



PRINCESS FOR SALE

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

"Excuse me?"

Jack Lucas grunted at the sound of a far off voice as he again twisted the stubborn bolt with his wrench.

"Hey, you. Excuse me."

The woman's voice was closer this time and he jerked his head, swearing as he hit the heavy mast above him.

"What!" he shouted. Who the hell was intruding on his peaceful afternoon, hindering his tinkering on his favorite old fishing boat? This time was sacrosanct. Everyone in the Bay knew that.

"I want to hire your boat," the soft, but demanding voice continued.

"She's not for hire and neither am I," Jack replied, picking up the wrench. He was going to loosen this bloody bolt if it took all day.

"I'll pay you whatever you want."

The woman was insistent, he'd give her that. Curiosity got the better of him and, cautiously avoiding the painful mast, he lifted his head to stare up at this annoying person standing on the quay side. Rather, his eyes were drawn to slender feet and ankles encased in impossibly high-heeled sandals.

Following the lines of her curvaceous legs and elegant thighs, Jack was treated to a glimpse of lacy cream panties before the sweep of a swirling blue skirt obscured his view. A tiny waist and rounded breasts pressing against a matching blue top were accentuated by the slender arms folded firmly in front of her.

Jack narrowed his eyes against the sun to stare into the heart-shaped face of the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. To complete the vision, her porcelain skin was protected from the sun by a large, cream-colored hat.

He'd hardly recovered from the impact, which felt as if he had been punched very hard in the solar plexus, when she spoke again.

"Did you hear?" Her tone was imperious as she looked down her proud nose at him.

Rubbing an oil-streaked hand across his jaw and enjoying the feel of the rough bristles from his week-old beard, Jack decided his position on the deck of the boat several feet below her definitely placed him at a disadvantage. Who the hell did this woman think she was? She looked as if she had stepped from the pages of a top fashion magazine. That was it. She was some sort of model.

"I need to get to Seagull Island," she went on. "I've been told you will take me."

"Who told you?" Jack threw the wrench down with a clatter and, grasping the rope ladder hanging from the edge of the wharf, he pulled himself up so he was standing in front of her. This was interesting -- very interesting.

"The taxi driver who brought me here from the Harcourt Hotel. He said you were the best sailor in Port Margaret."

"I'm a fisherman," Jack replied, cursing Joe Davis under his breath. What was he

playing at dumping this model doll on him?

She was shorter than he'd thought, the top of her head not quite reaching his chin. But, boy! She was even more beautiful up close. Her complexion was flawless with only light make-up and a smear of lip gloss. Her huge eyes were a brilliant green, but as he peered more closely at her, she turned away, glancing worriedly behind her. Just what was this young woman up to? Escaping from a possessive boyfriend? Or husband? Something wasn't quite right. He glanced at the five matching suit cases surrounding her.

"I don't care what you are," she said. "I've asked that you take me. How much do you want?"

"Why do you want to go there?" Jack's curiosity was now very much aroused.

She glanced over her shoulder again before replying. "I've rented a holiday home on the island, and I'd like to get there before dark," she added, her voice rising slightly, whether from frustration or some sort of odd desperation, Jack wasn't sure.

Opening her handbag, she thrust a bundle of notes at him. "I'll pay you five hundred dollars if you'll take me. I'm sure someone like you won't refuse that."

Jack prided himself on being a pretty calm sort of guy but an unusual surge of anger flowed through him at the high-handedness of this young woman standing before him, her feet shifting restlessly on the stone pavers.

Reaching out a large, dirty hand, Jack took the money and stuffed it in his trouser pocket not bothering to count it. This lady definitely needed to be taught a lesson in good manners.

"Okay. I'll take you, Miss." He gave an exaggerated bow of his head and bent to pick up two of her cases. "Are all of these cases to go?"

"Yes."

"Have you got food with you?"

"No. I'll buy it there. I gather there's a shop on the island."

Jack nodded again. Swiftly, he loaded the cases on to the deck of the boat and then looked up at her. "Be careful climbing down with those shoes on," he said, watching her anxious expression as she turned and began a perilous descent to the deck. The rope ladder suddenly swung precariously and the girl gave a startled yelp as her knuckles grazed against the rough stone wall.

"Here, I'll help you." Jack's reaction was instinctive as he placed his hands on her skirt feeling the curves of her deliciously rounded bottom beneath his fingers as he guided her.

Even with Jack's support she landed awkwardly on the wooden deck. A loud crack caused them both to look down as one of the delicate heels of her shoes snapped. Bending, she removed the shoe, holding it aloft as she examined it.

"That's bad luck," Jack remarked, feeling he needed to say something to fill the ominous silence. As she bent again to remove the other shoe, his jaw dropped as he saw the clear imprint of his two oil-streaked hands marking the pale blue material of her skirt.

He hesitated. Should he say something? After all, it was hardly his fault but -- wow! It looked funny! As the girl turned to face him, he managed to suppress his laughter.

"Ah, Miss. I think I should tell you that you've got a couple of dirty marks on your...your skirt." Phew! He'd got that out of the way.

The girl twisted from side to side in an endeavor to view the damage. Touching

one of the marks, she held up her hand now smeared with engine oil.

This time Jack couldn't contain his mirth and burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, but you are in a bit of a mess, aren't you," he grinned, reaching in to his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe her hand. They both stared at the filthy cloth he produced, which was the one he had used earlier to wipe the engine.

"I'll change my clothes, if you show me where," the girl said coolly.

She had a slight foreign accent and Jack couldn't quite pick it. French? German? He studied her face. Her eyes were downcast and he realized that not once had she looked directly at him. She showed no change of expression at these sudden calamities but wore the same proud look. He wondered for a moment whether he should kneel and kiss those delicate little feet with their shell-pink colored toe nails. Perhaps that would bring a smile to her face?

"You can change in the cabin. Its not very big but will suffice. By the way, my name's Jack."

The girl examined the cases and then picking one and, lifting it, threw him an almost embarrassed look. "Mine's Lara," she replied, before carefully picking her way in her bare feet down the few stairs into the boat's cabin.

Jack shrugged and, turning away, began to prepare the boat to sail. He lovingly patted the safety rail. "Well, Jezebel, are you ready for an adventure?" he asked softly. "I know you haven't been feeling the best so I'll understand if you don't want to go too far." He half expected the old boat to reply, after all, they'd been together since Jack was a teenager and he knew all her moods and how to handle them. She could be as temperamental as any woman and Jack enjoyed the many challenges that Jezebel flung at him as her age forced her to rebel at various times. And this could be one trip that they would both enjoy.

With a sigh of relief, Lara sat on the hard wooden bench in the tiny cabin, pulling off her sun hat and placing it on the rickety table in front of her.

She had made it. She was free! A feeling of exhilaration swept over her as she listened to the man -- Jack, moving around on the deck above her. Soon she would be alone on her island paradise left to ponder her future, if only for a few days. But it was enough time. It had to be. Enough time to give her the breathing space she so desperately craved. The space she needed to consider the demands about to be thrust upon her because of her royal birthright.

Of course, she would need to let her parents know where she was and that she was safe so that Mark, the detective assigned to guard her, wouldn't be blamed because she had given him the slip.

Lara jumped as the engine spluttered into life and settled into a comfortable drone. As she felt the movement of the vessel slowly drawing away from the wharf, Lara relaxed. Placing her case on to the table, she opened it and rummaged through the clothes, pulling out a pair of dark brown slacks, a lacy beige top and her favorite sneakers. While keeping a wary eye on the stairs leading to the deck, she hurriedly changed, grimacing as she placed the stained skirt into a plastic bag and packed it on top of the other clothes.

Glancing around, she wrinkled her nose in distaste at the sight of the tiny sink full of dirty dishes. A half eaten can of baked beans sat on the counter top along with a carton of milk and a jar of coffee. A small stove was piled high with used saucepans and a heavy

iron fry pan. What a mess! In one corner of the cabin was a long, narrow bunk covered with a shabby tartan blanket. Still, it wasn't her business how this man lived and she had been unbelievably rude to him demanding that he take her to the island. She would apologize profusely, but she had been so desperate in case Mark had found her and tried to put a stop to her plans. Still, it didn't excuse the way she had spoken to the tall, lanky sailor covered in grime.

Her lips twitched with amusement as she thought of Jack's hand prints on her skirt, a perfect outline of her bottom, and his hesitation in telling her what had happened. She smiled broadly. Time to say sorry and explain that I'm not usually so nasty, she decided.

When she climbed on to the deck, the evening sun was still hot and she frowned as she realized she had left her protective hat in the cabin. Jack was at the wheel of the vessel carefully maneuvering it through the various craft already moored for the night to come. Looking back, Lara could see the wharf and the outline of Port Margaret rapidly disappearing into the distance. The water was a little choppy now they were clearing the shelter of the harbor but Lara didn't mind. The sun and the wind added to her feeling of euphoria on being free.

She carefully made her way along the narrow deck towards Jack, intent on apologizing for her behavior. Before she could speak however, Jack thrust a plastic bag at her with one hand, while continuing to guide the boat with the other.

"Put that on." His tone was commanding.

"What is it?"

"A life jacket."

"I don't need a life jacket. I can swim."

"Put it on. That's an order. While I'm in charge of this boat, I'm in charge of your safety."

Jack turned to face her and Lara was exposed to extraordinary blue eyes as she fully studied his face. She blinked at the impact. They were so intense – the same deep, beautiful color of the sea. She focused on his high forehead, straight nose and angular cheek bones. His hair was dark and long, touching the nape of his neck and as for his bristly black beard -- well, he looked like a pirate of the high seas. He had washed his face and hands and changed into a sleeveless blue shirt, which the wind molded against his chest. His tanned arms and hands were muscular and strong as they lightly guided the wheel.

Lara could feel a blush like hot fire running under her skin as Jack returned her stare. Confused at these unknown feelings, she looked down at the bag she was holding.

"Do you know how to put it on?" Jack continued.

"No. But, why should I wear one? You're not."

"I'm used to Jezebel. You haven't got your sea legs and could easily fall over board and become a tasty shark dinner."

Lara shuddered and then decided she couldn't let that gem of information go unchallenged. "If a shark wants to eat me, it won't care if I'm wearing a life jacket or not."

Jack sighed. "Are you usually this argumentative?" he asked, turning to her again. Without waiting for a reply, he said "Look, I'll put my jacket on if you do the same. Satisfied?"

Nodding, Lara unpacked the bag and, pulling out the bright yellow jacket, placed

it over her head. Puzzled, she studied the number of ties hanging from the jacket and tried to pull them together.

"You've got it on back to front." Jack laughed at her bewilderment. "Here, hold the wheel steady and I'll sort it out for you."

Lara stepped closer and tentatively grasped the steering wheel with one hand. Jack moved in front of her, turning the jacket around and lacing the ties through mysterious loops, all the time explaining what he was doing.

"There. Now you're okay," he said, bending to tie a bow on her slender hips.

Lara looked down at his bent head. His hair was thick and wavy as it blew in the breeze and she had a sudden longing to touch it -- to feel the texture under her fingers. To caress it. Shocked at her wayward thoughts, she turned away, placing both hands on the wheel.

"You had better put on your jacket," she said, annoyed at the slight quiver in her voice. "I'll drive the boat."

"You *steer* a boat and her name is Jezebel," Jack responded, reaching for his life jacket on the deck behind him and quickly putting it on.

Lara stepped to one side as Jack took over the wheel.

"It seems a big fuss about nothing," she said, more to hide the strange feelings this fisherman had evoked than anything. "How long before we reach the island?"

"About thirty minutes. That's still long enough for accidents to occur. It's also long enough to get burnt by the sun and wind," Jack added, his blue glance taking in her pale features.

"I've got sun block cream with me."

"Then go and put some on -- and your hat."

Lara hesitated. "You're *so* bossy." She gasped as she blurted the words.

To her surprise, Jack threw back his head and laughed, a rich, glorious sound. "So are you, lady. So are you," he repeated and was still laughing as she made her way to the cabin.

Managing to retrieve her tube of sun block and her mobile phone, Lara tied on her sun hat and made her way to the back of the boat, well away from Jack. Rude man! She had been going to apologize but perhaps she would re-think that now. Besides, they would be at the island shortly and she would never see him again.

She soothed the protective cream on to her exposed skin, knowing from her years spent in Australia that her fair skin would easily burn. Lifting a hand, she removed her hat and pulled the clasp from her flaxen blonde hair, releasing it from its smart chignon so it cascaded on to her shoulders. That felt better. She was starting to feel in holiday mood, but first she had to let her parents know where she was.

Pressing a button on her mobile, she waited for the international connection putting her directly through to the palace.

"May I speak with Queen Francesca, please?" she asked, automatically speaking in her own language. "This is Princess Lara here."

The next moment she was speaking to her mother thousands of miles away in the tiny principality of Challoner in Northern Europe.

"*Lara, darling, how are you? What's that strange noise I can hear? Are you phoning from the university?*"

"Hello, Mummy. The noise is from this ship that I'm on. I've decided to spend a

few days at a holiday resort off the South Australian coast."

There was silence for several seconds and then her mother continued. *"That sounds lovely, Lara. Are Jade and Kate with you?"*

Lara swallowed. Here comes the awkward part. It was natural for her mother to think that her best friends would be with her. They had spent so many holidays together. "No. Jade has gone to work in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory and Kate has a job with a big winery here."

"Well, at least Mark is with you."

Lara rushed the next few words. "Mummy, actually I'm on my own. I just want a few days in the sun relaxing and reading without anyone around. No detectives, no maids -- in fact, no minders."

"Do you think that's wise, dear? Where exactly are you staying? Will you be safe?"

"I have rented a lovely, secure holiday home on the beach. There are lots of people on the island, plus some good shops. I'll be fine." Lara paused before plowing on.

"I just need a few days before I fly home next week, Mummy. It's been a tiring year at Uni and this is my little treat for me. I hope that you and father don't mind."

The Queen's voice softened and Lara had to strain to hear her against the wind. *"Lara, I understand better than you think. I know only too well what its like to be constantly in the public eye. The King and I have granted your wish to attend boarding school and University in Australia...."*

"I know." Lara broke in, having heard her mother's lecture many times before.

"But, it has always been on the proviso that you will come home and take up your royal duties along side of your brother," her mother continued hardly missing a beat.

"I appreciate everything, Mummy."

"So, have your days of freedom if you must, with your father and my blessings and love. I will arrange for your detective to be informed and I will expect to hear from you in a few days."

"Thank you. I love you both."

The phone call ended and Lara felt her spirits soar. Her mother knew how she felt. Lara's eyes welled with tears as she thought of her parents and her brother Carl, the Crown Prince. She was fortunate in so many ways to be part of a monarchy with centuries of history, which could still allow her the freedom of this modern world. Sure, she'd worked hard to persuade her parents that she should be educated in Australia and enjoy the comparative privacy in the cosmopolitan nation. But always there was a detective lurking in the background on constant alert for any dangers to Lara -- any signs of kidnapping, or worse.

Even her best friends Jade and Kate, had been startled at what they considered her strange need for isolation. She smiled as she thought of them. Friends since boarding school and then at University, they called themselves the three princesses with Jade and Kate teasing Lara, who was the only one of them with royal blood. But they had all felt like princesses and had given each other their love and loyalty through good and bad times as they had often struggled with studies and personal dilemmas. Now sadly they had parted, each to face the world in their own way but with promises to keep in contact no matter what.

Only it was Lara who wasn't prepared for the future. She was the one who was

hesitating, knowing a life lay before her as Princess Lara Antoinette Rosalina of Challoner. A life of royal protocols and the expectation to marry a man of acceptable standing and breeding. Her mother had already suggested that on her return she consider marriage to Prince Michael, a distant relative and long-time suitor.

Leaning against the rail, Lara watched as they came close to a small island. It was covered with trees and dense foliage and lying in the azure sea like a sparkling jewel. Surely this wasn't Seagull Island? She couldn't see any houses or signs of life.

Suddenly Jezebel's engine popped and snorted and then died as the boat gradually came to a stop. There was silence except for the sound of the small waves slapping against the bow.

"What's happened?" she called, making her way towards the front of the boat as Jack loosened a huge chain, allowing the anchor to roll with a splash into the water.

"Jezebel's conked out. She does it sometimes," Jack replied calmly.

"But...but, what are we going to do? Can you fix it?"

"I'll try but the sun's beginning to go down and it'll be dark soon."

"We can't stay out here all night. You must do something."

"I'll have a look to see if I can fix it. Why don't you make us a cup of coffee?" he suggested a look of innocence on his face as he took control of this outspoken young woman.

"I'm not going into that dirty kitchen. It's disgusting."

"It's called a galley and I'm sure you can overcome your sensitivities if you want me to get Jezebel going again."

Lara glared at him as she disappeared into the galley.

Jack grinned. Jezebel had chosen to break down right opposite his island as if she knew she was coming home. He tried to start the engine a couple of times, but Jezebel refused to cooperate and was obviously in need of some serious nurturing from her owner. Shrugging, Jack made a quick call on the ship radio connecting with his mate on the shore, Dave Shelton and explained what had happened.

"Dave, can you ring Seagull Island and tell them the lady with the rental won't be there tonight?" He heard Dave's agreement before the radio gave an ominous crackle and went dead.

Well, that was that. Jack sat on his favorite chair and propped his feet on the rail. He guessed it wouldn't hurt for Miss High and Mighty to rough it for a night. "Good girl, Jezebel," he mouthed, as the clatter of pots and pans resounded from below deck.

It was a good twenty minutes before he heard Lara's feet on the stairs and quickly stood up pretending to wipe his brow with a towel in mock exasperation. Lara emerged carrying a steaming mug of coffee, which she pushed unceremoniously into Jack's waiting hands.

"Any luck?"

"Nope."

"Can you radio for help?"

"That's conked out, as well."

"You can use my mobile."

"I don't think so."

"Why not? You're welcome to use it." Lara pulled it from her pocket and then gaped at it. "There's no signal."

"I know. We're out of range. You won't be able to use your mobile from now on."

He felt his heart soften at the stricken expression on Lara's face and suddenly realized that she was frightened. Of course she would be, he thought. Stuck out here with a strange man who might just take advantage of her.

He took a sip of coffee. "Look, it will be dusk in about thirty minutes. Here's what I suggest we do." He nodded towards the island. "I've got a holiday home over there. We can row over in the dinghy and stay there for the night. At least we can have a shower and there are beds to sleep in. Then in the morning I'll get Jezebel started and we'll be on our way."

"Are there other houses on the island -- other people?"

"No. But I have provisions that I keep there. Also, there will be hot water and cool drinks as soon as I get the generator going."

He held her gaze as green eyes probed his in the fading light. He knew she was considering whether she could trust him. He wondered if he could trust himself. She was gorgeous, her hair a blonde cloud around her heart-shaped face and her eyes huge as she studied him.

"All right," she agreed. "There doesn't seem much else we can do. I'll pay you extra money for the use of your home."

Jack didn't answer as he threw the dregs of his coffee overboard. Did everything have to come down to money with this woman? It was getting under his skin.

He gathered some items of clothing and toiletries from the cabin and, glancing at the galley, was surprised to find it spotless with all of the dishes and pans washed and neatly stacked on the shelves. Impressive! Jack had never seen Jezebel's galley so clean.

Lowering the dinghy into the water, he loaded one of Lara's cases on board after she had checked and re-packed what she needed. Jack then rowed them effortlessly across the short stretch of water to the shore.

Carrying her case, he led the way from the beach, through some trees and then stood back. With a dramatic wave of his arm, he indicated the cottage in the clearing wondering what Lara's reaction would be.

"There you go, Lara. Welcome to my luxurious holiday home."

CHAPTER TWO

Lara was stunned into silence as she gaped at the ram-shackle house before her. Although it was a reasonable size and made of sturdy wooden planks fastened together in a haphazard way, the cottage tilted oddly and appeared about to fall over. A rickety veranda surrounded three sides and there was even a chimney, also leaning to one side at a precarious angle. It was as if she had walked into the middle of a Grimm's fairy tale and she wondered if a witch lived there. A tiny, overgrown garden lay in the front with the remainder of the house closed in by native shrubs and trees.

"This is my home-away-from-home. I built it with my own hands," Jack said, a ring of pride in his voice as, lifting Lara's case, he walked towards the entrance. Lara trailed uncertainly behind him.

She carefully climbed the few uneven steps to the porch as Jack swung the door open, almost causing it to fall from its hinges.

"There you go." Once again he flung out his arm in a dramatic gesture as Lara peeped cautiously inside the dimly lit room. The last of the sun's rays emphasized the layers of dust as it slanted across the fireplace and sparsely furnished lounge room. At the end of the room was a dining table and chairs and beyond that a small kitchen with a heavy iron stove and antiquated fridge.

Without stopping, Jack led the way along a short, narrow passage and into a bedroom containing a double bed and mattress. He placed Lara's case on the bed, and she flinched as a large and very startled spider scurried across the mattress and disappeared.

"You can have this room, seeing you're the paying guest," Jack said, turning to her with a dazzling smile, his teeth very white in his tanned face. "There's a smaller bedroom across the passage, which I can use." With an innocent expression he added, "It's quite big inside, isn't it?"

At last Lara found her voice. "I can't stay here. It's filthy! You're crazy to suggest it." She knew her face expressed a look of horror as she placed a finger into the dust on the tiny dressing table.

