

Chapter One

Rayden leaned forward in his chair and rested his elbows on the table. He rubbed his hands across his face in agitation. He'd been sitting there for hours reading scrolls and messages. Most of them were from other kings giving condolences on the death of King Galen and wishing him the best in his new role as monarch. Being king wasn't something he had chosen. It was a position forced upon him. The life he knew and loved was now gone, cruelly snatched from his grasp. At twenty-three years old, his future looked dismal.

The War Room door burst open. Bowden and Prince Leon stepped into the room, with Leon holding a scroll. "What is this?" Leon said as he threw the parchment on to the table.

Both men stood a little over six feet tall, and even in their old age they maintained a warrior's build. Bowden ruffled his gray streaked, light brown hair, and his brown eyes stared at Rayden.

Rayden turned away. His heart ached with grievous pain every time he saw the man who raised him and then betrayed him for his own ends. His former partner claimed his gift of Sight had shown that Rayden would become king and keep the world on the right path. He said it was Rayden's destiny. How could the man believe in such nonsense? No one could see the future.

Prince Leon placed his hands on his hips. "I want an explanation."

"Didn't I tell you I was going to send King Tenor a message concerning the alliance you, he, and Galen concocted? I want it sent, Leon."

King Galen, on his deathbed, had issued a decree giving his brother the power to train his bastard son to take responsibility over the Ruar Kingdom. Once accomplished to Prince Leon's satisfaction, the power of the crown would revert to King Rayden. Until then, his uncle's word overrode his.

"It will not be sent." Prince Leon brushed a hand through his black hair sprinkled with gray. His dark brown eyes glared at Rayden. "At this point, we won't be making unreasonable demands."

"Unreasonable?" Rayden stood.

The alliance with King Tenor would unite the two largest kingdoms. Not only did it require Rayden to marry Tenor's daughter or niece to seal the deal, the smaller kingdoms were against it. They feared invasion by the joined kingdoms.

"I told you, if you want this alliance, get me out of the picture. I will choose my own bride, and that will not be for years to come. In addition, I want to know if the smaller kingdoms have anything to fear from this alliance. If either of these things prove to be a problem, then I'm not signing it."

"I will speak to King Tenor on your behalf. However, you need to leave the negotiations to me. You're newly crowned. You don't have enough experience to deal with this."

Rayden picked up the scroll. One way or another, he was getting this delivered. His uncle had proven himself merciless. To gain control over him, Leon threatened to kill the three guardsmen assigned to him if he tried to escape, or didn't do his kingly duties. Leon believed in duty to the kingdom above all else. He didn't trust his uncle to look after his interests.

"I warned you I wouldn't put up with any of your antics. If King Tenor pulls out of this alliance, there could be war."

Rayden lifted his chin. “There could be war with a coalition of the smaller kingdoms if we agree to this alliance. Not to mention the smaller kingdoms who believe if they kill me, the deal will be stopped cold.”

“That’s why you’ll remain under strict guard.” Prince Leon’s gaze swept over the table. “Get back to reading your messages.”

Once they withdrew, Rayden ran both hands through his black hair, the usual color of the Ruar monarchy. His pale, light blue eyes differed from the usual dark brown of his heritage. He dropped his six-foot frame into a chair. The muscles of his warrior-built body were so tense they ached. How was he ever going to be able to do this? He wanted out with an intensity that overwhelmed him to the point he could think of nothing but escape. If he did though, there would be a high price paid.

How he hated Leon and Bowden. They made his life miserable. Each had their own agendas for wanting him on the throne. Bowden said it was his destiny. Leon said it was his duty. Galen had ordered his mother and him slain as he didn’t want the embarrassment of a bastard child. However, when his other two children died, his bastard son was left his heir and Rayden became a convenience. He didn’t owe Galen, Leon, Bowden, or this kingdom a damn thing.

Rayden sighed and picked up the next parchment. It was from a villager. She complained of the taxes and declared injustices by the City Guards. He had sent out many decrees during his first days as king to help alleviate some of the burdens the citizens were carrying. It shouldn’t be long before they would reach every town and village within the eight regions of the Ruar Kingdom.

He picked up another scroll. The lords used many words in their messages, but they really had little content. After observing some of his nobles, he hadn't seen or heard much to endear them to him. Rayden tossed the scroll aside. He had sent a message to Connor and Nard. If they were interested, he had a new job for them.

The messages concerning executions of peasants tore at his heart. A distant town had one scheduled for a couple of days from now. Searching his mind, he tried desperately to find a way to stop it. His decree outlawing noble ordered executions wouldn't reach there in time, nor would a courier even if he rode day and night. He could only hope these people deserved their fate.

