

HER ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGHNESS

By

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*I will praise the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.
When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.
Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God Psalm
146:1-4*

CHAPTER ONE

Krystal Black and her cousin Jill Lancieri made it to the passenger pickup area of Denver International Airport with five minutes to spare. John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High" streamed through the speakers in the terminal.

"I wish we had a picture of the prince," Krystal said. "Six feet 2 inches. Light blonde hair, blue eyes. His description could fit dozens of arriving passengers." Suppose he tried to hide his identity with a hat or sunglasses, the way celebrities often did.

"I bet he's handsome," Jill said. "As good looking as Prince William, maybe even better."

Krystal snorted. "Will you ever stop expecting Prince Charming every time we have a new client from abroad?"

"Not as long as they keep sending us to meet royalty at the airport." Jill giggled.

She had a point. Today the two tourist guides were meeting Prince Johann van Koppleberg of the former city-state of Forsberg, which had been located along the Lapland/Russian border.

"What if he's pot-bellied, or has round shoulders, or has hair the color of dishwater?" Krystal teased.

"You don't have a romantic bone in your body," Jill countered.

"No, I don't," Krystal said. "I'm not Snow White, waiting for Prince Charming to come rescue her. I'm a professional in his service for his stay in Colorado."

A wave of passengers swept in the baggage claim area, headed to the carousel where Krystal and Jill waited.

"That should be his flight." Krystal checked that her Colorado Tours name tag was clearly visible on her jacket, the only agreed upon identification.

How will I recognize the prince? She had asked.

After a small silence, a very American voice had answered the prince would be easy to spot. “He will be accompanied by a man looks like he stepped out of the story of Jack and the Beanstalk.”

Perhaps the prince was more flamboyant than the press indicated. In a world mad for pictures of royalty and celebrities, she hadn’t found any good closeups. A good-looking royal prince would have a hard time hiding.

Jill tugged her arm, nodding to her left. “That has to be them.”

A single man the size of David’s Goliath with the build of a defensive end drew her immediate attention. He dwarfed the people around him, although his companion was probably six foot tall—blond, blue eyes blazing even at this distance.

The prince. Krystal stood to attention and straightened her jacket ever so slightly.

“Oh, my,” Jill said.

“Be professional.” Krystal sent up a quick prayer for professionalism. Someone had to be. With her best smile pasted on her face, she took a couple of steps forward,

She knew the moment the prince saw her. He paused in mid-stride and pointed in her direction while speaking to the giant. His bio had said he traveled with a valet, but that brute looked every inch a body guard.

What language were they speaking? Of course, the prince spoke fluent English. But was that his native language? Would she need to use any of the other languages she’d learned in preparation for her career?

The closer the pair approached, the more imposing they looked. Three—two—one. They stopped in front of Krystal.

She drew a deep breath. In a finely tuned voice trained not to attract attention, she said, “Welcome to Colorado, Your Royal Highness.”

The prince acknowledged the welcome with a tilted smile. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.” His voice was a pleasant baritone, the same highbrow tone of everyone born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Its sound raised the light hair on her arms. “And you as well.” He nodded at Jill.

The bodyguard scanned the area. “I will make arrangements for the luggage.” He walked away, more light-footed than a man of his size had any right to be.

After his departure, Krystal returned her attention to the prince. “Would you like to wait in the coffee shop?” She could have suggested a bar and would take him there if he requested it, but she preferred not to direct her clients in the direction of alcohol.

He turned those laser-sharp blue eyes on her. “I would prefer to wait until we are at a more private location.”

“Of course,” Krystal demurred. The prince was taking control of their agenda, and she found herself liking it.

“Here comes Gus,” said the prince.

The body-builder carried two large suitcases and had a backpack hanging from his left shoulder. “Let’s go.” He headed for the transit cars without direction.

“Shall we?” The prince extended his hand, inviting the women to follow.

Krystal sensed there was a lot about this prince that was atypical of royalty. While the underground transit car rolled along, the prince asked, “Is this the light rail? Will it take us into town?”

“No, it’s designed to carry passengers from one end of the airport to the other. We came in a in a Subaru Forester.” The SUV was considered the best for mountain travel. “You had said you wanted something—anonymous.”

He nodded. “The Forester is suitable.”

They left the train and headed across the lobby and outside. “I will drive,” the bodyguard said. “Show me where it is located.” Jill disappeared with him, leaving Krystal and the prince at curbside.

“We made arrangements for you to spend the night at the Brown Palace as you requested, Your highness.”

A genuine smile lit his eyes. “I look forward to roaming the building and studying its colorful history.” He scanned the line of cars circling in front of the sidewalk. “This visit will go more smoothly if you think of me as John van Koppberg. Any other form of address becomes cumbersome.”

Krystal’s professional demeanor faltered. This man was so personable, he promised to be a danger to her heart, if she wasn’t careful.

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So far John hadn’t seen more of Denver than a rather generic airport. Perhaps they would see more of them once they cleared the cluster of buildings around the airport. He had hoped Colorado might be freer of the scent of motor oil and exhaust.

Setting aside his temporary disappointment, he studied his effect on the women sent to greet him. He had allowed his charm to shine for a moment. Their response would set the tone of his experience of Colorado—fawning? Deferential? Friendly? He’d much rather travel as an ordinary citizen, but his family insisted on a bodyguard. John insisted on Gus, who had become his fast friend in college.

John had watched while the one woman, Krystal Black, according to her name tag, had felt the force of his charm. She had felt it and retained her professional demeanor without faltering.

