AMY RUTTAN

The Surgeon King's Secret Baby

MEDICAL ROMANCE™

Amy Ruttan

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«HarperCollins»

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A family by New Year’s Eve?Reagan Cote left war-torn Hermosa thinking the gorgeous surgeon she’d shared a brief affair with was lost on the frontline. So she clung to the child she was carrying.While Kainan Laskaris’ voice is damaged, he’s alive. And when he finds Reagan in Toronto and discovers he’s dad to their sick baby boy, he asks her to marry him. Now he’s King of Hermosa, he needs a queen and heir, but before she’ll accept, Kainan must prove that marrying Reagan means more than claiming his kingdom.

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up a copy of The Surgeon King's Secret Baby.

I have to say this book was one of the hardest books I've ever had to write, because of the piece of me that goes into writing all my books. It was emotional. Still, this story needed to be told—but I can tell you it was a challenge, writing a book with a hero who had no voice!

Kainan has had a lot put on his shoulders, and his life is changed after the war that broke out in his country—as lives are always changed after war.

Reagan has never really had love, but she finds something special with Kainan and then thinks she's lost it.

Writing about strong heroines is one of my favourite things to do. I was always taught to be strong and independent, and what Reagan endures when she gives birth to her medically fragile son alone is what makes her a superhero in my eyes.

I remember vividly being in Reagan's shoes, but thankfully my son didn't have the severity of illness that Reagan's son did.

I hope you enjoy Kainan and Reagan's second chance at happiness.

I love hearing from readers, so please drop by my website amyruttan.com or give me a shout on Twitter @ruttanamy.

With warmest wishes,

Amy Ruttan

The Surgeon King's Secret Baby

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This book is dedicated to all the mothers waiting
next to their child's hospital bed. Waiting for a miracle.
And this book is also dedicated to all those doctors
out there who perform those miracles on tiny humans.
Thank you.
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Prologue
Isla Hermosa—war-torn country

"I NEED A unit of packed cells—stat!" Reagan shouted over her shoulder. But no sooner had the words left her mouth than another explosion rocked the mobile hospital unit.

She had a wounded man open on her table, and instinctively she threw her body over her patient's to try and prevent dust and debris from entering into the exposed body cavity.

After working in this war-torn place for over a year, throwing herself over a patient came as second nature. It shouldn't have to, but such was the nature of war.

Isla Hermosa had been a beautiful, peaceful country once. A paradise in the Atlantic for vacation-goers. A country founded by Spanish and Greek settlers over seven hundred years ago, full of pristine beaches and tall palm trees.

Now the beach they were on just held the charred remains of its tall palms, and the blue sky was blackened with plumes of smoke rising from the capital. Dust filled the hot air, making it hard to breathe. There was no relief.

It was not ideal to be operating out in the open like this, but it was stiflingly hot on the beach, and being closed up in a tent in this humidity would not make matters any better. What they needed was a hospital, but that was impossible. Most of Isla Hermosa had been taken over by the rebellion, and Canadian peacekeepers, along with those on Isla Hermosa who remained loyal to the dysfunctional Hermosian King Aleksander, had been pushed out of the city and back to the Atlantic Ocean.

The mortar fire stopped and Reagan went back to work on saving this Hermosian soldier's life. As a trauma surgeon for the Canadian Armed Forces she had seen her share of war-torn countries.

As soon as she'd had her medical training she'd joined up for active duty. She wanted to serve her country. To prove to herself.

To whom?

She shook that thought away and continued her work. It wouldn't matter soon. Her agreed-upon tour of duty was ending and she had to return to the attending position that was waiting for her in Toronto.

She didn't know quite what she was going to do with herself back there, besides work. During patients there was down time, card games and a camaraderie. She didn't really have any one in Toronto. The people she served with were like a family. Not like her family, though. Not really, because her real family was cold and barely in her life.

The people she served with were her family.

In Toronto she'd be all alone. Again.

Toronto was her home town in the sense that she had been born there, and knew it well. She had a job waiting for her, but it wasn't really home. Her parents weren't there anymore.

Her parents had retired and moved to warmer climes while she'd served. They hadn't even told her that they sold her childhood home until a letter she'd sent them came back marked "Return to Sender."

Only the Canadian Army had ever wanted her, but she had to return to Toronto. She'd served the time she'd signed up for and her leave of absence from the Toronto hospital was ending.

The friends she'd made here would forget her soon enough. No relationship ever lasted and that was fine. She was used to that. She didn't want to rely on anyone.

Her parents had taught her well. They'd always told her to make a life for herself. Not to rely on them. So she didn't.

I wish I had someone.

She was annoyed that she'd let that little thought sneak in.

Get a grip on yourself, Reagan.

Now was not the time to get maudlin.

"The packed cells you were looking for," a rich, deep voice said, and her body instantly reacted.

Dr. Kainan Laskaris, the foremost trauma surgeon in all of Isla Hermosa, stood beside her. Kainan always unnerved her. He made her feel exposed, vulnerable, as if he knew the pain she was hiding. Knew all her insecurities.

He was the first man in a long time to unnerve her in a good way.

"Thanks," she said, barely glancing at him.

When she'd first arrived there she'd tried to keep him at a distance, but it had never worked. He'd wiggled his way in and, though they didn't really talk much about personal stuff, she enjoyed his company. And he was a damn fine surgeon.

He hung the unit of packed cells, calmly drowning out the chaos of the war that was going on in the background.

His presence made her very aware of how very close the quarters were in this tent, but he helped her focus. He distracted her from all that was going on outside.

"How do you keep such a calm demeanor?" she'd asked, the first time they'd worked together on the wounded during mortar fire.

"I drown it out. I ignore it. I think of it as thunder, or something else, and focus on the person in front of me. I try to picture my patient's life and on my duty to return this patient to those who love him or her. Clear your mind and picture the life you're saving."

It had worked. The tactic had worked and helped her focus.

She was going to miss working with him.

"Do you need help, Dr. Cote?" Kainan asked, but he was already pulling on a pair of surgical gloves.

If he had been any other surgeon she would have barked orders to him, as she outranked most in her unit, but there was something about Kainan that commanded respect.

She could never turn him down, and she didn't want to. He knew what she needed in surgery without asking. He was like a second set of hands for her.

"Thank you," she said. "Are there no others?"

"No, the fighting is ending. The rebels are being driven back—that's the last report that I heard."

Kainan went straight to work, helping her repair the damage to the soldier.

He shook his head and tsked in disgust. "This situation should never have happened."

"I agree," she responded.

She didn't know much about what had caused the once peaceful island kingdom of Isla Hermosa to erupt into revolution, but she knew it had something to do with King Aleksander, after he'd been crowned after his father's death.