"Oh, I know it's not up to the standard of your posh rental and it needs a bit of a clean up but that won't take you long. Just flap a duster around, or whatever you women do, and it'll come up a treat. While you're doing that, I'll start up the generator so we can have some light and use the fridge. Then I'll go and catch us a couple of fish for supper."

He turned away but Lara caught his arm. "Just a minute. Do you really expect me to clean up the mess in here?" she asked, aware as she was speaking of the hard, rippling muscles flexing beneath her hand.

Jack faced her with a polite, but puzzled look. "Well, it's not usually this messy, but I haven't been here for a while," he explained in a matter-of-fact kind of way. "But, it comes up well with a bit of spit and polish."

Lara watched as he wiped a loving hand over the dusty bed head. Was this man mad, or what? She hesitated, realizing that she had really got herself into a jam. After her big, brave statement to her mother about wanting time alone without being protected by

detectives and minders, and the first thing she had done was to trap herself on an island with a mad man, or even worse, a rapist and murderer.

But she wasn't going to show that she was afraid -- that was the worse thing she could do. She decided that attack was the best form of defense. Lifting her chin, she put on what she considered to be her most haughty and fierce expression.

"Now listen, Jack. I do not intend to clean your dirty house or do any of the other chores you feel like allocating to me. I shall sleep on the beach tonight and if you as much as come within ten yards of me then I'll...I'll kill you!" She held up a bunched fist in the most aggressive pose that she could remember from her self defense classes.

"Does this mean you won't want any supper?"

Lara snorted in a very unladylike fashion. This guy *was* crazy!

"Of course, if I can't get Jezebel started, we could be here tomorrow night, as well, and even the next night, so I could do with your help. Just to cook and clean up, you know, while I work on the boat. Not much to ask really," Jack continued.

Lara stiffened as she thought she saw his mouth twitch with amusement. "The people at the resort will be expecting me and when I don't turn up, they will send out a search party." Her stance was even more defiant as she stood her ground.

"No. They won't."

"What do you mean? Of course they will."

"When Jezebel broke down, I radioed a mate and he's going to contact the resort and explain what's happened."

"What? But you said the radio had broken." For the first time a shiver of fear ran through her.

"It has. It broke just after I'd sent the message but its okay, they know you're safe with me."

Jack touched her arm in what was meant to be a comforting gesture, but Lara jumped back. I've taken this joke too far, he thought. Idiot! He decided he'd better move into damage control -- quickly.

"Lara, you don't need to be nervous. I won't hurt you."

"How do I know that?"

"Look, you stay in the house tonight and I'll sleep on Jezebel. I promise you will be safe."

"No. How do I know you won't get that stupid boat going and drive away, leaving me ship-wrecked here ... forever?"

Jack, once again, contained his amusement. "You *sail* a boat -- not drive," he automatically corrected her. "And you haven't been ship wrecked."

Lara suddenly pushed a fist into his chest and Jack's heart pounded as he controlled the desire to hold and caress that small hand.

"It's a ship and as far as I can see, it's a wreck," she replied, her voice rising. "And I am *still* sleeping on the beach."

"It could get cold in the night. You had better take a couple of blankets with you." Jack reached into a drawer and pulled out two rugs making the mistake of patting them and causing a cloud of dust to rise and envelop them both.

"Owwwwh!" Lara exploded with exasperation as she made her way to the door, case in hand. "You are impossible!"

"Lara?" Jack opened another of the drawers. "There's an old dunny at the back of

the house. If you have to go, you will need this." He tossed a toilet roll through the air, which Lara managed to catch with her free hand.

"And if you want a shower, there's one outside. It's a bit primitive, I'm afraid." Jack tried to sound apologetic. "Only cold water."

The front door slammed behind her, once again almost falling from its hinges.

"Woops! My Lady is not pleased." Jack grinned as he bounced gently on the bed. Then as he thought about the expression on Lara's face as she had rushed out of the door, his grin faded. Enough was enough. He'd had his little joke and it hadn't worked too well, he decided. Lara was still acting the high and mighty but underneath she was scared and that wasn't his scene -- to scare young women.

He looked around the bedroom and, getting up, walked into the lounge area, studying it analytically in the dim light. Yeah. Who could blame a lovely girl like Lara for being cranky? The place was a dump. Jack mentally calculated the last time he was here and realized it was over a year ago -- a wonderful hot summer, like now, when he had managed to escape from his busy life and come here to his special, lovely place. His island where he could fish and swim and generally laze around, a world away from his usual frantic work life. And that was all that Lara had wanted to do, for whatever reasons she might have, except she had chosen the popular tourist resort of Seagull Island with its up-market holiday homes and expensive souvenir shops.

Jack frowned as he drew his fingers through the dust spelling the word

I D I O T. Idiot, that's what he was. He had acted on an impulse in bringing Lara here, although Jezebel had quite legitimately broken down and he couldn't help that. However, they could have stayed on the boat, even if it was uncomfortable. He had made things worse by bringing Lara here. He loved this old place -- his special island, but how could he expect this classy lady to feel at ease?

He had to admit he was physically attracted to Lara with her perfect features and beautiful body. Her proud, demanding attitude had annoyed him at first, but now he found he was enjoying the challenge she presented with her sharp, rapier like tongue arguing with him at every turn. It was a long time since he'd met such a woman. If ever. Except, he was here alone and she had decided to give him the cold shoulder completely and sleep on the beach, for heaven's sake!

Still, he could make it up to her and if she insisted on sleeping there, he would make sure she was warm and well-fed. That was the least he could do. Tomorrow he would coax Jezebel into life and take Lara to Seagull Island, which was only thirty minutes away. He would never see her again -- no harm done.

Jack reached for the heavy duty torch he always carried in his knap-sack and made his way to the rear of the house to start up the generator.

The sunset was the most beautiful Lara had ever seen. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the glorious, changing colors as the sun's red orb gradually slipped behind the horizon. She rested her chin on her knees as she sat on the soft, warm sand. This is what she craved, the beauty and isolation with no one in the world knowing where she was. Well, except Jack.

Lara knew that he had been quietly making fun of her since she first insisted he take her on board. She, like a stuck up snob, had fallen hook, line and sinker for every teasing situation he'd set up. Lara smiled at her own turn of phrase. Very apt considering the tall, dark fisherman.

It had been quite a day. This reminded her that she hadn't written in her journal today and soon it would be too dark to see. Hastily opening her case, she pulled out her precious diary hugging it closely to her for a few moments. Her secret world lay between these pages -- her private thoughts that she couldn't, and wouldn't share with anyone. It had become an obsession for Lara to write her innermost thoughts and feelings in her journal. She believed it kept her sane in this mad world, particularly when faced with what lay ahead when she returned to her own country.

Unfastening the gold pen from its holder, she turned to the next blank page and began writing in the half light.

"Dear Diary

You wouldn't believe where I am. On an island, a beautiful island, but it isn't what I'd planned. Don't know what to think of fisherman Jack. I was so dumb to insist he take me to the resort. His boat is called Jezebel and she's an old junket but I can see he loves her. He'll get her going tomorrow and my little adventure will be over.

Lara hesitated, her pen poised over the paper as she felt a lurch of excitement as she wrote about Jack. She continued to write, gripping the pen hard.

I'm not really afraid being here with Jack. I don't think he would hurt me. He's bossy but funny too. Younger than I first thought, perhaps in his early thirties, and handsome in a swarthy, dirty, fishy sort of way. His eyes are so blue. Hope he showers occasionally. Probably not.

There's a dreadful shower here with a big bucket that pours water over you when you pull on a piece of rope. There's no cubicle or shower curtain. It's open for everyone to see. If Jack thinks I'm going to shower with him perving at me, he's mistaken. The sea water feels great so I'm going for a swim and get clean that way.

I'm hungry! My stomach is rumbling but I don't know whether Jack will give me supper after my tantrums. No matter, I'm not cleaning his dirty house and that's final."

Lara tucked her journal carefully away in its secret compartment in her case. Then, pulling out some of her clothes, she arranged them so they formed a blanket to lie on for her bed that night.

Glancing through the trees, she could see lights reflecting from the funny, fairy tale cottage. So, Jack must have got the generator going, she thought. But, if he thinks I'm going to sleep in that messy, filthy place with him, then he can forget it. She rubbed her hands over her legs feeling grimy and very much in need of a bathe. Pulling out her bright green, but modest bikini, she quickly changed and made her way to the water's edge.

The sun had disappeared and the sea birds were settling for the night. She could see the outlines of hundreds of cormorants and hear their raucous calls as they nestled into the rocky outcrop, which helped to create the sheltered bay. A full moon had begun to rise and although the evening was still warm, a breeze now blew in from the sea, ruffling and teasing the water into small waves that rushed to break on the shore.

Lara placed a tentative foot in the water. It felt cold in contrast to her warm body. Wading out to where the water reached her hips, she stumbled slightly as some sharp rocks beneath the waves cut into her feet. Holding her breath she dived beneath a sudden

larger wave and swam for several feet under the water before breaking the surface with a gasp. She felt exhilarated as she dived again and swam further, stroke after stroke, until she had to stop to catch her breath. Now the water temperature felt like a tepid bath and she lay on her back floating contentedly with the movement of the waves. Gazing up at the night sky where trillions of stars had begun to twinkle, she realized again that she was at last free -- and she was happy.

The suddenness of two strong arms grabbing her by the waist was such a shock that she sank under the water and came up spluttering and furious.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Let go."

"Not until you promise to come back to shore with me." Jack still had his arms around her, holding her as he trod water.

Lara could feel her breasts in their bikini top crushed against his naked chest and as she struggled, to her embarrassment, her legs became intertwined with his and she felt his lean hips and thighs pressing against her.

"How dare you," she gasped. "You said I could trust you."

"And you can, which is why I'm here. Now, stop fighting me and either return to the beach or I swear I will tow you back."

"I am not going anywhere because you say so," she shouted, trying to push him away and ignoring the angry expression on his face.

"Right. Don't say I didn't warn you." The next moment, Jack had flipped her on to her back and with a strong hand around her throat, proceeded to swim to shore, pulling Lara behind him. As Jack's feet hit the rocky bottom, he hoisted Lara over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and strolled confidently to the shore ignoring her yells of protest.

On the beach, Jack lowered Lara to her feet and they faced each other. Lara was panting with anger and fright as she stood her ground.

"Okay. If you want to assault me, then you had better get on with it," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "But, I'll fight you with every last breath in my body." She placed her hands on her slender hips in an act of defiance, although she was shivering with fear and cold.

Jack bent over and picked up his large beach towel at his feet and placed it around her shoulders, briskly rubbing her arms in an endeavor to warm her.

"Lara, I have no intention of hurting you," he said, the angry expression replaced by one of concern. "You placed yourself in danger out there," he continued. "Firstly, you should never swim alone. If you were subject to cramp or something, no one would hear your cries for help and you would drown. Secondly, you are swimming in the wrong area. On the other side of that rock formation is a sheltered cove with a shallow, sandy bottom. Here, there are jagged rocks beneath the surface. It's a wonder you didn't cut your feet to shreds."

Lara bit her lip. She could already feel the stinging sensation of several cuts on the balls of her feet.

"Finally, and you can scoff if you like, but we are in shark infested waters. You had swum far enough to be grabbed by one and then -- wham, no Lara."

Jack stopped rubbing her arms and picking up his sneakers where he had thrown them. He turned away and began to walk up the beach towards the house.

"Jack?"

He stopped at the sound of her voice but didn't turn around.

"I've cut my feet."

This time he walked the few yards back to her.

"I can't see in this light. I'll take you to the house and have a look," was all he said in his calm, deep voice and then surprised Lara by lifting her in his arms.

Lara tentatively held on to his neck marveling at the silky texture of his skin beneath her hands. The movement of his chest against her body caused the strangest sensations making her skin tingle where it touched his. Her breasts swelled where they rested against him and a burning heat pooled between her thighs. She wriggled with embarrassment but Jack tightened his grip, not even glancing at her as he kicked open the front door.

"Let's have a look." He placed her in the old armchair by the fire place and kneeling in front of her, lifted each foot and gently probed the soles.

Lara studied him in the brightness of the overhead light. He was exquisitely formed with his upper body tanned and muscular and a smattering of dark hair on his chest disappearing into the belted shorts that he wore. His waist was lean with not an ounce of surplus flesh while his legs were long and also tanned.

She stared at his thick, dark lashes lowered over those oh-so blue eyes and then at his sensual mouth as he closely examined her feet. Lara wondered what he would look like without his swarthy beard. He really was beautiful just the way he was. Beautiful!

"There's nothing too serious but you have got a few cuts. I'll get the first-aid kit."

Jack looked up, his eyes darkening at the lustful expression on her face.

"I'm sorry, Jack." Lara blushed as she realized he had seen and interpreted her look. "I mean, I'm sorry that I accused you of ...of those things but a girl can't be too careful."

He grinned and Lara caught her breath, her heart racing as she felt the heat once again rise in her body.

"You are in a vulnerable position," he replied, as he opened a drawer in the dresser pulling out a large first-aid tin. "But, I said you can trust me and I meant it." He deftly wiped her feet with disinfectant and then applied a soothing cream.

"Are you still going to sleep on the beach?" Jack moved away but only to reach for a pair of his socks from his holdall and roll them on to both her feet.

Lara nodded, unable to speak as she watched fascinated as he administered to her, one lean hand gripping her calf as he carefully maneuvered the second sock into place. She closed her eyes as the rough calluses on the palm of his hand brushed her tender skin.

Jack stood up, flexing his legs as he did so. "There. That should protect your feet for now. Tomorrow, bathe them in the shallows -- the salt water will heal those little cuts. And then keep your shoes on."

She tucked her legs beneath her and wrapped the towel more closely around her shoulders. She couldn't begin to describe the hot embarrassment of the past few minutes from when Jack had carried her unceremoniously from the beach until he had knelt in front of her, his large hand gently caressing her feet.

"Are you feeling okay?" He sounded puzzled and his eyes reflected his concern.

"I'm fine. Thank you for looking after me." She breathed a sigh of relief as she found her voice at last. "I'll go down to the beach now."

"I thought you might so you'd better take this. I've shaken and aired it to make sure there aren't any bugs." He held out a smart green sleeping bag.

"It's too warm for a sleeping bag," she replied, moving back relieved to place some distance between them.

Jack shrugged. "You'll be surprised. A cool wind is getting up and in the middle of the night the temperatures can drop quite dramatically."

"But, isn't this yours?"

"I've got another one. Also, I'm going to light a fire on the beach, which will keep us warm and also cook our supper." Jack waited patiently for her to speak.

"That sounds good," she said, her voice soft with unknown emotion. Turning she hurried out of the wobbly front door and made her way to her make-shift camp.

She almost ran to the beach landing with a thump next to her belongings. What had she got herself into, for heaven's sake? Her heart gradually returned to its normal rate as she hastily changed from her swimsuit into her warm slacks and top. Jack was right. The air was cooler now and she shivered as she settled into her home-made bed, wrapping the sleeping bag around her and wondering how she was going to make it through the night.

It was an hour later that Lara saw Jack bending over a fire he'd set up on the beach a short distance from her. He had soon coaxed it into life, the red flames accentuating the darkness around her.

"Why don't you bring your sleeping gear over here?" he called. "You'll be much warmer and I'm just going to start supper."

Feeling disheveled and sandy, Lara made her way to the fire, carrying her bag with her and trying to appear nonchalant. Jack had brought an ice-box from the house with various cooking utensils and crockery items in it and he laid them out on a large towel as she sat opposite him.

"I've caught a couple of whiting. They'll taste a treat with some new potatoes," Jack continued, his tone inviting conversation as he balanced a frying pan over the fire resting it on an iron rung.

"Where did you get the potatoes?"

"They're canned. I've one large larder in the cottage full of everything you can think of so while there is fish in the sea and cans of food in that larder, we won't starve."

"Don't you ever have fresh produce besides fish?" Lara grimaced and then nearly gagged as Jack placed the fish on a chopping board and sliced off their heads with one swift movement of his long, sharp knife. He then began to skillfully fillet them.

Glancing up he must have noted the disdainful expression on Lara's face and made a great show of removing the fish innards and tossing them to the waiting seagulls. "Sure. But I didn't exactly plan to stop at the island this time around -- or in such regal company."

Lara's head shot up. "What do you mean? Regal?" Her voice was sharp with suspicion.

"Well, you seem pretty high and mighty," he said, placing the fish pieces in the frying pan with a splash of cooking oil and giving a nod of satisfaction as they began to sizzle.

"Are you saying I'm a snob?" Lara drew the sleeping bag around her shoulders as she studied the strong planes and angles of Jack's face vividly reflected in the flickering lights of the fire. He placed a small pan of potatoes on the iron rung and sat back on his heels to admire his handy work. His eyes lifted to meet hers and Lara could feel her

temperature rise. Whether it was from the heat of the fire or because of his analytical, yet teasing expression, she wasn't sure.

"Yes, you probably are a snob," he said at last.

"Why do you say that?"

"Think about it. You arrive at the quay side dressed to kill with five designer suitcases in tow. You see me, a poor working fisherman, and start to order me around as if I'm a lowly servant."

Lara bit her lip at Jack's blunt words. How dreadful that he should consider her in this way. "I didn't mean to offend you. I'd come from the race day in Port Margaret, that's why I was dressed like that."

Flipping the fish over in the pan, Jack continued his verbal attack. "Ah, so that explains your glamorous gear. You had been mixing with the snobby and rich racing set."

"They weren't snobby."

"Many of them are."

"Some of them, I suppose, and some of them are wealthy. You obviously have a problem with people who make a success of their lives." Lara shrugged her slender shoulders, not liking the way that this strange conversation was progressing.

"You must admit that you acted pretty oddly. Why couldn't you have caught the tour boat out to Seagull Island tomorrow like any other normal visitor? Are you running away from someone?"

Lara was grateful that Jack gave her precious thinking time as he expertly flicked one of the fish on to a plate and spooned some potatoes to join it. He handed the plate to Lara along with a knife and fork. Balancing it precariously on her knees, Lara sniffed the wholesome aroma of the freshly cooked meal, her mouth watered in anticipation.

Serving himself, Jack settled next to her, stretching his long legs in their cut-off jeans towards the fire. He raised one eyebrow waiting for Lara's answer.

"Yes, there was someone that I wished to avoid," Lara replied cautiously. Cutting a piece of the moist fish, she savored the texture as she placed it in her mouth. "Oh, this is fantastic!" she sighed, closing her eyes in bliss.

Laughing at her open pleasure, Jack proceeded to eat his meal. "I guess we are both hungry," he said between mouthfuls.

"I had no idea fish could taste this good." A few minutes later Lara put her plate to one side and watched Jack as he finished his meal.

"Do you want a drink? I've some mineral water cooling in the fridge."

She nodded and together they cleared up the supper things and carried them to the house. They rinsed the crockery, placing it on the draining board to dry. Lara pulled out two small bottles of water from the refrigerator, which, although antiquated, was doing a great job of cooling things down.

Wiping her hands on the tea towel, Lara stood awkwardly as Jack took a long swallow from his water bottle. She hoped that he wouldn't pursue their previous conversation because she wasn't sure what to say and he was definitely probing into why she was going to Seagull Island on her own.

"I guess it's late. I'll settle down to sleep now," she said, watching in fascination as a trickle of water ran down Jack's chin and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"I'll build up the fire so that you won't get cold. Here, this may help you to sleep better." He handed her a soft, feather pillow. "It's clean," he added, the corner of his eyes

crinkling attractively.

Lara returned his smile. "Thank you, Jack. You've been very kind. "And then unable to resist it, she said, "I'm sorry you think I'm a snob."

He shrugged. "It doesn't worry me. You just need to chill out a bit."

Nodding to save another disagreement, Lara made her way to the beach and arranged her pillow and sleeping bag ready for the night. It was much cooler now and she was glad to snuggle into its warmth. Jack loaded some logs on to the fire checking that they were secured and then settled into his sleeping bag a few yards away from her.

Lara closed her eyes as a delicious drowsiness enveloped her. The fire crackled and burned and with these comforting sounds in her ears, she drifted into sleep feeling protected with Jack to watch over her.

CHAPTER THREE

Jack woke as dawn was breaking and the first pink rays of the sun appeared over the horizon. He stood and stretched his long body, his gaze instantly going to Lara. She lay inside her sleeping bag but with her arms thrown above her head in a gesture of abandonment. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders in a pale golden cloud.

Jack moved closer and crouching beside her, studied the beauty of her face. She looked serene, her mouth slightly pursed emphasizing the perfect shape of her lips. Her cheeks were flushed and as he watched, her eyelids flickered showing she was in a dream phase of her sleep. Glancing down he could see the swell of her breasts beneath the top she was wearing. God, she was so beautiful!

Resisting the temptation to smooth his fingers along her velvet cheek, Jack stood up and made his way towards the house. As he filled the kettle and placed it on the sturdy stove, he mulled over his mystery guest. And she *was* mysterious, he decided, laying a couple of places at the table for breakfast. She was obviously well bred with every inch of her screaming class from her elegant clothes to her pure voice with its fascinating accent.

Jack grinned as he shoveled spoonfuls of coffee into two mugs. She was used to getting her own way and he would bet that it was a brave person who said no to her. He could tell she'd had to practice unusual control in trying to put him in his place and she didn't like it. No, she didn't like it one bit. He was sorely tempted to have a wild fling with her and put to rest this sexual tension crackling between them and brewing like a tropical storm. But, he could also sense a resistance within her. She was worried about something or somebody and he doubted that she would tell him about it.

