

Completely Yours

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SNEAK PEEK

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“So what kind of sex do you need to have?”

The curiosity and humor in her tone was what made Zach open his eyes. Kiera had turned to face him and had one leg tucked up underneath her, her elbow on the back of the couch, her head in her hand.

And he wanted to make her breakfast in the morning.

Not a no-go-ahead-and-keep-it travel mug of coffee on her way out the front door. Real, made-from-scratch pancakes. In his kitchen. With his mom’s recipe. After they’d cuddled late into the morning in his bed.

He sighed. “Up against the wall, hard and fast and loud. And over in one night.” He made sure to add that at the end. Just in case she was feeling cuddling-with-pancakes too.

Kiera seemed fascinated by his answer. “And you can’t have that with me?”

She wasn’t being coy; she wasn’t flirting. She was truly curious, and Zach shook his head. “No.” Because he wanted the against-the-wall stuff, but he also wanted to take about three hours to kiss her from head to toe before he did anything else.

He definitely liked her. *Damn.*

Chapter One

“They’re estimating up to twenty-thousand were inside when it came down.”

Zach Ashley stared at his crew leader, Troy. “Twenty *thousand*?”

Troy nodded grimly. “If a ceiling in an exhibit hall is going to collapse, it’s gonna collapse during Comic Con, right?”

Zach scrubbed a hand over his face. It was going to be a long day.

The ambulance screeched to a halt outside the Seaport World Trade Center, and Zach bailed out of the back, yanking his bag up onto his shoulder. His crew members were right on his heels as they started toward the front doors. But the going was slow through the throngs of people. And Zach was trying not to simply stand and stare. Creatures and characters in all shapes, sizes and colors had been evacuated from the convention center and now covered the sidewalks and streets. It was a sight to behold.

“This way!” A member of the Boston PD waved them forward, clearing a path through the crowd.

They made it inside a moment later, and Zach had no idea what he was looking at. There was the general panic and confusion that went along with any catastrophe, but here it was multiplied by the thousands. A big crowd was always a difficult scene to work, but this was insanity. The convention boasted an attendance of nearly fifty thousand each year so Zach knew it could have been worse. But twenty-thousand potential victims inside a one-hundred-and-fifteen-thousand-square-foot exhibit hall where a sixth of the ceiling had come crashing to the floor? That was holy-shit-chaotic stuff.

“Worst of it’s in the center,” Troy called to them, holding his radio to his ear. “There are three crews already on site treating vics as they dig them out. Start out here and triage as you work to the middle.”

Fortunately, most of the building had been evacuated. Besides the rows and rows of booths that sold everything from comic books to jewelry to tech gadgets, the huge exhibit hall

was empty of any attendee that was able to walk out on their own and not bleed along the way. The only people remaining inside were the emergency workers and the injured con-goers.

Zach and the other guys spread out, stopping and examining anyone they came across.

“You’re good to go,” Zach told a woman and her son a few minutes later after checking out a wrist sprain and a few scrapes and cuts. “Ice, rest, and call your doctor if anything worsens.”

He moved on to a guy who was limping toward the front doors. A few minutes later, he applied an ankle splint and told the guy to head to the ER. And so it continued over the next half hour. One injury at a time. One person at a time. That was what he needed to focus on. Even though everything in him itched to storm toward the center of the hall to help dig through the debris himself.

The people on the periphery were hurt too. They needed checked over too. Zach’s job was to treat and help those he came into contact with. But the need was greatest in the middle. His crew should have been first on the scene. He should be in there with the worst of the worst. He should be doing everything he could, including search and rescue, instead of applying band-aids and ace wraps. But they hadn’t been dispatched first. They weren’t the closest. It would have taken them longer to get there than squads two, six, and seven.

Still, Zach hated being on the periphery of anything.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to remove your... scales.” Zach was proud of himself for only hesitating slightly as he addressed the man he was kneeling next to.

Of course, the man, who was dressed as what Zach could best describe as half man-half alligator, didn’t look impressed.

“They’re not scales. They’re body plates,” the man said.

“Is there a difference?” Why had he asked that? He didn’t care one way or the other.

“You’re born with scales; you *apply* body plates.”

Right. “Well, I’m going to need you to remove them so I can get your blood pressure,” Zach told him.

The alligator man exposed a spot on his arm for the blood pressure cuff, and Zach worked on focusing on one thing at a time. Regardless of how the victims were dressed, they all had actual human blood, bones, and organs inside that needed attention. But the injured here presented a challenge Zach hadn’t encountered on any of the crazy calls he’d been on in his five

years as an EMT in Boston. It was hard to tell which red streaks were blood and which were stripes of paint, which protruding appendages were broken or dislocated bones and which were horns or dorsal fins or extra arms or legs. It was even hard to tell which victims were male or female, young or old, or how tall some of them were—he'd just assisted a guy who had been on stilts underneath his long, black wizard's cape. Or had he been a warlock? Hell if Zach knew.

"Hey, need more hands on deck in the middle. How are things out here?"

Zach looked up to find Troy at his side. "Good. We've cleared a bunch out."

"Great. Let's go."

He was more than ready to get into the thick of things. "Blood pressure is good." Zach released the alligator man's arm. "You're not bleeding anywhere. You don't have any tenderness except on that rib. I'm guessing you have a crack. You need to get to the doctor to be sure."

"You're not taking me?"

Zach glanced around and then gave the man a look to say "are you kidding me?" "There are going to be a lot of people not able to get themselves there. You should be grateful you're not one of them." Zach shouldered his bag and turned to Troy. "Ready."

As they started toward the center of the convention hall, three figures went running past, almost tripping Zach. They were short and wore identical wigs of shaggy brown hair and had capes flapping out behind them.

"Munchkins?" he asked. He'd seen that movie. Probably.

"Hobbits," Troy said.

"Ah." He'd heard of them. He was pretty sure.

"You have to know hobbits," Troy said with a laugh.

"Some kind of dwarves, right?"

"Jesus, don't let any of them hear you say that," Troy said. Then he gave Zach another grin. "And go to the movies sometime."

"I go to movies." Well, at one point he'd gone to movies. But yeah, it had been awhile. Sitting still for two hours straight was not his thing.

"Go to a movie without a sports theme," Troy said.

"You saw the hobbit movie?" Zach asked.

"All six of them."

Zach glanced over at his friend, his mouth open to reply, but his gaze landed just beyond Troy's left shoulder. Words deserted him, and every thought evaporated but one—*I could be a Trekkie for one night.*

Because the woman who could make him care about all of this was standing one hundred feet away.

She was on her feet—and her own two feet without the help of stilts or platforms—but she was yanking on the skirt of her dress, trying to pull the bottom from under a pile of debris. Her attention, however, was on two women talking with other EMTs. One woman, dressed in purple from head to toe, was sitting on the ground, wincing as one of the EMTs pressed fingers into her side. The other was in white, with streaks of blood red. Literal blood red from the gash on her head.

Zach immediately started in the direction of the woman who had first caught his attention.

“Zach, hey!”

He glanced back at Troy. “Got somebody.” He gestured toward the woman.

Troy looked over. “Looks like Steve and Reed have this.”

Zach shook his head. “She needs me.”

As he approached, Zach's gaze worked from her feet up. Well, the one foot he could see since he could only see her right side. She wore a flat gold slipper on a tiny foot that connected to a delicate ankle that connected to a smooth calf that led to a toned thigh. Her leg wasn't long but the inches of smooth skin he could see still made his heart thump. It peeked from the slit in the skirt of an emerald green dress that flared below her hips but hugged her waist and breasts. Her shoulders were bare, and she had a gold necklace around her throat that connected to the light green cape draped down her back. Her long brown hair was held away from her face by a circle of gold adorned with green gems that caught the sunlight as she moved. She had small ears and a small nose, but large round eyes.

She was cute. That was the best word.

And most of all, she sparkled.

Literally.

From her cute forehead to the sweet breasts behind the bodice of the dress to the top of her petite foot, every inch of skin he could see was gold. Not *golden*. Gold. Shiny, gold coin gold. Like the ones in the leprechaun's pot at the end of a rainbow or pirate's treasure chest.