She responded with a genuine smile. “Welcome to Colorado, Mr. van—”

“John. Please call me John. I am here on holiday, after all.”

Gus pulled up at the curb at that moment. Jill sat beside him in the front. The prince held door behind Jill open for Karen. Her eyelashes fluttered, as if surprised. After she took her seat, he circled the van and sat behind Gus.

The Forester was spacious, but even so, Gus filled the driver’s seat the way a linebacker strained the seams of his uniform.

American football. He enjoyed it much more than soccer. Denver had a team, and John had debated about catching a game during his trip.

They drove past airport-inspired hotels and restaurants for several minutes. “How far are we from downtown?”

“Twenty-three miles or, as you probably calculate it—”

Before she could do the math, he said, “Forty-three kilometers. Quite a distance.” He caught sight of a passing sign and tapped Gus on the back. “Look at that.” “You didn’t inform me this was a dangerous route, Miss Black,” Gus said.

“Dangerous?” Krystal’s oval face sagged in a frown. “It’s an interstate highway. Perfectly safe.”

John pointed out the window. “We just passed a prison. Not a friendly welcome.”

He meant it as a jest, but her face tightened as if taking offence. “Prisoners have to be incarcerated somewhere. Unfortunately this one falls along the public highway.” Her features brightened. “And here are the Rockies.”

The majestic mountains rose in front of them, and all other concerns fell away. His mind wandered to the photographs he had seen of his great-grandfather’s kingdom, a small city-state overlapping Lapland in what was now Finland, that was swallowed up by Russia after the second world war. He had never seen the kingdom of Forsberg, but he imagined it looked a lot like this. He felt an instant tug of kinship, as if he were seeing his homeland in all its glory. “One of my favorite things about Denver.” Excitement ran through Krystal’s words. “Any time you travel west on a street, you see the mountains.” She toned down the smile before she turned to him. “But of course you must have seen many mountains. I’ve always wanted to visit the Alps.”

“The Alps, yes. They might be a trifle more dramatic.” Although he had never seen the mountains of his family’s heritage. “But these are awe-inspiring as well. I look forward to touring them.”

Her eyes sought the mountain range again. “I trust the itinerary I sent is acceptable with you. We’ve planned to stay in Denver the first week.”

He waved away her concerns. “I hope for more flexibility, or will that create difficulty?” The light in her eyes dimmed. “We can do whatever you need, your high—”

He narrowed his eyes.

“John,” she said flatly.

He nodded in appreciation.

“John,” she repeated. Her smile turned into laughter. He chuckled with her.

Ah, good, there was the woman beneath the polished exterior. She had a sense of humor. “Tell me the truth.”

She hesitated. “It depends.” She sounded apologetic, as if fearful that a prince would expect everything to come to him easily. “On what?” he asked, without censure.

She seemed to take courage from his words. “Availability. Colorado is a prime tourist destination, and some activities are filled months ahead of time. We were lucky to snag some of these events and might not be able to exchange.” Efficient. Knowledgeable. But not fawning.

“There will be things that can’t be arranged.” He smiled. “Even for a prince.”

“I’m sorry, you must be used to going where you wish.” She looked so earnest.

He chuckled. If only she knew. With so much of his life scheduled to the minute, he rarely had the opportunity for spontaneity. “Then you must be honest with me. If I ask for something that is difficult, let me know. I’m sure we can find equally pleasant alternatives.”

“I shall do my best, of course.” She twisted in his direction. “I know this is your first visit to Denver, but have you ever visited the Rocky Mountains before? Or elsewhere in the American west?”

John shook his head. "I spent one rather lonely year at Harvard. That's where I met Gus." Gus glanced over his shoulder. "Don't believe everything he says." "Oh?" Krystal said.

"I'll correct his tall tales when we reach the hotel." Gus straightened his shoulders and returned his attention to the road ahead.

Krystal gaze shifted from John to Gus and back, but she didn't comment. Calculating the data and wondering what it said about this person she was meant to amuse, no doubt.

"You have me at a disadvantage. Since you are well-versed in your job, you must have studied my background, and know more about me than any one person should know about another except for family and the law. Whereas I only know your name." He paused. "Unless Krystal Black is an alias."

She laughed. "No, I am Krystal Karen Black. Just ask my parents. I'm a very ordinary person. Nothing much to tell."

"You have to tell me more." He would have fun teasing the information out of her. "Krystal with a K."

She sighed. "All our names start with a K. My father, Kell Black, married Kathleen Anderson."

"My aunt," Jill volunteered from the front seat.

So, the women were cousins as well as co-workers. Close-knit.

"They chose all K names for their children. Kenneth Kyle, me, then Kimberly Kate."

Before he could insert another question, she asked, "What about John—Johann—is it a family name?"

She pronounced Johann with ease.

"You mean, am I Prince Johann the tenth?" He smiled. "My greatgrandfather, the last king to rule in Forsberg, was the last Johann. And no, in case you were ready to ask, our names do not all begin with a J."

She had the grace to giggle.

They left the highway and began the twists and turns to reach downtown Denver. Typical city, with its nightmare of over and underpasses, he wouldn't have recognized the unprepossessing looking flatiron building as the "Palace." Its advertising bragged of stained glass ceilings, marble floors, and brass fixtures.

He wondered what it would be like to spend a night in the spot where Krystal lived—a *home*, not simply a place to sleep.

And with someone as pleasant as Krystal to pass the time with.