The former King, Mateo, had been instrumental in aligning his kingdom with Canada, and had had a good relationship with the country and good trade agreements.

King Mateo had been a great king for more than fifty years, but his eldest son, Aleksander, was not proving to be so great.

Isla Hermosa had severed its ties with Spain five hundred years ago, so when the revolution had broken out Canada had promised to help. Isla Hermosa had called to Canada and Canada had responded.

Which was why she was there.

"I hope this is over soon," she said as she finished her repair of the spleen. "My orders came in last night and I'm shipping out tomorrow."

"So soon?"

There was a hint of disappointment in Kainan's voice, which made her heart skip a beat.

Don't get hung up. It's probably nothing. You're a good surgeon and he can see that.

The mortar fire had become distant and the unit of soldiers that had been lying in wait to protect the hospital began to move. Tanks were soon going by, kicking up dust.

Reagan cursed under her breath and covered her patient again.

Kainan helped her. She was very aware of his body close to hers as they protected their patient.

"I thought you would stay until the end," he said, after the roar of the tanks had died down.

They went back to work as the dust settled.

"No, a new unit has come in to relieve us. They'll stay until Isla Hermosa is back on its feet."

"That could be some time," Kainan muttered darkly. "I wonder if Isla Hermosa will ever recover from this."

"Hopefully it will. Your country has seen enough bloodshed."

"Yes." There was sadness in his voice.

She wondered if he'd lost loved ones. They worked well together, and he was a brilliant surgeon, but they didn't delve much into personal issues beyond the sphere of this surgical unit.

Which was fine with her.

Even though she knew little about Kainan, there was still camaraderie between them. They'd experienced the war together here, patching up soldiers and civilians. They were friends and she'd miss him.

Even though it would be good to put some distance between them. She didn't want to do something she'd regret.

Live a little.

"I've grown accustomed to working with you," he said, and those dark eyes held her captive.

It thrilled her, unnerved her, this effect he had on her.

Reagan smiled behind her surgical mask. "I like working with you too, but it looks like this is the end."

Kainan nodded. “I guess so.”

Reagan finished her repair and began to close up. Her patient would be taken to Spain which was the closest hospital they could get to, where he would be monitored in a military hospital. At least now he would survive the journey.

They didn’t say anything as they prepared the soldier for transport, loading him onto the waiting helicopter that would carry him to an American aircraft carrier. A medical plane would take the soldier on to Spain.

When Reagan pulled off her surgical mask and gloves she let out a sigh of exhaustion. She had been working straight for almost twenty-four hours, since the peacekeepers had been pushed back to the beach. It was late afternoon, and though the sun was no longer beating down on them it was still sweltering, and she had the urge to run into the ocean and cool herself off.

Except for the fact that the beach was littered with boats belonging to the allied forces coming ashore.

Kainan was staring back toward the hill where the tall, ancient city gates were. There was smoke rising from the city and he was frowning.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

She wanted to tell him she knew how he felt, but really she didn’t. She didn’t know what it was like to lose the country of your birth. To have it mangled and everything destroyed.

She couldn’t even imagine what he was going through.

“You okay?” Kainan asked.

Reagan closed her eyes and shook her head. “You don’t need to worry about me. I’m just exhausted.”

He cocked his head to one side, those dark brown eyes penetrating her to her very core, and she fought back the urge to run her hands through his thick chestnut curls.

“I think there is more. Sadness has come over you.”

“I was just thinking of leaving here. I was thinking...” She trailed off, getting choked up.

She didn’t want to tell him that she was sad she was leaving the people she considered friends, the people who were like her family, in order to return to a lonely life in Toronto.

It had never bothered her until now.

“I hate leaving a job undone. There is so much work here, but my tour is over.”

He sighed and dragged his hand through his hair. “Yes, there will be many pieces to pick up once the dust settles, but Isla Hermosa will rise again. There have been other wars, other strife that has hit our shores, and we have stood the test of time.”

Reagan smiled and they walked in silence back to the tent. There were no more critical patients. Just those with minor wounds that were being made ready for transport off the island.

“Captain Cote, you’re officially off duty,” said Major Smart as she came to the hospital tent. “You’ve done a wonderful job, but we’re getting ready to pull out. The next rotation is here and you need your rest.”

“When does my transport leave, Major?” Reagan asked.

“Zero one hundred. I suggest you get some rest—and that’s an order.”

Reagan saluted Major Smart and stood there for a few moments. She had been relieved of duty and at one in the morning she’d leave Isla Hermosa and head back to Petawawa, before being formally and honorably discharged from the Canadian Armed Forces.

“You hungry?” Kainan asked. “You look like you need food and rest.”

“I do—but don’t you have to move to the front with the Hermosian Army?”

Kainan shook his head, a strange expression crossing his face. “Not yet. I have time. Why do you think I came here to help with the wounded when our mobile medical unit is further up the line?”

Reagan smiled. “I’ve just got used to seeing you hanging around these last few months. Usually getting in my way.”

Kainan grinned that mischievous grin which always caused her pulse to race. If they weren't here in the middle of a war... But they were, and Kainan was off-limits. She was leaving in a matter of hours and she wasn't even sure that she'd ever see him again.

"You have a beautiful smile, Reagan."

A blush crept up her cheeks. "What?"

"You never smile for me. You're always so serious."

"This is war. I don't feel much like smiling."

Kainan stopped and took her hand, those intense dark eyes focused on her. She wasn't used to that. She wasn't used to the attention.

"You look tired, Reagan. You need sleep and food."

"I'm fine."

"Come."

It wasn't a request, it was an order, and technically he outranked her. Kainan placed his hand on the small of her back and led her toward the mess tent.

She was so exhausted that she let him get food and a Thermos of coffee, but he didn't let her sit down at a table. Instead he led her outside.

"Where are we going?" Reagan asked tiredly. "The beach is full of armed personnel."

"We're not going to the beach. We're going to my tent. It's in a shady spot and we won't be in any danger."

"There was mortar fire not that long ago," she said, falling into step beside him.

Kainan sighed. "The rebels have surrendered and there's a cease-fire. We should be at peace for a while."

Kainan's tent was on the edge of the Hermosian camp that bordered the Canadian forces' camp. And it was in a shady spot, with camouflage netting. They took a seat down in the sand under the awning, and felt the breeze blow in off the Atlantic.

Reagan closed her eyes and let the cool air wash over her.

"Here, drink this." Kainan passed her some coffee.

"I'm supposed to be resting."

