

“Have you lost your way?”

Alana turned sharply. It was him. He was standing against the door, arms folded across his chest, mouth curved in a grim smile.

Blushing, she stammered, “I...I...yes. I was looking for my room.”

His eyes went to the locket in her hand.

“She is very beautiful,” she said awkwardly.

“She was beautiful,” he corrected. He came forward and took the locket from her. “Thank you. She was my mother.”

But Alana had already noticed the chilling resemblance. The same features that had given Darya Romanova her classic beauty gave her son his rugged handsomeness. The mouth was identical with full, expressive lips. His eyes too sparkled like emeralds. But while Darya had been a fair-haired beauty, her son’s hair was as black as a starless night with a few errant locks falling across his forehead.

Shaking herself loose from those looks that were uncommonly handsome, Alana moved away, and said, “I was admiring that painting. I’ve never seen a sled like that one.”

“It’s called a troika. The artist recreated it from the one my family owned when I was a boy.”

Examining the painting more closely, she saw a man, a woman who bore a resemblance to the one in the locket, a boy with dark hair and a girl. “Your family?” she asked.

“Yes.”

In his curt reply she detected an undercurrent of undisguised tension. “Well, then, I’ll bid you goodnight.”

“Leaving so soon?” he asked. He stepped in front of her, barring her path with his tall frame. “Tell me, what is your name?”

She answered with all the courtesy due royalty.

“Ah, the Senator’s daughter from America. If I am not mistaken, your room should be on the floor below this one. Are all Americans so lacking in direction? Or is it discretion?”

Alana’s blue eyes flared. “I told you, Your Highness, I lost my way.”

His green eyes sparkling brightly, he said with a laugh, “I assure you, Miss Welles, the title is as decorous as the uniform. I don both for special occasions. As you can see, my personal tastes are somewhat simpler.”

He had removed the jacket with the gold buttons and was dressed casually in a plain white cambric shirt that was opened to expose a chest of darkly curled hair. The black trousers tucked into the tops of well-worn riding boots and the wind-tossed look of his hair told her he’d just come back from an evening gallop. Without the garnishment of his uniform and jewel-studded scabbard, there was nothing to distract from his alarmingly good looks. That, and his disarming candor, threw Alana off her guard.

“Why do you dress like that, then?” she inquired.

“They have come to expect it to me.”

“And you oblige them?”

He shrugged elegantly. “Whenever I can.”

She began to grow uncomfortable beneath the heavy weight of his stare. Gathering her skirts in her hands, she brushed past him. “If you will excuse me, I’ve been gone far too long and I wouldn’t want Monica to worry.”

He stepped aside with a speculative look. “I see. But it is rather uncommon of you to care what others think, is it not?”

The accuracy of his remark took her back. “How would you know what is uncommon of me?”

With a cool but devastating smile, he replied, “Just a guess.”

Alana started for the door.

“Will you join me for a ride in the morning?”

His invitation sounded more like a command, causing her to bristle. Tersely, she replied, “I have already promised someone else.” She saw no particular reason to tell him that she had already committed her morning to Ross.

“Perhaps you would consider changing your plans to accommodate me.”

She whirled to face him, indignation brimming in her blue eyes. “I realize you must be accustomed to having your way,” she said heatedly, “but in this case, I’m afraid you cannot.”

“Oh?” he ventured, smiling. “And is that a guess into my character?”

“Not at all,” she replied. “Your reputation has simply preceded you.”

She was almost blinded by his luminous smile “I will take that as a compliment.”

“It was not intended as one.” And with that, she swished past him out the door.