, but he was pretty sure that there was sarcasm hiding in there somewhere.

“Five minutes,” he said.

She smiled. “There. A compromise. We’ll work fine together, Mr. Nash.”

Rome blinked. *Shit*. Her smile, her real one, was gorgeous. It brought her to life.

It wasn’t the careful, polite smile she gave to the crowd. It was real, lighting up her beautiful face.

She walked ahead of him and he followed. His gaze traveled down her body.

Hell. She was slender, but she had a shapely ass. She wasn’t tall, but she wasn’t short, either, and a lot of her height was all leg.

The princess walked along the temporary barrier holding the crowd back. She waved and smiled, sharing a few words and accepting posies of flowers.

Rome followed silently behind her. He eyed the crowd. They weren’t all kids or giggling teenagers. There were hard-eyed paparazzi, and several adults, as well.

“Princess Sofia!”

“You’re so beautiful, Princess.”

“Here, Princess. I love you!”

Sofia waved and smiled.

Rome dragged in some breaths. So, she was beautiful. He’d guarded beautiful women before.

But in the four months since he’d met her, he hadn’t forgotten the feel of her pressed against him, the sensation of her lips on his, or the faint, tantalizing taste of her that she’d given him.

And since that night, he also hadn’t been with another woman. A fact he’d deliberately not

examined too closely.

Princess Sofia of Caldova was strictly off-limits.

For the next two weeks, he would keep her safe. That was it.

Rome loved his job at Norcross Security. He loved the challenge of keeping his charges safe. Vander Norcross, his former Ghost Ops commander, was a good boss. Vander let Rome do his job and provided everything he needed. He also paid well.

After several years as a Navy SEAL, and then two years in Ghost Ops, doing the toughest missions of his career, Rome had been ready to stop being shot at. When Vander had offered him a job, Rome had jumped at it.

And he liked San Francisco. The only downside was that his mother and sister were on the other side of the country, but he kept an eye on them, visited them in Atlanta when he could, and they regularly visited him.

It had just been him, his mom, and his sisters since his dad took off when Rome was eight. It'd been rough, his mom working two jobs to support them. She'd depended on Rome to look out for his younger sisters.

Except he'd failed spectacularly. It'd been rough when they'd lost Lola.

Remembering his sister's death, an ugly sensation moved through him. He ground his teeth together.

Head in the game, Nash.

He needed to keep his new charge safe. Not rehash his worst failure.

He hadn't kept Lola safe, but he'd made a career out of protecting others.

Teenagers were pushing against the barrier, chanting the princess' name. Sofia smiled, but he saw it dim the more they shouted.

The fence scraped on the ground, pushing forward.

Rome looked up and saw a sweating man with a ball cap staring at the princess. Beside him were two middle-aged women, recording with their phones. Everyone was shoving forward.

Two little girls, maybe seven or eight, were handing the princess some flowers.

Rome took a step closer, and waved at some of the security guards.

Then the fence gave way.

The crowd surged forward. Princess Sofia's mouth moved, and he was pretty sure she'd cursed.

And the man in the ball cap lunged at Sofia, sunlight glinting off the knife in his hand.

Fuck. Rome charged into the fray.