
Chapter 1

Karia Daly looked at the castle-like structure in front of her as she got out of her father's car. He'd insisted on driving her to school for her third term after all she'd been through recently.

She had been dating the heir to the throne, Prince Henry, for a few years, which had resulted in being stalked by the paparazzi on occasion. But this past summer, she and the prince's sister, Princess Emma, had been set up by one of the fashion designers she'd interviewed for an article last year. The designer, in an attempt to gain some publicity, had arranged for the two girls to pick out some fashions from her new collection. Then she'd alerted the press and they had shown up in full force. One had even accosted Karia as she tried to get away and had gotten nasty with her.

As a result, she had broken off the relationship with Henry, unable to handle the notoriety any longer. Henry hadn't been happy about that, but he was leaving for a year's stint with the military, so it may have been for the best anyway. She hadn't been totally sure of her commitment to him, so maybe some time apart was what they both needed.

Henry had asked to see her before he left for duty. As the heir apparent, he wouldn't be deployed to a hot spot. Rather, he'd be working alongside some of the top military officials, to learn from them.

She had agreed to see him, but only at the home of her parents. He had stopped by, bringing his sister, Emma, with him.

Karia had been happy to see both of them. She and Emma spent some time together, promising to stay in touch. Emma had graduated from the university and would begin her royal duties after taking the summer off. Then Emma enjoyed a visit over tea with Karia's mother, Rosemary, to give Henry and Karia some time alone.

"How are you doing, Karia?" he'd asked as they sat together on a bench in her mother's flower garden.

"Better. I've spent the rest of the summer here, at home. I've worked from home and enjoyed some time by the pool. I just couldn't go back to the city after..." She hesitated then went on, "...after what happened. I'm so sorry, Henry. Maybe I acted like a crazy person when that all happened with the press, but it was just too much."

"No, it wasn't your fault or Emma's, and you have to believe that. You were set up. And that paparazzi member who grabbed you and called you names was way out of line. He's been fired, by the way. My father saw to that."

"And the designer?" she asked.

"She was told in no uncertain terms that if she ever did anything so underhanded again to a member of the royal family or anyone associated with them, she would lose her business license in this country."

"Wow," Karia said.

"My father was furious, as was I."

"My parents weren't too happy, either," she reminded him. "But I'm going back to school soon, so I'll be fine. What about you? Are you ready for your time with the military?"

“I am. I need a change. I really hate the way we ended things, sweetie. But, in all honesty, it is probably for the best, with me being away.”

“I agree. I’ll always think of you as a good friend, no matter what happens between us in the future.”

“Oh, Karia, you are so dear and precious to me. Yes, you will always be welcome in my family’s home. Mum and Dad send you their best.”

“Tell them I am doing better and looking forward to returning to my studies.”

“I will. Maggie sends her regards as well.”

“Oh, I love that woman.”

“We all do. She has a real soft spot for you. She misses you.”

Maggie was one of the staff who had taken care of Karia any time she visited the castle. She was a real sweetheart, and Karia was fond of her.

“Perhaps I will visit Emma while you are away. Not soon, though. I still haven’t gone back into the city.”

“Hopefully, with me gone, the paparazzi will find someone else to follow around.”

They talked a while longer, sharing a sweet goodbye kiss before he rounded up his sister and they said their goodbyes. He promised to email her whenever he had a chance and to text or call if he could. Emma told her they would make plans together soon.

After they’d gone, she had a few weeks to get ready to return to the Academy of the Arts on the mysterious Avalon Mountain. Even though most people thought it was a mythical, magic place, Avalon was an actual mountain, and at the top, there was an old building that housed the school. It was the academy Karia’s parents had chosen for her to attend after her graduation from high school.

Now, she was back. She took a deep breath, waited as her

father got her bags out of the trunk, and gave him a kiss after he'd taken them inside for her.

She looked for her friend, Colleen. When she found her, she told her dad goodbye and joined Colleen to get their room assignment for the year. The two girls had been roommates for the past two years and had grown close.

She'd said goodbye to her mother at home. She knew her parents had worried about her, but she hoped with the new school term, things would get better for all of them.

"Hey, sweetie, how are you holding up? When you called to tell me what had happened, I was so upset. I wanted to come see you, but we were in Scotland at the time."

"It's okay. I wouldn't have been fit company anyway," Karia said as she hugged her friend.

"We can talk after we get settled. Come on; let's get ready for the big welcome speech."

They both laughed, having gone through this routine before. The headmaster always gave a speech, and then the students were assigned to their rooms for the year.

This, being their third year at the school, meant the girls would be on the second floor. Their other friends, Rhiannon and Calista, were seniors, so they would move to the first floor.

"Have you seen Rhiannon or Calista?" Karia asked.

"Rhiannon is here. I haven't seen Calista yet, though. You don't suppose she's not coming back this year, do you?"