She took a drink of the dark, sweet Hermosian coffee. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been able to savor a cup of coffee. Usually she downed it quickly, burning her tongue in the process, as she tried to patch together the wounded soldiers and the unfortunate civilians who'd got in the line of fire.

"If you go to bed now you will be even more tired by the time your transport comes because you won't sleep when you're so stressed. Unwind and relax."

"This is nice," she admitted.

"I will miss you," he said out of the blue, and he smiled sadly at her. "You have been a great friend and you're an amazing surgeon. I've enjoyed working with you."

Reagan was shocked, but pleased, and she squeezed his hand. "Ditto."

"Really?" he asked, surprised.

"Of course."

"You could've fooled me. You're so closed-off around me sometimes."

"Then why will you miss me?"

Kainan grinned. "Because you're brave, compassionate..."

"You just called me closed-off," she teased.

"Compassionate with your patients. You have a kind heart."

She blushed again. "Thank you."

"You're also beautiful."

He ran his thumb across her knuckles. His hands were rough from the dry heat and the tough conditions, but they were strong, surgical hands. And the simple touch was both calming and exciting at the same time.

"You're the most beautiful soldier I have ever seen."

His eyes twinkled and he smiled, causing a dimple to pucker in his cheek under his stubble.

Blood heated her cheeks at the compliment. No one ever paid her compliments. She wasn't sure how to take it.

"Why do you need my approval all the time, Reagan? For goodness' sakes, leave me alone. You don't need validation for something that is so ordinary."

Her mother's harsh words rang in her ears.

She began to tremble, thinking about her mother and the lack of parental compassion she'd had growing up.

"You're trembling." Kainan pulled her close and whispered, "Why?"

"Tired. That's all." She was lying, but she didn't want to think of her mother now.

Kainan held her. She buried her head in his chest, drinking in the scent of him, and the human connection she hadn't realized she'd been craving calmed her.

"Where are you going after we pull out?" she asked, still clinging to him.

"To the front lines," he said tersely. "Tonight."

Her heart skipped a beat. The front lines were dangerous. Even if there was a cease-fire, the capital city of Helicia had become a tangled mess of debris, mines and IEDs. The thought of him getting hurt scared her.

"You're shivering again," he whispered as he rubbed her back.

"I'm just worried about you advancing tonight." She looked up at him. "It'll be dangerous."

He grinned at her. "I will be okay. I will worry about you too, you know."

"I'll be on military transport, headed back to Canada."

"Things happen—and Canada is a long way away. A whole ocean divides us."

He reached out and stroked her cheek, wiping the tears from her face, and before she knew what was happening he was kissing her. Tenderly at first, and then possessively, but it felt so good and she kissed him back, gripping the collar of his tattered linen shirt as if his life and hers depended on it.

"I'm sorry," he whispered breathlessly against her mouth. "I don't know what came over me. I've gotten so used to being around you, seeing you every day, just the thought of not seeing you..."

She should put an end to it, the kissing, but she just wanted to feel. She wanted to give in to the attraction she felt for him. The white-hot lust.

It would be once.

Just one time.

It had been so long since she'd been with someone, since she had any kind of intimacy.

"No apologies—and don't stop." She kissed him again, running her hands through his hair.

"Reagan, we need to stop."

"Why?"

"I'm advancing and you're leaving. What future do we have?"

"Right now, none. But I'm not asking for a future, Kainan. I just want to feel tonight. I just want a connection with you. I've been fighting it since I met you."

He nodded, his gaze holding hers. "Me as well."

"So don't stop," she whispered, pulling him into another kiss which seared her very soul.

He stood to his feet, helping her up. "Come."

Reagan thought that he was going to take her back to her camp, but instead he led her inside his tent, taking her in his arms.

"I want you so much, Reagan. I wanted you the first moment I saw you. But I don't want to make you a promise I may not be able to keep," he whispered against her ear.

“I care for you too. And you don’t need to promise me anything. I just want this.”

“As you wish,” he said, before kissing her again, making her melt into his arms completely.

* * *

It was dark outside and she could hear movement. People on the move to the front lines. She rolled over in the narrow cot that she and Kainan were sharing and glanced at her watch. It was midnight. In an hour her transport would be leaving. She had to pack up what little gear she had and get to the rendezvous point.

Kainan was already up and dressed in his uniform, which she’d rarely seen him wear at the mobile hospital. It was a bit surreal, and thinking about him in danger made her stomach knot with unease.

“I was just about to wake you,” he said gently.

“Sorry I slept so long here.”

“No, it’s okay.” He leaned over and kissed her. “I have to go with the next transport to the front lines. There is fighting going on in the city. More wounded. I’m needed there.”

“I thought there was a cease-fire?” she said, dressing quickly in her wrinkled clothes.

“There was, but some insurgents have been found hiding in the city. It will be taken care of.”

He said that with a finality which sent a shiver down her spine.

She finished dressing.

He took her in his arms and held her close.

“Please be safe,” she whispered, drinking in the scent of him. She wanted to remember every moment of this time with him, and she sent up a silent prayer that he would be safe.

“You too, Reagan. My beautiful Reagan. I shall never forget you.” Kainan kissed her. “Come, we’d better go.”

They walked out of his tent and saw the Hermosian camp was a flurry of activity. He walked her as far as he could, to where the Canadian forces were packing up what they could, ready to join the Hermosian Army.

“I’ll never forget you,” she said, and she wouldn’t.

How could she forget him? A man who had seemed to see past her façade. A dangerous and yet gentle man, and one heck of a surgeon.

A man she’d been proud to serve with.

“Ditto.”

He kissed her hand one last time and then headed toward a large transporter that was waiting for him. He climbed up into the back of the armored vehicle and waved at her as the truck rumbled away into the darkness toward the front lines.

Please keep him safe.

Reagan headed back to the tent she shared with another surgeon. She packed up her kit bag and then waited for her transport.

It was past 1:00 a.m. when the radio in the mess hall crackled to life.

“Explosion. Hermosian medical transport attacked. All personnel dead.”

The words hit her like a rock and her stomach knotted. She closed her eyes and bit her lip as the words hit her.

Maybe it wasn’t Kainan’s transport?

She wanted to stay and find out if his name was on the list, but her transport came then.

She was airlifted to the waiting Canadian vessel which would take her back home. She was assigned her berth, but as soon as she’d set her bag down she found the nearest commanding officer from her unit.

“General Travis, do you have a list of casualties from that Hermosian medical transport?”

General Travis shook his head. “No, not a full list, but I know who you’re asking about and I’m sorry, Captain Cote. I know that you worked with Dr. Laskaris, but his name is on the list of those who perished. His dog tags were found and not much else. An IED near the palace went off.”