Clearly it was some kind of body paint, but the fact that it had him thinking about leprechauns and pirates made Zach wonder if it wasn't a little magical too. Because he really wasn't a leprechaun or pirate kind of guy.

He was the kind of guy to wonder just how committed she was to that body paint though. Had she painted only the skin that would show or had she gone all-in and painted *everything*?

Just then she looked around, and her gaze connected with his.

And Zach suddenly couldn't remember how to breathe.

Those big eyes in that cute gold face were outlined with thick black lines, surrounded by elaborate sparkling green, white, and black swirls almost like a half mask and her lashes were twice the length of normal lashes. But in spite of all of that, Zach could only focus on the huge black pupils surrounded by a deep French-roast-coffee brown color...and that they were filled with worry.

Sparkly gold breasts might get his heart pumping, but that look in her eyes sent a streak of protectiveness through him that was stronger than any feeling of lust.

She straightened quickly. "Oh my God, can you help me get free? I have to get to my friends." She yanked on the skirt of her dress.

"Definitely." He was prepared to do whatever this woman needed.

"We were together, but I hung back at this booth and then the ceiling came down and things went flying and they were hurt and I don't know what's going on." She was talking fast, her cheeks pink with adrenaline.

Out of instinct, Zach stepped close and took her upper arms in his hands, making her focus on him in an attempt to calm her. "Are those your friends?" he asked, gesturing toward the women in purple and white.

She nodded. "Maya and Sophie."

"Which one is in purple?" he asked.

"Maya." Her voice shook as she answered.

Zach bent his knees so he could look into her eyes, realizing as he did it that she was nearly a foot shorter than his six foot three. “Hey,” he said firmly and evenly. “I’m going to help.”

He had a lot of experience dealing with accident scene anxiety. He understood the pounding of the adrenaline that yanked oxygen from lungs and obliterated rational thought. Too well. But because of his own past experiences, he was the best victim communicator in Boston. It wasn’t as big a deal as a hostage negotiator or something, but the jobs involved a lot of the same skills. Being firm and thinking fast, but staying calm and reasonable at the same time.

The woman’s gaze clung to his with something he was very used to seeing at scenes—gratitude and hope. But that usually happened with little kids. The ones that looked at him like he was one of the super heroes that had brought people here today.

She started to nod her head. “Okay. I’m good. Just get me loose.”

“Alright,” he said calmly. “Are you hurt?”

He’d looked her over pretty thoroughly. Not necessarily with a professional eye, but he would have seen any major wounds or blood.

She shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“You didn’t get hit in the head or anything?”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. Hang tight.”

He crouched beside her, proud that his gaze only danced over her sparkly bare leg for a moment before examining how her dress was caught. The bottom of it was sandwiched in between a huge piece of metal and the floor. A huge piece of metal that had missed cracking her in the head by only inches. Zach felt a shudder go through him before he focused again. It didn’t do a damned bit of good to examine a scene with an eye to all the things that *could have* happened. He needed to deal with what *had* happened.

He pushed against the metal beam but quickly confirmed that he wasn’t moving the thing by himself. If it had been on someone’s leg or something, he would have recruited help, but this was a skirt. He withdrew his pocket knife and slashed the bottom of the skirt, parting the material and freeing her within a matter of seconds. If she was upset about her dress...

The woman took off at a run the moment she was loose.

“Hey!” Zach followed.

She ran toward the two women being treated. “Maya! Sophie!”

His buddy Reed was the EMT working on one of the woman’s friends. Zach strode forward. Reed saw him coming.

“Check her out? For something?” Reed gestured toward the golden goddess.

She was fussing over the woman in purple. She was readjusting the ice pack Reed had put on the woman’s shoulder and was kneeling directly next to the woman’s injured arm. In Reed’s way. The look he gave Zach said *just get her out of here*.

“I can check her out,” Zach offered, pointing to Maya.

That was ridiculous, of course. Reed had already assessed her and had been cleaning a large gash on her forearm. Still, for some reason Zach wanted to give Maya his attention instead.

The woman was dressed in tight purple leather and was beautiful. And she didn’t stir him a bit. *That* was ridiculous. What guy wouldn’t respond to a beautiful woman in tight leather? But no, the woman that made his body hum was the one in green velvet and gold body paint.

“I’m good here,” Reed said. “She needs assessed.”

He gave a pointed look at the princess, who suddenly popped up and rushed to kneel next to the woman in white. Sophie. She was lying on her back and had a laceration above one eyebrow and goose egg already starting to show.

The princess was talking to her friend rapidly and trying to blot at the cut while Steve, another paramedic, moved around them, trying to evaluate if there were other injuries. The least Zach could do was help his fellow EMTs. With a sigh, Zach went over and took the princess by the arm. He tugged her to her feet.

“Hey!” She pushed against his hand. “Stop it.”

“I need to see if you’re okay.” When he started walking away from her friend, she dug her feet in, but Zach was twice her size. And not overcome with emotion.

Curiosity and attraction weren’t really emotions were they? And he couldn’t really be attracted to her anyway. He didn’t even actually know what she looked like because of her face paint and makeup.

“I’m fine.” She struggled against his hold.

She continued to try to peel his fingers off her arm until he got a few feet away and turned so her back was against the side of a still-intact vendor booth. He pressed her against it

and got right in her face, somehow ignoring the gold breasts that were now rising and falling rapidly only a few inches below his chin. And mouth.

Holy shit. Who knew that he had a thing for the color gold? Because that had to be it. He did *not* have a thing for girls who wore capes or for girls who went to Comic Cons. It had to be the shiny gold. Maybe he'd been a pirate in a past life and he had a centuries-long desire for sparkly treasure. Because pillaging and plundering suddenly sounded good.

He itched to run his hands all over her. Not to mention the tingling in his tongue. And even if they weren't in the middle of a trauma situation that needed his attention on things other than how gold-painted skin might taste, she was a victim. He couldn't mess around with a victim. That was Emergency Management 101.

But then he caught a whiff of her scent and the sweet smell only intensified the desire to taste. She smelled like candy flowers.

Jesus. Candy flowers? Really?

"You need to stay out of the way and let the guys do their jobs," he told her firmly. "You're not helping anyone right now."

Her gaze flickered to her friends. Her mouth tightened.

"Breathe," he told her. He ran his hands up and down her arms once, then immediately stopped because, dammit, that gold skin felt really good.

Her eyes locked on his. She nodded. And breathed.

"Zach, what is—" Troy came up behind them. "Oh."

"We have a little situation. No big deal," Zach said calmly, not taking his eyes off the woman.

"I see." Troy sounded surprised. Maybe even amused.

Zach didn't care. Surprised and amused was better than what *he* was feeling. Considering he was feeling aroused and protective and confused and worried all at once for a woman he'd just met. Who wore a cape. "While the guys are checking your friends over and treating their injuries, I'm going to make sure you're okay," he told the woman.

"I'm *fine*," she insisted.

Just because she wasn't feeling any pain at the moment didn't mean she wasn't injured though. Adrenaline did crazy things.

"Good. But we still need to be sure. How about we start with your name?"

She swallowed and licked her lips, and Zach figured he deserved a freaking medal for not watching the motion of the tip of her tongue. For more than two seconds.

“Kiera,” she finally told him.

“Is that your—” He let his gaze move up and down over her costume. “Elven name?”

Kiera lifted an eyebrow. “Elven?”

Okay, not an elf. “Your enchantress name?”

Her other eyebrow went up. “Strike two.”

It was a limb, for sure, but his chance of getting this right was a billion-to-one anyway.

“Your hobbit name?”

She snorted at that. Actually snorted. And it was the cutest thing he’d ever heard.

“You think I’m a hobbit?”

“Nope, pretty sure you’re not. But I don’t know what you are.”

“Kirenda. Warrior Princess of Leokin.” The corner of her mouth curled slightly. Also very cute.

But the word *Leokin* made him want to groan. He knew *World of Leokin*. It was the new worldwide online gaming phenomenon that had sucked his sister in and turned her into an anti-social, near-zombie over the past few months. Zach hated that game more than anything.

Of course the first woman he’d been attracted to in far too long was into WOL and dressing up for Comic Con. That was exactly how his luck had been going lately.

He swallowed his bitterness and focused on her. She was a victim, and he needed to assess her status. “And while you’re... dressed up... do I call you Kiera or is it strictly Your Majesty?”

