

Chapter One

Samantha

“Where are you taking me?” Samantha shouted, as their ATV whipped along the jungle path. She tightened her arms around Nate’s torso. Beneath his faded gray T-shirt, his abs were pleasantly flexed.

“You’ll see when we get there!” He cast her a wink over his shoulder, and she laughed. The sound unfurled behind her like the tangled, dyed ribbon of her hair.

Dusk was falling. Shadows lengthened and multiplied in the jungle around them. Yang pai trees stretched up to either side of the path, starred with tiny white flowers. Some of the branches were heavy with an oblong fruit that Sam didn’t recognize. Everything was a bright, lurid green, lush and overgrown in an almost wanton way.

They careened around a corner, their wheels throwing off sprays of mud, and Sam realized with a spike of adrenaline that their ATV was aimed directly toward a sheer four-meter drop. At the bottom, she saw the murky waters of a river.

“Nate!” she cried out. He just kept hurtling faster toward the embankment.

Sam’s heart skipped. Every instinct was screaming at her to stop, or at least to squeeze her eyes shut, but her will had always been stronger than her instincts, and she forced herself to keep watching. She was determined to live every experience on the pulse-pounding edge.

Her parents’ psychologist would have pointed out that her recklessness was defiant in nature. But Samantha had never bothered with what psychologists said, even psychologists who had been knighted for their many years of service to the Crown.

Nate pushed the motor to its top speed. The ATV vibrated in protest like a living thing; Sam could feel it, humming through the soles of her thin leather sandals. She braced herself.

Then somehow they were soaring through the air, the Mekong River churning beneath them. The moment of suspension seemed to stretch out forever, in all its wild impossibility.

They landed with a jarring thud on the other side.

“You okay?” Nate glanced back at her in concern.

“That was...” Sam’s blood pounded. She wanted to let out a primal scream, dance on a table, hook up with Nate right here in the middle of the jungle.

He grinned at her reaction. “Wait till you see where we’re headed,” he promised, and whipped the ATV into another turn, slowing as the path began to narrow.

Sam reached up to retie her hair, which had escaped into damp curls over her shoulders. It would rain soon; she could feel the landscape holding its breath in anticipation. She didn’t mind. She’d planned her trip this way on purpose, to avoid being in Thailand during the dry months, which were the touristy high season. Much better to have places like this, and people like Nate, to herself.

She’d met him just this morning, at the open-air market, when they both reached for the same pork skewer and Nate offered to share it with her. What brings you to Chiang Mai? he’d asked, with that impetuous grin. Adventure, Sam had said flippantly, watching his eyes for a flash of recognition that never came. Nate truly didn’t recognize her.

He was from New Zealand, or wait—was it Australia? In spite of her language tutor’s efforts to drill her on those accents, Sam never could tell them apart. And what did it matter? The important thing was that Nate was a tall, tousled boy who apparently didn’t watch television, and right now that was more than enough for Sam.

Their ATV crested a final hill, emerging onto a broad rock face, where a weathered wooden structure braved the elements. “Where are we?” Sam asked, as Nate pulled to one side and killed the engine.

“Best place in Thailand to watch the sunset.”

Was the sun already setting? The day seemed to have blurred and melted away, the way these magical vacation days tended to do. Sam didn’t keep track of the time when she was alone. Her phone had died—she never remembered to charge it—and she wasn’t exactly the type to wear a watch.

Sam quickly reached into her pocket to reapply her lip gloss, a custom shade that Sephora had made specifically for her. Humming a disjointed melody under her breath, she followed Nate through the painted green door.

Inside the bar, mismatched tables and chairs were jumbled together, stained with circles from decades of drinks. Notes of music floated indolently toward them. Sam’s breath caught when she lifted her eyes to the far wall—which was entirely open to the air, and built along a steep ridge. Several groups had gathered along the edge, clutching coffees or cocktails or old-fashioned cameras.

“Told you it was a sunset worth traveling for,” Nate remarked, as Samantha stepped instinctively closer.