"You should have woken me." A soft voice gently reproached him and he turned to see Lara standing at the open door, silhouetted against the sun's rays. She looked ethereal in a white flared beach skirt and matching top, her slender legs and body clearly outlined through the thin material. On her feet she wore his chunky black socks, which should have looked incongruous and yet on her were unbelievably sexy.

He grabbed the coffee mug as it was about to fall from his fingers. Jeez! He was acting like a love-sick teenager but she knocked him out. He wanted her!

"You were too sound asleep for me to dare to disturb you," he joked, turning to take the kettle from the stove, giving him time to recover his equilibrium.

"Can I help?"

"Yep. Get a can opener and open these peaches, will you?"

"Are you going to work on Jezebel after breakfast?"

Jack nodded. "But you needn't come. I'll have to strip the engine down and see what the problem is. You can stay here and relax." He poured two coffees and placed them on the table. "And don't go swimming on your own," he warned, with a frown.

"I need a shower." Lara carefully wiped two dusty fruit bowls with the tea towel and then served the peaches, pouring some of the sweet juice over the top of them.

Jack sat at the table, his chair clattering on the wooden floor. "I'll be out of the

way soon so you can have your shower in peace without having to worry about hiding your blushes."

Lara laughed as she sat next to him and lifted a spoonful of peach nectar to her mouth, running her tongue over her lips as she swallowed. Jack watched as her tongue caught and held a tiny droplet of juice. He could feel his heart slamming in his chest like a thousand jack-hammers beating out a tune. Was she deliberately trying to tease him? He didn't think so. There was too much of an air of innocence about her, although she appeared a lot more relaxed this morning. Perhaps she'd got the message that he wouldn't harm her in any way.

Finishing his fruit, he stood up and pushing back his chair, took a great gulp of scalding coffee. "I'd better get started," he said gruffly. "It could take me a while."

"Perhaps you should try and fix the radio first then we could send for a rescue boat." Her green eyes were wide and beguiling as she looked up at him.

"That's what I intend to do," he snapped irritably. "But I'm no electrician and if I get it going, it will be a bloody miracle."

"Won't your wife and family be worried about you?"

Jack hesitated, slowly placing his half drunk mug of coffee on the table. "I don't have a family. I'm divorced."

"Oh."

"The locals are used to me disappearing for days on end after all I am a fisherman. But there could be concerns over you, which is why we need to get you to civilization."

"I told my mother that I would contact her in a couple of days so she won't be worried."

"Are your cuts healing?" Jack glanced down at her small feet still encased in his socks.

"I'll bathe them later. They'll be fine." Lara lowered her eyes as swift color rose in her cheeks. Jack wondered if she was thinking of the zinging, unbearable tension between them when he had smoothed her sore skin. He had felt her tremble beneath his touch and for all her haughtiness he had sensed a vulnerability and shyness about her.

He cleared his throat. "Right. I'll get going. I'll be back at lunch time so perhaps you can have a look through the larder and rustle something up. If it's not too much effort."

"I think I can manage to open another can of something. What if I want you? Shall I swim out to the boat?"

Jack studied her apprehensive expression, and just stopped himself reaching for her. Did she bring out this protective instinct in every man, he wondered? Or just idiots like him.

He lifted a large ship's bell from the dresser and gave it to her. "If you are worried about anything then go to the edge of the beach and ring that. But I'm sure you'll manage for a few hours. After all, isn't this what you're here for -- peace and quiet?"

Lara watched him go, striding down the beach twirling a towel in his hand. She missed him already. Ridiculous! She rubbed her hand thoughtfully across the tarnished surface of the bell she was still clutching against her. Setting it down, she began to open the various cupboards and drawers in the kitchen peering inside each one and then moved to the lounge area, finishing in the bedrooms.

"Okay, Mr. Smartie Fisherman," she said aloud. "I know you think I'm just a

helpless and hopeless female. Let's see if I can surprise you."

* * * *

Three hours later Lara sat in the armchair by the fireplace and looked around. She gave a nod of satisfaction. Jack's home -- his pride and joy, glistened and sparkled in the mid-day sun streaming through the windows, as if it had been touched by a magic wand.

Surprisingly Lara had found a good supply of cleaning materials, including disinfectants and polish and even a bottle of bleach and she had set to work on the tiny house scrubbing, cleaning and polishing every surface. She had washed the filthy windows and aired the linen stored in a large cupboard in the passage and even swept and washed the wooden porch.

With a strange feeling of pride, her eyes roamed across the lounge and dining areas and came to rest on the vase of native flowers she had picked from behind the house. The finishing touch, she decided. Let Jack make fun of her now with his cynical throw-away lines about her being a snob and inferring that she was too stuck-up to get her hands dirty.

She glanced at her literally filthy hands and then at her grimy and stained top and skirt and grinned. Jack couldn't say she hadn't got "down and dirty." She thought for a moment about her two best friends, Jade and Kate, and the apartment they had shared in Adelaide until very recently.

Neither of her friends had been keen on housework and preferred to be out and about and involved in their university activities. But, Lara had loved taking care of their smart home and had reveled in the housework, even though her parents had offered to provide her with servants. Jade and Kate swore it was only because she had been spoilt and had everything done for her in the royal households that she found pleasure in the basic daily chores of keeping their apartment tidy and clean.

Lara had been inclined to agree with them even though she had made some ignorant and terrible mistakes. The girls had yet to forgive her for turning their clothes a shocking pink in a washing machine venture which had gone drastically wrong.

Checking her watch, Lara saw it was already twelve thirty. Jack must be starving - - she knew she was. She washed her face and hands in the sink grimacing again at the state of her clothes. She would need to change before calling Jack for lunch. Opening the larder door, she studied the array of cans. Yes, he had been right when he'd said there was a good supply. She puzzled over the choice of what to serve and settled on a large can of beef stroganoff accompanied by green beans and baby carrots.

Pouring the ingredients into saucepans and setting them in place on the shining stove, she arranged two places at the dining room table together with a jug of water and tumblers. She moved the vase of flowers into the centre of the table and stood back to admire her handiwork.

"Magnificent! I'm very impressed." Jack's deep voice made her jump and she turned to find him leaning against the door jamb, his arms folded across his chest as he surveyed the scene before him.

Lara looked down at her grubby clothes wishing she'd had time to change. "I just flicked a duster around as you suggested," she said, with a mischievous smile.

Jack strolled in and stood in front of her. He touched a streak of dirt on her cheek with a long finger. "Thanks, Lara. You've done a great job, even if you did manage to get yourself in a mess in the process," he said, returning her smile.

Lara's heart began its now familiar erratic thumping at Jack's touch and the look in his eyes. "You're not exactly Mr. Perfect," she blurted out, more to hide her embarrassment than anything.

Laughing, Jack looked at his own oil-streaked and dirty clothes. "Touché. But, I've got good news. Although I didn't fix the radio, I have managed to start Jezebel. We can pack up and leave for Seagull Island right after lunch."

"Oh." Lara found it impossible to say more. She knew there had been every chance that Jack would mend the boat but now he had confirmed it, she couldn't comprehend her disappointment. Her time on the island with Jack was over.

"I don't want to go."

"What?"

"I want to stay for a couple of more days."

"Why?"

"I like it here." Lara made unnecessary adjustments to the cutlery on the table as she tried to gather her thoughts. She knew that she was getting into deeper trouble by the moment but seemed powerless to stop herself. "Besides, it would be a shame to leave now I've spent all of this time cleaning everything," she finished lamely.

Jack's expression grew serious and she lowered her eyes rather than face more explanations. However, he tilted her chin so she had to look at him. "I don't think it would be very smart to stay here any longer, Lara," he said, his voice husky.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't trust myself with you, that's why." Jack sounded regretful as he continued. "You must feel the sparks flying between us? I want to make love to you and unless I'm very much mistaken, the feeling is mutual."

The blood in Lara's veins pulsed and surged as she gazed into Jack's warm, blue eyes so full of desire. He had at last spoken about this extraordinary sexual tension that had gradually built between them. Both of them aware of it but not willing to acknowledge it -- until now.

Swallowing hard, Lara found her voice. "You're not mistaken, Jack. I want you to make love to me."

Jack brushed a stray strand of hair from her face. "Thank you for being honest, Lara. But, as much as I would like to, I can't."

Stepping back, Lara stared at him. Didn't he realize how important this was to her? That she was offering herself to him? That she had never been with a man before but now she wanted this man. She needed only *this* man.

"I don't understand. Do you have a girl friend on the main land?" Please, please say no. Lara clenched her fists tightly, her body tensing waiting for his reply.

"No. It's simpler than that. I have no protection with me. Unless you're on the pill, I couldn't risk having sex with you and making you pregnant."

Lara's face burned at his outspokenness. She held her breath at the image of Jack's lean body on hers as he entered her -- loving her -- making her complete, with his baby.

"Are you on the pill by any chance?"

"No."

"Well, that's that. I'm sorry but condoms aren't items I stock in my larder."

Lara rubbed a hand over her eyes not quite believing they were having this conversation. He was making a joke and she was making a fool of herself. "It's okay. But,

perhaps we could stay tonight, Jack?" she added, with a tilt of her mouth.

"I guess we can if you really want to." Jack moved to lift the lid on one of the saucepans peering at the contents. "At least we've cleared the air and know where we stand."

"Yes. And I can leave here knowing that Jack, the fisherman, wanted to make love to me. If things had been different, I mean?"

He turned and studied the beautiful girl fidgeting nervously with the place mats. She looked forlorn, hoping for reassurance from him.

"I've never wanted a woman more in my whole life," he breathed and watched as her face lit up and she stepped towards him.

He held up his hand as if to stop her. "But, I think a quick swim before lunch would be a good idea, don't you? I feel the over-powering need to cool off."

Changing into his swimming trunks in the spare bedroom, Jack noted with pleasure the freshly made-up bed and the clean floors and polished furniture. He paused as he looked out of the window on the over-grown garden at the side of the house. He'd had to say it, he thought. He had to bring their feelings into the open and discuss them. It had developed into an impossible situation between them, which had been exacerbated over the few hours they had spent together. The looks, the caresses, the unspoken words full of unfulfilled promises.

Lara had shocked him. Firstly, asking to stay on the island and then her declaration that she wanted him to make love to her. Jack could sense that this was not normal behavior for her and she had stepped from her comfort zone by making such bold statements.

Picking up a towel, he gave a wry smile. He would never have believed he could get caught in such a predicament where he was desperate to make love to this glorious creature but couldn't take the risk. He reasoned that it wasn't just a physical problem but rather a question of where would it lead? Precisely no-where, he decided. They would part after satisfying this primal sexual urge and never see each other again. That wasn't his style. It was a crazy situation.

Lara had covered her bikini with a wrap, whether to protect her skin from the hot sun, or from his eyes, Jack wasn't sure. All he knew was that the sensual, sexual tension still hung in the air between them. Damn it!

"Come on." Jack walked ahead to the beach leaving Lara to follow. He headed for the sheltered cove with the curving sandy bottom, which he knew was safe for bathing.

As they reached the water's edge, Lara tossed her towel and wrap to one side almost in an act of defiance, and running into the water, dived beneath the surface. Jack followed more slowly, his gaze on the spot where Lara had disappeared. He waited, his feet still touching the sand, when Lara emerged in front of him wiping the stream of water from her face and hair.

"What is it?" Lara tried to decipher the strange expression in his face. "Isn't it safe here?"

Jack reached for her, pulling her against him and covering her mouth with his, probing and drinking in its velvet softness. Lara instantly returned his kiss with reckless abandonment as she wound her arms around his neck pressing more closely to him.

Jack drew away at last, his breathing rapid as he stared into her eyes now glazed with passion and her body molded against him as he supported her weight. His hands

caressed the delicate curves of her waist and hips as he fought to control his desire.

"I'm sorry, Lara. I didn't mean for this to happen. It appears it *isn't* safe here."

"It's alright. It was only a kiss," Lara replied before turning and diving beneath the water once more. She surfaced and began to swim as if a thousand devils were after her, feeling her body pulsating with need. How could she feel this way? She knew little about men and was aware that she was reserved in their company mostly due to her royal training but also because of her own shy nature. Jade and Kate would tease her because she was so shy, her manner often mistaken for being standoffish and proud until she was pushed too far and then a red-hot temper would surface. Jade was the "in your face" noisy one of the trio while Kate was studious and rarely had her head out of her books.

Lara watched Jack swimming strongly away. She floated on her back shutting her eyes against the glare of the sun and pondered his sudden kiss and the passionate way she had responded. He probably regretted it now. She was sure that he wasn't a play boy intent on seducing her. He had seemed as shocked as she was at the loss of control between them but then -- did she really know anything about him?

Lara moved her arms and legs through the water slowly propelling her towards the shore. A feeling of peace spread through her. Jack hadn't been exaggerating when he had said he wanted her. She saw it in his eyes, felt it in the depth of that kiss and in his hands touching her.

Was she falling in love with this rugged fisherman or was it the island weaving a strange magic spell over them? She knew she was foolish asking to stay another night but she couldn't bear to say goodbye yet -- not to the island -- not to Jack.

At the house, Lara dried herself and changed into a fresh top and slacks. Her long, blonde hair was sticky and unmanageable from the salt water and she made a mental note to wash it with the shampoo she had brought with her.

They sat opposite each other eating their lunch in silence. Lara felt awkward and unsure of what to say. Jack looked cool and controlled in his clean blue shirt and shorts.

"I want to go over to the boat this afternoon and tidy up a few things," he said at last, taking a swallow of water. "Then I'll catch another couple of fish for our dinner." His smile was warm and Lara found herself responding.

"There's a bottle of white wine in the fridge. We could celebrate."

"Celebrate what? My lack of control?"

Lara's eyes widened at his blunt statement. "We'll celebrate meeting and being on this lovely island -- and parting." Her voice quivered and to cover her confusion, she stood abruptly gathering the empty plates.

Jack also stood. "You're quite right. We should make our dinner a happy occasion," he said. Lara was relieved to hear that the tone of his voice had lost its sarcastic edge.

"I'll even make a white wine sauce to go with the fish," he added.

Laughing, Lara stacked the plates on to the sink top. "You must have missed your vocation. You should have been a chef, not a fisherman." She turned to face him and was suddenly still at the look of desire in his face.

"If I was a chef I wouldn't have met you," he said softly, his blue eyes caressing her features.

This time, even though a blush rose in her cheeks, Lara didn't lower her eyes, but returned his look. "In that case, I'm glad you're a fisherman," she replied.

* * * *

It was four hours later and Jack still hadn't returned from Jezebel or his fishing expedition. Lara had cleared up after the lunch and tidied the tiny, lop- sided cottage once again. She had washed some of her clothes and repacked her suitcase ready to leave the next morning.

Finally, she had washed and conditioned her hair in the strange, antiquated shower near the house. The water from the large container above her head had been pleasantly warmed by the long, hot day in the sun but she'd used it sparingly aware that the rain water in the tank could be getting low.

At last Jack returned holding two fish aloft as he entered the front door. "Here we are," he said cheerfully, his eyes on Lara's cloud of shining hair as she placed the book she had been reading to one side.

"You're not expecting me to ... to gut them, are you?"

Lara was so aghast that Jack burst out laughing. "Seeing that you are all clean and pretty, I'll let you off that particular chore," he responded, slapping the fish on to the sink. "I'll prepare them, then I'll go and have a shower. Can't have you being the sweet smelling one, while I reek of fish."

He was being remarkably affable, Lara thought. He was probably glad their trial of being trapped on the island was nearly over. She was sure he had many other things he would rather be doing than stuck here. She decided to follow his positive lead. After all, it had been an adventure and they would never see each other again after tomorrow. What was the point of dwelling on things and being miserable? This time next week she would be home in the palace and a secretary would be going through her appointment diary arranging engagements for at least the next year. Lara blinked away the tears welling in her eyes. She had been prepared to return and take up her royal duties after her few days on Seagull Island but now meeting and knowing Jack -- recognizing the careless freedom that he took for granted, she wished that life could be different for her. And if she let her romantic ideas really take hold, that she could stay here with Jack and that he would love her. Truly love her.

"I've opened a can of chicken soup. I thought we could have it as a starter," she said, watching as he prepared the fish.

"Good idea." Jack glanced up to absorb the sight of her. He had made no comment about how long he'd been away -- only *he'd* known that he needed thinking time. Time to muse over these unknown feelings that Lara had aroused. He'd wanted her so much that he'd felt it safer for both of them to simply stay away.

He could hardly take his eyes from her now. Her perfect ivory skin was devoid of make-up but she had touched her lips with pale pink color. She was wearing a light aqua top with a delicate, lacy pattern adding to her very feminine appeal, and the brown slacks she had worn on the previous day. Her feet were bare.

"Cuts healed?" Jack returned to his work of skinning and filleting the fish aware that his swift appraisal had brought soft color to Lara's face.

"I think so."

"I'll have a look at them later. You don't want to risk an infection."

Lara nodded and busied herself preparing the soup. Bringing the wine from the fridge, she endeavored to open the bottle with a rusty opener she'd found in the cutlery drawer.

Jack washed and dried his hands and then rescued the wine from her. "May be easier if I do this," he said casually, removing the cork with a gentle popping sound and pouring the wine into the two waiting glasses. Handing one of the glasses to Lara, he chinked his own against it.

"Here's a toast -- to the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. May she find the happiness she is seeking."

Lara was stunned into silence as she sipped the cold, fruity Riesling. Jack's startlingly blue eyes were caressing her, making love to her and she was tempted to throw herself into his arms and to hell with the consequences. Fortunately, the temptation was removed as he set his glass down and, retrieving his towel and bag of toiletries, headed for the shower.

Lara waited nervously for Jack's return and when he strolled through the door ten minutes later, she clutched at the back of a chair as her eyes drank him in. Jack was naked except for the towel draped around his lean hips. His tall, magnificently proportioned body glistened with moisture and his dark hair gleamed in a shaft of sunlight from the window.

But it was his face that captured Lara's attention, her eyes riveted on his clean-shaven chiseled jaw and firm chin with a small cleft adding character to his handsome face.

"You look so different," she breathed.

"I'm normally clean-shaven. Seeing we're returning to civilization tomorrow, I thought I had better shave off my beard."

"But, you're a fisherman."

Jack grinned. "Not all fishermen have beards," he remarked, moving past her to his bedroom. She caught the scent of soap and shampoo as she took a shaky, controlling breath. Suddenly, even standing there half naked, he had acquired a polished veneer and she felt her vulnerability to him intensify.

* * * *

"You never finished telling me from whom you were running."

They were seated on the patio after dinner in two old rocking-chairs watching the sun sink low in the sky. Earlier, with much hilarity, Jack had made a grand performance of preparing his wine sauce to go with the fish, which Lara had declared as the best she'd ever tasted. Lara had stacked the dishes while Jack had made the coffee. He sat opposite her now gently rocking in his chair and it seemed, determined to have a heart-to-heart discussion.

Lara watched a stray coffee grain swirl around in her cup as she measured her reply and how much she would tell Jack. She would explain just a little, she decided.

"It was a friend."

"Male?"

"Yes. I left because I wanted some time alone."

"Why? Are you in a relationship? Is he annoying you?" Suddenly, the questions were coming thick and fast and although Jack's tone was casual, Lara sensed he was more than just inquisitive.

"No. He was a friend only." She smiled thinking of her burly detective and what he would make of this conversation. "As I explained, I had attended the race meeting, which was the last...last thing I'd planned to do before returning home to my parents in

Europe." She hesitated as she almost blurted out that she had been on an official engagement presenting the cup to the winning race horse owner. She was surprised that Jack didn't know about her visit. The small town of Port Margaret had been a buzz with the news that a real princess was the special guest at their annual race day.

"While I was in Port Margaret I booked the rental home on Seagull Island so I could get a few days to myself. I've just finished my studies at university and wanted some time out."

Jack frowned, his eyes narrowing as he watched the sun disappear behind the horizon. Something didn't make sense. It sounded odd that this lovely girl should want to be alone. Real Greta Garbo stuff. "What were you studying," he asked.

"Fine arts."

"Hmm. Handy subject."

Lara laughed. "Don't be cynical, Jack. It will be very useful."

"Yeah -- if you're going to work in a museum."

"I also majored in political science," she added.

"In that case I guess you could get a job in a museum run by the government."

She laughed again and he watched the pure line of her profile as she leaned her head back against the chair. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to smooth his fingers over her white skin and place his lips to the tiny hollow at the base of her throat. He wanted to lift her against him and feel her body on his.

"Why were you carrying all of that luggage?" Inane question, he thought but he had to take control of his lustful imagination.

"I'm returning directly to Europe from Port Margaret -- changing planes in Adelaide. I've been sharing an apartment with my two best friends while we were studying. Now we've gone our separate ways." A fleeting sadness reflected in her eyes and Jack wondered if one of her friends had been the man she'd been running from. A shaft of jealousy gave him a hefty punch in the stomach.

Lara leaned forward and lifted a foot to examine the sole. One of the cuts hadn't healed and looked red and sore.

"Problem?"

"It throbs a little. It will be okay."

Jack stood up. "Stay there. I'll get the first-aid tin." He returned with the tin, plus a bowl of water and towel. "Rest your foot on my thigh," he demanded and she obediently lifted her leg to rest on his. He cleaned the wound and placed a plaster across the small cut.