"Oh, I can't imagine she wouldn't. Oh, look, there she is." Karia waved to her friend, who threw her hand up in a greeting before catching up to Rhiannon.

Once they got to their new room, the girls started to unpack. They had made plans to meet the other two girls for dinner, then they planned to come back to the room and catch up.

Karia was a journalism student, while Colleen was majoring in art.

"I'm curious about my assignment this year. I don't relish the

idea of having to go into the city,” Karia told her roommate as they made their way to the dining hall a little later.

“Oh, Karia, I’m so sorry. It’s awful the way the bloody paparazzi treated you. And that designer, she was so underhanded.”

“Well, it’s over now, and so are Henry and me.”

“What? You really did break up with him?” Colleen asked in surprise.

“It’s for the best. He’ll be gone for a year, doing his time working with the military. And I wasn’t so sure about my commitment to him, so we are good. We’ll stay in touch, as friends. And Emma has promised that she and I will get together soon. I need to concentrate on my studies.”

“I know you had mixed feelings about the relationship and your future. I just hate the way the breakup came about. It’s seems so unfair.”

“I think it would have eventually happened anyway. Look, the girls have a table and are waving us over.”

They joined Rhiannon and Calista, and the four of them began to talk before the headmaster spoke again. They waited their turn then got up to fill their plates, before meeting back at the table. They talked about their summers, being careful not to press Karia for information. Colleen had filled the other two in before the start of the school year.

When it was Karia’s turn to talk, she only spoke of working for her father and enjoying time at the family’s pool.

After dinner, Colleen told the other two that she and Karia were going to go to their rooms to prepare for the first day of classes, and the other two did the same.

When they had gotten ready for bed, Colleen made hot chocolate, which had become their bedtime custom, and the two got comfortable to chat.

“Only tell me what you are comfortable with. Just know I am here for you,” Colleen began.

“Thank you for that.” Karia started by telling her about the invitation from the designer and how she and Emma had been thrilled. She went over the events of that day and of how frightened she had been. “We were whisked off to the palace, and my parents came.”

“So where was the guard?” Colleen asked.

“Oh, I left that part out. The designer had told him we would be busy for a few minutes and suggested he go down the street for coffee. He had no reason not to believe her.”

“She was a real piece of work, it sounds like.”

“Oh, yes. At least, we got some new outfits out of the whole mess.”

“That’s something, at least. Well deserved, too.”

“Anyway, Mum and Dad were there to take me home, after Dad and the king talked about what had happened. I told Henry as I was leaving that I just didn’t think I could do it anymore, and that I was sorry. Of course, he tried to call me several times, and I wouldn’t take his calls. Finally, I did talk to him, and then he and Emma came to visit.”

“Wow, I’m so sorry,” was all Colleen could say.

“It’s all right. I’m going to be fine now that I’m back at school. My studies will keep my mind occupied.”

“I hope so, but you need some fun time too.”

“I’m not going to think about that for now. Anyway, I have you.”

“True, and I’ll make sure we have some laughs while we are here.”

“I did leave out one other thing,” she said quietly.

“Oh, what’s that?” Colleen asked as she got up to rinse their mugs in the kitchenette sink.

“Well,” she said then paused. “Oliver—Master Armstrong—and Professor Evelyn came to my house.”

“What?” Colleen said. “Tell me more.”

“Ms. Matthews, the designer who was so helpful to me when

I was writing my article and who had her assistant take me under her wing during Fashion Week, had heard about what happened and called Professor Evelyn. Her mother and Evelyn are friends. She also knows Master Armstrong. Anyway, Oliver called my dad, and then he and Evelyn came to the house. They were both very nice. They talked to me about what happened and stayed most of the afternoon. This was a few days after it took place, when I was at my worst. They were very supportive.”

“Wow, really? That’s kind of cool, you know? I mean, they can be nice at times.”

“Yes, I was very grateful. They helped me see that it wasn’t anything I had done and that I should take it easy for the rest of the summer and not push myself too much. I did start working from home some, but Dad told me to work at my own pace, so it all worked out. I was able to relax and take some time for myself before I had to come back to school and face people again.”

“That’s good. I can’t imagine going through what you did. It had to be scary.”

“It was. Emma wasn’t as spooked as I was. She’s more used to it, but she admitted that she was a little put out with the one guy who grabbed me and started yelling at me.”

“I can imagine. There was no call for that. No excuse whatsoever. I’m glad he was fired.”

“The tabloids had a field day, though, at my expense. Called me a stuck up little rich girl and a few other unsavory things.”

“Ugh. Well, it’s over now. Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow is a big day.”

“Yes, I’m tired now, after rehashing that whole experience. Goodnight. It’s nice to be back here with you to tell my secrets to. Tomorrow night, you get to tell me all about Scotland and your beau.”