She narrowed her eyes.

Apparently he’d miscalculated his charm on that one. He’d messed up somehow but he wasn’t sure if it was the *dressed up* part or the *Your Majesty* part. “What’d I say wrong?”

Just then an ambulance came bumping down the main aisle of the convention center.

“Who needs transport?” someone called.

“Over here!” Reed yelled to them.

Under his hands, Zach felt Kiera stiffen at the words. Clearly one of her friends was getting a ride to the hospital.

“Kiera!”

At the sound of a woman calling to her, Kiera slipped around him and ran back to her friends.

Dammit. Zach followed, wanting to be there when they told her about her friends' injuries. It had nothing to do with her gold breasts. But it might have had something to do with her big brown eyes.

He caught up with her as she rounded the back end of the ambulance.

"Is she okay?" Kiera asked Reed.

"She's got a nasty gash on her arm," Reed said. "And I'm concerned about her side there."

He pointed to her right side, and Zach knew he was worried about her spleen or a kidney.

"They'll want to do x-rays and tests, and I'm sure they'll keep her at least one night for monitoring," Reed summarized.

Zach leaned so he could see Kiera's face. "You okay?"

She looked up at him. The worry in her eyes made him want to pull her into his arms.

Whoa. What was that? He'd been in a lot of emergency situations, and that was definitely a first.

But she nodded. "I'm fine."

"Need another hand!" Zach heard someone call. He immediately ducked around a pile of metal and plastic. They were getting ready to roll Kiera's other friend onto a backboard.

An EMT was kneeling with the board while another stabilized the woman's neck. Zach got into position knowing exactly what they needed. One of the EMTs made sure her spine didn't move, while Zach knelt and slid his forearms under her hips and they slowly shifted her onto the board.

Once she was secured, Zach stood back as the others picked the board up.

"Her neck hurts," the EMT at her head filled Zach in. "But she can move all of her extremities and feels touch and pain."

It wasn't a bad report. Neck trauma was never good but the fact that she could move and feel things was positive.

"Oh my God!"

Zach's attention snapped to Kiera who had followed him.

“We’ve got her, Kiera,” he said in a firm, soothing voice. “We’re going to take care of her.” He stepped in front of her, willing her to look at him instead.

As the EMTs started for the ambulance with Sophie, she said Kiera’s name.

“She can’t turn her head to look at you,” Zach said. “You can get close so she can see and talk to you.”

Kiera swallowed hard and moved beside her friend. She took the woman’s hand. “Soph, I’m right here.”

“I have a guy coming to check the lighting at the theater on Monday.”

Kiera frowned and squeezed her hand. “You’ll be okay by Monday.”

She glanced up at Zach, and he felt her clear desire for reassurance like a punch to the gut.

He swallowed and nodded. “I’m sure you’ll be feeling a lot better by then.” But he had no idea if she’d be out of the hospital or back to work.

“Just promise you’ll remember to go down there for me if I can’t,” Sophie said.

“Yes, of course I promise.”

“You swear you’ll remember? It’s at two p.m.”

Even from where Zach stood, he could see the dubious look Sophie was giving Kiera.

“I will absolutely try my very hardest to remember,” Kiera said.

“I’ll call you to remind you,” Sophie told her.

Kiera sighed and looked at Steve. “Her ability to nag is a good sign, right?”

Steve chuckled. “It is.”

They loaded Sophie into the ambulance and then Maya walked over with Reed’s support.

“You’re going too?” Kiera asked, the worried expression immediately back.

“Precautionary,” Maya said. “Or so I’m told.” She winced as she climbed up into the back of the rig with Reed’s help. “Reed here doesn’t get that margaritas can fix anything, and that free margaritas are the best kind.”

“Where were we going to get free margaritas?” Kiera asked.

“Well, they’d be free for me. You totally owe me for dragging me down here for this.”

Kiera flinched, and Zach felt the stupid desire to come to her defense. But that was ridiculous.

“This is what you get for making me leave the house,” Kiera said.

Her tone wasn't totally light-hearted, but Zach saw the smile Maya gave her.

"Touché," the woman in purple said with a nod.

They started to slam the back door.

"Hey!" Maya stopped the door with a hand on the window. "You," she said, pointing at Zach.

He stepped closer. "Yeah?"

"Take care of her." She pointed at Kiera.

Zach turned to the warrior princess. "You got it," he promised Maya.

"Can't I..." Kiera said, watching them shut the back door of the ambulance and start weaving the vehicle back out of the hall.

"No room, princess," Zach said gently. "Non-victims don't get to ride in the cool trucks with the sirens."

She was still watching the ambulance, and she nodded absently. "Okay."

He moved in front of her and crouched to get on eye level. "You can go right over and see them at the hospital. Mass General. If you're not family, they might not be able to tell you much, but if you can get in touch with their families, they can come and sit with you, right?"

She nodded again but Zach wasn't sure she'd heard him. He really wanted to know that someone was going to be there with her. Shock in survivors wasn't uncommon. The that-could've-been-me thing could kick in at any moment if it hadn't already. But there was nothing like seeing someone you cared about hurt.

He put his hands on her arms again, this time rubbing up and down and just ignoring how good her skin felt against his rough palms. Mostly. He needed to comfort her more than he needed to worry about how *she* made *him* feel.

"Do you know where Mass General is?" He didn't love the idea of her driving herself over there. She was clearly overwhelmed.

Kiera nodded. "Yes."

"You can get there?" he asked.

She nodded again.

Okay. So...

"Zach! Let's go!"

Zach glanced over at Reed. His co-workers needed help so he was going to be here for a while. He couldn't be messing around, obsessing about a woman who liked to play dress-up.

"Kiera, I need to go but..."

"Yeah, of course." She shook her head and looked around. "You go."

"But..." But nothing. She was fine, and he was needed by people who weren't fine.

"Okay."

He had the fleeting thought that he wanted to kiss her goodbye. But that was crazy. They'd just met. In the middle of an emergency. No way should he kiss her.

Finally, he let go of her and stepped back. But not touching her didn't do a thing to make him *not* want to touch her. He forced himself to turn away and head toward Reed, trying to clear his mind of green and gold sweet-smelling flowers as he went. But when he got about twenty feet from her, he glanced back.

And she was still standing there. Hugging herself. Looking lost.

Fuck.

"I'll be right there," he told Reed.

Reed glanced back. "Dude..."

"I know." And he did. He needed to not be distracted. But the only way that was going to happen was if he knew for sure that Kiera was taken care of.

He jogged back to her side. "Hey princess, what's up?"

She looked at him, and her look of confusion cleared. That made him feel stupidly good.

"I don't have a way..."

She trailed off, and Zach frowned. "You don't feel up to driving?"

"We brought Sophie's car, and her fob thingy is with her."

Ah. A little issue. "You have someone you can call?"

"I didn't bring my phone."

"You can use mine."

"No one's home. I live with Maya and Sophie," she said. "Obviously, they're not... there."

Her voice wobbled, and Zach worked on not grabbing her and hugging her.

They'd just fucking met. Hugging and kissing wasn't appropriate. *Dammit.*

"How about a cab?"

“I don’t have any money.”

He looked her over again, revisiting the curves he realized he’d already memorized. He could give her money for a cab of course. He could get her home. But she’d be home alone. He could get her to the hospital, but they wouldn’t talk to her and she’d be stuck in the waiting room for God knew how long. Alone.

And leaving her alone was simply something he could not do.

“You need to come with me.” He reached out and snagged her hand before he could tell himself that holding her hand was a bad idea.

Because it was. Her hand felt good in his, and the way she curled her fingers around his tightly and followed him without question felt good. And the idea that he was going to get to spend more time with her felt good. And all of that was bad. And yet, he pulled her along with him through the convention hall and into the heart of the chaos.

“What are we doing?” she asked.

“I need to go help with some more injured. And I need you to stick with me.”

“Me? Why?”

He looked over at her. Her cape floated behind her, and for the first time, he noticed the golden sword swinging at her left hip. Damn. That was kind of hot. “Because you’re a gorgeous kick-ass warrior princess, and the people in here are gonna need some gorgeous kick-ass stuff.”