Reagan’s stomach twisted and she ran to the side of the boat, losing what little food she’d managed to eat since leaving Kainan and arriving on the transport, over the side of the ship.

General Travis patted her back. “I’m sorry, Captain.”

She nodded, and managed to keep the tears at bay.

This was why she kept people at distance, why she never let anyone in. Because in an instant they could be taken from you. They left. They died.

Kainan had wormed his way in past her defenses and now he was gone.

She was alone.

Completely alone.

She should have known better. She was meant to be alone.

It was easier that way.

Chapter One

A year later, Toronto

REAGAN WALKED THROUGH the halls of the hospital in a daze. There wasn’t enough coffee in the world to wake her up. It had been a long shift at the hospital and then her infant son had a bad night. The cot in her son’s hospital room in the pediatric critical care unit wasn’t exactly comfortable, and she could use a break to go home and have a shower.

The problem was there was no one to give her a break.

It was just her and Peter in the world.

A year ago she’d spent an unforgettable night in Kainan’s arms. A night that she would cherish forever. Then he’d gone to the front lines and died for his country.

She’d come back to her life in Toronto, empty and alone.

Although it had turned out she was not completely alone, because her one night with Kainan had resulted in pregnancy.

It was the best gift.

A piece of Kainan.

A child.

Someone to love.

And she wasn’t going to make Peter feel like a mistake, the way her parents had made her feel.

Nothing she’d ever done had pleased them.

Her father had never wanted kids. When her mother had got pregnant with Reagan he’d stuck around, but he had always been distant. Over time, her mother had come to resent her for causing such distance in her marriage.

There had been times when she’d got shreds of love and affection from her mother, but it they had been few and far between.

She’d thought maybe being grandparents would soften her parents’ hearts.

She’d been wrong.

When she’d told her mother about the situation—about the baby and the father dying—her mother’s response had been heartless. Painful.

“Get rid of the problem, Reagan. You can’t raise a baby on your own.”

“I’m not getting rid of the baby, Mother.”

“Then what do you want from me, Reagan?”

Honestly, she didn’t know. Some part of her had hoped her mother would change, but she should have known better.

Reagan had always been a burden to them. And her getting pregnant overseas on a mission was just another disappointment for her parents. They were even more disappointed that she'd kept the baby.

As soon as Reagan had found out she was pregnant she'd vowed that she'd protect Peter. She'd give him the love she had never had, the compassion she had to learn by herself.

No one would hurt Peter. Ever.

Her parents had never cared about her. They'd only taken care of her because they were legally obligated to do so.

"I've never run from my mistakes, Reagan. That's why I took care of you. At the time, abortion wasn't an option."

Reagan was a mistake. It hurt to hear it time and time again.

She focused on the lukewarm coffee she was drinking.

A baby had never been in her plan, but she was responsible for her actions. There were plenty of single parents out there, going it alone. And she would do the same. She would never let Peter feel as if he was an obligation or a mistake.

But what should have been one of the most joyous days of her life, when Peter was born, had quickly turned into her worst nightmare.

In all her years as an intern and then a resident in hospital, and then her time in the field with the Canadian military, serving as a trauma surgeon during natural disasters and being tossed into the fray of war zones, she'd seen many sick children. Critically ill children. It had always been a deep-rooted fear of hers that one day, if she ever had a child, something might happen to that child.

She had never been able to handle the thought of it.

And then it had happened.

She'd had Peter.

"Let me see him!" she'd cried, relieved that the birth was over.

Only none of the doctors had answered her. Marisa, her OB/GYN, hadn't looked at her. It was in that moment that Reagan had realized the baby wasn't crying. There wasn't a sound coming from him at all.

"What's wrong?" Reagan had asked.

She'd craned her neck as Marisa had turned back to her, watching the pediatrician on call with her baby in his hands, blue-grey and barely moving.

It had only been a couple of hours later when she'd learned that her baby had cardiomyopathy and would be staying in the hospital indefinitely. The only reminder of her and Kainan's time together was placed on the list for UNOS and would be staying there while he waited for a new heart.

The nursery she had so painstakingly started to prepare in her small apartment before his birth was still unused, and she hadn't been able to look at it the few fleeting times she'd managed to get home.

Don't think about it—and don't think about Kainan.

Even a year since his death often Kainan crept into her thoughts because Peter looked like him so much. And she couldn't help but wonder what it would have been like had Kainan lived.

Reagan had had a couple of relationships before Kainan, but they'd failed because of her—because she couldn't trust. At the back of her mind she was terrified she'd disappoint, that she'd never be good enough and her heart would be broken. Again.

It was better this way.

She was better off alone.

"Reagan, you look like you didn't get a wink of sleep!"

Reagan rubbed her tired, sore eyes and saw the Chief of Surgery leaning over the central desk, where he'd been studying a chart.

Michael McNeil had been so understanding. He'd trained her as a resident, and encouraged her into the Canadian Armed Forces to expand her skills, and since she'd announced her pregnancy and Peter's birth he'd been accommodating, knowing she needed to work. Right now he was looking at her with pity. Like most people. She hated pity.

"We need better cots on the NICU floor," she mumbled, stifling a yawn.

"Are you going to be able to work with this new doctor?" he asked.

Reagan nodded. She needed this job. It was more pay, and not so much time spent doing surgical rounds. Right now she couldn't do a lot of surgery. A call about a heart might come in at any time, and she needed to be near Peter.

Peter was all she had.

She really needed sleep, but right now she needed work more. It kept her sane. And she was looking forward to this new job. It was more flexible.

"Yeah, I'm good." She walked to the other side of the central desk and poured herself another cup of coffee into a plastic cup and capped it.

"Good. I know things have been hard—"

She held up her hand to cut the chief off. "Michael, I'm okay. I need the work. I love the work. And Peter is not that far away. Besides, I'm the only staff member available who knows American Sign Language."

"And you worked in Isla Hermosa as well," Michael said, setting down his chart.

Reagan's heart skipped a beat—which was silly. "The new specialist is from Isla Hermosa?"

Michael nodded. "The Canadian government is giving him asylum. His work is important. That's all I know. And he's a brilliant teacher. I think he will be an asset to our medical students."

"I wonder if I worked with him?" Reagan said, taking another sip of the bitter coffee. The caffeine was doing its job. There had been many other Hermosian physicians out in the field whom she'd worked alongside, but none had been like Kainan.

No one will ever be like Kainan.

She couldn't think about him now.

"I don't know, but the Canadian government was very adamant that he should be given asylum here, and after chatting with him over email I'm very excited to have him on board."