“My beau? Oh, that’s funny.”

They turned out the light, giggling as they settled in for the night.

The next morning, they were up early and ready to go down for breakfast before beginning their day. They went over their schedules as they ate, then they split up, with plans to meet back in the dining hall for lunch.

Karia's first stop was a meeting with Professor Evelyn to get her assignment for the year. She was apprehensive about what it would be, but she tried to stay as calm as she could.

The professor met her at the door. "Good morning, Karia. Welcome back."

"Thank you, Professor, it's good to be back," she said as she sat down.

"I must say you look to be in much better spirits than the last time I saw you."

"I want to tell you how much I appreciate your visit to my home. It helped me immensely."

"I'm glad to hear that. Melinda was so upset when she phoned me. I knew I just had to come."

"It was an experience I don't wish to repeat."

"Which brings us to your assignment. I've given it a great deal of thought, and I think I've come up with the best idea to keep you from having to go into the city to do your research this year."

"Really, I'm intrigued. What is it?" Karia asked.

"How would you like to write an article about the history of the academy? There are reference books in the library. You can interview staff and your own father, of course."

"That sounds like fun! I've always wondered about how the academy started and what was in this building before."

"Well then, it's settled. Your enthusiasm is more than I could have hoped for. After all, you've interviewed the royal family and the city's most influential designers. I was afraid this would be boring for you."

"Oh, not at all, Professor," Karia assured her.

"All right, then. I'll mark this in your file, and you can be on

your way with the rest of your day. Let me know if I can be of any help.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When she got into the hallway, Karia breathed a huge sigh of relief. She glanced at her schedule and saw she had a class with Professor Clarice next. She got there early and waited outside the classroom for the current class to let out before entering the room and finding a seat.

When the other students had arrived, Clarice stood up and said, “Good morning, class. I want to welcome you back to the academy. Today, we’ll be discussing grammar. Open your textbooks, and we’ll begin.”

Study period was next, so Karia went to the library and checked out some books about the school. She sat down and started to read until it was time for lunch. She had been so engrossed that she could have easily skipped the meal and continued reading had it not been for the fact she had promised to meet the girls in the dining hall.

“So, how was everyone’s morning?” Rhiannon asked when they all had their food.

“Fine,” Colleen said.

“Typical,” Calista added. “How about you?”

Rhiannon smiled. “I think senior year is going to be great if this morning is any indication. Karia, did you get your assignment?”

Karia finished chewing her food and swallowed. Then she nodded and said, “Yes, I did. It’s going to be an interesting one. I’m to write an article about the history of the academy.”

“Oh, maybe you’ll come across some deep, dark secrets in your research. Like why is this place so creepy and spooky?” Colleen said.

“Ha ha, silly. I doubt that, but I do think it will be fun to find out what this building was used for before the academy was here and how the school came to be.”

“Well, I’ll be working on a sculpture for my assignment,” Colleen said.

“Oh, maybe it will go into a museum,” Rhiannon chimed in.

“I doubt that.”

The senior girls talked about what they would each be doing and soon, lunch was over. Now, it was time for Karia’s class with Master Armstrong. She was a bit nervous to see him again after he’d visited her in her home.

When she got to class, some other students were already there conversing with the Master, so she was glad of that. She slid into a seat quietly and waited for him to begin. Even though he was the main disciplinarian for the school, many of the students liked the young, handsome professor as was apparent by the crowd gathered around his desk.

Karia saw him glance at the clock on the wall. He told the students to be seated and then got up to stand in front of them.

He looked around the room at the students, smiling and nodding when he saw her, then he began to speak. “Welcome back, third year students. I’m happy to see you. I hope you had a relaxing summer, although I know many of you have summer jobs. This year, we’ll be focusing on writing a novel. I know some of you aren’t planning to pursue that type of writing career, however, it is something you should learn. We’re going to be creating novellas, around thirty thousand words. I’ll let each of you choose the genre, but you must sign up by the end of the week, so I know what your choices are.”

There was some grumbling among the students.

“Any questions?” Master Armstrong asked.

A few students raised their hands, and he patiently answered their concerns.

“This is the list of genres you will be able to choose from. I will pass this list out. Consider carefully, future writers. Write about a genre you are interested in; it will be more enjoyable and easier for you.”

Karia looked over the list when he handed her a copy. There was science fiction, mystery, romance, paranormal, and non-fiction. Which should she choose? This would take some careful consideration.

Oliver went on to discuss each genre with the class until it was time to go.

Karia got up to leave, but before she could get to the door, he asked, “Ms. Daly, could I speak with you for a brief moment?”

“Of course, Master Armstrong,” she said. She’d been expecting him to say something to her. It would be a first if he didn’t.

“You look rested, Karia, more relaxed than when I visited you at your home last month. Are you holding up all right?”