She looked at him with surprise, but as he held her gaze, he saw something that turned him on even more than her smelling like candy—a spark of determination. She pulled up straighter as she walked, and he felt her hand tighten on his.

“Kick ass. Right. I can do that.”

He smiled. “And I could use some help from an interpreter.”

“An interpreter? I speak some Spanish but that’s about it.”

“You don’t speak geek?” He hoped he wasn’t committing a faux pau in calling her, and all of this, geeky.

But she actually gave him a half smile. “Oh, *geek*. Yes, I’m fluent.”

Chapter Two

Zach grinned at her. “That’s what I need.”

Kiera felt her heart flip. That grin. *Dang*.

She immediately recognized what it was, of course —pure adrenaline. But that didn’t make the flip any less strong. But it wasn’t throw-me-over-your-shoulder-and-take-me-to-bed adrenaline. It was throw-me-over-your-shoulder-and-carry-me-out-of-here adrenaline. This guy had come striding confidently through the dust and confusion and had freed her. Of course she was projecting feelings of affection and attraction on him.

But adrenaline-fueled fantasy or not, that grin was lethal. She even felt a little dizzy looking at it. And nauseous. Kiera frowned. No, not nauseous from his smile. Just... off-balance. Or dazed. Or something.

Zach squeezed her hand, and she took a deep breath. She really loved his hands. When he’d held onto her and when he’d run them up and down her arms, she’d felt reassured. His touch had been warm and steady, and she’d needed it in those moments. He’d known exactly how to make her feel safe in the midst of the chaos, and it was definitely working now too. Zach was a big guy. Well, big in the over-six-foot, big hands, big feet, big grin way. He had a wide chest and shoulders, but his stomach was flat, his legs long, and his butt tight...

Kiera frowned. When had she had time to notice his butt?

When he’d squatted next to Sophie to help her up.

Kiera was not going to analyze what kind of friend that made her.

As they moved deeper into the convention center, there was more of everything— more mess, more people, more noise, more problems. Kiera crowded close to Zach. So what if it was a shock-reaction? Being close to him made her feel better.

Zach stopped next to another man in uniform. “Where do we start?”

“Anywhere,” the other man said grimly.

“Got it.” Zach tucked Kiera closer to him. “Stay close okay?” he asked her.

She nodded. “Absolutely no problem.” When she’d been standing alone, the ambulance driving off in one direction and Zach walking in the other direction from her, she’d felt so discombobulated. She was really not herself at the moment, and he was the only steady thing around her.

Zach glanced side to side. “We don’t often manage such a huge scene, but I promise we don’t need superpowers or capes to get our jobs done.”

Yep, that calm assurance was definitely sexy.

“Your uniform is kind of a superhero outfit though,” she said.

He looked down and grinned. “Yeah?”

“It tells people that you’re here to help and gives them a sense of comfort.”

He seemed a little surprised, but he said, “Well, I’m glad to hear it.”

“And you saved me with just a pocketknife,” she said, trying for a light-hearted tone. She felt his hand tighten around hers.

“Yeah, we’re just regular guys.” He paused. “Okay, really awesome, strong, and smart regular guys.”

She smiled. “I won’t argue with any of that. You’re making me feel better.”

She cringed even as the words were barely out. That sounded clingy. She blamed the whole one-of-us-could-have-died-today thing. But the big, solid body moving against hers wasn’t helping. She *wanted* to cling to him. Her head hurt and she was still feeling like the room was spinning at times. She needed something to hang on to. Or someone.

“Well, that’s definitely pumping up my ego. It’s not every day I get to rescue a beautiful princess.”

Don’t let that get to you. He’s placating you. He’s just flirting to keep you calm.

He tugged her around the stretched-out legs of a couple of people already being tended to. “I’m guessing you take care of most of the mass disasters that occur in your kingdom though, right?”

“We don’t have mass disasters,” she said, completely straight-faced. Maybe if she tapped into Kirenda a bit, she’d make it through the rest of this without sounding pitiful. She might sound crazy, considering Kirenda was a fictional video game character, but crazy was preferable to pathetic. “But I do lead troops into battle when necessary.”

“Battle, huh?”

“Yep.”

Princesses in Leokin weren't just figureheads. Kiera had made sure of that. Of course, when her friends, Pete Candon and Dalton Sagel, had first come up with *World of Leokin* in a dive bar just off campus six years ago, she'd never imagined the guys would eventually turn those scribbled notes and beer-infused ideas into the fastest growing video game franchise in history. But they had, and they'd used all of Kiera's beer-infused input too. Which meant, even though she was a princess, she got to participate in good battle once in awhile. Lopping the head off a troll or two was a great way to work out pent-up frustration. Even if their heads did grow back during the next full moon.

Zach grinned. “You probably don't even need to unsheathe your sword to get most of the opposing army to surrender,” he said.

“Why do you think that?”

“Unless all the men in bordering kingdoms are stupid, they'd *want* to be captured by you.”

Oh, he thought he was so smooth. Kiera fought the smile that threatened. As far as diversions went, he was pretty good.

“I'm not their type.”

“No? I find that hard to believe.”

“The trolls would rather feed me to their dragons, and the centaurs on our eastern border only mate with their own kind.”

Zach studied her for a moment as if trying to decide if she was messing with him. Then he said simply, “Glad I'm not a troll or a centaur.”

Yep, definitely smooth.

He was playing along. That was nice. But she kind of hated feeling like a little kid he needed to play along with in the first place.

Still, maybe thinking about how everyone in Leokin got six lives as long as they lived them with virtue and honor was better than thinking about the fact that her friends were at the hospital right now.

Zach stopped next to a tall man sitting with his back against a wooden booth that had survived the collapse. He was easily in his sixties, with a long white beard that was clearly real. He was clutching one arm with the other and was very pale.

Zach dropped Kiera's hand and squatted next to the man. "Sir? I'm Zach. I'm an EMT. Can I help you?"

The man looked up but seemed to have some trouble focusing. "My arm."

"Did something hit you or did you fall?" Zach asked, opening the bag and pulling out a blood pressure cuff.

Kiera stood to the side, hugging her arms across her body, watching. She felt a little cold without Zach right against her, and yet there was a definite heat watching him do his EMT thing. He had a deep voice, and he kept it soothing and calm as he checked the man over for injuries.

The man didn't answer. He was staring past Zach's shoulder.

"Sir? Can you tell me what day it is?"

"The attack came out of nowhere," the man mumbled. "We weren't prepared."

"Sir, can you look at me?"

The man wore a floppy black hat that covered most of his skull and Kiera realized that any head injury would be hard to assess with the hat in the way. Zach reached up to remove the hat, but the man jerked away.

"You can not touch a Sorcerer of Relmand."

Relmand. One of Leokin's allies. Kiera grinned. Of the two of them, Zach might be the all-knowing healer, but this man needed a little geek first. She was definitely a little geek. "Your Greatness, I have word from the king."

Zach pivoted so quickly that he almost fell over. Kiera ignored him, not wanting to smile, or worse, feel like an idiot, as she knelt at the sorcerer's feet and addressed him.

The man focused on her, and something changed in his face. He went from overcome to earnest in a flash. "You are from Leokin."

"I am," she said with a nod. "We were also caught unaware. But our King fights alongside yours to defend our kingdom, and they have enlisted the help of these men to tend our fallen."

She felt Zach staring at her. She knew it was in part the lilt she'd added to her voice and probably that she was gazing back at the man in black as if all of the things she was saying were real and... not crazy.

"These men are sent from the King?" the older man asked.

"They are," Kiera assured him.

The man looked at Zach. “They don’t look like much.”

Kiera smiled quickly but hid it before the man looked back at her. “Sir, I—” she started.

But then Zach said, “Our powers are well hidden so the enemy doesn’t capture us and use us on his side.”

Oh my God. She had to work to not stare at him, mouth hanging open. He was going along with this? In character even? Really? Why? And how could she *not* like him now? Emotional trauma or not, she might be in trouble here.

Kiera was completely composed—on the outside anyway— by the time the older man looked back to her for confirmation.

With the man’s head turned, Zach did take the opportunity to inspect the back of his neck, but Kiera knew that Zach needed to see everything that was still covered as well.

“Sir, can you tell me what the date is?” Zach asked again.