"Your skin is very tender from walking around without shoes. You should have taken more care," he said, bending his dark head to examine the fine bones of her foot with lean, sensitive fingers. "I'll massage them for you."

Lara tensed as he squeezed a sweet-smelling cream from the first-aid tin into his hands and began to rub her foot with long, sensual strokes.

"So, you've heard about me, Jack. What about your life story?" Lara could hardly speak as the feel of his hands on her skin created a fire which seemed to burn through to her very core. She had to take her mind off what he was doing to her.

"Nothing much to tell," he replied, concentrating on his task. "I was born along the coast in a small village. My father and my grandfather before him were fishermen. It's my life."

"You appear to be well educated." Lara could have bitten off her tongue. What a pompous remark. God, she was hopeless!

"I went to school, if that's what you mean." Instead of being offended Jack smiled and motioned for her to balance her other foot on his leg.

Lara decided to ignore her faux pas and press on. "Was your wife local?"

"No." Wham! She could almost hear the crash of the shutters coming down around him.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out."

Jack shrugged. "We were very young. She was a city girl and it was always going to be tough. Fortunately, we didn't have any kids."

His movements on her foot slowed as if he was thinking of something else. His wife and what might have been? Lara went to pull her foot away but his hands tightened around her ankle, caressing the delicate bone.

"Of course, there are other ways of making love, Lara," he remarked, his tone casual.

Her eyes widened and she could feel the burning sensation through her body intensify. "What do you mean?"

"We could touch and hold each other, like I'm holding you now. It doesn't require the actual act of sex to make love."

The electricity crackling between them almost suffocated her. She wanted him so badly. "I'm not experienced at love-making," she whispered, her eyes on his mouth.

Jack raised an eyebrow. He knew she was shy and strangely vulnerable, much different than the proud, arrogant young woman he had first encountered. But inexperienced? A beautiful woman like her who would attract male attention at every turn? He was surprised and heaven help him, delighted.

"I can teach you. Trust in me." He tensed waiting for her reply. Lara touched his face, smoothing the hard cheek bone and square jaw with gentle fingers. He turned his head pressing a kiss into the palm of her hand. Still he waited.

"I would like you to teach me, Jack," she said at last and he heard the tremor in her voice. She was offering herself to him and at that moment he would readily have given his life for her.

"Let's go inside," he said softly.

Lara lay on the bed in the room she had been using. She trusted this stranger with her body and her mind and she didn't care. She wanted Jack to make love to her.

The daylight had faded and Jack switched on the bedside light creating a soft glow over their features. Sitting next to her, he leaned down and kissed her mouth, his lips warm and sweet on hers as he lingered, savoring her taste. He pulled the top over her head revealing her lacy bra and she felt his breath on her as he placed tiny kisses along her slender neck to the curve of her breast.

"Jack, I'm nervous," she said as he released her breasts to his view.

He traced a fingertip across her lips. "Don't be," he replied. "Concentrate on how I make you feel."

His tongue lightly caressed her sensitive nipples while one hand slid down her taut stomach to the swell of her hip, touching and soothing. Her senses reeled as pleasure radiated through her. His tongue explored her hardening nipples and he suckled first one and then the other breast, causing her body to instinctively arch towards him. Moaning

her delight, she moved her body beneath him.

Slowly he removed her slacks and panties so she lay naked before him.

"Take off your shirt," she breathed, fumbling with the buttons.

Jack obliged and pulled her against his hair-roughened chest as he continued to awaken the flames within her.

"You are beautiful," he whispered, kissing his way across her ribs and her flat stomach. He moved to her feet and legs, caressing every part of her until she almost cried out for release. Frantically, Lara reached for the belt of his shorts and he helped her push them aside. She stared at his arousal. In awe, she touched the silken shaft, her hands trembling as she explored him.

"Will you make love to me? Please?" she pleaded.

He shook his head. "Not that way, sweetheart." He touched the very core of her womanhood with gentle fingers, massaging the sensitive nub until she gasped in sweet agony. Then his mouth replaced where his fingers had so expertly caressed her and love flowed from her like warm honey as his tongue stroked her, and continued to stroke her. Lara grabbed the sheet beneath her as the world spun and she soared higher and higher until she shattered into a million waves of ecstasy.

Jack held her tightly as the tremors of passion ran through her to be replaced by golden warmth and a deep feeling of peace.

She was too emotion-filled to speak and burrowed against him feeling his skin against hers as her hands moved over the strong muscles in his back marveling at the smooth feel of him beneath her probing fingers.

She pressed a shy kiss against his chest. "I've never done that before," she murmured.

"Are you a virgin?"

"Yes."

"Then it's as well we made love as we did," he said, kissing her mouth.

"Don't you think it strange? I'm twenty-four-years old, Jack."

"No. I don't think it strange. But, you may have regretted losing your virginity to me -- a stranger who you will never see again. It's a good job I didn't have any condoms here because I swear, I would have taken you, Lara."

She colored at his bluntness, her eyes moving over his handsome features committing them to memory. "What about you? You gave me pleasure but..."

"I'm fine," he broke in. "Making love to you in that way -- having you come apart in my arms as you did, is all I ask."

"Will you sleep with me tonight? Will you hold me and touch me?"

Jack laughed and kissed the tip of her nose. "I must be an absolute glutton for punishment but yes, okay." His hands cupped her breasts as he spoke. "I made need to take a few cold showers," he added, his mouth closing over one pert nipple.

Lara woke at sometime in the night. She wasn't sure what time it was but suddenly she remembered that she hadn't written in her journal. She lay in the darkness for a few minutes relishing the feel of Jack's arms around her. Carefully wriggling free, she searched for and found her journal in her case and took it into the lounge so she didn't wake Jack.

Switching on a lamp, she settled in the armchair by the empty fire place and began to write.

"Dear Diary,

So much has happened I don't know where to begin. I disliked – no, hated Jack but now I love him! Yes, love him! He's so kind and tender and tonight he made love to me. Not once, but many times. He aroused a passion in me that I never knew I had and he gave to me – just me, not caring about his own pleasure.

Whatever happens in the future, I shall never, never stop loving him. I know I am just another woman he met that he will soon forget but to me he is the man with whom I would want to spend the rest of my life, if I could.

I have to find away to come back to him, somehow."

Lara hesitated in her writing as she heard the floor creak. Hastily hiding the diary beneath the armchair cushion, she looked up with an air of innocence as Jack walked out of the bedroom. He had put on his shorts but even so, her eyes were out on stalks as she stared in admiration at his physique.

"What are you doing out here? Come back to bed," he said, holding his arms out to her.

She went to him, adoring his welcoming kisses. "Oh Jack, I never want this night to end," she murmured into his neck as he lifted her in his arms.

* * * *

Jack woke early to the sound of a helicopter. Puzzled, he climbed from the bed leaving Lara still sleeping soundly.

Peering out of the window, he was even more astonished to hear the sound of high powered motor boats. Hastily pulling on his shorts and tee-shirt, he was about to go outside to investigate when the front door burst open and he faced what appeared to be a small army of star force police officers carrying guns all aimed at him.

"What the hell is going on?" Jack had hardly got the words out when a man in a suit pushed his way through the officers.

"Place your hands behind you," he shouted, and as Jack obeyed, he roughly snapped handcuffs on him.

Jack turned to face the man. "There's been a misunderstanding ..." he began.

"There's no mistake. Jack Lucas, you are under arrest for the kidnapping of Her Serene Highness Princess Lara of Challoner.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lara woke with a start, her head resounding with the sound of men shouting from the lounge. Scrambling from the bed, she hastily pulled on her underclothes, followed by her slacks and top. What was going on? Who was yelling?

She would never forget the sight that met her eyes as she raced into the other room. The place was full of police officers brandishing guns while Jack stood in the middle of them arguing with a man in a suit. As she flew to Jack's side, Lara could see that his hands were shackled behind his back in handcuffs.

"Jack, who are these men? What is happening?" Her eyes widened with fright as she pressed closer to him, her arms around his waist. She felt Jack stiffen and step away.

"You might well ask what's happening," he snapped, his blue eyes as cold as ice as he looked down at her. "Why the hell didn't you tell me who you were?"

Before Lara could reply the man in the suit spoke to her. "Your Highness, I'm Agent Brian Hawkins from the Federal Police. This man has been placed under arrest for your kidnapping and holding you hostage."

"What?" Lara's hands covered her mouth in shock.

"I have instructions to take you both to the mainland where Mr. Lucas will be formally charged," the agent continued.

"But there has been a most dreadful mistake," she gasped, staring at Jack who merely shrugged his shoulders and to her astonishment, gave a wry smile.

The agent turned his attention more fully to Lara. "For clarification purposes, you are Princess Lara of Challoner?"

"Yes, I am."

"You are not an Australian citizen?"

"No. But, please Agent Hawkins, Jack...Mr. Lucas wasn't trying to kidnap me. He's a friend of mine." Lara said with what she felt was righteous indignation.

"Let them have their fun, Lara. We can sort this out on the mainland," Jack said, amusement now coloring his voice.

Lara rounded on him. "This isn't funny," she lashed out. "They could put you in prison." She quivered at the prospect and turned again to the police agent.

"Mr. Hawkins, I ask that you please unfasten Mr. Lucas' handcuffs and allow us to pack our things. We aren't likely to run anywhere." Her tone was firm and controlled but her insides were quaking with fear. Didn't Jack realize the potential trouble they were in? Or didn't he care. Somehow the police had been told that she had disappeared and her parents notified and they had pressed the panic button. She briefly wondered the whereabouts of her detective, Mark.

Hawkins stared at Lara's anxious face and seemed to relent. "Okay. I guess it will be all right," he said grudgingly as he unlocked Jack's handcuffs. "Please, both of you pack up your clothes as quickly as possible."

Jack caught Lara's arm as she was about to move into the bedroom, and spoke to the agent, his manner polite. "It would be preferable if the Princess and I travel on

separate boats, Agent Hawkins."

The policeman nodded, a gleam of respect in his eyes.

"Jack, why?" Lara couldn't contain herself. "I want to go with you."

Jack ushered her into the bedroom and turned her to face him. She was aware that Hawkins was standing at the door watching them.

Gripping her shoulders, Jack pulled her close, his voice low. "Listen to me. Sending these policemen here must mean that you and I are big news. Because of who you are there will be a lot of media hype. Until I can sort this mess out when we get to Port Margaret, it is wiser if we leave here separately. The less attention on you, the better."

Lara gazed into Jack's handsome face, his eyes intent on hers and then studied his sensual mouth that only a short time ago had woken a passion within her she hadn't known existed. Now, he was going to be accused of something he hadn't done and be punished because of it. Because of her and who she was.

"I'll contact my parents as soon as I can and explain it's all a mistake," she said, seeing the sense in what Jack had said.

Jack suddenly grinned and took her breath away with his beauty. "You can come and visit me in prison, Your Royal Highness. That would cause a stir," he laughed.

Tears welled in her eyes and she furiously blinked them away. "Don't joke about this, Jack. My parents are very strict and will be extremely angry if this blows up in the media."

"*When* it blows up," Jack replied. He bent his head, his mouth against her ear as he whispered so only she could hear. "You and I know what really happened but, no one else need know and if that means going to prison to protect your reputation, then so be it."

Before she could reply, Hawkins interrupted. "Mr. Lucas, I must ask you and the Princess to hurry. We need to leave the island as soon as possible."

Jack shrugged and began to push the few clothes he'd brought into his bag. Lara quickly placed her things into her case, having already packed most of her belongings the previous night.

"Here, take this." Jack thrust a bundle of paper money into her hand. She looked at it bewildered. "It's the five hundred dollars you gave me to take you to Seagull Island. Doesn't look as if I'll need it where I'm going."

Lara opened her mouth to speak but Jack was already being led away accompanied by four of the uniform police. Rushing to the window, Lara watched them go, making their way towards the beach and the waiting launch.

She turned to face Hawkins and the remaining two policemen. "I have left some of my cases on Jack's boat," she said quietly as she tried to gather her riotous thoughts. What was going to happen? How could the police think Jack had kidnapped her? True, he was a poor fisherman but she believed him to be honest and the last thing he would surely do is hold her hostage.

"We have your cases already, Your Highness."

"The generator needs to be switched off and Jack's boat shouldn't be left here, Agent Hawkins."

"You don't need to worry. We will see to all of that."

Lara picked up her hand bag and moved towards the door. But, *I am* worried, she

thought. This is Jack's special place. It needs looking after and Jezebel won't like being left out here. She wants to be near her master.

Hawkins walked at her side as she made her way to the beach while the other officers followed behind. He appeared awkward as he explained what was to happen.

"There are media units waiting at the quay side in Port Margaret so we have arranged to land further up the coast. There you will be met by your own security and flown by private plane to Adelaide and taken to a secret location."

"This cloak and dagger stuff is outrageous. Mr. Lucas and I have done nothing wrong." Lara knew she was being at her most difficult as the realization hit her that she would never see Jack again.

Hawkins assisted Lara into the police launch and made sure she was safely seated inside the small cabin. She peered at the departing beach as the powerful boat drew away from the shore. "Oh, Jack, I'm so sorry. I'll come back to you," she whispered under her breath, as she pressed her face against the window.

Hawkins sat opposite her and she waited for him to speak. "Princess Lara, if what you say is true and your story about how you came to be on the island was in all innocence..." He stopped as Lara glared at him but then continued. "Then I'm sure it can be sorted out. However, you would be unaware of the concern your disappearance has caused in the past twenty-four hours. I'm afraid it has rapidly become a diplomatic incident between Australia and Challoner with an expectation that you could be murdered, or at the very least, held hostage for a huge ransom."

Lara gave a very un-princess like snort. "I've never heard such rubbish. I told the Queen, my mother, where I was going."

"But, you never arrived."

"Jack radioed and left a message." Lara hesitated as a sudden thought came to her. Had Jack done this? She only had his word for it. Would he have kept her there? No, of course not. He was ready to leave and she was the one that had begged to stay. But, had he been tricking her -- leading her on, seducing her...? She was so naïve and he was a poor fisherman who probably needed money. She unclasped her hand and stared down at the wad of notes Jack had returned to her.

"I need to speak to whoever is in authority and explain everything," she said abruptly.

"We can arrange that when you arrive at the safe location, Your Highness."

* * * *

Jack could see a throng of reporters and cameras as the police launch drew closer to the quay at Port Margaret. Jeez! What a strange situation to be in. So his Lara was a royal princess. It all fell into place now. The regal bearing, that proud, almost haughty attitude when they had first met and later, her shy reserve. There had been such innocence about her...innocence which he had almost taken from her. As it was they knew each other intimately -- very intimately.

He pondered on what could have gone wrong with his communication to cause this storm. Surely his mates would have told the police who he was? That he could be trusted. That he was one of the wealthiest men in Australia and the last thing he needed to do was to kidnap a princess from a foreign country for money, or anything else.

He wished Lara had told him about her background then he would have been more alert to the possibilities of what might have happened. And yet, why would she? It

wasn't the sort of thing that you want to broadcast -- the fact that you were a princess and probably worth a fortune. He needed to know more. He was puzzled, and he had to admit, intrigued.

He turned to one of the police officers beside him. "I would like to use my mobile," he said, the police having taken it from him earlier. He had a feeling he would need his lawyer present.

"Sorry, Sir."

"Come on, Constable. An accused man is entitled to one phone call." Jack smiled but privately he thought this had gone beyond a joke.

"I expect that can be arranged at the police station, Mr. Lucas. Meanwhile, would you please make sure that you don't speak to the media and certainly don't mention the Princess?"

Jack nodded his head in agreement. He didn't want to talk to them, besides he was sure his story would be an anti-climax compared to what they *thought* had happened and the possibility that he was a wayward criminal.

He didn't enjoy his arrival at the quay side. Although his guards protected him, he was still jostled and pushed by an over-excited media and was glad when he was driven away in a police car arriving at the station a few minutes later.

"Mr. Lucas, the Government of the Country of Challoner has brought some very serious charges against you."

Jack studied the two men opposite him -- more Federal police officers but very high up the ladder this time, he gathered.

"You don't need to answer, Jack." His lawyer Lawrence Hayward butted in.

"Lawrence, I appreciate the fact that you're here but I've got nothing to hide." Jack could feel his usual calm nature beginning to boil.

"Then perhaps you'll explain why you took the Princess to this island, Mr. Lucas."

Jack did explain succinctly and patiently, but left out any reference to his and Lara's very close relationship. It took several hours of questioning but things improved when a report came in that Jack's friend Dave Shelton had confirmed he'd received a message from Jack. Unfortunately, he had forgotten to contact the resort on Seagull Island and relay the message.

"When the resort owners reported that the young lady hadn't arrived, it started a chain-reaction, Mr. Lucas," the police officer explained, in an apologetic voice. "You're free to go and I'm sorry that this has caused you such problems. I will inform the Challoner officials as to what happened."

"Where is the Princess now? I'd like to see her before she leaves Australia -- just to say goodbye," Jack added at the look of perplexity on the officers' faces.

"That's not possible. Her security people have taken her into hiding to protect her, mainly from the scrutiny of the media."

Jack left the police station avoiding the media by exiting through the rear entrance. Well, that's that, lovely Lara, he thought as the police drove him through the town and up the steep hill to his huge villa overlooking the bay. "I would have liked to have brought you here, Lara," he said aloud as he stood on the cliff at the edge of his property. The sun was dipping low in the sky and dusk had begun to gather. "Perhaps one of these days I need to head to Europe for a break. Challoner perhaps?"

* * * *

"I would like to speak to Jack. This is not good enough." Lara was at her imperial best but was getting no-where. Mark, her detective, was adamant that she needed to speak to her parents.

"I have placed a call to the palace, Your Highness," he replied.

Lara wandered around the elegant room of her secret location, which turned out to be a large rambling house in the prestigious suburb of Springfield on the outskirts of Adelaide. Lara had no idea to whom the house belonged and at this time, she didn't really care.

On the flight from Port Margaret, Mark had explained in detail what had happened and how the nation's media had grabbed hold of the story making it instantly front page news. When they had landed in Adelaide, Lara had been whisked away by the Federal Police to this safe house.

It was mid-day now and Mark had taken pity on her long enough to tell her that Jack was still be interrogated by the police. Even though Lara had repeatedly told Mark that Jack was innocent of any crime, he seemed to think it was up to the Federal Police to decide that. Meanwhile, Lara had fretted and fumed as she waited for the call from her parents.

A few minutes later the phone rang and she waited as Mark took the call and then placed it on a secured line. He passed her the receiver.

"His Majesty," he said with reverence in his voice and left the room so she could speak to her parents in private.

Lara felt her stomach quiver and her nerves tighten a notch as she placed the receiver to her ear. She knew her father loved her but he was also very strict and wouldn't be happy about the difficulty that had arisen.

"Hello, Sir." Her voice was subdued.

"Lara." His voice was so clear it was as if it was in the next room. *"The Queen and I have been very disturbed by this incident. Arrangements have been made for you to fly home tomorrow and remove you from the mess you've created."*

"Its all been a terrible mistake, Daddy."

"So I understand. We have received the police report and it would appear this man Jack Lucas meant you no harm. But, you were at fault, Lara. You should never have placed yourself in that compromising position. I'm very angry with you."

"But, I've been in Australia for years and have never caused as much as a ripple of scandal." Lara felt flustered as the clipped voice of her father continued, riding over the top of her explanation.

Then her mother's voice came on the line and Lara's eyes filled with tears as the soft concern cocooned her and she felt a huge lurch of homesickness.

"Darling, are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Mummy, please tell my father that it wasn't anyone's fault. In fact, no one would give it a second thought if it wasn't for who I am."

"He knows that, dear but we have always trusted you to be so sensible and you have been until now. I really shouldn't have allowed you to go away on your own."

Lara gripped the receiver, feelings of suffocation sweeping over her. She had fought so hard with her parents to be allowed to lead an almost normal life, firstly as a school student and then at university. But, she had always been aware that she was constantly watched and protected against harm. Her first bid for freedom, just for a few

days, had gone disastrously wrong.

"However, we have had this man checked out and he seems harmless enough. I assume he behaved like a gentleman?"

Lara cringed at her mother's words, her throat going dry as she thought of Jack and how she had begged him to make love to her. "Yes, he did."

There was silence for a few seconds and Lara's heart began to pound. Her mother was very shrewd and knew her daughter well. Would she pick up the vibes from Lara?

The Queen's next statement said it all. *"Something happened between the two of you, didn't it?"*

Lara swallowed. She had always found it impossible to lie to her mother. "Yes." Her voice was almost a whisper.

"Did he force himself on you?"

"No. God--no! We made love. He became my lover." The words tumbled out before she could stop them. She couldn't bear her mother to think that Jack had perhaps attacked and raped her.

"Did he use protection?"

Lara gasped at the bluntness of her mother's question. They had always enjoyed a close relationship but never conversations like this. Lifting a trembling hand to her forehead, Lara found it impossible to form the words to reply.

"Very well. Your silence has said it all. When the King and I heard about your situation, we took this possibility into consideration. We know that for all your independence, you are naïve when it comes to matters of sex and this man has taken advantage of you. Mr. Lucas will be invited to fly back with you to be our guest at the palace so we can sort this matter out."

"Mummy, he won't accept. You can't embarrass me in this way."

"Don't interrupt. He will stay until the test can be done to find out whether you are pregnant or not. If you are, we will then discuss the next step."

"Meanwhile, the press office will issue a statement to the international media explaining that Mr. Lucas is a close friend of the royal family and that you were staying with him in that capacity. Do you understand?"