The sun was furling into flames, sinking below the tree line in a spectacular show of light. A light dusting of stars seemed just visible far overhead. It all made the world feel big, and Sam’s own role in it feel uncharacteristically small.

Then she realized that one of the tables was studying her a little too closely.

“I’m thirsty,” Sam murmured, and headed to the bar that took up one wall. She slid casually onto a raffia barstool, leaning onto her elbows as if she’d been here countless times before. An international news channel flickered on a television overhead. Countless photographs were tacked on the walls, mainly of famous patrons who’d visited the bar. Samantha saw a signed photo of the Thai princess Siriannavari, and stifled a smile. She’d met Princess Siri before, and wouldn’t have expected her to end up at a place like this. It just showed that appearances could be deceiving.

Speaking of appearances, Sam caught her reflection in the mirror and gave an arch wink. She didn’t look at all like herself; her neon yellow tank top was damp with sweat, her hair ratty and tangled from that wild ATV ride. Not to mention its color. Normally Sam’s hair was a deep cappuccino brown. She was famous for it; her whole family was. But right now Sam was blonde: the cheap, obviously fake color of a teenager acting out, which Sam supposed she was. It looked especially false next to her skin, which was burnished an even deeper tan than usual after all these months outdoors.

Samantha had never thought of herself as beautiful. Her forehead was too wide and sloping, her brows too heavy, her features too starkly hewn, like those of her Bourbon French cousins. But people tended to forget all that the moment she began talking.

There was a magnetism to Sam, a nebulous energy that no amount of dye or dirty clothes could cover up. She seemed somehow more alive than other people, as if all of her nerves were sparking at once, just below the surface.

If only she could focus that energy into something productive, her father always told her. But he said it with a proud smile that let her know it wasn’t too strong a criticism.

“Nina,” Nate began, and Sam smiled. She’d almost forgotten that was the name she’d given him last night. The real Nina, her best friend, was going to love this story. “Can I get you something?”

“I’d love a beer.” Sam draped one long leg over the other, already drafting a message to Nina in her head. I was traipsing around Thailand with a hot maybe-Australian-maybe-New-Zealander...

Nate lifted a hand to signal the bartender, who slid two bottles across the counter. There was a dragon on the label, which made Samantha smile. She and her twin brother Jeff used to be obsessed with dragons when they were kids. She clinked her bottle with Nate’s, not caring that it was bad luck to cheers with beer, or was that only in France?—and lifted it easily to her lips.

A familiar face caught Sam’s attention from the TV monitor overhead. It was America’s Princess Beatrice, welcoming a delegation of state administrators to the capital. She looked cool and elegant as always in a tailored navy dress and matching heels. EXCLUSIVE QUEEN’S BALL COVERAGE was inscribed in bold letters above her head, with a caption below: Beatrice Alexandrina Louise, heir to the American throne, will help conduct tomorrow’s ceremony knightng new Peers of the Realm.

The camera switched to a news correspondent stood outside Washington Palace, shouting eagerly into a microphone. “The palace has just released the list for tomorrow’s Queen’s Ball, and it’s got a few surprises!” the reporter gushed, squeaking in excitement.

“Shouldn’t you be there?” Nate’s voice broke into Samantha’s thoughts.

“What?” Sam went very still.

Nate’s hair was flopping forward into his eyes; he reached up to brush it back with an impatient gesture. “You’re American, aren’t you? It seems like most of America is excited about that party, and instead you’re halfway across the world. Don’t you want to be there while they make history?”

Make history. Sam had never much liked that phrase. There was something sterile and self-important about it, something that made her think of a museum hallway, footsteps echoing against cold and unfeeling sculptures of marble.

The realm of history didn’t belong to someone like Sam. At most she would be one of its footnotes, a name occasionally referenced alongside that of her more famous sister. She glanced around the bar, where laughter and excitement were as tangible as the moisture hanging in the air.

“I’d rather be here,” Sam declared, and lifted the beer bottle lazily to her lips. She didn’t make history, she made moments; and then she invited people to share them with her. No history, no future, no strings attached. Strings had never worked out for Samantha, in the past.