"I'm looking forward to meeting him," said Reagan. "To become a surgical consultant when you can't speak—that's impressive."

She couldn't recall any nonverbal surgeons out in the field on Isla Hermosa. Of course it had been a war zone. Everything was a bit blurry about her experience. Except...

"Well, he could speak before. He was injured at the front and a badly placed endotracheal tube damaged his vocal cords. I'm told he can speak a bit—but not much, and not for long periods of time. He will be getting corrective surgery here before the New Year, but for now you'll help him."

"Of course," she agreed. She would be happy to. "Does he know about my son and my need for flexibility?"

"No," Michael said. "I told him you needed a flexible schedule, but I thought it best if you tell him about Peter if you want to."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

It was exhausting, constantly explaining Peter's condition to people. It drained her. The new surgeon didn't need to know about Peter, he just needed to know she needed flexibility—which Michael had taken care of.

Reagan fell into step beside Michael as they walked toward his office, where she would meet this Hermosian doctor and they could get to work.

"So, my job consists of interpreting American Sign Language to the students so he doesn't overtax his voice?"

Michael nodded. “You can use my office to draw up your plans. The first medical students will be coming at one—after the lunch rotation.”

Reagan nodded. “Sounds good, Chief.”

Michael smiled, and then said softly, “You know we’re all here for you, Reagan. If there’s anything more we can do...”

Reagan gave Michael a quick nod. She appreciated it, but she didn’t want pity or help. Too many people pitied her, and she was tired of it. She was still a surgeon. She was still Reagan Cote, even if it sometimes didn’t feel that way.

“I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” Michael asked, and there again was that expression of pity that she loathed, directed toward her.

She couldn’t push Michael away like she did so many. He had been her mentor when she was resident. He’d taught her compassion and patient care. Things she hadn’t been able to learn from her parents. When she’d started her bedside manner had been atrocious, but Michael had guided her, and he had been the one who welcomed her back with open arms when she’d finished her tour of duty.

“I appreciate it so much, Michael. You know that, but I’m fine. Let me work—it keeps me busy.”

Michael gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head and whispered, “He’ll pull through.”

She nodded, blinking back the tears that always threatened to fall when someone started talking about Peter and his condition. Tears that she had learned to swallow because she had to be strong for Peter.

And for herself.

She had to be tough. There was no time for weeping or sorrow. If she gave in to the grief that she was actually feeling she would collapse and be useless.

This new assignment had come at the perfect time. Even though it would take her off her precious surgical rotation, it would keep her at the hospital.

It would keep her busy and close to Peter.

And that was the most important thing.

“You okay?” Michael asked.

“Perfectly.”

Reagan plastered on the fake smile she was used to wearing. The one she’d perfected when she was a small girl, because her father had liked her just a bit better when she’d smiled, and had been nicer to her mother when Reagan had smiled and behaved.

Michael nodded and then opened the door.

Reagan stepped in, seeing the Hermosian doctor had his back to her. Something tugged at the corner of her mind, but she couldn’t sift through the fog—or maybe she was having a hard time seeing. Maybe she was so sleep-deprived that this was just a dream.

She began to tremble.

“Dr. Kainan Laskaris—I would like to introduce you to Dr. Reagan Cote, who will be working with you here at the hospital.”

The ghost turned around, those dark, expressive eyes of his hollow and wide with shock. The beautifully chiseled face was marred with scars, and on his throat she could see where they had put the botched endotracheal tube. It was almost as if his throat had been slit, the scar was so bad. The dark brown curls were tamed, and streaked with silver. He’d aged. The war had aged him. But he was still devastatingly handsome.

He opened his mouth, as if to say something, but then snapped it shut. And his lips pressed together firmly, as if he was angry.

Her coffee shook in the cup she was gripping so tightly. Her world was spinning and her tight rein on those emotions she’d become so darn good at locking away had gone slack.

She was losing control.

“Never lose control, Reagan. Don’t show your weakness to anyone or they’ll take advantage of you.”

Her mother’s voice was screaming in her head.

“Kainan?” her voice finally squeaked out in disbelief.

“You two know each other?” Michael asked.

She waited for that deep, rich voice to answer, Si. That affirmation had always made her go a bit weak in the knees.

But of course it couldn’t.

His voice had been taken from him.

Instead he just nodded quickly and looked away. As if he was annoyed she was there.

“We worked together on Isla Hermosa during my last tour of duty,” Reagan answered, steadying her hand so Michael wouldn’t see her tremble. “And we worked well together.”

Michael looked visibly relieved. “I’m glad to hear it! Well, I’ll leave you two to it. I’m sure you have a lot of catching up to do.”

Reagan didn’t even see Michael leave. She just heard the door shut, her gaze focused on Kainan. The man she’d thought was dead.

He stared back at her, but he didn’t smile at her the way he’d used to. There was no twinkle in his eyes. Just darkness. It was cold. It didn’t faze her, didn’t hurt her. She was used to people looking at her that way. It did sting a little, and it gave her confirmation that Kainan was like all the other men she’d met. Like her father. Cold and distant.

“You’re alive.” It wasn’t so much a question as it was a statement of fact, because she’d thought he’d died.

Clearly, he signed in American Sign Language, barely looking at her.

“They told me you had died.”

His expression softened briefly. I’m sorry. There was a lot of confusion at first. I was reported dead for days...

“Your medical transport was attacked and they found your dog tags in the rubble.”

Again, there was a lot of confusion.

It was obvious that he wasn’t going to give any further information about it.

Reagan sat down on one of the chairs at the table in Michael’s office. There was a stack of materials there. New orientation information for Kainan. She needed to keep busy and not think about why he never reached out to her.

“Has anyone explained all this stuff to you?” she asked as she quickly scanned the binder full of information. If she kept busy she could ignore the racing of her pulse, her trembling hands, the urge to hug him and cry because he was alive.

He shook his head and took a seat across from her. Then he cleared his throat. “Best...come...from...you.”

His voice was broken, harsh and guttural. And color bloomed in his cheeks. It was either embarrassment or anger, and knowing Kainan it was most likely anger.

She knew how much he liked to be in control of every situation. He’d commanded all those around him during surgery, and those working with him had followed him blindly.

When he lost control he got angry, but that would drive him to work harder to solve the problem and regain control.

He was an amazing surgeon.

And this loss of control...

She could only imagine what he was going through. She liked control in her life, but she’d learned a humble lesson when Peter was born. Control was just an illusion.

Reagan had to admit that she was angry too. That he was alive and hadn't let her know. He'd known where she was going. He'd known so much about her. Why hadn't he reached out?