Dropping the message on the table, Rayden stood and stretched. He walked around the War Room and studied the tapestries on the walls. A cabinet caught his attention, and he opened it to find a horde of scrolls yellowed with age. The ones in the next cabinet weren't as old. He picked up one and read it. It was a partial map of the eight regions, and inked in were x's denoting the places searched for the king's bastard son. Bowden had kept him hidden from the old king until news of the monarch's illness spread, and he had kept the truth of Rayden's heritage from him as well.

He turned from the cabinets and looked at the huge table in the center of the room. Uneasiness settled over him, and he ran damp palms over his breeches. This was a king's domain.

Leaving the War Room through his private entrance, which came out under a spiraling staircase, he ascended the stairs hoping his mistress would be waiting for him. Upon entering his apartment, he looked at the two barred windows, the large hearth on the center wall, cushioned chairs, a settee, and the table at the back of the room. Two doors led from the area. One was a

manservant's room. He had dismissed the valet the first day he arrived. He didn't need someone constantly waiting on him. The other led to his bedchamber.

These accommodations were grand, but according to Leon, he was supposed to move into the king's apartment as soon as the cleaning and airing out were completed. Rayden did not intend to do it. What would be the benefit? He'd still have barred windows, and he didn't belong there.

The apartment seemed empty without Sadie. His gaze landed on a piece of paper lying on the table. It was his appointments for tomorrow. Leon wasted no time. They placed Galen's body in the King's Crypt only this morning.

Prince Nelson was thorough. He mentioned what the meetings were to be about and gave the names and titles of each person. Most of the people were his so-called advisors. One appointment caught Rayden's eye. It was with a small boy named Samuel. Rayden's eyebrows rose. This boy had wanted to talk to him when he rode through Ruar Town. Samuel's appointment was the first after noon meal.

Rayden had just plopped down on the settee when a knock sounded. Bowden, Prince Leon, and Prince Nelson entered. Rayden shook his head in wonder at his cousin. Nelson was Leon's son, but other than the hereditary hair and eye color of the Ruar monarchy, they looked nothing alike. Nelson was twenty-six years old and matched Rayden's height of six feet, but instead of the muscular Ruar body, he was slight of build. Nelson dressed outrageously; he now wore a dark green, silver-splotched outfit. It had puffy sleeves embroidered with silver flowers.

Prince Nelson spoke. "I see you have the list of appointments. I hope it is suitable."

Rayden frowned.

"Do you wish any changes?"

“Yes, I want the appointments cancelled, all but one.”

“No.” Prince Leon shook his head. “King Rayden, you have duties to perform.”

“I know, Leon, you won’t let me forget it.”

Bowden said, “How did it go today? You closed yourself up in the War Room and didn’t come out to eat. You can’t be doing that.”

Rayden rubbed his hands over his face in frustration. It amazed him how they could physically have him subdued to ‘teach him a lesson’ and then insist on taking care of him. “Go to Hades, Bowden. As far as the War Room, it was boring and overwhelming. Leon, I want to know how many garrisons we have in every region and who runs each one.”

“I’ll get you the information, but my commanders are above reproach. I require it of them.”

“I don’t doubt your commanders meet your requirements, Leon, but since I don’t agree with some of your tactics, I might find they don’t meet mine.”

“We’ll see, King Rayden.”

“No, I’ll see. You want me to reign, I’ll do it my way, and with people I choose.”

“As you wish. Are you ready for evening meal?”

Rayden groaned. Apparently, as part of his kingly duties, he must preside over the evening meals in the dining hall. It was a long and drawn out event, and he had to eat with the annoying nobles visiting the palace. It drove him to distraction.

He descended the polished wooden staircase to the great hall. Luxury surrounded him, and he didn’t care for it. There was a huge hearth and gold laden settees, chairs, and tables spaced about the room. A large area was open for entertainment after the evening meal, which he

shunned. Rayden found to his surprise and delight that there were fewer nobles in attendance. He had ordered Nelson to get rid of them, and finally some were gone.

Prince Nelson spoke from beside him. “King Rayden, I gave the nobles who wished an audience with you appointments which allowed them to go back home for a while.”

“Thanks, Nelson.”

Rayden avoided, whenever possible, mingling with the nobles before evening meal, so he hurriedly left the great hall. It was very rare when he tried to bypass this that Bowden and Leon didn’t stop him. After all, it was also his kingly duty, according to Leon, to make small talk with ‘his’ guests.