“It’s day three of the great battle,” he said. “We’re going on the eighth hour.”

Okay, well it was day three of the convention and was about eight hours since the doors had opened that morning. She gave Zach a quick nod.

Zach actually shook his head. Did he think she was weird? It didn’t matter. The injured man was the priority. In fact, the weirder Zach thought she was, the less likely it was that he’d keep flirting and charming her. And that was a good thing. Because hot guys who didn’t know anything about *Leokin* or wizards or any of the other things she adored were firmly and forever *off* her to-date list.

“You need to rest,” she told the older man. Kiera moved closer and put a hand on his shoulder. He let her guide him to a supine position on the floor, and as she did, she slipped his hat from his head and laid it on his stomach. “He has everything you need,” Kiera said, gesturing to Zach. “Your care is in his hands. As ordered from the king,” she added.

Kiera met Zach’s amazed gaze. And winked at him.

Why did you wink at him?

His eyes went hot as a grin stretched his mouth.

Oh, that’s why.

##

Suddenly, Kiera was on her feet and backing away. Zach frowned. She couldn't leave. Zach started to stand, but the man chose that moment to say, "The Leokinese are a beautiful people."

Um... yes, they were.

Zach got back to work, but he kept track of Kiera out of the corner of his eye, grateful she hadn't gone too far.

Ten minutes later, the man had passed all of the general assessments. He had a huge bump on his head but he was otherwise fine. Then he started talking about wizards.

"So you have wizards in your world?" the man asked him.

They did. They played basketball in Washington D.C.

"Yes."

"Ah." The man nodded. "A well-trained wizard can be an asset to any kingdom."

"Are they different from you and other sorcerers?" Zach was proud that he didn't even look around to see if his buddies were within earshot to hear that question.

"In our world, wizards are made—through study and training—while sorcerers are born," he said.

Well, Wizards on the courts in D.C. didn't get there without study and training, that was for sure. "I would say it's the same for us," Zach told him.

The man gave him a big smile. "Then you are fortunate."

"Seems you are too," Zach said, leaning back on his heels. "Minor cuts and scrapes, no indication of internal bleeding, no fractures." He grabbed a cold pack from his bag, snapped it in the middle to mix the cooling chemicals, and pressed it against the bump on the man's head. "But you're going to need to have your head checked."

The man gave a low chuckle. "My kids have been telling me that for years."

Zach grinned at this first glimpse behind the veil. "I wouldn't seek treatment for anything but this lump," he told the older man sincerely.

He meant it. The man wasn't doing anything but enjoying a few hours in a world that made him happy. He wasn't hurting anyone.

"Thank you, Zach," the man said, holding the cold pack to his injury. "You've been very kind."

Because of Kiera. He was kind and caring to all of his patients, but he knew he would have grown frustrated with this guy's role playing and no way would he have gone along with it. Zach glanced over to where Kiera was standing, watching them.

"Um..." He forced himself to look back to his patient. "I'm going to put you down for transport to the ER. But it might be a bit. There are others who will be more critical."

The man nodded and reached under his robe. "I'll just call my daughter. She can take me."

At the sight of the cell phone, Zach smiled. "I didn't realize Relmand had cell service."

"It's spotty in the woods and over the Calanthe Mountains," the wizard said, grinning. "But if you stay in the villages, it's not bad."

Zach laughed and got to his feet. "It was nice to meet you."

"You too. Go to your princess."

He wanted to do exactly that. More than he should. He headed in her direction, and when she saw him coming, she gave him a big smile that sent his heart thudding against his ribs.

"How's our wizard?" she asked.

"Sorcerer," Zach corrected without thinking.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Very good."

"You were testing me?" He wanted to reach out and pull her closer. He gripped his bag tighter instead.

"Maybe a little."

There was a twinkle in her eyes now that had nothing to do with the sparkly eye shadow surrounding them. And he decided that they were more the color of rich chocolate brownies. One of his favorite things.

"He called his daughter on his cell phone for a ride to the ER."

"Ah." She looked pleased. "That's good."

"Thanks for your help back there." He moved a few inches closer. "That was pretty great."

"No problem. Escaping reality is a specialty of mine."

His first reaction to that was *damn*. He lived very firmly in the real world. His second reaction, however, was surprising and went along the lines of role playing and costumes in the bedroom.

He cleared his throat and gave her a grin he was sure worked in any universe. “Reality can be good.”

She looked up at him with a thoughtful expression. “That has not been my general experience.”

He had to admit it hadn’t always been his either, and he was tempted to see what it would be like to spend more time escaping the real world with Kiera. Even if it would lead to an evening of her regaling him with stories of quests for hidden treasure or something. Because being regaled by Kiera seemed like a hell of an idea suddenly. And yeah, maybe *regaled* meant something different in his world.

“You okay sticking with me for a little longer?” She had not only been helpful, but he was enjoying having her around.

She took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“Great.”

It didn’t take long to find someone who needed him. Zach knelt and immediately started his assessment on a woman with a bloody foot, but he glanced up. It was always a good idea to keep an eye on other people at a scene. If one of them fainted and fell, they could turn into another patient quickly.

Kiera looked pale.

“Kiera,” he said sharply, “sit down.”

She plopped to the floor on her butt. She was still staring at the woman’s foot. Clearly the warrior didn’t do well with blood. Real blood anyway.

“Hey,” Zach said to her softly, but firmly.

Kiera looked at him.

“Gorgeous and kick-ass, right?”

Her eyes widened slightly as she processed his words. Then she nodded and pulled in a deep breath. “Right.”

“Are you Felicity Smoak?” Kiera asked the woman as Zach began his assessment.

The woman turned her head toward Kiera with a small smile. “Yep.”

“I always liked Felicity the most of all of Oliver’s women,” Kiera said.

They chatted about what Zach surmised to be a television show called *Arrow* while he determined the woman had no other significant external injuries. He started to clean the wounds on her ankle and foot. She needed to get the hospital to be assessed for internal injuries.

“So I’m clearly missing out by not watching *Arrow*,” he commented. If he could get Kiera snuggled up next to him on the couch, he might just be willing to turn his TV away from ESPN for a night. Or two.

Then he shook that thought off. He didn’t have time to be cuddled up on the couch for anything or with anyone. The last thing he needed was another woman in his life to worry about. The amount of concern and protectiveness he’d already felt for Kiera was more than he needed to take on for anyone outside of his own messed-up family.

“Felicity Smoak is an ally and love interest of millionaire playboy Oliver Queen, aka *Arrow*,” Kiera said. She turned to the other woman with a smile. “And you look just like her.”

Zach carefully began splinting and wrapping her ankle, and she sucked in a quick breath and gritted her teeth.

Kiera leaned in. “Did you watch *The Flash*? I love how they did the crossovers with *Arrow*.”

The woman opened her eyes and smiled at Kiera. “I did. I was so happy it got renewed for another season.”

He finished wrapping her up and radioed for transport, as Kiera distracted her. A few minutes later, he helped load Felicity into the back of a rig. As they drove off, he turned to Kiera. He might not have time to watch TV with her, but he was impressed and intrigued by her and he liked to think it was about more than her breasts. And the dress that showed flashes of smooth, toned legs. And the way her hair fell down her back in silky waves that made him itch to touch. And the sword that was surprisingly sexy. “Thanks again for the help.”

“My pleasure.” She frowned, seemingly puzzled by that. “It was nice to be able to help.”

He smiled. The hero thing was addictive. He knew well. “I have some more work to do.”

“Yeah, you’ll be here for a while.”

“Do you...” He cleared his throat. “Would you stay?” he asked. “I know nothing about *Arrow*. God knows what else I’m going to run into here.” He wanted her to stay so he could keep an eye on her and make sure she was okay. At least that was part of it.

She laughed and nodded. “I can stay.”

They worked together for the next hour and twenty minutes. She helped calm a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle while Zach splinted his arm. She talked about some Ryan Reynolds movie with a teenaged girl wearing a t-shirt that read *Save a broom, Ride a wizard* while Zach cleaned a deep cut around her eye. She talked Batman sequels with a man with a significant crush injury to his leg while Zach started an IV and gave him a shot of a painkiller while waiting for the ambulance. Zach helped start an airway, hooked up three more IVs, and cleaned more cuts and scrapes than he could count. And all the while, Kiera was there, talking to the patients, handing Zach supplies and generally just making everyone feel better.