Only she couldn't think about that right now. She'd swallow the anger she had and do her job. Keep moving forward as she had always done. If she stopped for a second everything would fall apart.

"Okay," she said, setting her half-empty coffee cup down and opening up the materials. "We can do this together."

Is there anyone else? he signed.

The words were like a slap. He didn't want her here. She realized his body language was more than just embarrassment or anger over his situation. He was annoyed that she was here, helping him.

Her spine stiffened.

She should have known his attention to her back then had just been seduction. He didn't want to see her again. He'd just been using her.

You wanted it too.

Well, she wasn't going to let him shove her aside. She had a job to do, and anyway she'd got the best part of him. She had Peter, and she didn't regret that for anything.

"No, there is no one else. I am the only doctor here who can interpret American Sign Language and who's free to support you." Now she was really annoyed with him. She wasn't going to let him ruin this job for her.

Fine, he signed. He crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair. His gaze was fixed on her, but instead of anger or annoyance, like before, there was bit of humor. Some smugness.

She wanted to wipe that off his face. "What?" she snapped.

I forgot how prickly you get. How fast your walls go up.

The twinkle she knew so well returned to his eyes. It was meant to lighten the mood, but she wasn't in the mood for that.

"I get prickly when people are acting like jerks."

"Sorry." He spoke, his voice now barely a whisper.

Reagan shut the binder and, though she knew she was going to regret it, she had to ask. "Why don't you want to work with me?"

* * *

The question caught him off guard. Of course this whole situation had caught him off guard. He'd known that Reagan was Canadian, but hadn't realized that she worked at this hospital, in this city. Canada was a large country. He'd chosen this hospital simply because Dr. Shaw, his otolaryngologist was here.

He hadn't known that Reagan was here. And he hadn't known that she knew American Sign Language or that she would be working in the education part of the hospital. He'd have thought she would be on the surgical floor, wherever she worked, which was where he wanted to be, but couldn't be any longer.

How could a man with no voice convey what he needed to his surgical staff during an emergency situation? He couldn't, so his surgical career was over.

Of course that wasn't the only reason his career was over.

His throat tightened at the thought of why it was over. It always tightened when his stress levels rose, and he was certainly stressed now.

Seeing Reagan again was a shock.

And he'd had to hold himself back, because his first reaction when he'd seen her had been to run to her and take her in his arms and kiss her. But this wasn't the time or place.

Nowhere was the time or place.

Still, seeing her again had brought back so many memories. Even though they'd served during a war—a brutal war which had torn his country apart—working alongside her had been some of the happiest moments of his life.

He loved his country, but being called back to serve had been painful. Since his mother had died Isla Hermosa had reminded him only of loneliness and pain.

Reagan had brought back joy into his life.

One of the hardest things he'd had to do in his life was to leave her behind, knowing that she was going back home to her country and that he was going to the front lines. That he might never see her again.

It had nearly broken him, but it had been for the best that she'd left when all was said and done. Now circumstances had changed and they could never be together. He'd never trap her the way his mother had been trapped in her marriage to his father.

Still, he wanted Reagan—even though he shouldn't. Their year apart had done nothing to extinguish the flames of passion that he felt for her.

He still wanted her.

That long, silky brown hair that was so neatly tied back. The long, graceful neck that he'd once run his hands over. And those lips he'd kissed and wanted to taste again.

Only he couldn't now. Not because he'd lost his voice, but because he would never, ever put her inside the dangerous situation he now found himself in.

He was a displaced king, of a country that was precarious and about to sink into oblivion, and he couldn't bring her into that situation.

There were people who wanted to assassinate him. And he would gladly take a bullet for his country, because he felt responsible for Isla Hermosa's downfall.

He hadn't been able to control his late brother. Kainan had tried, but his brother had ruined the country in six months after their father had ruled gracefully for fifty years.

Now Kainan was King of a broken, bleeding country. And instead of being there he was here in Canada. First in Ottawa, to recuperate from all the injuries that he'd sustained when the palace had been attacked, and now here at this hospital in Toronto, working and waiting for surgery that might or might not return his voice to him. Surgery he might not survive due to the damage in his throat.

Still, he needed a voice to rule. As King, he had a duty to his country—a tradition to uphold and a service which had so depressed his mother and made her feel trapped.

His father had been a great king, but cold, and protocol had come first. Kainan had watched his mother take second place to Isla Hermosa.

So, no, he couldn't drag Reagan into that. The crown would die out with him. And maybe it was better that way.

What's first? he signed.

"Have you got your hospital identification yet?" she asked, leafing through all the papers from Human Resources that Kainan had just skimmed.

No. I haven't got that yet.

"Okay, we'll fill out this paperwork and—"

Kainan touched her arm and got her attention. Why aren't you practicing surgery?

"I told you. I'm the only one fluent in American Sign Language here who has room in her schedule to assist you."

So this is a punishment for you?

"What?"

Surgery was your life.

She frowned, and continued to leaf through the binder. "It still is, but I was asked to do this and—" She was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Yes?"

A nurse stuck her head round the door. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Dr. Cote, but it's Peter."

Reagan's expression changed. She frowned, looking worried as she slammed the binder shut. "I'll be right up."

The nurse nodded and shut the door.

“I’m sorry, Kainan. I’ll try to be as fast as I can but...it could take a while.”

Is it a patient? he asked.

Reagan sighed sadly. Her expression was tired, broken, and Kainan couldn’t help but wonder who Peter was. Was Peter her husband?

That brief, fleeting thought of her with another man enraged him. It made him jealous to think of another man loving her.

Not that he deserved to feel any sense of jealousy when it came to Reagan. He’d given up those rights when he’d let her go in Isla Hermosa.

“No, it’s not a patient.” Then she sighed again and looked almost as if she was going to be sick. “Kainan, I’m... He’s my son. Peter is my son.”

She stood up to leave, her body tense.

Kainan was shocked, and sat back as reality sank in. He hoarsely asked, “Your son?”

And then it dawned on him—because he knew that she hadn’t had a child when she was serving alongside him in Isla Hermosa.

A cold tendril of dread unfurled in his belly. He jumped up and stood in front of her, blocking her escape and he cleared his throat. “How. Old?”

“He’s three months now. He’s your son, Kainan.”

Reagan didn’t offer any other explanation.

* * *

“Never trust women, Kainan. Never. Your mother tried to hide you from me when she wanted to divorce me, but you were a prince of Isla Hermosa. She had no right to do that. But she did try. Women are fickle. They are not devoted, they only think of themselves. Never trust them. Close your heart to them or you’ll be hurt!”

Kainan didn’t want to hear his late father’s voice in his head. He’d been a fine king, but a terrible husband and father.