Rayden went directly to the dining hall and sat down at the head of a table that ran the length of the room. Everyone filed in, taking their seats, and he nodded to the servant.

“I thought I made it clear I wanted you to all to go home.” Rayden peered around the table at the nobles. “What are you still doing here?”

Prince Leon said, “King Rayden, the palace is for everyone. These nobles are here for different reasons, and they have a right to stay unless you specifically tell each to go. I hope you won’t find that necessary.”

One lady spoke. “I understand Prince Nelson brought in minstrels for our enjoyment tonight. King Rayden, I hope you’ll be so gracious as to honor us with your presence.”

He peered at the lady and almost gagged. Her lips were so red as to be unnatural, and the pale skin of her face and arms appeared leathery on her thin frame. The look in her eyes was one of unadulterated lust.

“I’m not gracious, and I have no interest in noble entertainment.”

“Come now, King Rayden.” She ran her tongue over her upper lip. “Surely, a dance or two with me won’t hurt.”

“I have no desire to dance with *you*.”

The woman gasped, threw her napkin on the table, and bowed slightly as she stalked out of the room. A man stood. “My wife and I have been unduly insulted. Under the circumstances, we’ll be leaving the palace. A formal protest will be forthcoming.”

Rayden glanced at the man. “Who are you?”

The lord gaped at him. He seemed to expect recognition. “I happen to be Lord Duvoir, Your Highness.”

“You’re Lord Duvoir?” Rayden glared at the man who had threatened Sadie for sexual pleasures. Why were they still here? He rose. “Your wife has very nasty, roving, and inviting eyes. And you have a bad habit of threatening your servants for sexual favors.” Stomping over to the lord, he struck hard with his fist, knocking the man to the floor.

Rayden loomed over him. “Get up. I’m not through with you. Forcing your attentions on a maid is not appropriate behavior for a lord, or for anyone else for that matter. I’m going to show you just how inappropriate it is.”

Bowden and Leon grabbed him, and he growled as they pulled him back. He tried to twist free but there was no breaking Bowden’s hold.

Rayden knew his former partner had above-average strength because he had seen it growing up. He had experienced it firsthand when they dragged him to the palace. Bowden said those with the gift of Sight had this ability. He didn’t believe it. The man was just born that way.

Leon ordered, “Guards, get Duvoir out of the palace. Now.”

They didn’t let Rayden go until the lord was gone.

“You should have left me alone.” Rayden jerked away from them. “He would have deserved every punch he received.”

Bowden said, “You would have killed him.”

“Why would that bother either of you?”

“Sit down.” Bowden pointed toward the king’s chair. “He’s gone.”

The servants were standing by, holding the first course. Prince Leon nodded for them to serve the meal.

Pure rage welled inside Rayden. That was all he was now, anger and hatred. There was very little left of the man he used to be in Keeper’s Town.

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Other Books by Joy Brooks

King’s Heir - Blurb

Raised from infancy to be ignorant of his birthright and duty, Rayden is caught unawares when eventually forced into his role as king of seventeenth century Ruar. Rayden intends to refuse that unwelcome responsibility, but his most beloved and loyal companions aim to see destiny fulfilled – no matter the cost to comfort, dignity, or liberty.

Book One in a Three Book Series

Fourth Son – Blurb

Twenty-One year old Grayson has been chosen to be the next Jewell and Master of the Green Stone. The Stone imparts power to control the dragons – all the dragons. As Master of the Stone, Grayson will live for 7 centuries. Bonding with the Green Stone is a torturous and necessary process. Grayson fights to escape that bonding torment and he flees from the certain anguish of losing everyone and everything that he loves over the course of 700 years.

Coming Home – Blurb

While Europe faces the ensuing Battle of Waterloo, Gabrielle Anderson travels to her brother's best friend's estate. Lord Marshall Hampton opens his home to her but Gabrielle also wants his love. Gabrielle is determined to show him how she feels, but her time is shortened when Marshall is summoned to the war front. Will Gabrielle win the heart of the only man she has ever loved?

A Christmas Wish – Blurb

Katie Holston, raised in foster homes, wants nothing more than a family to call her own. She meets the man of her dreams in Ian Stokely. Being his five year old son's teacher, she is in a position to make her dreams come true. Kyle Stokely confides in Katie his greatest wish for Christmas. He wants his widowed father to be happy again. Ian Stokely has a different view than Katie Holston and his son, Kyle. He wishes to be left alone. Can Katie and Kyle convince Ian to live life fully again?