She realized that the TV still hadn’t switched away from the Queen’s Ball coverage. God, didn’t they have some real international news to report? Even a commercial? Sam debated asking the bartender to change the channel, except it might give her away. Maybe she could say something vague, like would you mind putting the game on—there was always a game of some kind to watch, right?

She glanced down, meeting the bartender’s gaze—only to realize that he was looking at her with an expression she knew all too well. Sam pretended not to notice.

“I think I know you from somewhere,” he said slowly. Nate looked over in evident surprise.

Sam shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

But the bartender wasn’t so easily dissuaded. “You’re an actress, aren’t you? On that show about the girls who live in the skyscraper in New York? I know,” he exclaimed, snapping his fingers. “You play the girl who died at the end of last season!”

Sam smiled from sheer relief. “Or maybe I didn’t die,” she said enigmatically. It was just too tempting.

The bartender laughed. “I love your character. You’re so evil!”

Sam couldn’t help it; she laughed too. Nate joined in, his laughter light and easy, the way people laughed when they didn’t have any real responsibilities. Their laughter drew them all into a circle of temporary, shared intimacy; three young people perched on the side of a mountain. And Sam knew that the moment of danger had passed.

“Is Nina not your real name?” Nate murmured, his breath hot in her ear. “Are you saying I’m sitting here with a celebrity?”

If he only knew. “Play your cards right, and you just might go home with one.” Sam reached to lace her fingers in Nate’s, letting him run his thumb distractingly over her wrist.

“It’s time to leave.”

Samantha bit back a sigh and pulled away. An all-too familiar figure walked with long, loping strides toward the bar.

“Hi, Caleb,” Sam exclaimed, as brightly as she could. How did you find me? was what she really wanted to ask. No matter how thoroughly Sam tried to shake him, Caleb always caught up with her eventually.

Nate frowned in confusion as Caleb came to stand next to Samantha. “Is this your brother?” he asked, oblivious. To be fair, Sam had mentioned her brother Jeff a few times today. He was such an integral part of her life; she couldn’t really tell any stories that didn’t include him.

“It’s time to leave,” Caleb repeated, his jaw tightening.

“This is Caleb, my... friend,” Sam hurried to say. Unlike Caleb, she was deeply amused by Nate’s assumption that they were related. She blamed this abysmal dye job, which happened to be the exact same blond as Caleb’s hair. You might almost think she’d chosen this color to irritate him.

At least Caleb wasn’t in uniform. You would never guess that under his t-shirt and cargo shorts he was carrying multiple weapons—a gun at his waist and a knife at his ankle, discreetly hidden in his sock—and Sam had a feeling there was a stun grenade somewhere, too, for good measure. Not that Caleb really needed any of them. He was probably deadliest with nothing but his bare hands.

Samantha had been saddled with a bodyguard for her entire life. And for years, it had been a running palace joke that the role of her bodyguard was cursed. No one could hold the job for more than six months. Once she turned fifteen, her bodyguards kept getting fired, because no matter how hard they tried to watch her, Sam kept escaping from them or flirting with them. Usually both.

But Caleb had proven much tougher than all the rest. None of Sam’s usual tricks worked on her, not flirtation or pleading or even raw intimidation. Eventually Sam had stopped attempting to sneak away, and resorted to simply running away—like this morning, when she took off at a sprint into incoming traffic, then hailed one of those Thai motorcycle taxis. A little dangerous, but it had worked, hadn’t it?

Sam swiveled on her barstool to face Caleb, speaking in low tones so Nate wouldn’t hear. “Please, can’t we stay half an hour? Just this once.”

“It’s never just this once with you,” Caleb pointed out. Sam would have argued, except that her bodyguard was right.

“Okay then, fifteen minutes.”

“You seem to be under the mistaken impression that we’re negotiating here.” Caleb’s hand closed around her wrist, dragging her off the barstool.