Still, Reagan hadn’t told him he had a son.

“I have to go and check on him. Kainan, please move.”

Numb, he stepped to the side so she could open the door.

Of course Kainan was going to let her go, but he needed more answers. His son? It couldn’t be. Why was his son at the hospital? Why was a nurse taking care of him?

He dashed after Reagan, cursing himself inwardly because he couldn’t call out to her to stop, but he caught up with her quickly and grabbed her arm, holding on to her.

She tried to shrug out of his grip until she saw it was him and relaxed.

My son? he signed.

“Yes.”

Why didn’t you tell me I had a son? Were you trying to hide him from me? He instantly regretted the words. They were so much like something his father would have said.

Her eyes narrowed. “I thought you were dead. They told me you were dead. I wouldn’t hide him from you—you know that.”

He wanted to believe that, but his own mother had tried to hide him from his father when she was pregnant.

“I never wanted you locked away in the palace, Kainan. I didn’t want you locked away like me. I tried to leave, but I couldn’t hide you from him either,” his mother had said on her death bed. “I just wanted us to be happy. To be free. I didn’t want you to grow up with him as a father.”

“Why?” He’d felt as if his life was a prison sentence. He was guarded and watched all the time, and though surrounded by people he’d always felt alone. “Why did you tell him?”

“I had to. I loved him.” His mother had sighed. “I am sorry I am leaving you. You will never be free. Even as the spare. You will never be your own man. I wanted more for you, Kainan. I’m sorry.”

His mother had died then, and his father had told him woman weren’t to be trusted.

"Never trust a woman, Kainan. Never."

Kainan rubbed his temple, where a pounding headache was brewing.

Reagan didn't hide your son from you. She thought you were dead.

That was little consolation to him at this moment.

"I have to go see him," Reagan whispered.

What is wrong with him? he asked as they waited for the elevator.

"Cardiomyopathy." There was a glitter of moisture in her eyes as she cleared her throat. "He was born that way. He was born with a failing heart."

Oh, God.

His heart sank. It was too much. He'd learned he was a father and that his son was dying all in the same day.

He was no fool. He knew the severity of cardiomyopathy in a child.

Run. Turn and leave.

But he couldn't do that either. He was not the cold, unfeeling man his father had been.

The elevator dinged as the doors opened, and they stood to the side as people got off, before getting in.

Kainan didn't say anything as they rode in silence. Everything was still sinking in.

He had a son.

And his son was the Crown Prince of Isla Hermosa.

He felt bad for inflicting that burden on him. And his son was ill. Cardiomyopathy in an infant was horrific, and Kainan could only assume that he was on the UNOS wait list for a new heart, because that was his only chance at life.

Reagan led him to the NICU, giving him a disposable gown and mask. He didn't really hear anything that anyone was saying as he was led into the room.

In the far corner stood an incubator that was covered with a blue blanket.

His heart was hammering.

He had never wanted a child. He didn't want to sentence any child to a life where he couldn't live, where he was under constant scrutiny. He'd never wanted a family. Relationships didn't work. His father and late brother had shown him that. He didn't want to trap a woman the way his mother had been trapped.

Reagan raised the blue blanket and Kainan gasped as he saw a baby with dark hair. A baby who looked like him and Reagan.

A baby hooked up to a machine.

His heart ached to hold him. It was instant love. It surprised him.

This child was the future of his country. But how could a voiceless king and a broken-hearted crown prince rule a country that was already broken and bleeding?

His heart shattered and guilt washed over him. Reagan had done this on her own. He hadn't been there. He'd failed her. He'd failed them both.

All Kainan could do was turn and leave.

His heart was breaking along with his son's.

Chapter Two

THERE WAS SUCH a flurry of activity that Reagan forgot Kainan had followed her in. When Peter was stable again, and she'd spoken to the doctors, she turned to introduce Kainan to Peter's team. But Kainan had slipped out.

Where did he go?

That was her first thought, and then she was disappointed that he'd left. He hadn't even come over to the incubator. She'd lifted the blanket and he'd looked once, before she'd turned her attention to the nurse. Then she'd drowned out everything else. Her main focus had been her son.

With every day that she stepped through those doors, rinsing her hands, a deep, dark part of her told her over and over again that any future with her son became darker and darker.

The other part of her—the part that had sustained her since she'd found out she was carrying Kainan's child—told her not to give up hope.

To keep going.

To be strong.

To drown out everything else and pour all that she had into her son.

And that was what she did. Day after day since he was born.

She had no other choice.

So she hadn't noticed when Kainan had left because he'd never been there before. She was used to being on her own.

Reagan turned back to Sophie, Peter's nurse in the PCCU. "I'm only a text away."

Sophie nodded. "Sorry for dragging you away from your work. I know your first priority is to work with the new Hermosian doctor."

"My first priority is Peter. Always."

Reagan smiled and gave Sophie's arm a squeeze. She wanted to tell Sophie that Kainan was Peter's father, but she couldn't really form the words. Like Sophie, everyone in the hospital had been told that Peter's father was dead.

And that was not the case.

Kainan was alive. He'd have rights over Peter. She would no longer be in complete control. Kainan would have a say, and that made her nervous. Kainan might return to Isla Hermosa. What if he wanted to take Peter with him?

Don't think about it now.

She didn't want to make herself sick with worry.

"You okay, Reagan?" Sophie asked.

"Yes. I'm fine. I'll swing by later, Sophie, if I don't hear from you before then."

"Okay, Reagan."

Sophie turned back to the incubator and Reagan sent a mental kiss to her boy, since at the moment she couldn't actually kiss him. She'd only kissed him once, before he was intubated.

Her heart ached at the thought that maybe she'd never be able to really kiss him, see his eyes open and look at her in wonder.

Focus. Find Kainan.

Once she was out of the PCCU she peeled off the disposable gown and mask, tossing them in the nearest receptacle. She was contemplating how she was going to page Kainan when she saw that he was pacing at the end of a dead-end hall near the PCCU.

All the annoyance and anger she'd briefly had for him walking out on their son melted away. She put herself in Kainan's shoes. He'd just learned he had a son and that same son was gravely ill.

She remembered how she'd felt when she'd found out that Peter was so ill. When they'd whisked him away from her. When she hadn't heard any wail when he was born and she'd been left alone.

Still, he had left.

"You left?" she said gently.

Kainan's dark eyes were a bit wild, and he ran his hand through his thick, dark curls. He nodded and signed, Sorry.

"It was a lot to take in. I'm sorry I didn't prepare you better."

Hard to prepare for that. Hard to prepare for learning about a son you never knew you had. He closed his eyes.