Maybe especially him. Big disasters were tough on the first responders and rescue workers too. There was no rest while patients were still in need. There was no break. And there were statistically higher odds of not being able to help some victims. Zach didn't deal well with not being able to help people.

Kiera looked exhausted and still a little pale as he walked with her toward the front of the convention center an hour and a half later.

"How about I let you tell me all about Princess Kirenda over dinner?" he heard himself ask.

Why had he done that? He didn't have the time or energy to date anyone. Too many other people in his life needed his attention right now.

But he did have to eat.

And eating while listening to Kiera go on and on about... whatever... would be better than eating and *not* listening to Kiera go on and on. As long as he could be sitting close enough to smell those candied flowers and maybe touch that gold skin and start inching that emerald green dress down a little farther—

"And you're going to tell me all about the brachial plexus and how the tibia and fibula connect?"

He pulled his gaze from her cleavage to her eyes. She knew the brachial plexus?

"I read books," she said to his unasked question.

He moved closer and dropped his voice. "Well, I can tell you about any body part you're interested in."

He saw the interest flare in her eyes, whether she wanted him to or not.

The corner of her mouth curled slightly. "Is that right?"

“Absolutely.”

Zach watched Kiera consider the invitation for a few seconds.

“I should warn you,” she finally said. “I’m immune to charm.”

“You got a shot or something?” he asked. She amused him. He couldn’t help it.

“You’re right. More likely it’s an allergy,” she said thoughtfully.

He felt his mouth quirk. “An allergy? To charm?”

“Yeah, my stomach feels a little funny.”

He gave her a slow grin. “Oh, those are butterflies, princess. And that’s a *good* symptom.”

##

Kiera gave a little huff of laughter. Which was amazing after the day she’d had. She’d never seen anything like the convention center. Her head was throbbing, and she felt light-headed and like she could sleep for the next fourteen hours straight. Plus she was worried about Maya and Sophie. But she’d felt like she’d truly helped a lot of people today. She’d felt bonded with people over her interests in *World of Leokin* and comic books and superheroes before, but today that bond had felt... important. It had helped some people through a pretty horrible experience.

And she’d met Zach.

Which was noteworthy. Because he was right. Those were most definitely butterflies. And she hadn’t felt butterflies over a guy in forever.

But Zach’s grin said that he fully *expected* her to have butterflies around him. That should annoy her. Instead, it made the damned things swoop and swirl even faster.

She was responding to cocky.

She *never* responded to cocky. Anymore.

Confidence was attractive for sure, but there was a difference between cocky and confident. A subtle but definite difference.

Zach Ashley had both. Not to mention the hero thing. But she’d bet nine-and-a-half out of ten women got a few butterflies because of the hero thing. That wasn’t a concern so much as it was something to be careful about. She wouldn’t let herself get too caught up in the way he

could clean and bandage a wound with sure, steady, strong hands, all the while smiling and joking and putting off this air of I've-totally-got-this.

Especially because he was also alarmingly good looking. Ignoring that fact would be like denying that the North Star was in the northern sky.

But he didn't know wizards from wombats. He didn't know anything about *Arrow*. He couldn't have picked Felicia Day out of a line-up of kickass gamer girl redheads.

There was no way she could think for two seconds about even having dinner with him. Not to mention developing a completely over-the-top, blushing-giggling-butterflies-in-her-stomach crush on him.

She'd been there. *So* been there. And had no desire to go again.

Plus she was twenty-seven years old, for God's sake. Blushing and giggling and butterflies were in her past. She was a mature, intelligent, professional woman. Who dressed up as a warrior princess on the weekends.

She sighed.

At one time she would have downplayed her interests and laughed it all off so that Zach didn't think she was weird. But she'd done that once and had still gotten her heart broken. She'd then spent a period of time hating herself for trying to change for someone and then hating herself for hating herself for that.

She wasn't going to change for anyone ever again.

Including the hot hero who was really cute about not knowing anything about wizards but who had played along with a scared, hurt old man anyway.

"I can't," she said. "But thanks."

"You can't?" he frowned. He probably didn't recognize a woman turning him down for... anything.

"My two best friends are in the hospital. I have to go check on them."

She did. She'd been trying to put Sophie and Maya's injuries out of her mind so she wouldn't freak out or break down and be no good to anyone here. But the truth was, she had no idea how they were.

"Holy shit." Zach was staring at her. "You're right. Fuck. I can't believe I forgot that." Then he grimaced. "Sorry about the fuck. And the holy shit. And forgetting."

She smiled. "Not offended. And don't worry about it. You've been preoccupied."

His eyes roamed over her face. “Yeah I have. But maybe not by what you think.”

Goosebumps danced up and down her arms. “Anyway, I should get to the hospital.” Besides, the idea of food made her queasy.

“You definitely should,” he agreed. He grabbed her hand and started toward the front of the convention center.

“Where are we going?” Kiera asked.

“I’m getting you to the hospital.” With the hand not holding hers, he pulled his phone out and started swiping his thumb over the screen as he walked.

Well, that would be a way of extending their time together without it being a *date*. Or whatever dinner would have been. He hadn’t let go of her hand yet, and he still didn’t when he paused just inside the conference center’s doors.

He pulled her around to face him. “I confirmed that Sophie and Maya were both taken to Mass General.”

“You did?”

“Texted a buddy in the ER.”

“Oh, great. Thanks.”

He reached into his pocket and tugged his wallet free. He did let go of her then to pull a twenty from it. He handed it over, and Kiera’s cheeks got hot again. He was giving her money for a cab. *Damn*. She suddenly didn’t want him taking care of her. She didn’t want him to see her as just another person he was being paid to help.

“I’ll pay you back,” she said quickly. She did need it. Or she’d have to walk to the hospital.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He gave her a grin. “That means I’ll get to see you again.”

Okay, he was a hot guy who saved lives and had a grin that made her tingle. Big deal.

“No, I can mail it. Just give me your address.” She reached for the money.

He pulled it back out of reach. “I’d rather have a personal delivery.”

She couldn’t meet his eyes and focused on his collar instead. She wasn’t a mess— she really wasn’t— but in spite of her warrior princess outfit and her sword, she knew she’d come across that way today. Hell, her outfit and sword—spray painted foam board, of course—probably made her seem even more pitiful, like someone who could only be tough when she was pretending to be someone else.

“It’d be better if I mailed it,” she said again, finally lifting her eyes to his.

He frowned slightly and handed her the twenty. “Okay, I’ll text you my address. What’s your number?”

She couldn’t help it. She smiled slightly. He was smooth. “Nice try.”

“Then I’ll give you my number. You can text me for my address, and I’ll text you back. But that seems less efficient.”

“Probably the easiest thing would be to mail it to you at work,” she said.

“You don’t know that address.”

“I can look it up.”

Finally, he gave up with a shake of his head. “What am I missing here? I’d like to see you again and thought you’d feel the same way.”

She swallowed her pride that wanted her to say “Nope, don’t feel the same way, thanks all the same” and told him the truth. “I like you. You made today... not horrible.”

Okay, part of the truth. He’d made today pretty damned great.

He gave a quick laugh. “Not sure I’ve ever had a woman describe time with me as not horrible.”

She could imagine.

“I just...” Dammit. She took a breath and blew it out. “I’m a geek, Zach. I love to cosplay. I game every single night. All of my friends are into this same Comic Con stuff. I go to every Marvel movie on opening day. I read fantasy and sci fi. I spend ninety-eight percent of my time on the computer—both for work and pleasure. I’m addicted to Table Top and Felicia Day is my idol.”

Zach looked at her for a long moment. Then just as she thought he was going to say “Yep you’re right, this will never work” or even “What the hell is Table Top?” he reached up, cupped her face between the two big capable hands that had been helping and healing all day, and pulled her in for a kiss.

No, not *a* kiss, Kiera corrected three point two seconds later. The. Best. Kiss. Ever.

It was not a meeting of lips. It was a full contact we-were-made-to-do-this fusion.

It literally made her head spin.

And then her legs got a little wobbly.

And the next thing she heard was “Kiera!” just before everything went black.