“I’m doing much better, thank you. I think being back at school will help tremendously.”

“Have you been back to the city at all? With your parents, maybe?”

“N-no, I haven’t yet. I finished the summer working at home part time for Dad and just trying to get myself in the right frame of mind to come back to school.”

“I see.” He rubbed his goatee and asked, “Have you spoken to the princess or to Prince Henry?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, they both came to see me right before I came back to school. Henry is leaving for a year with the military. Emma will be starting her royal duties.”

“I trust the princess has recovered from the incident?”

“Well, she was never as upset as I was. She is used to the media attention, and they weren’t as rude to her that day.”

“I’m glad you’re both doing well.”

“Thank you, and I appreciate you and Professor Evelyn paying me a visit. It really was thoughtful of both of you.”

“No need for a thank you. Melinda was quite concerned, so Evelyn and I were both happy to check on you. When I phoned your father, he was in favor of it, so we came.”

“I probably should send a note to Ms. Matthews, to thank her for her concern as well.”

“I’m sure she would appreciate it.”

“Are you satisfied with your assignment? I know Evelyn worried about you going back into the city.”

“I am quite pleased with learning about the history of the academy and this building. I may ask you for an interview.”

“I’d be happy to help. My next class is waiting outside, so I must end our conversation, I’m afraid. Perhaps we might talk again soon?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Have a good afternoon.”

“You do the same, Karia.”

If she wasn’t mistaken, she could swear she’d seen the hint of a smile on his face.

She went to her next class, and then she noticed she was free for the rest of the day. She rushed up to her room to read some more before Colleen arrived.

She got in two more chapters before her roommate showed up.

“Hey, how was your day? Did you have a class with Armstrong?” Colleen asked.

“Yes, I did. We have to write a novella for his class this year. Maybe you can help me choose a genre.”

“Did he say anything?”

“He did speak to me after class to ask how Emma and I are both doing now.”

“Clever, asking about the princess so he isn’t so obvious.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, come on. You know we all think he has the hots for you. Now that you and Henry are no longer a thing and Henry is gone for a year, don’t think he isn’t going to hit on you, girl.”

“He can’t,” she said, looking at Colleen as though she’d grown another head.

“Who says he can’t? You are twenty now.”

“So, he is still my instructor.”

“Are there rules against a teacher dating a student that you know of? Maybe you should research that while you’re looking into the history of the school.”

“You are a romantic fool, Colleen. Not with a third-year student, I’m sure. Maybe a senior, almost ready to graduate, but no, just no.”

“Okay, we’ll see.”

“I’m in no hurry to stick my toe in the dating pool again, believe me.”

“Well, I guess I can understand that. Still, just see if I’m right.”

“Let’s get ready for dinner. I’m starved.”

“All right. All right. I can take a hint. I’ll shut up for now.”

The girls met their friends for dinner, and everyone discussed their first day. Shortly after they’d finished eating, Colleen and Karia excused themselves and went back to the room to study.

Karia continued with her research and looked again at the genre list for her novella while Colleen made notes for her project. She was still trying to figure out the subject of her sculpture.

Around nine, Karia yawned and stretched. “Are you about ready to call it a day and get comfy?” she asked.

Colleen looked up and said, “What time is it?”

“Nine.” Karia got up and put her books on the desk.

“Already?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m going to get changed, then I’ll make the cocoa while you take your turn in the bathroom.”

“Okay.”

After slipping into a pair of warm flannels as the evenings were already chilly on the mountain, Karia came out and went to the small kitchenette to make their nightly treat.

When Colleen was ready, she handed her a steaming mug full

of hot chocolate and tiny marshmallows before sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Mmm, so good,” Colleen said as she took a sip.

“Now, I want to hear all about your trip to Scotland.”

“Well, we had a lovely time. My folks got together with some of their friends, and I spent most of my time with Peter when he wasn’t working.”

“So you two are still together?”

“Yes, we are. He is going to try to take a few days off during my fall break and come visit.”

“Just how serious is this, Colleen?” Karia asked with interest.

“Very. In fact, we’ve already discussed getting married. But, my folks still say we have to wait until I graduate and find a job. I’ll probably look for something in a museum in Scotland. We’ll live there because of his family’s business, you know.”

“It’s wonderful you are so sure. See, I just didn’t feel that way about Henry. I’m not sure if it was the fact I’d be giving up a lot to marry into the royal family, or if I just didn’t have the right kind of feelings for him.”

“I think it was a little of both. And I think you are harboring secret feelings for someone else.”

Karia blushed. “I like Henry, just not in that way. As for Oliver, you are crazy.”

“Whatever you say, girl, whatever you say. I’m going to rinse my cup and get some shut-eye. Are you finished? I’ll rinse yours too.”

Karia handed her mug to her roommate and crawled under the covers.

Soon, both girls were sound asleep.