"Are you okay?"

I will be fine. The question is, are you? Are you okay?

The question took her aback, because she wasn't fine. How could she be fine? Her son was ill, Kainan was alive, and she needed sleep. No, she wasn't fine.

"I'm okay." Liar. "I should've told you sooner."

You didn't even know I was alive until earlier today.

"True."

They both smiled then, and a bit of the tension melted away.

What's wrong with him? Kainan signed finally. You said before, but...

"Cardiomyopathy." The word stuck in her throat. She rarely said it out loud, because if she said it out loud it became real. And she didn't want it to be real.

She was deluding herself. It was very real—and scary.

At least she didn't have to explain what cardiomyopathy was to Kainan. He understood the gravity of the situation.

Is he on the transplant list?

"Yes. We're waiting."

How terrible for you. How do you do it?

A spark of anger flared up in her. It was an innocent enough remark, but it had cut her to the quick.

How do you do it?

How could she not? There was really no choice in the matter. Just one foot in front of the other.

"There's no choice," she said wearily.

No. I suppose not. Kainan scrubbed a hand over his face. He didn't sign anything else.

Reagan was waiting for him to sign I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. Or Let me help, but he didn't offer any of these things.

Instead he signed, Is he stable now? Can we get back to work?

It was a slap to the face—but then again a lot of stuff had happened to Kainan in a very short span of time. Still, he hadn't even asked their son's name.

Don't take it personally. It's a lot to process.

She'd been disappointed before. Countless times, when her parents had been too busy for her.

"I need help, Mom. Please. I'm tired and Peter is sick..."

"It was your choice to have the baby, Reagan. I told you to get rid of it."

Her mother's callous words still haunted her.

What's wrong? Kainan signed.

"Nothing."

Your expression says otherwise.

"He's stable," she said, answering Kainan and yet ignoring his questioning.

Good.

There was a hint of relief on his face, but only a brief hint. Reagan hoped it was in regard to their son, but again she'd been disappointed before.

"Let's get back to Michael's office and we'll go through everything," she offered.

Kainan nodded and fell into step beside her. There was silence between them, which was good, because right now she was having a hard time to keeping it all together.

* * *

Kainan listened to Reagan go over protocols and some other things that he couldn't seem to focus on. All he could think about was taking care of Reagan and Peter. Doing his duty to them.

Even though it would kill him to trap them both in royal protocol.

If his brother had still been alive there wouldn't be this guilt about forcing Reagan into this life Kainan never wanted. He was the "spare," so he's pursued medicine in order to escape Isla Hermosa. He'd gone to medical school in Switzerland and worked there. He'd been happy.

He hadn't ever planned on returning to Isla Hermosa after his brother became King, but then war had broke out and his brother had been killed.

Kainan's freedom had evaporated then. It had been obliterated.

Inside he was screaming and raging, but if he tried to let it all out there would be no sound, and that made him rage all the more at his own stupidity. Yet he still wanted Reagan, and now his son. She'd been alone. She shouldn't have been alone.

I should never have let Reagan go.

If he'd have been with her... He didn't finish that thought, because it wouldn't have changed the outcome at all.

Their son would have been born with cardiomyopathy anyway. That was if he'd survived being born in a war-torn country. The thought made his stomach clench. He tried not to think about it.

"Alek, you have to surrender. It's done. Too many lives have been lost!"

"I will not surrender! Father never would've backed down."

"He would if innocent blood was being spilled. What you're doing is folly!"

"You just want the crown for yourself, Kainan. I know you."

"You don't know me. You're completely absurd. I never wanted this. Never."

"Then why are you here?"

"To save your life. You're my brother, Alek..."

"I'm your half brother."

"Half, then—but still I'm here to save you."

"Why?"

"Because Father loved you. I'm doing this for Father."

Alek had sneered and shaken his head.

"Always trying to please Father. But he's dead and I am King. I will always be King."

Kainan shook those thoughts away. They were treading on dangerous ground. They were threatening his control. He'd tried to save his half brother's life before Alek had been overthrown. He'd been trying to drag Alek out of the palace to safety just before the IED had gone off in the throne room.

Kainan had survived the blast, but had lost his voice for his brother...his King.

In the end his brother hadn't survived after the explosion. So it had all been for naught.

Which now made him King and his critically ill son his heir.

His son who was dying.

"Kainan, are you okay?"

He turned and saw Reagan was looking up from the piles of paperwork.

"Overwhelmed?" she asked gently.

He smiled. "Under..." Only he couldn't finish the word because his throat closed up, He felt humiliated by it.

Her expression softened. "Statement? Understatement?"

Then she smiled. That warm and friendly open smile which had won him over. She'd always tried to act so strong, but when he'd seen her smile at wounded soldiers, offering them compassion, he'd been won over time and time again. Reagan had reminded him of his mother—not in looks, but in strength and fortitude.

His mother Ariana had been compassionate, strong, independent. She'd loved his father, even though his father hadn't seemed able to love her back in the same way.

When his mother had died he'd been so lonely. There had been no love in the palace. His father had stood on formality. As had his elder half brother Alek. Only his mother had given him affection.

Reagan hadn't known he was a prince. She'd been so honest. So warm. He'd craved that warmth. Needed it like air. She'd treated him like everyone else on the unit and with her he'd been himself.

There had been no formality. No protocol. It had been nice to be himself for a change, instead of Prince Kainan.

If there hadn't been a war... If he was still the spare...

He didn't want to drag her into the tumultuous situation that was still happening in his country. Still, she'd borne his child and she would be in danger if word got out. If he married her he could protect her. He had to do right by her, even though that would mean her life wouldn't be her own anymore. Even though he would be condemning her.

Yes. That. He rubbed his temples, felt his throat tightening again.

"I'm sorry there's so much. I swear we're almost done with the orientation."

Can we take a break? he signed.

She cocked an eyebrow. "A break?"

Coffee?

He had to get out of this room. He felt as if he was suffocating again. Like when he'd woken up after the blast and not been able to breathe, with a tube in his throat, burns on his body.

"Okay..."

She seemed unsure. Confused.

He was confused too—about this whole situation.

When he'd felt this way in the past, surgery and practicing medicine—his work—had helped him get through so much. Saving lives made sense to him. It made sense of this mixed-up world.

And he couldn't do that anymore. He couldn't be a proper surgeon because he couldn't speak, and couldn't sign when his hands were busy. He couldn't lead his broken country for the same reason. He was trapped in limbo.

They walked in silence to the coffee cart.

Even though there were Hermosian guards all through this hospital, and he was being monitored by the Canadian government, no one besides those watching him for his own protection knew he was King.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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