Chapter Three

Having a woman fall into his arms sounded like a compliment. But having one actually pass out while kissing him? That was new.

Zach strode into the emergency department at Massachusetts General Hospital with Kiera cradled in his arms.

“You can put me down now.”

He didn't respond. His jaw was clenched too tightly.

She'd only been unconscious for two minutes, but he'd already been on his way to the ambulance with her when she'd awakened. He'd found the huge goose egg on the back of her head and made her confess that she'd had a headache and felt dizzy and a little groggy all day.

A little groggy? She'd been amazing, helping him with patients and keeping everyone, including him, calm. And she'd been groggy during all of that? Damn. He wondered what she'd be able to do at full capacity.

“Zach! What's going on?” Sheila, the emergency department's receptionist, came around the front of the main desk.

“Comic Con. Concussion. Brief loss of consciousness,” he said.

“Bay four,” Sheila said. “Tom's around here somewhere.”

The place was crazy. It was usually busy, but the majority of the serious Comic Con injuries had been brought in here, so the activity level was now frenzied.

“Thanks.” Zach started for the fourth curtained area in the room. Tom Watson was one of Zach's favorite of the ER docs. He was glad Tom was going to check Kiera over.

“Kiera?” a female voice called out.

Zach turned to find Kiera's friends, Maya and Sophie, in bay two. Sophie was on the bed and Maya was in the chair next to the bed, but she sprung to her feet when she saw Kiera in his arms.

“Oh my God, what happened?”

She was across the floor and in front of him before Zach could blink.

“Nothing. I just have a little headache,” Kiera told her.

Zach frowned. “It’s not nothing. She has a concussion. She was hit in the head at some point but didn’t tell anyone. She fainted.”

Maya looked up at him. “Not really what I meant when I said you should take care of her.”

He scowled, but Maya didn’t look impressed. Or intimidated. She crossed her arms and frowned right back at him.

“Yeah,” he said shortly.

He felt the same damned way. It wasn’t his fault. He didn’t need to defend himself. But *fuck*. He couldn’t shake the feeling of panic that had hit him when Kiera had gone limp in his arms. She’d been with him all day and he hadn’t noticed anything. But he should have. This was what he did for a living. He took care of people. Hell, his job was who he was—a lifesaver, a hero. At least until six months ago when his sister had been killed and his world and family crumbled around him. Now it seemed he couldn’t get a fucking thing right. Not even recognizing a head injury in a woman he’d spend a solid two hours with.

Yeah, he was doing a bang-up job at the hero thing.

Kiera wiggled, and he tightened his hold. That streak of panic was probably why he hadn’t let go of her since she’d fainted. That and needing to prove that he could take care of her. And he wasn’t letting go of her yet. He wasn’t putting her down until there was a bed under her and a doctor looking her over.

“Zach—” Kiera started.

“Give me another minute,” he told her firmly. Of course she didn’t need him to carry her. This was all about him. He’d gone through the concussion protocol in the ambulance. He’d put an icepack on her head. He’d brought her here. That was what he could do. That’s what he would have done for anyone with a head injury.

But it didn’t feel like enough.

He headed for bay four, Maya right on his heels. He could feel the protective mama bear vibes coming off of her, but he wasn’t going anywhere. Not until he heard the doctor say Kiera was fine. He put her down on the bed and made himself take his hands off of her and step back. He didn’t want to. He wanted to keep touching her, as if, somehow, that would insure she was alright.

Kiera looked up at him with wide eyes. “Are you okay?”

He laughed humorlessly. “No.”

“*You* didn’t hurt me, Zach. And I’ll be fine.”

“But I didn’t—”

Tom Watson strode through the curtain just then. “Zach, what’s the situation?”

“Concussion.” He rattled off her assessment scores and recounted her symptoms and how long she’d been unconscious.

“How’d it happen?” Tom checked Kiera’s pupils then had her turn her head so he could see the lump.

Zach shook his head. “I didn’t see it. It was before—”

Tom looked over at him. “I was asking Kiera.”

“Right.” Zach shut up, but it was hard to just stand there.

“I don’t remember,” Kiera said. “I was too busy worrying about getting to Maya and Sophie. I saw them both get hit, and I guess it just blanked my own injuries out.”

“It’s not uncommon to have a temporary loss of memory, particularly of the injury, with a concussion,” Tom told her.

“I just have a headache,” Kiera protested. “I’m fine.”

“Kiera,” Maya said, with a frown. “Stop it.”

“I’d like to get a CT,” Tom went on. “Since no one saw the injury, and based on your assessment scores, I’d like to do it just to be sure.”

“But—” Kiera started to protest.

“Kiera, let him do his job.” The softer appeal came from Sophie, the curvy blond who had made her way to Kiera’s bedside.

“You shouldn’t be up,” Kiera protested when she saw her friend.

“I’m okay to walk five feet,” Sophie assured her. “My neck is fine. That was the main concern.”

“I’ll get the CT ordered,” Tom said and stepped outside of the curtains.

Zach resisted the urge to follow. What would he ask him? He knew everything Tom knew at this point. But he felt like he needed to be doing something.

“I hope this doesn’t take long,” Kiera said to her friends. “You guys have already been here for so long.”

“It’s been a madhouse,” Maya said. “They really just got both of us fully admitted and evaluated and everything. We’ve both had x-rays and CT scans too.”

“But you’re okay?” Kiera asked, concern lacing her tone.

“They’re moving us upstairs for observation overnight, but mostly yes,” Sophie told her. Kiera looked on the verge of tears as she took that in. “God, you guys. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Zach heard himself say.

Everyone turned to look at him.

He frowned. “Well, it’s not.” But why did he feel the need to jump in and defend her?

“I talked them into going to Comic Con today,” Kiera said.

“Well, it was Maya insisting that you get out of the house that prompted it,” Sophie said with a smile. “If she hadn’t nagged you, you’d still be up in your room working.”

Kiera shot a look at Zach and then frowned at her friend. “Okay, that’s... all we need to say about that.”

“You’re the one that said she had to pick a place with more than five other people and had to stay out longer than two hours,” Maya said to Sophie.

“You guys,” Kiera protested, her cheeks pink.

“You were the one that didn’t check the calendar. If you’d seen the date, you would have known she’d pick Comic Con,” Sophie told Maya.

Maya sighed. “True. But Comic Con shouldn’t have counted as social anyway,” Maya said. “That was basically work for her.”

“You didn’t say it couldn’t involve work,” Sophie said. “You just said it had to be out of the house and in clothes other than her *Galactic Renegades* pajama pants.” She grinned at Kiera. “She’s definitely not in her pajamas.”

“You *guys*,” Kiera said, her voice firmer. “Enough.”

Zach couldn’t help it. He was intrigued.

Someone arrived just then to take Kiera for her CT scan. Zach stepped forward as she started to get up from the bed to move to the wheelchair. He took her arm and more or less lifted her into the wheelchair.

She gave him a sweet smile that made him want to kiss her and insist on going along with her. Hell, part of him wanted to carry her to the test. All of which was ridiculous. When he stepped back, he caught Maya and Sophie exchanging a look.

He was making an ass of himself. Terrific.

As the tech rolled Kiera down the hall, Zach took a deep breath.

“You don’t have to wait around,” Maya said to him. “We’ll be here. And Rob can come and pick her up.”

Rob? Who the fuck was that? Zach relaxed the scowl he felt on his face before he turned. “I’m good. I think I’ll stick around.”

“Just to be sure she’s okay?” Maya asked.

“Yeah.”

“You give such personal service to all of the people you bring to the hospital?”

Zach realized what was going on. These were Kiera’s best friends. They were checking him out. But he couldn’t explain to them what he was feeling. Responsible? Sure. But it was more than that. As an EMT, he typically dropped people off at the ER and headed out again. So, hanging out to see how things turned out for Kiera was unusual.

He didn’t care. “Nope,” he said simply.

Maya nodded. “Okay.”

While Kiera was being scanned, Zach figured he’d run down to the locker room and change. He was off duty now and would head out as soon as he knew Kiera’s status. He didn’t have time to be hanging out in the ER all day and night. Hell, he shouldn’t still be here now.