Lara had never known her mother to be so tough. Her parents, and probably their close advisors at the palace, had worked it all out. What would Jack say? That it was all a lie? And he'd be right, she thought dismally. Jack knew that she couldn't possibly be pregnant because he had made sure of that.

What if he refused to come with her? She dreaded to think what might happen. Between the palace and the police, they could make things very difficult for him and he had to go on earning a living, not be placed in jail for something he hadn't done. Besides, her family would probably pay him handsomely if he didn't cause any trouble.

"Yes, I understand," she replied, her manner subdued as she made her decision to keep quiet.

The Queen's voice softened. *"Lara, don't worry. I'm sure that everything will be all right. We are so looking forward to you coming home and we will make Mr. Lucas welcome."*

They finished the strange conversation and Lara sat in a nearby chair, her legs trembling. She had done the most terrible thing to Jack but perhaps he would forgive her. He might never find out what was suspected -- that she might be having his baby, and he

might even enjoy being a privileged guest of the Challoner royal family. After all it would make a change from fishing!

* * * *

Jack climbed the few stairs into the cabin of the private jet. His luggage had already been transferred from the light aircraft that had flown him from Port Margaret earlier that day. He had been rushed through a customs clearance, in the company of two government officials, and was now on his way to Challoner in Northern Europe.

Nodding to the pretty female flight attendant, he made his way along the aisle of the luxurious cabin. Hmm -- nice, he decided. Almost as good as his plane. Lara was facing away from him seated in one of the small number of wide, beige-colored leather seats. Passing his jacket and carry-on bag to the attendant, Jack took the seat opposite her. Now, this should be interesting.

"Good afternoon, Princess," he said politely.

Her eyes were huge and very green as she stared at him. He looked for any sign of guilt. Yes, it was there! She instantly averted her face and he could only imagine that it was a blush of embarrassment that touched her cheeks.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered, her hair in an elegant chignon and light make-up emphasizing the creamy texture of her skin and the softness of her lips. She wore a matching jacket and skirt in pale apple green with her slender legs clad in fine silk stockings and on her feet were elegant black court shoes. How well he knew those beautiful feet. He could feel them now, her skin like silk beneath his fingers as he caressed them. He felt himself grow hard thinking about it. Perhaps he had a foot fetish. It was definitely turning him on, or was it just seeing her again?

She leaned towards the window as if to hide from him. Yeah-- you've got a lot to answer for, Your Royal Highness. Jack cocked his head to one side as he raised a quizzical eyebrow. Surely she wasn't going to subject him to the silent treatment for the next twenty-four hours?

"What's wrong? Did your media advisors gag you?" His voice was sharper than he intended.

She looked at him then. "Hello, Jack. I'm so glad you could get here. I hope you'll enjoy your holiday with us."

"Oh, the lady doth speak."

She smiled but Jack could see she was nervous. Her hands were clasped tightly together in her lap and he could almost feel the tension in her shoulders. He studied her face. She was pale and strained -- unsure. She doesn't know what I've been told, he thought. Well, let's string it along a little.

"I appreciate the opportunity," he said pleasantly.

"It's good that you could get away from your work. Did your employer mind you having a break?"

"No. I think he was pleased to see the back of me for a while."

"So, you won't lose your job, or anything?"

"Absolutely not. I'm important to the company." Jack made a big thing of fastening his seatbelt, turning away so he could hide his grin. "It's a long trip but I guess you're used to traveling," he continued.

"Have you flown on long journeys before?"

Jack almost choked. Had he ever! There had been times when he had done

nothing else but spend time in planes flying to and from the Asian countries. "Yes, a few times."

"There's a bedroom with a double bed in the back of the plane."

Jack watched in delight as Lara positively wriggled with embarrassment as soon as she had made the unthinking statement. He made no comment, deciding to let her suffer a little longer.

"And there's a shower," Lara added, as if to try and take his mind off the double bed. No way, Princess.

"That's great."

"Did either of my parents speak to you -- about coming on holiday, I mean?"

Yes, wriggle away, Lara. I've got you hooked on the end of my fishing line, gorgeous. "You're referring to the King and Queen, of course. No, it was one of your minders from the palace."

"Oh. I know my parents are looking forward to meeting you."

Jack looked around making sure the two attendants weren't close to them, and leaning towards Lara, said in a low voice "Let's cut the crap, Lara. I know exactly what you told your parents."

"I don't know what you mean." Her eyes widened. He had to give it to her -- she was the epitome of an innocent ingénue.

Jack let ten long seconds tick by before saying "I understand you may be having my baby."

CHAPTER FIVE

Lara gasped. He knew. How humiliating. How embarrassing. She took a deep, controlling breath aware that she had to face the situation but, what must Jack think of her. Oh hell!

"I don't know what to say." She needed to give herself more time to sort out her thoughts. Besides, there was nowhere to run.

"You could start by telling me why you said anything about our...our being intimate."

Good. She wasn't the only one grappling for words, or was his hesitation deliberate? She couldn't tell.

"I thought we had agreed to keep that to ourselves," Jack added, with a twist of his mouth.

"My mother guessed."

"She guessed? You must have given something away."

The inquisition was on, well and truly. Lara looked along the aisle for one of the attendants. Surely they must be near to the flight leaving, for heaven's sake.

"I...I actually didn't say anything, Jack, except that you had behaved like a gentleman."

"Hah! Such a gentleman that I seduced you and made you pregnant."

Jack wasn't taking this well and who could blame him, she thought. Suddenly being accused of making a baby with a royal princess and then to be literally forced to accompany her to Challoner to face the music.

"Excuse me, Your Royal Highness -- Mr. Lucas."

Thank goodness! They were being interrupted at last. Lara concentrated on what the flight attendant was saying about the safety features of the aircraft, even though she had heard it many times before.

"Mr. Lucas." The attendant turned to Jack giving him a flashing smile. "For your information we have a satellite phone and a fax and computer on board, should you require to make contact with your business."

"He won't require them." Lara could have bitten out her tongue as soon as she'd said the thoughtless words, which had drawn an enigmatic stare from Jack.

"And we have a well equipped gymnasium. There are showers and toilets at the rear of the plane and when you are ready to sleep, we have a comfortable bed for you."

"Thank you. A double bed?"

The attendant blushed under Jack's teasing manner and Lara could have hit him.

"I'm afraid not, Sir. The bedroom is for Her Highness but we will ensure that you are very comfortable."

"I'm sure you will."

Lara pressed her lips together. He was flirting with the attendant. How dare he! She turned to look out of the window as the plane began to taxi towards the main runway.

Jack touched her silk clad knee making her jump. "We haven't finished this

conversation by a long shot," he said, settling into his chair as the jet began its ascent.

When the seat belt sign was turned off, Lara remained seated, not quite sure what to say next to the handsome and relaxed man in front of her. He was casually dressed in a short-sleeved blue and white checked shirt and clean, but very old jeans with a tear across one knee. On his feet were navy runners and as she watched, he bent forward and removed them revealing one navy and one black sock.

"You have odd socks," she couldn't help remarking.

Jack grinned. "So I do. That's what comes of having to leave home in a hurry. Does it bother you?"

"No."

"And are you going to stay dressed in your Barbie Doll outfit for the whole of the flight?"

Lara sucked in a furious breath. She was sure he was being deliberately offensive firstly, openly flirting with the attendant and now, re-starting his attack on her.

"I will change shortly," she replied, knowing she sounded prim. As prim as she looked she thought, politely refusing the champagne the attendant now offered, noting that Jack settled for a beer.

"Let's get back to sorting out our relationship, Lara. We need to get our story straight before meeting your parents."

She could feel Jack's eyes focused on her. He was right, of course. For both their sakes, they couldn't afford any more slip ups and she did owe Jack a proper explanation.

She gripped the arms of the chair as she began. "I was hesitant in talking about you and my mother suspected something had happened between us."

"She was right."

Lara waved a hand in the air as if to stop him interrupting. This was bad enough as it was. "She asked if you had forced yourself on me."

She could sense Jack's sudden tension and hurriedly continued. "I said no but that we had made love -- become lovers. She asked if we'd used protection and ...and I couldn't bring myself to answer."

She could feel Jack's blue eyes intent on her.

"That's when my mother told me that you would be invited to the palace as a friend of the family and we would wait and see if I was pregnant. My mother and the King, and probably their advisors, have it all planned."

"Why didn't you tell the Queen that you couldn't possibly be pregnant?"

Lara shook her head in bewilderment. "I don't know."

"Besides, you could have taken a pregnancy test in Australia within a few days without this panic to get you home and insisting I come with you."

"The palace wouldn't risk anything like that in case word leaked out." Lara frowned. "You seem to know a lot about that sort of thing?"

"I was married, Lara."

Politeness kept Lara from questioning him further but she instantly wondered if his wife had perhaps had a baby and miscarried.

"My mother seems more comfortable to let nature take its course."

"And you always do what your mother says -- except tell the truth leaving me to be the fall guy." His harsh words ripped into her.

Lara leaned forward, her eyes filling with tears. Suddenly it was so important that

he understood. "Jack, you know I had never been with a man before. When you made love to me, it was as if you tore away every conceivable reservation I had ever had. I know we didn't have actual intercourse but, the way you caressed me and kissed me, it was as if we had been the most intimate a man and woman could be -- at least, it was to me. To tell my mother that it hadn't happened would have denied something very precious and I couldn't do it."

Jack was silent as Lara wiped away a stray tear from her cheek. Would he understand? This man of the sea who had stolen her heart. Yes, he'd been married and probably had lots of relationships before and after his marriage. To him, their little episode on the island meant nothing. To her, it had changed her life.

Jack took a long swallow of beer before speaking. "I think it might be best if we both stick to the story that you might be pregnant."

His voice sounded strange -- deep and sort of husky. Lara saw that his expression had softened and a smile played around his mouth. She had shown her vulnerability to him but she didn't care. If it was only for three weeks, she would cling to every memory of being with him.

"Did the advisor question you about ...about a possible pregnancy?"

"Obviously. Otherwise I wouldn't be here, although he was very discreet. I thought for some obtuse reason of your own you had lied about our association so I kept quiet and did what I was told."

Lara twisted a tissue between her fingers. This was dreadful. "Did the advisor offer you money to keep quiet?"

"No."

"They probably will when we get to Challoner. And I think you should take what they offer, which will be a substantial amount, I'm sure. It's the least you deserve after putting up with this."

Jack finished his beer, placing the glass on the small table between them. "I don't know whether you mean to be deliberately insulting, Lara, or whether these statements come naturally to you."

"I don't know why you should be offended. You are dropping everything to fly to Challoner and losing pay because of it. You were hounded by the media and made to look like a criminal. You have been embarrassed and even threatened by my family. Why shouldn't you seek recompense?"

Jack watched the angry spark in her green eyes. She seemed to have recovered from her bout of shyness and was bouncing right back at him. From what she was saying Lara still believed him to be a lowly paid fisherman. That puzzled him. He knew very well that his background had been checked by the Challoner officials on behalf of the royal family and government. But, it appeared that Lara had not been informed and he wasn't sure why. Perhaps there were reasons he didn't know about and for the moment he decided to play the game.

"We'll see. At present I feel I have been well recompensed. A flight in a luxurious private jet, an all-expenses paid holiday in Europe and the company of a beautiful Princess. What more could a man ask for?"

"Have you no shame? What about when we meet my parents and they accuse you of seducing their daughter?"

Jack smiled. "I'm not worried about that, Lara. After all, they would have to know

you would lose your virginity at sometime and I think you've done well to last until you're twenty-four-years old."

Warm color rose in her cheeks as she said in a fierce whisper. "But, I'm *still* a virgin and *you* are being insulting now."

This time Jack couldn't help laughing. "Well, if it worries you so much, tell your parents you are still virginal. Otherwise, we'll wait until you get your period and when you do that will be my signal to fly home. Do I get the use of a private jet to take me back?"

If looks could kill he would have been dead several times over in the past thirty minutes, Jack decided. He watched as Lara flung off her seat-belt and taking her hand bag, walked towards the bedroom at the rear of the plane.

Refusing another beer from the very attentive attendant, he leaned back in the comfortable chair, his expression thoughtful. He shouldn't have teased her. In fact, he had been cruel slamming the words back in her face. He knew, for all her royal upbringing and mostly because of it, that she was naïve and vulnerable and he was playing on it.

He had to admit to being intrigued with Lara and still very smitten. She was an enigma. From what she had told him, she had spent some years in Australia at boarding school and then at university but in a cloistered atmosphere with someone watching her every move. Who she talked to -- who she partied with -- who her men friends were.

His guts tightened as he thought of her with other men. Had she had any serious relationships? He knew she was innocent sexually but there was such a thing as meetings of the minds.

He went over what she had said about them making love. It must have taken courage to admit that his love-making had meant so much to her. And he had been so overcome by her declaration that he hadn't been able to respond. He had just gulped his beer like an embarrassed teenager. So what if he had to face her parents? He'd made love to her, hadn't he? As he'd said at the time there were many ways of making love and he couldn't deny that if he'd been carrying protection with him that nothing on earth would have stopped him from taking her virginity -- so who was he kidding.

Jack glanced at his watch. Lara was taking her time. He hoped he hadn't upset her too much. He wasn't usually an unkind person but with her, his harsh words came so easily -- and she gave as good as she got. Still, it would have been pretty daunting for her to have spoken to her strict parents and admitted a sexual relationship with a man she had met only hours before -- a poor fisherman, at that.

Getting up, he stretched his legs. Boy, it was going to be a long flight! They had been told they would land in Singapore to refuel but wouldn't be allowed to leave the aircraft for security reasons so, they were stuck together whether they liked it or not.

He noticed the attendants were in the galley preparing dinner and on an impulse, he walked to the back of the plane and without knocking, opened the door to the bedroom.

Lara was brushing her long, golden hair and hearing the door open, whirled around to face him. She had changed and was wearing a light grey jumper with matching slacks. She looked classy and beautiful. He felt his heart- beat sky rocket.

"Jack! What are you doing in here?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay. I'm sorry if I upset you."

He caught a lock of her hair in his hand. It felt like finest silk beneath his fingers

and he lifted it to his mouth and then smelt its delicate perfume. Lara went to pull away but her eyes told him another story. Excitement and desire lay in their depths. She wanted him! Almost roughly Jack pulled her into his arms, her soft curves molding to the contours of his body.

He could feel her heart pounding wildly against his chest as she clung to him and when her lips parted under his demanding mouth, he was lost as he drank in her sweetness.

"Jack -- stop!"

Her pleading voice penetrated his consciousness and he looked down into her imploring eyes and drew back. "I'm sorry, Lara. I didn't mean this to happen." He shook his head in bewilderment as once again he realized he had lost control as soon as she was close.

"It's alright." She was breathless and her lips were pink and swollen from his passion.

"Its still there, Lara."

"What?"

"This feeling between us. This sexual awareness -- this lust. And it won't go away until we make love properly. Until you can feel me inside you ..."

"Don't. Don't say anymore, Jack. You're right when you say its lust because that is all it is. A physical need and when you have had me, there will be nothing left between us."

He watched her turn away, straightening her hair in front of the mirror. "Please go. I'll be out in a moment."

Jack returned to his seat and endeavored to calm himself. He wanted Lara so much...was he nothing but an animal with the primal urge to mate? Yet she had responded -- and how! He could feel her now pressing into him, his arousal hard against the curve of her stomach as she had returned his kisses with a reckless eagerness. He hadn't chosen the right time or place but he knew she wanted him with equally lustful feelings. Perhaps she was right. When he did make love to her, truly made love to her, it would cure this insatiable need for each other.

Lara sat down abruptly on the bed as Jack closed the door. Her hand holding the hairbrush was shaking and she hastily placed the brush on the dressing table. Oh, goodness, didn't Jack have any idea of what he was doing to her? The strength of will she had needed to stop herself begging him to take her -- right here on the bed and to hell with everything else?

I would have joined the mile-high club, she thought hysterically. Making love -- no, as far as Jack was concerned, having sex a mile above the earth. She pondered on how she and Jack were going to behave when they met her parents. After all, they could hardly keep their hands off each other and she couldn't imagine how this would change.

She began to brush her hair again with long, soothing strokes, attempting to plan the next three weeks in her mind. Three weeks! She knew she would have her period then as she was always very regular and then she would have to tell the Queen that she wasn't pregnant and Jack would leave.

And how would Jack cope with life in the palace? Would he think it all a huge joke? What would her parents think of the handsome fisherman? Too many questions and no answers, she thought as she took a deep breath and steeled herself to return to her seat.

She opened the door and moved down the cabin to find Jack reading a magazine about fishing. The crew had certainly thought of everything.

She peered over the top of the magazine and smiled. "Could we determine how we are going to act towards each other in front of my family? Then, we can put it from our minds until we land."

"Good idea." Jack lowered the magazine and gave Lara a slow, sensual smile. "It could upset the works if I behave like I did a few minutes ago."

Lara willed herself not to blush. "Nevertheless, my family knows we have been intimate so, if you agree, I think we should be relaxed and friendly with each other."

"No touching?"

"I don't think so."

"Won't your parents find that strange? After all, I am potentially the father of their grandchild."

"It would be inappropriate."

"You mean it won't look good as far as palace protocols are concerned that a poor Australian fisherman tried to hold your hand, and the news might be leaked to the press."

Lara sighed with frustration. Jack was being difficult again. She tried a different tactic. "No one will know what we do in private." She smiled at him again hoping he would be reasonable.

"Does that mean I can visit your bedroom in the middle of the night?"

She should have instantly corrected him but some imp inside her made her rebel and she gave him a coquettish look from beneath her lashes.

Jack leaned forward, his face inches from hers. "Lara, you're playing with fire."

Suddenly she couldn't breathe as his sheer closeness and magnetism made her giddy. "I know," she whispered, her tongue licking her dry, bottom lip.

"Your Highness. Dinner will be served in half an hour. May I offer you an aperitif?"

Saved! Lara nodded and accepted a glass of French champagne. To her surprise, Jack also took a glass and clinked it against hers. "To us and the next three weeks," he said, and although she hadn't taken a sip, she felt instantly intoxicated by this man.

Dinner was served on the central table, which doubled as a conference area. But now it had been set with the finest china and cutlery and crystal glassware. Fortunately for Lara, Jack had decided to ease the sexual tension and they were able to talk comfortably.

Lara took the opportunity to tell Jack about her country, including its impressive history and the royal lineage dating from the fifteenth century. "My brother Carl is the Crown Prince and will succeed my father when he dies," she explained, as she finished her main course of veal with mushrooms, realizing how hungry she had been.

"The royal family doesn't have a say in the ruling of the country?" Jack appeared genuinely interested and had plied her with inquisitive questions throughout the meal.

"No. Not now. It used to, but like most of the small European countries, we have a government in power. The royals are figureheads. We continue to exist by the grace and favor of the government and our people."

"What's the population?"

"Only two hundred and fifty thousand people. Our main language is German but we also speak Russian and French."

"Do you speak all of those languages?"

"Yes."

"Clever girl."

"It is part of my heritage and for most Europeans, languages come naturally. English is our second language."

"Why did you take a fine arts degree at uni?"

"When you arrive, you will realize that Challoner is a very beautiful country steeped in history with many classical buildings, statues and art galleries. Tourism is the country's main source of revenue. It is important that I'm familiar with the arts as well as political sciences."

Jack was quiet and seemed lost in thought. She took the opportunity to study his features as if she couldn't stop drinking him in. The straight chiseled nose and strong, slanting cheek bones -- his face bronzed by the wind and sun. His long, sensitive fingers holding the elegant wine glass were toughened by the rough work that he did to make a living. They were literally poles apart, she realized. How could she ever think that anything could come from a relationship with him?

"It is winter there, Jack. Did you bring warm clothes?"

He grinned. "Yeah. I remembered at the last moment when I was packing."

Lara placed her serviette on the table, the signal for the attendant to clear the plates. "I'm sure my parents will arrange suitable clothing for you if you don't have it."

"You mean, like a dinner suit?"

Lara hesitated. She hadn't thought about Jack not being able to afford the necessary suits to wear. "You won't need to attend formal functions," she said quickly, afraid she would embarrass him.

"Oh, but I want to." Stubbornness was written across Jack's face.

"It's not required," she said, equally as stubborn.

"What's the problem, Princess? Afraid that I will show you up with my bad manners and ill-fitting clothes?"

"I'm not going to get into another argument with you, Jack." Lara rose from her chair and Jack stood also. They glared at each other across the table.

"I told you on the island that you were a snob. Nothing has changed," he said, tossing his serviette on to the table.

"And you are an uncouth, ignorant, rough, common ...man. You should thank your lucky stars that you weren't thrown into prison for a very long time."

"What?"

"You seduced me -- a royal princess."

"And you loved every moment of it. In fact, if you'd had your way, you would be pregnant now with a royal bastard."

"Oh. *Oh!*" Lara couldn't speak she was so mad. Aware that the attendants were not too far away, she lowered her voice as she leaned towards him.

"This is a large enough plane for you to keep out of my way for the rest of the flight so, please make sure you do," she said icily.

"It will be my pleasure, Your High and Mightiness," Jack responded and leaving her standing at the table, he entered the door to the gymnasium, slamming it behind him.

Both of them managed to avoid the other for the remainder of the flight with Lara reading umpteen magazines, while Jack spent an eternity working out in the gym. Lara

then had to wait for him to shower before she could prepare for bed.