Sam glanced fleetingly back towards Nate. “Can’t I just—”

“No, Your Highness,” her Guard snapped, more loudly. The words cast a sudden hush over the bar. Dozens of sets of eyes turned curiously toward Samantha.

With impeccable timing, the television—which was still stuck on its Queen’s Ball coverage—flashed her official press portrait. “Everyone is wondering whether Princess Samantha will make it back in time for tomorrow’s ceremony,” the reporter was saying.

Sam didn’t listen to the rest. Her eyes had locked onto the image on the screen.

It was hard for Sam to recognize herself. The girl in the portrait looked perfectly put-together: in a long-sleeved dress and diamond studs, her riotous dark hair blown into perfect waves. The only thing that gave her away, perhaps, was her expression. They had instructed her not to smile, because supposedly royals didn’t smile in their official photos, but Sam’s lips still curled upwards. Her dark eyes gleamed willful and turbulent beneath their lashes.

Beneath the photo, the news station had provided a helpful caption. Princess Samantha, currently building schools in Thailand, is expected to return to Washington for tomorrow’s ball.

Building schools in Thailand, that was a good one. She probably had her parents’ PR team to thank for that.

“Are you... I mean...” Nate spluttered a string of curses as he began to realize who she was.

Sam felt all the eyes in the café dart from the picture-perfect princess on the TV to the bedraggled-looking blonde sitting there before them. Comprehension dawned on their faces, and they began fumbling for their phones.

Well, if Samantha was already caught, then she might as well give these people something to remember her by. A story for them to tell their grandchildren. Her own small contribution to the dusty annals of history.

She clambered upwards, to stand on the wooden surface of the bar. She saw Caleb tense, ready to drag down by force—but then he realized how many phones were out, already recording video, and took a reluctant a step back. The last thing the palace needed was a meme of Samantha being tackled by her bodyguard. That would certainly go viral.

“Hey, everyone,” Sam called out, with a blithe wave. She studiously ignored Caleb’s face, which was going purple with outrage. “It’s clear by now that you all know who I am. So you probably also know I have to head back to Washington for tomorrow’s ceremony. But before I go, I want to leave you with something, to say thank you. I have loved the time I spent in this country—it’s so beautiful, it makes me want to dance,” she exclaimed, and winked. “I wish my sister was here, except that she might actually dance, and you really don’t want to see that. Trust me.”

There was a round of good-natured laughter at Beatrice’s expense; because after all, being unlike her sister was what Sam did best.

She twisted over her shoulder to look back at the shell-shocked bartender. “Can you get a round of drinks for everyone, please? Compliments of the United States of America!”

The bar resounded with shouts and cheers. Dozens of lights flashed, camera phones flaring up like fireflies. Samantha just smiled into the photos and managed an ungainly slide off the bar. She turned to Caleb. “Do you have my wallet somewhere in there, in the middle of all those guns and knives you’re carrying?”

Ignoring Nate’s flinch at the mention of weapons, Caleb reached into his pocket. Sam couldn’t stop smiling at the irony. Caleb had insisted that Sam hand over her wallet this morning, claiming that she wasn’t vigilant enough to keep it away from pickpockets, not in the middle of a crowded market. But Sam knew he’d really just wanted to keep her tethered to his side. Without any cash, he’d assumed, Sam wouldn’t dare run away.

Really, he needed to stop underestimating Sam’s improvisational skills.

“Thanks.” Sam pulled out a wad of cash. As always, she was distracted by the sight of her dad’s face on the currency, printed in stark green ink. She slid a stack of bills toward the dazed bartender. “I don’t have any Thai money, but hopefully this covers a round?”

“This is far too much—I can’t—”

“Keep the change.” Sam strode out the front door, where a helicopter was already waiting. Of course it was. She went ahead and climbed inside, Caleb a few steps behind her.

As the helicopter rose impatiently into the air, its blades slicing the transparent twilight, Sam watched the Thai jungle fall away from her. A crowd spilled out of the bar to wave at her from the clearing.

Princess Samantha blew one last impulsive kiss out the window, leaning out so far that Caleb had to yank her back inside.