He not only didn’t have time for another relationship in his life, he didn’t have the energy for it. Relationships took work. He’d learned that the hard way when he’d lost his sister Josie. He hadn’t been there for her. He hadn’t been paying attention. And now she was gone.

He was trying to give his other sister, Aimee, the time and attention she needed, but he felt like he was losing her too. Not physically maybe, but emotionally. No, physically too. She holed up in her room on her damned computer all of her waking hours. She gamed and slept. She didn’t go out, she didn’t eat anything but cereal, she didn’t even shower some days. So yeah, physically she wasn’t doing so well either.

He barely had energy left for his parents, who weren’t doing much better than Aimee. Zach had plenty of people he needed to help. He didn’t have the time for a warrior princess, no matter how kickass and gorgeous she was.

By the time he checked out with Troy and changed and grabbed his stuff, Zach had convinced himself not to stop back in the ER to check on Kiera. Her friends were there. She wasn't his responsibility.

He got halfway down the hall before he amended that to checking in with her quickly and then getting the hell out. But the moment he stepped into the emergency department and Kiera looked up and smiled at him, he realized he was screwed. He couldn't walk out. He was here for her until... Hell, he didn't even know. Until he was sure she didn't need him anymore, he supposed. Maya and Sophie were still there, each in a chair by Kiera's bed, but still he strode to her bedside, planting himself there for the foreseeable future.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her.

"Like everyone is fussing over me," she said.

"Good," he told her. "That's kind of the point."

"Kiera isn't very good at being the center of attention," Sophie said. "I can't get her on stage at the theater for anything."

Kiera rolled her eyes. "You should appreciate that I'm not trying to steal the spotlight from you."

Sophie laughed. "You've got me there."

Theater. Something else Zach knew very little about. But the mention of being on stage made him think of his sister. Josie had loved the spotlight. She'd been doing a show with her band the night she'd been killed. Her love of the stage had been the reason she'd been on the road so late.

He cleared his throat. "How's your head?" he asked, focusing on Kiera again.

"Hurts," she admitted.

"That might be like that for a few days," Tom said, stopping at the end of Kiera's bed. "But your scan is clear."

Thank, God, Zach thought.

"You have a moderate concussion," Tom went on. "And it could progress over the next seventy-two hours. We'll need to keep an eye on you, and you'll need physical and cognitive rest."

Kiera slumped back against her pillows, but Maya sat up straighter. "What's that mean?" she asked.

“Concussions can be tricky. The next couple of days will require monitoring so we know what we’re dealing with. You need to avoid anything physically exerting,” Tom said. “For the next twenty four hours, you’ll need to be pretty quiet in general. No jogging, jumping, sports of any kind.”

“Not a problem,” Kiera muttered.

“And cognitive rest means just what it sounds like. Nothing that involves much focus or concentration, nothing stimulating. With kids and teens, we keep them out of school for a few days. You’ll need to take a couple of days off work. At least.”

“Awesome,” Maya said brightly.

Kiera frowned at her. She focused back on Tom. “What’s “at least” mean?”

“It means it depends on your symptoms. You need to be symptom-free before you’re back to full activities. You can slowly work back up to full time, but you have to pay close attention to how you’re feeling—headache, dizziness, nausea, feeling slow or groggy, trouble focusing. We’ll give you a guide that outlines some of the things you might experience and what to do and not do.”

Kiera was chewing her bottom lip, looking thoughtful, and Zach wondered what was going through her head.

“We’ll be sure she doesn’t do anything she’s not supposed to do,” Sophie told Tom.

“We’ll absolutely keep her away from her work and the computer,” Maya added. “We’re completely on board with that.”

“Hey,” Kiera said. “He didn’t say I had to stay away completely.”

“She works fourteen hours a day, every day, on a computer,” Maya told Tom. “Her work is very creative and stimulating and takes a lot of concentration. She sleeps weird hours—like two or three hours at a time and then is up again for a few hours and then sleeps again. She eats cereal for at least fifty percent of her meals. And she hardly exercises or socializes or does anything non-work related,” Maya said.

Zach had been watching Kiera’s eyes during Maya’s recitation. They’d grown progressively wider as her friend listed her behaviors for the doctor and, at the end, her mouth even dropped open.

Zach was torn between being amused and thinking *of course*. It wasn’t that she was a workaholic. That he understood. He loved his job and was totally committed. But the never

leaving her room, wearing pajamas all day, and eating cereal all the time was too familiar. The woman he'd been unable to walk away from all damned day did all of the things that made him nuts with Aimee? Yep, of course.

"Kiera, it's very important that you take care of yourself during this recovery period," Tom said. "The first seventy-two hours are when we can see a progression of symptoms, but patients can experience residual effects from a concussion up to a year, sometimes longer."

Kiera frowned at him. "A year? Or *longer*?"

Tom nodded. "You should recover completely. On average it takes about a week. But sometimes there are issues that linger."

Zach felt his stomach knot. He knew everything Tom was saying, but watching Kiera's eyes fill with worry got to him. "If you take it easy, you can minimize the chances of it getting worse or lasting," Zach said.

She looked up at him. "Fine," Kiera finally agreed. "I'll stay off the computer for a day or two."

"And if you don't, I'm telling Pete," Maya said.

Who was Pete? Zach felt a frown form.

Kiera's eyes widened again. "No!"

Maya nodded. "Yes. If you don't take some time off, I'm going to tell Pete what happened and that you can't work for a while. And I'll tell him about the fourteen-hour days stuck in your room."

"Maya—" Kiera started.

"I'm serious, Kiera," her friend said. "I know that Pete needs you and wants you working on this new stuff, but he won't like that it's *all* you're doing, and you know it. I haven't said anything so far, but this better be a wake-up call. You take care of yourself or I'm telling Pete that he needs to get you help."

"He doesn't," Kiera protested. "I can do this. I want to do this."

"I know. So show me you can be a responsible grown-up who works normal hours and has a life outside of work and I'll leave it alone."

Kiera sighed heavily and leaned back on her pillows again. "You're such a bitch."

Maya grinned. "I know."

“Okay, so you’ll need someone with you for the next twenty-four hours,” Tom said. “I’d like them to wake you every four hours throughout the night to reassess.”

Kiera looked at her roommates.

Sophie frowned. “You’re keeping us for observation,” she reminded Tom.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Can Kiera stay with us?”

“I don’t have a reason to admit her,” Tom said. “And we’re filling up with all the Comic Con folks. I’m sorry.”

“So she has to go home,” Sophie said.

“But no one’s there to be with her,” Maya said.

“Rob can come over,” Kiera said.

“You can come home with me.” Zach heard the words come out of his mouth before he’d really thought the offer through.

Still, as he looked into Kiera’s eyes, he knew that this had been inevitable. He’d insisted on keeping her with him all day at the convention center and that was when she’d simply been alone and shook up. As far as he’d known anyway. Now that she was actually hurt and in need, there was nothing else he could do but take care of her.

“You do *not* have to do that,” Kiera said. “I’ll be fine.”

“You can’t even drive home,” he told her.

“I have twenty bucks I can use for a cab,” she said, lifting her chin.

He couldn’t help but smile. She had his twenty bucks.

“I’m taking you to my place for the night. If you need references, I know everyone in this ER. And my sister lives with me so we won’t be alone.”

“That’s perfect,” Maya said before Kiera could protest again. “Not only will you be with her, but you’re an EMT so you know what to look for and what to do if things get worse.”

All true enough. But he didn’t miss the twinkle in Maya’s eyes.

“This is ridiculous,” Kiera said. “Zach and I just met. He can’t take on the responsibility—”

“I want to,” Zach interrupted. “If you’re uncomfortable coming home with me, I get it. Your call. But I want to do this. It’s not an imposition.”

That was all true. He did want to take care of her. He shouldn't. But that was a whole other story.

He watched her thinking it all through and wished she'd stop turning the wheels in her mind, trying to find another solution. Her brain needed to rest. And she needed to come home with him.

Kiera looked at her friends. "I can just call Rob," Kiera said.

"No." Zach said it firmly. He didn't even need to know who Rob was.

Kiera looked over again, eyebrows up. "Rob is—"

"Not necessary." He didn't give a shit who Rob was.

She crossed her arms again. "I'm not helpless."

"No, you're hurt," he said. "And helping hurt people is what I do best."