The stop in Singapore to refuel the plane and change crews was very brief and as they took off for Challoner, Lara settled into her large double bed aware that the crew had set up sleeping quarters for Jack in the forward cabin.

Before going to sleep, Lara took out her new journal that she had arranged for one of the security men to buy the previous day. She had gone hot and cold when she realized she had left her other journal under the armchair cushion in Jack's cottage on the island. Panicking, she wondered who she would ask to retrieve it, knowing in the wrong hands it would be dynamite. Then common sense prevailed. Housework wasn't Jack's forte and the journal wasn't likely to be found for years. People wouldn't even know who she was then.

She began to write.

"I am so mad with Jack; I could throw him out of this plane!

Just when I think we are getting on okay, he lashes at me with that barbed--wire tongue of his. He has a major hang up now that he has found out who I am and honestly, I don't care that he's a fisherman. In fact, I'm glad. I love him as he is and yet we ricochet between rowing like crazy and wanting to make love, or for him, have sex.

I'll never be able to hold out against him if he keeps looking at me the way he does. Oh, he makes my toes curl!

There are some difficult times ahead, dear diary. I don't know how Jack and I are going to manage.

Welcome to my world, Jack Lucas."

CHAPTER SIX

"Are we going straight to the palace?"

Jack swung himself into the chair opposite Lara aware that they would shortly be landing at Challoner. He had spent the last two hours on the flight deck talking to the pilot and first officer and had enjoyed their company. It also meant that Lara and he could continue to avoid each other and the possibility of having more rows. But the time had come to be civil to each other, particularly in that they would be spending so much time together in the next three weeks.

Lara looked up from the book she was reading. "Yes. But there's no need to change."

"I wasn't going to." Jack pursed his lips. He didn't mean to be uncooperative but straight away Lara's comment had irritated him. He consciously relaxed his shoulders trying to shake the tension from them following the hours spent in the aircraft. He hadn't been to Europe before, never having the need. All of his long haul trips had involved visits to Japan, China and Indonesia as part of his negotiations for the many businesses under his control, particularly the lucrative areas of aqua-culture and export trade. Although he had his own private jet and worked on his computer during most of his flights, he still found that time passed slowly and tediously.

Lara ignored his glib comment. "I've received a call from the Queen and she has asked us to join the King and her for luncheon. It will be about ten o'clock in the morning when we land so this will give us time to shower and change."

Watching Lara put into place her ever-so-cool façade was quite fascinating, Jack decided. The original Ice Princess. Yet he knew he could break through those barriers with a few words, or a touch of his hand on that soft cheek or the caress of his lips against her long, elegant neck.

He had been fascinated by their fiery exchanges earlier. She had come alive, her eyes sparkling into his and her cheeks pink with anger. He'd seen all her various moods on the island. The proud look that he had teased her about, which had caused him to label her a snob and the opposite, of innocence and naivety that she couldn't avoid him seeing. But, most of all, the fire and passion in her eyes when he had made love to her. The astonished look of pure ecstasy when he had made her come and afterwards, when she had trembled in his arms. He had met her only a few days ago and yet he knew her.

He knew her...intimately.

"Do you have a suit to wear?"

He blinked, endeavoring to put his lustful thoughts aside. "Yes. I've brought a suit with me."

"It will be a reasonably informal luncheon. My brother Carl will attend as well. The press office is leaking the word that you are more of a close friend of Carl's, than mine."

Jack laughed. "The Princess Media Machine stepping up the action?"

Responding with a warm smile, Lara said "the palace is very protective of me. I

am the people's favorite royal, which is why there was such an upset when it was thought you had kidnapped me."

She made the statement without the slightest trace of ego giving Jack some idea of what he was in for. The royal favorite and he had the audacity to seduce her. Wow! Even if their affair had been successfully hidden from the media and consequently, the people, he still had to face her family and palace officials.

"What are you thinking, Jack? You look bemused." Her voice was soft as she stared at him curiously.

Jack absentmindedly rubbed a hand over his jaw feeling the growth of day-old bristles. He really didn't know how to answer her. How could he say that he didn't approve of this subterfuge? That as a grown woman, albeit a Princess, Lara should be allowed to have what ever friends and relationships she liked? That it went against the grain with him to pretend he was a friend of the family, rather than her lover.

How could any nation still be so rigid and steeped in tradition to go to such lengths? He hadn't told Lara that when he had reached his home in Port Margaret, he had spent several hours on the internet researching her country including its history and the role her ancestors had played over the centuries. Then, because he was so curious, he had investigated other royal households in Lichtenstein, Spain, Denmark and the United Kingdom. None of them appeared on the surface to be as strict as Challoner but then, he didn't know what happened behind the closed palace doors.

"I was thinking how lovely you look," he said and meant it. He felt over- tired and knew he would suffer from jet lag and yet Lara was perfect, her features serene, her hair and make-up understated and elegant.

"You're very forthright. It embarrasses me," she replied, faint color tingeing her cheeks.

"Don't worry. I'll behave myself in front of your family."

"I think you should relax and be yourself, Jack."

He grinned. "If that was the case, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you and would ravish you on the banqueting table in front of everyone."

She surprised him by giggling as her cheeks grew pinker. "Have you forgiven me for getting you into this mess?"

"Lara, it's not a mess. It's a holiday, so don't worry about my feelings." He caught her hand and lifted it to his lips. "It will do me good to behave myself for a change."

* * * *

A flurry of snow flakes greeted Lara as she emerged from the aircraft on the private runway a few miles from the palace and the city of Challoner. She quickly descended the steps to the tarmac and entered the waiting limousine, which carried the Challoner royal standard. Jack was close behind her and she felt the length of his thigh touching hers as they settled into their seats.

Jack shook the snow from his hair. "Phew! What a welcome. It's freezing out there." He loosened his coat as the warm interior of the car hit him.

Lara flicked back the hood of her white fake fur coat. Her throat felt strangely tight and her eyes were stinging with unshed tears. She was home. For all that she had thought about coming home and the duties this involved in the role of a royal princess, she had missed Challoner and particularly missed her family. Soon she would see them.

"I told you it was winter," she managed to reply, swallowing the sudden emotion.

Jack's dark head touched her blonde one for a moment and she felt her heart begin to pound. "Yes, but you didn't tell me it was going to be this cold, Princess," he whispered. Was he going to kiss her? He was drawing away.

"Jack, hold me for a moment. I'm nervous," she whispered back. Had she really said that aloud? She couldn't believe it.

His arms instantly surrounded her, pulling her to his chest as his head rested on hers. "Why? Are your parents so intimidating?"

"No. But then I've never brought a lover home to meet them before."

"I'm glad to hear it."

She looked up at him, his sensual mouth so close. She needed him. Needed his strength and confidence but, mostly his physical presence.

He must have sensed it as his long fingers cupped her delicate jaw and his tongue traced the soft fullness of her lips. His kiss, as his mouth moved over hers, was warm and firm. When he drew back, she was on fire from his touch.

"That will have to suffice for a while," he smiled.

She turned to look out of the window, too overcome with her feelings to reply. How could she have asked Jack to hold her? It was as if she lost control every time he came near. Perhaps he had cast a spell on her when they were on the island. It had been such a magical place, she would believe anything!

The snow had eased and she peered at the familiar countryside as the car made its stately way to the palace. The media hadn't been informed of her arrival and she knew this was what her parents and the palace officials had wanted. She and Jack would be smuggled into the palace, surrounded by security guards and Jack's strange visit would begin.

Thirty minutes later the car drew up in front of the Challoner Palace. Lara greeted her aide, Rudolf Meinhart and her maid Greta, and introduced them to Jack. She tried to imagine the palace through Jack's eyes. The massive doors that opened into a marble entrance hall, completely overpowering in its size. Ahead of them was a wide staircase leading to the upper floors. Everywhere the eye could see were long, daunting corridors with walls covered in tapestries and paintings of her ancestors.

"Rudolf will take you to your suite and make sure your luggage is delivered to you, Jack." She stood a little away from him on the first landing of the stairway.

Jack stepped closer. "I'm impressed so far. Where is your suite?" he asked with a wicked grin.

Lara glanced at Rudolf who was standing discreetly nearby. She put a finger to her lips in a silencing gesture. "I'll meet you here at twelve o'clock and we'll go into lunch together. If you need anything delivered just pick up the phone in your suite."

"I want you. Can I get you delivered by picking up the phone?" he teased.

Lara lowered her lashes but a faint smile played around her lips. She turned and with Greta following, made her way to her rooms.

Two hours later Lara opened the door of her apartment. I am *really* nervous, she thought. What must Jack be feeling? This poor, gorgeous man, whipped away from his old boat and smelly fish and about to dine with European royalty. Oh help!

Jack was waiting for her on the landing where she'd previously left him. Her eyes almost fell out of her head as she stared at the elegant man in front of her. Looking vital and refreshed, his black hair gleaming under the lights of the massive chandelier above

his head. He wore a charcoal grey suit that surely must be tailor-made and a pale blue-toned shirt with a darker blue tie. He was magnificent!

She glanced at her blue-knitted suit and elegant shoes, realizing that she and Jack were color coordinated.

"Smart suit," she said, by way of greeting.

"And the same to you, Princess."

"Um...Jack, when I present you to the King and Queen and my brother, you give a slight bow of your head. Okay?"

"Thanks. Rudolf has already filled me in on the protocols," he said with a casual shrug. "Are you allowed to hold my arm as we walk down the stairs?"

Lara placed her hand into the crook of his arm, feeling the fine material and the steel of hard muscles beneath her fingers.

"I certainly am. Thank you, Mr. Lucas," she responded.

* * * *

Jack fidgeted with the knot of his tie. He knew he shouldn't but he was bored. This informal luncheon, as Lara had called it, had been anything but, and at the end of almost three hours he was decidedly uncomfortable and yes, very bored.

But, I've been well behaved, he thought, allowing himself a small congratulatory smile as the attentive butler poured him another coffee. I have been dutifully polite to King Johann and Queen Francesca and talked about non-descript topics with them and Lara's brother, Crown Prince Carl. Boring topics such as the weather and how different it was from Australia. Of course it was bloody well different! Australia was thousands of miles away at the other end of the earth and as far as Jack was concerned, it might just as well be on another planet compared to his present environment.

Earlier he had been greeted warmly by the King and Queen, although he had the feeling that he had better not step out of line. He wondered if they had dungeons here and whether he could be in danger of being locked away for the rest of his life for daring to defile a royal princess. King Johann was a slight, elegant man with a serious, intelligent face. He was quieter than the Queen, who appeared to be the diplomat, making sure that Jack was made to feel welcome. He could see where Lara had inherited her beauty for, in her early fifties, Queen Francesca was still a very lovely woman with a slender figure and noble bearing.

He looked across at Lara who sat opposite him, next to Carl. She was pale and her face was strained. In fact, he'd found it hard not to keep looking at her throughout the long lunch. He was bewitched by her beauty and gentle manner but he worried for her now and couldn't determine why. She should be fine returning to the loving arms of her family. However, he had been surprised at the cool greeting she had received from her parents. Perhaps they were different when there wasn't a stranger present or perhaps they were mad at her for breaking ranks and daring to live a life her own life. He didn't know, but he didn't like what he saw. Lara shouldn't be treated in this almost callous way. After all, he was the one who had seduced *her*, damn it! It was his fault.

He studied Carl, who was a good-looking man and at thirty-three, was the same age as him. But, for all of Carl's handsome features, there was a sulky petulance in his manner and signs of a weak character in the lines around his mouth and chin.

Jack fidgeted again, moving restlessly in the velvet upright chair. The five of them were seated in what he understood was the Small Salon, except it was huge. The

King and Queen sat at either end of the magnificent dining table, which was laden with silverware with a low display of yellow roses as a centre piece. Servants had hovered nearby to serve the three course meal and accompanying wines. This probably accounted for the stilted conversation, Jack decided, because there was no way this family was going to discuss anything of a personal nature in front of the staff.

Even so, he didn't understand why the King and Queen hadn't questioned him about his background and businesses. They were definitely keeping something from Lara and ... so was he. Frowning, he decided he would explain things to Lara as soon as he could. That in fact, he wasn't the poor fisherman she thought he was, but was wealthy -- substantially wealthy, even by this family's standards.

He noticed that Lara refused a port with her coffee, as she had refused the wines during the meal. He had done the same, not because he wouldn't have enjoyed them, but he wanted to have all his faculties on red alert if he had to deal with any awkward questions. Carl, on the other hand, had freely indulged in the wines and was now motioning to the butler to refill his port glass. His cheeks were flushed from the amount of alcohol he had consumed and his voice was becoming louder by the moment.

As the last servant departed, Carl turned to Queen Francesca. "Mother, I'm flying to Monaco tomorrow for a few days."

Francesca looked reproachfully at her son. "Not again, surely. You were only there last week."

"Well, I don't have any official engagements and I'm not required to attend the Ball. Quite honestly, I'm sick of this freezing weather. I need to get away."

"Seeing that we have a guest staying with us, I would think you could stay and entertain him," Johann said crisply.

Jack exchanged a glance with Lara who instantly lowered her eyes. He took a sip of his coffee. Hmm -- a family disagreement. Interesting.

"Sir, Mr. Lucas is Lara's guest, not mine. I'm sure he won't mind if I disappear for a few days, would you, Jack?"

Yep. Drop me in it, why don't you, Jack thought, deciding he didn't particularly like the Crown Prince.

Francesca hurriedly came to Jack's rescue. "We will discuss this later, Carl. Mr. Lucas, would you like Lara to take you riding this afternoon? We have excellent horses and a superb indoor school."

"Are you mad, Mother? Lara shouldn't go riding in her condition."

Following Carl's outspoken statement, there was an embarrassing silence. Even Carl realized he had blundered but was too intoxicated to let it go.

"Well, she shouldn't. It's no good avoiding the issue and pretending Jack is here for any other reason than the fact that Lara is having his baby."

Lara turned on Carl, her color high as her eyes flashed with fury. "Shut up, Carl. You're drunk," she hissed.

Jack decided it was time to defuse the situation. He turned to Francesca. "Actually, I don't ride."

"You don't ride?" The voices of the King and Queen and Carl were in unison as they stared at Jack in disbelief.

"Unfortunately, no. But, I'm good at fishing."

There was another one of the silences and then Lara began to laugh, a delightful

sound, her face alight with humor. You are the most gorgeous creature ever created, Jack thought as he grinned in response. By this time both the King and Queen had seen the funny side and it was only Carl who looked sullen. Pushing back his chair in a violent gesture, he stormed from the room, which caused Lara to break into more peals of laughter.

"Mr. Lucas, I'm very sorry that you've been embarrassed by my son," Francesca said, bringing her laughter under control with an effort as she lightly touched Jack's arm.

"Your Majesty, I'm not concerned," Jack replied. "Perhaps without realizing it, the Crown Prince has broken the ice."

Looking thoughtful, Francesca replied, "Perhaps he has."

"Lara, why don't you show Mr. Lucas around the palace this afternoon," Johann suggested, effectively capturing his daughter's attention.

Francesca nodded her head in agreement. "That's a good idea. Then I'm sure you'll both want an early night following that tiring journey."

Jack glanced at Lara trying to gauge her response. It would seem her parents were comfortable with them spending their time together. Good. He hoped Lara felt the same way.

"You haven't forgotten that the Palace Ball is only two days away, have you, Lara?" Francesca's tone was light as she rose from her chair, but Jack sensed an underlying warning in her voice.

Lara sighed. "No, I haven't forgotten. I gather Michael's arriving tomorrow, which is one of the reasons you wanted me home."

Francesca turned to Jack, who had immediately stood as the King and Queen prepared to leave. "Prince Michael is a distant relative, Mr. Lucas. He joins us at this time every year to attend the Ball." She seemed to hesitate as she glanced at her husband standing beside her. Lowering her voice, she said "Actually, we know the Ball is just an excuse for Prince Michael to visit. He is really coming to ask for Lara's hand in marriage -- again."

Jack wondered if his expression had changed as a bitter jealousy stirred inside him.

"Mummy, Jack's not interested in hearing this," Lara quickly intercepted.

"I can assure you I am." Jack was just as quick. "I mean, if you are pregnant, Lara, this could ruin your chances of marrying the Prince," he said, his voice silkily soft.

"No it won't, Mr. Lucas. Lara knows very well that Michael is so besotted with her, he would accept her as his bride on any terms." Francesca fingered the pearls at her throat as she made the damning statement.

Johann was obviously as uncomfortable with the conversation as Lara and Jack as he said gruffly "Enough! I don't want to hear any more about it. Lara, show our guest how courteous we can be and give Jack a tour of the palace."

"Yes, Sir." Lara gave a bob curtsey and caught Jack's arm to draw him away.

"Just a moment..." The Queen moved closer and Jack could see who the controlling influence was in the royal family. "The King would like you to join him for a game of billiards and an aperitif at six o'clock, if that is alright with you? Then perhaps you and Lara would care to dine in Lara's suite this evening and have some time on your own."

Jack gave a formal nod of acknowledgement, aware of the pressure on his arm as

Lara endeavored to pull him away. He wondered what the hell was going on. The King wanted to meet with him?

* * * *

Lara breathed a sigh of relief as she led Jack through the Grand Hall towards their suites. What a dreadful situation. Her brother drunk and speaking out of turn, her father annoyed and grumpy and her mother busy manipulating something -- Lara didn't know what. And she'd been worried as to whether *Jack* would be an embarrassment. It was her own family that had shamed her while Jack had been a true gentleman. The soul of discretion.

"Hey, wait a minute, Lara. Why are we almost running? It's as if you're escaping the scene of a crime." Jack stopped in the middle of the Grand Hall forcing Lara to stop also.

She faced him. "I am *very* sorry. I'm mortified at my family's behavior." She could feel her face burning with humiliation.

Touching her cheek with a gentle finger, Jack's smile was so tender that Lara felt her insides melt. "Is there somewhere private that we can go and discuss that eventful lunch?" he asked, lifting one dark eyebrow.

"We'll go to my suite. No one will disturb us there."

She led the way up the marble stair-case and through a maze of corridors until she unlocked the doors to her apartment.

"This is some place," Jack said, looking around at the large study they were in.

"Yes, it's nice. There's a dining room and two bedrooms with en-suites and also a kitchen." Lara crossed to the bar in the corner of the study and poured two mineral waters, handing one to Jack.

"At least your brother's comment opened things up a bit." Jack took the glass and, leaning against the large sofa, loosened his tie with his other hand.

Lara stood a few feet away and took a swallow of water. "I was so embarrassed I wanted to hide under the table." She gave a rueful grin.

"Does Carl normally drink to that extent?"

"I'm not aware of it, but I haven't been home since the summer and Carl was away in the States for most of the time I was here."

Lara studied Jack beneath her lashes. He looked casual and raffish and as she watched, he placed his glass on a nearby table and removed his jacket. She could see the ripples of his muscles beneath the pale blue material as he once again turned to face her.

"And why do you suppose the King wants to have a drink with me this evening?" His manner was suddenly intent, his eyes very blue in the reflected light from the huge windows behind her. "You'd better fill me in, Lara. I don't like surprises."

"Neither of my parents has spoken about you since my phone call with my mother. If I were to take a guess, I think my father will offer you money to get you out of my life."

"Charming!"

"But, it will be done in the most diplomatic way so that you don't feel inclined to inform the media." Lara knew she sounded disloyal to her parents, but she felt that Jack deserved to know the likely outcome of his meeting with the King.

Jack sighed and Lara wondered what he was thinking. Surely he would take the money. He must need it and he would know that there was no future for them. But then,

who was she kidding. Jack didn't want to be with her and was only here because he had been threatened with prison on a trumped up charge of kidnapping, if he'd refused to accompany her to Challoner. It was a wonder he didn't hate her -- and her family.

"So, you're saying that the King is going to buy me off?" Jack took the few steps to bring him closer. "What if I don't want to be bought?"

Lara studied the buttons on Jack's shirt and the strong column of his neck with the hollow at the base of his throat. When they had made love on the island she had pressed her lips against that golden hollow, caressing the warm texture of his skin. She could almost feel him now and taste the slight saltiness as his hands had aroused her, working their special kind of magic on her innocent body making her cry out for his possession.

"That's up to you, Jack." Her voice was breathless and she trembled as he lifted his hands to cup her face.

"No amount of money could pay for what you and I shared," he said softly.

"Besides, your parents have still to address the problem of your potential pregnancy."

"They could try and persuade me to have a termination." Even as she made the blunt statement, Lara knew she should have kept quiet. Jack's expression changed from sensual longing to one of shock as he dropped his hands to his sides.

"Your parents would ask you to have an abortion? I can't believe it." Jack turned and picking up a cushion from the sofa punched it with his fist in a furious gesture.

"Jack, I have no idea." Lara floundered, not knowing what her parents might suggest. "I'm probably doing them an injustice," she stumbled on. "Besides, if I was pregnant, I would never have an abortion. *Never*. But, they could insist that I marry Michael, as my mother indicated."

"Ah, yes. His Royal Highness Prince Michael, who is besotted with you, so I'm led to believe." Jack's face hardened and his mouth tightened into a thin, uncompromising line. "Do you love this man?"

"I have known him since I was a child. He's much older than I but he is kind and ..."

Jack moved closer, his face inches from hers. "I said do you love him?"

"No."

"So, there are two options, which you *think* your parents are considering. One is to pay me off even if you are expecting my child, which tells me that I'm not good enough to be involved with their royal daughter. Number two option, that if you're pregnant, and only you and I know you're not, is to marry you to some older royal who is crazy about you and willing to accept another man's child as his own."

Lara gaped at him. Was that how Jack saw things? Didn't he know that she would never marry Michael no matter what happened and that when the time came for Jack to leave, he would take her heart with him?

Greatly daring she placed her arms around Jack's neck, her fingers touching the thick, silky hair at the nape of his neck. "Please Jack, don't let's discuss it now. We have this time together -- these stolen hours and days. You said on the island that if you'd had protection, you would have made love to me. Do you still want to?"

"What sort of question is that? You know I do." Jack pulled her close, his hands caressing her back and then sliding over her curvaceous bottom, lifting her against him. She arched into him as she felt the hardness of his arousal between her thighs.

His kiss was demanding as his tongue parted her lips and plunged into the

honeyed sweetness of her mouth. With a sharp intake of breath, Lara returned his kisses, her control slipping as Jack pushed her against the back of the sofa, his fingers unfastening the buttons of her suit jacket as they continued to kiss.

"God, Lara! What do you want from me," Jack murmured, as he pulled aside her bra straps and bent to kiss her exposed nipples, arousing a melting desire within her. Lara encircled her legs around him, her skirt riding above her waist allowing her to feel Jack's sex pressing into the soft core of her body. She moaned aloud, her being flooded with passion as Jack moved against her in an erotic rhythm.

"I want you to be the man to take my virginity," she gasped, on the verge of her climax.

Jack stilled and lifted his head. His eyes were suddenly filled with contempt as he stared at Lara. Lowering her to the floor, he pulled her straps into place and straightened her skirt.

"It really turns you on, doesn't it?" His voice was bitter.

Lara, still trembling with the passion he had evoked, was confused at his words. She pulled on her jacket.

"I don't understand."

"I don't know how I could have been so stupid not to realize it before. The thought of having it off with a common fisherman excites you. You know you'll lose your virginity at sometime, so you've chosen me to be the one. You reckon I'm a good stud and that you'll enjoy yourself knowing that I can give you the sexual gratification you crave. Then I'll be gone and you won't need to be bothered with me any more. I'll be bought off so you can marry your pompous ass of a prince and settle in your cloistered, ivory tower. In fact, you seem so sure of what your father is going to say, I wouldn't be at all surprised if you haven't already discussed it with him. The only laughable thing is that he thinks we've already had sex."

"You don't know what you're saying. How can you be so cruel?"

"I do know what I'm saying. We have only one thing in common Lara, and it's called lust. I have awakened the passion in you and you're excited at the thought of doing it with me. You might be even more delighted to know that I've packed some condoms. Unfortunately, I don't have one with me or you might have got your wish and I'd be inside you right now."

"You're disgusting!" Lara tried to move away but Jack placed his hands against the sofa on either side of her, effectively barring her escape.

"Yes, I probably do appear disgusting to you coming from your pristine, protocol-ridden little world. But that's what you like about me, isn't it?"

Lara's eyes filled with tears as Jack bent and kissed her with a savage intensity. How could he have misunderstood her so -- it didn't make sense. Where had her tender, caring and fun fisherman gone? The man who cared for her on their island? She hung her head, deeply shocked and ashamed as his harsh words sunk in and she realized how low she was in his estimation.

Jack picked up his jacket. "Don't bother about showing me around, Princess," he said, with a faint smile. "I'm going to have a very cold shower, accept what ever recompense your father has to offer -- and then I'm going to bed. I'm tired. And don't worry, I won't tell him that I haven't had my money's worth yet."

Lara watched until Jack had closed the door of the apartment behind him before

allowing the hot tears to pour down her cheeks.

* * * *

Jack felt a false sense of bravado as Rudolf led him along the vast corridors towards the King and Queen's private quarters as it neared six o'clock.

True to his word he'd taken a cold shower and -- had he needed it! His lovemaking with Lara had been more than merely frustrating. Once again he had been so near to taking her -- there, against the sofa, particularly when she had made those little moans of passion and he'd felt her so ready to receive him.

Generally speaking, I've been an absolute idiot ever since Lara climbed on board my boat, he thought, briefly glancing at the huge portraits covering the walls as they passed along the corridors.

An idiot bewitched by a beautiful Princess who has used me. To Lara this is an exciting game. The romance of the island, my arrest, the intrigue, the lust. Sure, she wants me and there is no doubt I want her, he decided ruefully. But why didn't I realize earlier that we are poles apart. That this whole thing is madness.

"Not much further now, Mr. Lucas," Rudolf said, with a polite smile.

Jack continued with his own thoughts as he dutifully followed the aide. I don't belong here and the sooner I get back to Port Margaret, the better. He frowned at what Lara had said that the King would offer him money to leave her alone and keep things quiet from the press. This would mean that the King was unaware of Jack's wealth and that the royal family genuinely wanted him out of Lara's life. That hurt. It hurt like hell.

He pursed his lips as he thought of his harsh words to Lara earlier that afternoon. He had lashed out at her. He hadn't meant to be cruel and he was as carried away by their love making as she, if not more so. It was when she'd said she wanted him to be the man to take her virginity that a red haze of fury had descended over him.

Jealousy. I was blinded with jealousy at the thought of Lara and this God damned prince, he analyzed. I'm even more of a fool than I thought. Lara is much better off with one of her own kind than a rough diamond like me.

"Here we are, Sir." Rudolf stood to one side so that Jack could enter what appeared to be a large games room with a central billiard table. Johann greeted him and the butler served them both a drink. Uncomfortable, that's what you are, King Johann, Jack decided as he took a swig of his whisky and soda.

"The Queen will be joining us shortly, Jack. We have something of a delicate matter to discuss with you."

I bet you have. Jack gave a wry smile as he followed Johann to the billiard table. It wasn't until after the third game, which Jack won easily, that Queen Francesca joined the two men and the three sat in the lounge chairs in front of the roaring fire. As Jack thought might happen, Francesca took the lead.

"Mr. Lucas...Jack, thank you for meeting with us. The King and I have a very private matter to discuss."

Jack leaned back in his chair nursing another whiskey. Jeez! He was tired. He wished they would get on with it so he could leave.

Johann coughed nervously and began. "We have observed that Lara is, well, she is taken with you and you with her, Jack."

"Oh for goodness sake, Johann. It's pointless beating around the bush. Jack, we are aware that you are a very wealthy man. What the King and I propose is that you

consider making a substantial financial investment into our country's economy. In return we will offer you a title, royal privileges and our daughter, Princess Lara, as your bride."

CHAPTER SEVEN

If it hadn't been so serious Jack would have burst out laughing. He wondered if he had heard Francesca correctly, or perhaps misunderstood what she had said. The last thing he expected was to be asked for money and to be offered a Princess in return.

Both Johann and Francesca were studying him intently waiting for his reply. He cleared his throat. "Your Majesties. Just so I have this straight, you are proposing that if I invest money into Challoner you will allow me to marry Lara?"

"And there will be a title to go with it, after you're married, don't forget. A dukedom, I would think," Francesca said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"What does Lara think of this?" Jack felt he already knew the answer to this one.

"She doesn't know yet. It was important to discuss this with you first." Francesca reached over and patted her husband's arm as if to calm him. "After all, Lara will need to marry soon. It is very important that either Carl or Lara produce an heir to ascend to the throne when the time comes and it would appear that at present Carl isn't too interested in finding a bride."

"So, as well as making an investment and marrying Lara, you would also like us to produce an heir." Jack couldn't believe he was having this extraordinary conversation. It was less than a week ago that he had been happily tinkering on his boat enjoying a few days break and now look at him!

Francesca smiled. "As far as the heir is concerned, it would seem you have already made a move in that direction."

There was silence as Jack contemplated whether to correct the Queen. No, it was up to Lara to do that, if she had any intention of ever doing so. "May I ask why you need the investment and for how much?"

Johann answered this time and Jack sensed he was a lot more comfortable discussing financial matters than babies. "We badly need an injection of funds, Jack. If you agree, our government advisors will go more thoroughly into the details but generally speaking, we haven't been competitive in the exports markets and our economy has taken a dramatic down turn. Our main source of revenue is from tourism. This has dropped considerably in the past two years because we have been unable to invest resources into advertising. Most of the tourists prefer to visit the major European countries because these are heavily promoted in such places as the United States and Great Britain.

Jack rubbed his jaw, his mind racing. "How much are you seeking?"

"Well, this can be negotiated but somewhere in the vicinity of half a billion US dollars."

Jack swore. He couldn't help it. "That's big money, Sir. Why don't you approach the major banks or blue chip investors?"

Francesca broke in. "Because, my dear Jack, you *are* our blue chip investor. Not only will your investment be used wisely but with a royal wedding, we can be assured that this will lift the status of Challoner to record heights within the tourism markets."

A royal wedding! Jack almost groaned aloud. This was going way too fast for

him. And what about his beautiful bride? When was she going to be told about these grand plans? Jack ran a finger along the inside of his shirt collar trying to think of the best way to handle this without insulting his hosts.

"What if Lara refuses to marry me?" Try that one on for size.

"She won't. It is her royal duty to do as we request." Francesca was emphatic.

"Ma'am, you may think that, but in case you haven't noticed, Lara is a pretty determined young lady with a mind of her own."

"We are very proud of Lara's independent streak and her academic achievements. But, you need to understand Jack, that since she was born, Lara has been raised to accept that she is of noble blood dating back centuries. She has a duty to continue the royal line and obey the wishes of her parents -- the King and Queen." Francesca turned to her husband, who nodded in agreement.

"Don't you think it would be preferable for Lara to marry another royal rather than an Australian fisherman, Ma'am?" Jack out-stared Francesca thinking that she was one tough lady and the Lara had a snowball's chance in hell of going against her mother's wishes.

Johann leaned forward in his chair, taking his turn at persuading Jack that all of this was a very good idea. "Without wanting to be insulting to you in any way, the difference is that you are a very *rich* fisherman, Jack. Your reputation shows that you are a highly respected and honest businessman and ideally suited to marry Lara."

Once again Francesca broke in "and you are not a philanderer. You had a brief, if unhappy marriage but, and most importantly, you are attracted to our daughter."

"I see your people have been thorough in their investigations." Jack shook his head in disbelief.

They want me to agree to their crazy plan, he thought, wondering what Lara would say. He certainly wasn't her favorite person at present and if her parents did but know it, they'd parted on bad terms only hours ago.

He drew a deep breath. "Your Majesties. I realize you have paid me a great honor. However, I would firstly like to explain to Lara that I'm not the poor fisherman that she thinks I am and then at our meeting this evening, we discussed the possibility of my making a financial investment in Challoner."

"You prefer Lara not to know about the plans for a marriage between you?" Johann asked, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Sir, with regard to that, I would like to wait until we know whether Lara is ...whether she is pregnant."

Francesca stood up, causing Jack and the King to rise also. "I'm not happy with your suggestion. Are we to assume that if Lara isn't pregnant then you won't marry her or make a financial investment?"

Here we go -- Her Royal High and Mightiness. Lara had more of her mother in her than he realized, Jack decided. "That isn't what I mean, Ma'am. You have taken me by surprise. I need time to consider your proposal and quality time with Lara."

"He's right, Francesca."

Jack offered up a silent prayer as Johann came to his rescue.

"We apologize for the suddenness and bluntness of our suggestion, Jack. By all means let Lara know about your background and let's discuss this again in a few days time. Meanwhile, would you be willing to meet with our finance minister to provide you

with more information?"

"Yes, of course."

Francesca looked drained and in a strange way, defeated as she said "You must think us very manipulative with regard to Lara's future but, we have little choice. If you don't accept our proposal, we will be forced to arrange a marriage between Lara and Prince Michael with the same financial terms."

Jack felt her turning the knife in his guts and a wave of red hot anger raced through him. He carefully controlled his expression as he replied "If he has half a billion dollars, perhaps that's what you should do."

Turning at the door-way to face him, Francesca's face was etched with sadness as she said "The problem is that Lara *loves* you and whether you believe it or not, we want her to be happy."

* * * *

Jack paced up and down the lounge area of his suite. Lara loves me? Give me a break! Her parents wanted funds for Challoner and had pulled out every trick in the book, he thought with a grudging admiration. What a mess! Trapped by his stupidity. By allowing himself to fall for a beautiful woman. But Lara wasn't just an ordinary woman, as he first thought. She was extraordinary and not because she was a Princess. Yes, she was physically beautiful but there was so much more. Her shyness, her gentle manner, her multitude of moods and -- her passion. But, he doubted that she loved him. Not after only four days of knowing each other, for God's sake!

He stopped pacing and stared into the open fire, watching the flames leaping up the chimney with red, flickering fingers. Could it be possible that he was in love with Lara? Or was it this physical need, this ache to hold and possess that exquisite body? He didn't know. What he *did* know was that to do what her parents wanted and force her to marry him in return for money, wasn't right and a recipe for disaster.

And why were her parents keeping secrets from their daughter? There was something very odd about it and things didn't add up. He analyzed the preposterousness of the situation, which in effect, bordered on blackmail. Because of his and Lara's brief encounter -- because she was a Princess -- because he had money -- because Challoner was in trouble -- so was he.

Jack shook his head in amazement. He needed to talk to Lara tonight and at least tell her *some* of the details of his strange meeting with her parents. He glanced at his watch. Eight o'clock. Time enough, he decided making his way to Lara's suite of rooms.

"Dear Diary,

I'm tired and miserable. Thought I'd be happy to be home but HMs have been odd and cool to me. Mummy hasn't even come here to have one of her "deep and meaningful" but, I suppose it is only my first day home. They've been nice to Jack, thank goodness! I thought they were going to tear strips off him for having his wicked way with me.

The thing I'm most upset about is Jack accusing me of being turned on by the thought of having sex with a rough fisherman. Nothing could be further from the truth! Yes, Jack turns me on. I ache all over but only because it's him. And there is nothing common about Jack. He is the most beautiful man I've ever met. His touch sends me up in flames and when he looks at me, I melt on the spot. Surely he must know? I'm only telling

you the truth, dear diary. I love Jack. If only he could care of me a little.

I've decided not to wait for my period to see if I'm pregnant. The whole thing is ridiculous. I'll arrange for our family physician to give me a pregnancy test as soon as feasible, which will be negative, and then Jack can go home -- back to Jezebel and his fish!

I'm going to bed. They say things always look better in the morning."

Lara closed her diary feeling a little better after pouring out her most private thoughts, as she always did. Locking the diary away in her personal safe, she reached up and pulled the clasps from her chignon, allowing her hair to fall around her shoulders, massaging her temples as she did so where a thumping headache was threatening to take hold. Stress, she explained to herself. Stress and tiredness. It was eight o'clock here, but her body clock told a different story.

A tap on the apartment door made her start. She had dismissed her maid hours ago after Greta had insisted her mistress have a light dinner and had set it in place on the dining table. Lara had eaten two of the sandwiches and some fruit and then left the rest of the simple meal, her appetite deserting her.

Opening the door, she came face to face with Jack. Her beautiful Jack, dressed casually in a deep blue sweatshirt and jeans -- the jeans with a tear in the knee, she thought abstractly.

"What do you want?" She couldn't help the icy tone in her voice, after all, hadn't he left her earlier with her heart breaking from his searing and cruel words.

"I won't keep you long, Lara. I wanted to let you know about my meeting with your parents." His voice was deep and gentle and once again, she felt her insides turning over. She held the door open and Jack entered and stood by the sofa.

Swallowing hard to bring her emotions under control, Lara motioned him to sit down and she sat in the armchair opposite. Jack rubbed his jaw and she knew him well enough to recognize this gesture of uncertainty. But she wasn't going to help him out, blast him!

"The King and I had a few games of billiards and then the Queen joined us."

Lara made no comment but it didn't surprise her. Her mother probably thought that Jack should be chastised for seducing her daughter. What a laugh! Lara had been more than a willing participant. She watched Jack's fingers nervously gripping his knees. What was going on?

"I'm sorry if my mother upset you. She's very protective of me," she said, automatically trying to ease Jack's discomfort.

"Look, there is no easy way to say this, Lara. You believe that I'm a poor fisherman with a junket for a boat and a lop-sided cottage on an island.

"Well, I *am* a fisherman and Jezebel is an old boat but I actually own a very large fleet of ocean-going fishing boats. I have the largest aqua-culture industry in Australia, possibly the world, and I hold major government contracts for coastal surveillance in several pacific countries. All of this makes me a wealthy man." Jack stopped for breath, wiping a hand across his forehead.

"Oh." To say she was stunned would be the understatement of the year, Lara decided, as she madly tried to take in this information.

"How wealthy?" She winced at her crass question.

"A billionaire...several times over."

"Oh my."

"This was the main reason why kidnapping charges weren't brought against me when the police and Challoner security found out who I was. I'm surprised you haven't seen it in the press."

"I don't read the papers or watch television."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "That's not very smart for a political science graduate. How do you know what's going on in the world?"

Lara bit down on her bottom lip. It probably did sound strange to a man of the world like Jack, but in the past she had read such rubbish about herself, often demeaning and hurtful and rarely true, that she had decided the best way to cope was to avoid it.

"I have a press secretary who tells me what he thinks I should know," she said crisply.

"He's not doing his job very well. He should have told you about me."

"No! *You* should have told me, Jack." She could feel the color rising in her cheeks as the realization of the last five days hit her. "You should have told me on that first day on the island. You can't deny that you gave me the impression that you were a poor fisherman."

"My finances weren't really any of your business."

Lara leapt to her feet and stood over him where he sat on her sofa visibly more relaxed now. She clenched her fists, afraid that she might slap Jack's handsome face she was so mad.

"How dare you! If it was no business of mine, why did you bring up the fact of being a 'poor fisherman' at every opportunity? How could you attack me this afternoon saying I was turned on by making love to a common man when all the time you were laughing as you counted up your billions of dollars in the bank."

She was unable to go on as tears welled in her eyes. She hadn't meant to expose her hurt to Jack -- her raw and bleeding wounds. She had wanted to give the impression that she couldn't care less about his damning remarks.

Jack stood up, a look of concern and compassion on his face. He touched her arm but Lara furiously shook his hand away and turned her back on him. She folded her arms across her chest in a defiant gesture as she blinked away the tears.

"You're right. You're absolutely right, Lara. I shouldn't have treated you that way and I apologize. It was just that you seemed so high and mighty looking down your nose at the common folk. I was very poor when I started and had to work my way up for years through sheer grit and determination. I didn't have everything handed to me on a silver platter."

Lara whirled around. "Like me, you mean. Do you think I asked to be born into this ...this prison? Do you think I don't wish every day that I could live like a normal person and not be bound by protocols and royal duties -- and tracked by detectives and minders every moment from when I wake up in the morning until I go to sleep at night?"

She put up a hand to try and hide her trembling mouth as she continued. "The only freedom I've ever had was when I was allowed to share an apartment with my friends Jade and Kate. And guess what? My security people took over the whole floor and still tracked my every move." To her horror a huge sob escaped her and she hurriedly pressed the other hand to her mouth trying to control the emotions that were overtaking

her.

"Sweetheart, don't cry." Jack's arms were around her and she was drawn into him. She could feel his hand stroking her hair and his gentleness was the last straw. She burrowed her face into his chest and wept.

She wasn't quite sure what made her give in to her feelings. She knew that Jack smelt so good and that his arms around her made her feel protected and very feminine. As if she needed protection, she thought. She had just explained that she was surrounded with it everywhere she went. But somehow, here in Jack's arms, feeling his cheek resting against her hair, it was different and she liked it.

"Here." Jack pushed a handkerchief into her hand. She stepped back and wiped her eyes. How long had he held her? Thirty seconds? Thirty minutes? She didn't know.

"I'm sorry. I'm over tired," she said, trying to find excuses for her tears. She wondered if her eyes looked puffy and whether her nose was red.

"It's okay. We're both tired and we both have short fuses." Jack drew her again into the circle of his arms. "I didn't realize how unhappy you are," he said softly.

She studied his sensual mouth and the little cleft in his chin. She wanted to touch that cleft and run her caressing fingers along his strong jaw and over those magnificent cheek bones.

"Lara, if you don't want me to throw you on the sofa and make love to you, then stop looking at me like that."

"Is that a challenge?" she asked, her heart lifting at the intensity in his brilliant blue eyes.

Jack smiled and then bending his head, kissed her gently on the mouth. "For all our nasty words to each other, you have to admit we have great difficulty in controlling this lustful attraction. For me it's been there from the moment I first saw you on that quay side, looking down your proud little nose at me."

Lara colored delicately under his scrutiny. Had he really wanted her then? She responded to his teasing. "Well, I was smitten with you when you were steering Jezebel away from the dock and I couldn't put on my life jacket. You looked like a dangerous pirate on the high seas and I fancied you like crazy."

"Hmm. I would never have guessed. You were a pain in the butt." Jack grinned and then kissed her again, his tongue pushing her lips apart. It was a kiss for Lara's tired body to melt into and she responded to his tantalizing persuasion with demands of her own, her arms curving around his neck as she pressed against his hard body.

"Whoa. Whoa!" Jack was the first to break away. "We need to cool it, sweetheart. I guess it would be smart to wait until we're married."

"Married?" Lara's mouth opened in shock as she looked up into his face. "Who said anything about getting married?"

"Your parents, actually. At the meeting we had earlier they were happy for us to be married."

Lara felt her heart-beat drumming as if to suffocate her. "And you accepted?" Her throat tightened around the words making her voice sound odd and raspy.

"They offered me a deal and I said obviously you would have to agree first. In fact, I wasn't going to ask you tonight but thinking about it, I believe we could make a go of being married, don't you? You want me physically, I know you do Lara, and in time, you could learn to care for me."

Jack groaned inwardly. Damn it! He was making a mess of this. He had only meant to tell Lara about the possibility of investing money into Challoner and that he was considering it. And what did he do? Blurt out a marriage proposal.

But, he wanted her -- how he wanted her! Lara had become an obsession. His magnificent obsession. Feeling her in his arms a moment ago -- so wanton, so passionate, had sealed his fate and he'd made his decision.

Yeah, he would give their Majesties the money but he didn't want any title and as part of the deal he would lay down some rules of his own to protect Lara. He would take her to Australia to live with him in Port Margaret away from all of this royal hype. She was unhappy here, as she had already tearfully explained. As for producing an heir, that wouldn't be a problem. He could hardly wait to make Lara his wife in every sense.

"What sort of deal?"

He should have been quicker at hearing the suspicion in her voice and seeing the doubt in her eyes. He could see that she was lining up for a major dummy spit. What an assumption he had made in thinking that Lara would leap at the chance of being his wife. What an arrogant assumption on his part. He had miss-read her completely and was treading on very dangerous ground.

"You know that Challoner's economy is suffering at the present time," he began.

"I'm aware that we could do better but we aren't a poor country by any means."

"If you would let me finish, Lara. Your parents asked me to invest some funds into Challoner's treasury."

"How much?"

"Half a billion dollars."

"What?" Lara looked thunderstruck. "And what was the rest of the deal, Jack? That for your money you would get a royal bride thrown in for good measure? To make it a little more attractive?" Her green eyes sparked with fire as she glared at him.

"That's about right. They want to hold a royal wedding here in Challoner, which they say will lift the tourism markets and -- eventually for us to have a baby who will be heir to the throne, if Carl doesn't get married and have children."

"What was your reply?"

Jack hesitated. He could see Lara was holding on to her temper with difficulty. He gave a shrug of his shoulders. He was in the thick of it now -- he might as well continue. "I asked what would happen if you refused to marry me and your parents said it was your duty to obey their wishes."

Lara moved away from him and stood in front of the fire. Suddenly it was very important to Jack that she accepted his proposal because *she* wanted to marry him, not because her parents said so. She turned and he could see her face had paled with anger as she pointed an accusing finger at him.

"I am not some slave from an eastern harem that you can barter over. My parents have betrayed me with their scheming behind my back and I, unknowingly, have played into their hands by delivering their savior right to their door step. They may be willing to sell me in return for your filthy blood money but I refuse to be bought, even for the sake of my country. You *are* just a common man after all and if you think you can buy your way into the noblest royal house in Europe, think again, Jack Lucas. I absolutely refuse to marry you."

She stood tall and magnificent, her head thrown back in defiance. Jack knew he

was in for the toughest fight of his life but, he'd never been one to be beaten -- at anything.

"Lara, deny me all you wish. But, I want you as my wife." He moved towards her and she stood her ground, remaining motionless. "And I always get what I want," he whispered, as he caressed her cheek with a gentle finger.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I have brought your breakfast, Your Highness. It's stopped snowing and the sun is out. You'll be able to show your Mr. Lucas our beautiful city today."

Lara groaned as she struggled up from the soft pillows, keeping her eyes shut as Greta pulled back the curtains flooding the room with light. "What time is it, Greta?"

"It's ten o'clock. You've had a good sleep and should have recovered from your jet lag," the maid said tutting under her breath as she straightened the bed and plumped up the pillows behind Lara's tousled head. She placed the breakfast tray over Lara's knees and proceeded to pour her coffee.

If you only knew, Lara thought. It wasn't the jet lag that had caused her to sleep in, but the hours of restless tossing and turning as she went over and over in her mind what Jack had said. How could he and her parents have discussed and planned her future in this way? How could they possibly imagine she could be bought?

I don't really know who is to blame, she decided. My mother and father for setting Jack up and taking advantage of his wealth or Jack, for daring to think I would meekly agree to marry him. At first when he'd mentioned getting married, I was so happy. I thought it was because he loved me. But, it was all part of their deal -- their precious business deal. Jack only wants me so my family can open doors for him into the European business community.

She pushed her tangled hair from her eyes. That was the puzzlement, she decided. Jack, her fisherman she knew from their island, couldn't have cared less but, this Jack was new to her -- this top businessman was different. He would use all the contacts he would make through his royal marriage to further his wealth. That was really why he was willing to negotiate with her parents.

"Drink your coffee while its hot, Lara." Greta gently chastised her royal charge as she bustled around the room placing Lara's clothes in readiness for the day ahead.

"Do you know if Mr. Lucas is awake, Greta?"

"Heavens, yes. Rudolf told me he was up hours ago and at the moment is meeting with the King and the finance minister over something or other."

Lara took a sip of coffee. So Jack had ignored her refusal of marriage and was continuing to discuss matters with the King. She carefully replaced the cup in the saucer and wondered what to do. She would need to talk to her mother and explain that she had turned down Jack's proposal.

"Greta, do you know if the Queen has any engagements today?"

"Well, there is the official dinner this evening to welcome Prince Michael, plus your two great aunts from Lichtenstein will be there. You will need to pick out a dress to wear. I'm not sure about the Queen's engagements but tomorrow morning you have meetings with your personal secretary and press officer. In the afternoon I have arranged for your hairdresser and manicurist to be here at four o'clock to prepare you for the Ball."

Lara tried to control the sensation of panic as she listened to what Greta was saying. She should be used to having her days and evenings organized but after the

relative freedom of Australia, this was going to be hard to take. Greta patted Lara's hand as if she understood Lara's feelings and she knew how lucky she was to have someone like Greta who really cared for her. She had been Lara's nanny from when Lara was a small child and then, as she had grown into a young woman, Greta had stayed on in the royal household as Lara's personal maid. There had always been great affection between them and Lara pondered now on whether she should confide in Greta about this latest turn of events.

"Your bath is ready. I'll leave you for now."

"Thank you, Greta. I really appreciate everything you do for me."

"And I'm glad to have you home." The older woman returned Lara's smile as she closed the bedroom door.

Lara finished her toast and coffee and then with a glint of determination in her eyes picked up the phone and rang the Queen's apartments.

"Lara! Did you sleep well?" Her mother answered immediately.

"Yes, thank you."

"It's so wonderful to have you home. We must make time for a catch up. Did Jack dine with you last night?"

The question was casual but Lara knew her mother was probing. "No, but he did ask me to marry him." Nothing like getting to the point, Lara decided, deliberately hardening her heart.

"Oh, darling. I'm so happy for you both. And it's so wise of you, particularly if there's a baby on the way."

"Mother, I refused Jack's proposal."

"What? My dear child, how could you do such a thing? The man is going to invest millions of dollars into our country and you refuse him?"

"Exactly." Lara gripped the receiver hard to stop her hand from shaking. "I would have preferred to discuss this with you face-to-face but it appears you and my father decided to plan my life behind my back so ..."

"Lara, that's enough. You don't understand how important this arrangement is. Besides, I'm not blind. I can see that you're attracted to Jack and I understand that -- he is a very attractive man. After all, you've been intimate with him so it's not as if you would be marrying a stranger." Francesca's voice took on a persuasive tone.

Placing one hand to her burning face, Lara swallowed as she gathered herself to continue. She couldn't believe she was having this extraordinary conversation with her mother. She had always been a dutiful daughter and obeyed her parents with her one act of defiance when she insisted on attending school in Australia. And she would never have won that battle if Carl hadn't supported her, demanding that his royal parents allow Lara to be part of her modern generation. She loved her brother dearly and had always been grateful to him for taking her side on the issue.

"I'm not going to change my mind."

There was a pause and Lara waited knowing her mother wouldn't give in. "We'll see, dear. Now, it's a lovely day and I think we should treat our guest to a tour. I have arranged for the three of us to go on a sleigh ride through the parks and I would like you to be ready at two o'clock."

Tempted to refuse, Lara found herself agreeing instead. Jack was here as a royal visitor so she would need to be polite to him, particularly as he wouldn't be here at all if it

wasn't for her.

"Is Jack still with the King," she asked Francesca.

"Yes. They're going to have lunch together. And, Lara, I don't wish to discuss this matter in front of him until we have sorted something out. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"But the subject is by no means closed. You have to consider marriage in the very near future so it might as well be to a wealthy man like Jack."

"There are plenty of rich men around, Mother. Why don't you put me on e-Bay and see how much you can get for a real live princess?" Lara's tone was cutting. Since when had her mother become so hard and so desperate to arrange her daughter's marriage?

"Don't be cynical, Lara. It doesn't suit you. Yes, there are wealthy men around and if you don't agree to this arrangement with Jack, then your father and I will be obliged to choose another husband for you."

Click. Her mother had rung off. Lara looked around her room fighting the panic rising in her. Was this how the rest of her life would be? To be prodded and pulled to do other peoples' bidding. She needed someone to talk to -- Jade or Katie, her best friends.

She checked the time on her bedside clock. They were both in Australia and it was getting late there. Still ... She rang Jade's mobile and received a voice-mail message. Then a disembodied voice on Kate's mobile said her phone was either switched off or out of range. Disheartened, Lara replaced the receiver. She just couldn't win a trick.

* * * *

By the time two o'clock arrived, Lara had talked herself into a different frame of mind. She had decided that none of the present situation was anyone's fault and that to be petulant wasn't going to do her, Jack or her parents any good.

After all, this whole thing had been caused by a domino effect. If she hadn't met Jack and he hadn't been wealthy and her country in trouble, then her parents wouldn't have considered him for her husband. Regretfully, he wouldn't even have been invited here as the royal guest but, could possibly have been sent to prison instead. And because she had refused Jack's proposal, her parents would now seek another suitable husband for her. Well, that was too bad! She wasn't ready to marry anyone unless they loved her -- really loved her for herself. Not for her position and to take advantage of her family -- and not because they wanted to own her, like a prized possession. "And certainly not because they want to use my body to satisfy their physical needs, Jack Lucas," she whispered aloud, stepping down the remaining stairs and walking towards the main entrance of the palace.

She was worried about the financial difficulties of her country and would ask her father to explain this to her when she could get some time with him. She didn't understand how a huge debt could place the royal family in such an insidious position. Surely, Challoner's government was responsible for sorting this out, not her parents?

"There you are, Lara. She looks lovely, doesn't she, Jack?"

Lara smiled at Jack determined to put the marriage proposal episode behind her. "Thank you. Hello, Jack. Have you had a good meeting with my father?"

He looked very handsome in a thick, warm coat and on his head he wore a Russian-style hat. Obviously, Rudolf had wanted to make sure Jack didn't feel the cold and had provided him with appropriate clothing. Lara once again wore her white fake fur

coat and matching hat, which she pulled over her hair.

"I had a good meeting and an extremely pleasant lunch with His Majesty," Jack replied and Lara realized that he had no intention of giving anything away.

"Jack, you sit next to Lara and face forward so you can see the beautiful sights of Challoner."

Francesca was in her top organizing form and Lara found herself sitting in the horse-drawn sleigh with Jack at her side as the driver tucked a warm rug over their knees. Francesca had arranged for Hubert, the royal estate manager and expert historian on Challoner, to accompany them and he and the Queen sat facing the other two.

"This is fantastic and what beautiful horses," Jack remarked.

Lara smiled at Jack's pleasure as the two magnificent thoroughbreds, encouraged by their driver, moved forward easily pulling the giant sleigh across the snow.

He was right, Lara thought an hour later as the horses turned towards the palace on the return journey. She had forgotten how lovely her home was. It was a glorious blue and golden day with the sun shining brilliantly on a fairyland of beauty. The ride had taken them through the palace grounds and then into the royal parks. Every tree was dazzling under their ethereal mantles of snow.

When they had left the parks, they had been joined by a land-rover carrying four plain-clothed policemen who provided the necessary protection and escorted them through the old part of the city. Throughout the ride, Hubert had pointed out the historical features of interest to Jack who, in return, had asked many questions. Francesca was at her most charming and continued to make a huge fuss of Jack.

For Lara it had been a ride of exquisite torture. She was aware of the slightest movement that Jack made. His hands chopping the air as he emphasized a point in his conversation with Francesca -- the perfection of his cheek bones and firm jaw as he half-turned to her -- the occasional pressure and warmth of his thigh against hers and most of all, this inane desire she had to fling herself into his arms and have him hold and protect her and love her. She questioned herself as to why she was being so stubborn when it would have been much easier to accept Jack's proposal. Then everyone would be happy. But, Lara continued her silent argument. What about a year from now -- or five years? They could end up hating each other.

As they turned into the palace grounds, Jack took advantage of Francesca's distraction as she discussed some estate matters with Hubert.

He leaned towards Lara and whispered "I've been trying to grab the opportunity of telling you how beautiful you look."

Lara desperately wanted to stay calm but could feel the color running beneath her skin at his compliment. "Thank you, Jack," she said, lowering her head.

"You're like a fairy tale Princess set against the backdrop of her magical palace."

He was studying her and she dared not look up, knowing her feelings for him would be reflected in her eyes.

"Thank you again, but I'm still not going to marry you," she said quietly, glad that at last she felt in control and could talk calmly about Jack's proposal, while on the previous night she had lost it completely.

"I don't know why you're flirting with me," she added, glancing across at Francesca who was still deeply immersed in her conversation with Hubert.

"I won't rest until I have you in my bed, Lara. You started this little game and the

more elusive you are the more determined I am to have you. Whether that involves marriage or not, I really don't care."

Lara did look at him this time. She couldn't help it. Was he teasing her? Sure enough, his eyes were alight with devilment as he flashed a cheeky grin. Not to be out done, she murmured "You could have had me, Jack. I was all yours without you giving up your precious freedom to marry me. But, you've left it too late. Although my parents have betrayed me by trying to sell me off, I can cope with their attitude. While I may not agree, I understand why they're doing it. But you, Jack -- you want to marry me for all the wrong reasons."

"What are the two of you whispering about?"

"Lara was saying that she would like to sit next to me at dinner, Ma'am," Jack replied quickly, digging Lara in the ribs.

Expelling a deep breath into the cold air, Lara retaliated. "I was actually saying that you will want me to sit next to Prince Michael and that Jack will need to sit between my great aunts." She turned to Jack and gave a dazzling smile. "You'll love the aunts, Jack. They are both over eighty and quite eccentric. Unfortunately, their English isn't too good but they adore handsome young men. They will positively drool over you."

Jack returned her smile and touched her small nose with one gloved finger. "Touché, Princess," he said, and once again Lara felt her heart beating like a thousand drums as his eyes flirted with her.

"I can assure you both that I can manage the seating arrangements very well on my own." Francesca gave her own quiet smile and then turned to speak to Hubert.

* * * *

Bang! Jack aimed his cue and parted the rack of billiard balls with a loud crack wishing that Michael's head was at the end of the cue.

"Good start, Jack." The King was in an affable mood following, what was to Jack, a long and laborious dinner. Johann had insisted the men retire to the games room with their ports and coffee and he and Carl had challenged Jack and Michael to a game of billiards.

I need this like a hole in the head. Jack shot a couple of balls into the pockets and wished he was anywhere else but there. He wasn't sure he could cope with any more royal functions and he certainly couldn't cope with another evening of Michael pawing Lara as if he owned her.

Missing the next shot, he shrugged and leaned against a chair making room for Carl to move to the table. It was odd that Carl was here for a start, Jack thought. He was supposed to have left for Monaco that morning but had changed his mind and attended the dinner to welcome Michael and the aunts. I wonder if his Mum and Dad had a go at him. He was certainly subdued during the meal but, so was Lara. Something was really wrong with her. She was pale and sort of shell-shocked. And Francesca had placed her next to bloody Prince Charming instead of next to me while I had to put up with Francesca and Aunt Bertha.

Jack chalked the end of his cue as his mind went over the disastrous evening. Funnily enough, he had enjoyed the company of the aunts who were lively and very entertaining but, his attention had been constantly drawn to Lara and the creep next to her. Jack knew he was suffering from an enormous attack of jealousy. He had felt the agony of it twisting his insides at every look Lara gave Michael -- every word she said to

him. The Prince was quite a handsome man, Jack had to concede. In his mid-forties, he had a thick head of dirt-blond hair, graying at the temples, and the palest of blue eyes. He wasn't as tall as Jack and was inclined to plumpness nevertheless, he had made sure that he had charmed Francesca and the aunts.

But what had really grated with Jack was the way Michael had been so familiar with Lara. Throughout the dinner, he had constantly touched her arm, kissed her hand, whispered to her so no one else could hear. At any time it would have been rude, to say the least, but to Jack, it was like a red rag to a bull. Nobody remarked about Michael's behavior but Jack could see that Lara was embarrassed.

His Lara. No one else's, he thought savagely as he watched Michael prepare to take his turn at the billiard table. He had stuffed it up completely by springing his marriage proposal on her. He should have handled things differently. No wonder Lara had refused him, assuming she was part of the business deal he had made. Unfortunately, as far as her parents were concerned, she was. But not to him. He wanted her as his wife because ... because...

Jack frowned. Because he loved her? Or was it sheer pig-headedness because he hadn't got his own way. He wasn't sure. He did know that he was trying to make up for his earlier crass mistake. They needed quality time together -- time to get to know each other. Lara needed to be courted, for heaven's sake. Who could blame her for acting this way? But he could see she was still vulnerable to him. He had seen it when they were on the sleigh ride when she had opened up to his flirtatious remarks and blushed at his nearness. He would have done anything to have taken her in his arms tonight and protect her from that fool Michael.

"Jack, your turn."

Wearily he played a shot and missed the pocket, giving Carl the opportunity to play and win the game.

"Johann, why don't you and Carl play the next game? That will give my new friend and me the opportunity to chat," Michael said, in his strong guttural accent.

Jeez! That's all I need -- to sit and talk to you. At this point Jack would much rather have disappeared somewhere and drown his sorrows in a bottle of whisky.

"I understand that you are interested in marrying Lara?"

Jack was suddenly wide awake as the older man posed the question. "Yes, I am." As if it's any of your business, he wanted to add.

"I'm afraid you might be a little late, my dear man."

"What do you mean?"

"As you may know, Lara and I are second cousins and it has always been understood that we would marry."

"Then why haven't you?"

Michael laughed unpleasantly. "Because I needed to wait until Lara was ready to accept the responsibility of becoming my wife. Oh, I'm aware she's had a little dalliance with you and that's fine. It gets it out of her system. But in the future when we are married, there will be no more affairs. Not for her, any way."

Jack stiffened, feeling his jaw clench as he placed his cup on the table beside him. "And what if she's pregnant?" His words were as cold as ice but Michael didn't seem to notice.

"Ce la vie, as they say. I will insist that she has an abortion and afterwards I will

make sure I impregnate her with my child -- a child of royal blood who will be a fitting heir to the throne of Challoner. I have waited many years for Lara and when I have her, I intend to enjoy her, if you take my meaning."

Jack waited knowing he had to continue to play Michael's rotten little game and keep his cool or he was in danger of punching him right in the mouth.

"Are you going to pay any money for the privilege of acquiring Lara as your bride, Michael?"

"God, yes! I've topped your offer, the difference being that Lara was always going to say yes to me. It just took a little negotiation with her parents. Besides, she would never let Carl down. She adores him."

Jack raised an eyebrow. What the hell was this slime ball talking about?

Lowering his voice Michael said, "I suppose they didn't tell you. They do like to keep such a ...delicate matter in the family."

"Tell me what?" Jack was rapidly losing patience.

"The King and Queen don't want money just to prop up Challoner's economy, Jack, dear boy. They need it to pay Carl's gambling debts, which amount to many millions of dollars. If word leaked out, the royal family would be finished and a dynasty that has lasted centuries would come crashing down."

Keeping his face expressionless, Jack casually stretched his long legs towards the fire. "Oh, really," he said casually. "I wondered why Their Majesties seemed so concerned on what should be a government matter. So, Lara was aware of her brother's gambling problems, you say?"

"Of course. That's why Francesca and Johann were putting pressure on you when they found out you had a bit of money. Luckily for us all, I stepped in and let you off the hook."

"Indeed. Lucky me. Well, thanks for filling me in. I think I'll call it a night, if you will excuse me, Prince."

"Dear Diary,

The most terrible thing has happened. I don't know what to do.

Let me start with the sleigh ride. I thought it was going to be awful and that Jack would be difficult but, he was wonderful! I'm more in love with him than ever -- heaven help me! I was on a knife's edge but all of the time I had this warm glow inside me. Even though Jack was talking to HM and Hubert,

I knew he was aware of me and I could feel his eyes on me. I have made the most dreadful mistake in refusing to marry him and now, dear diary, it's too late.

Before dinner HM came to see me and told me that Carl was in trouble. Over the past five years he has gambled away millions and now, unless we can pay the debt, the news will come out and we will be disgraced and ruined.

Then HM told me that Michael had offered a few million more than Jack as long as I promise to marry him. HM says Michael doesn't care about my affair and any possible pregnancy. I told her then that I couldn't be pregnant and explained why. I have never been so embarrassed talking to my mother about something like that. But, she was pleased at the news, so I suppose that's something.

I couldn't answer her when she said I had to agree to Michael's proposal. I couldn't! So, HM has given me until the morning to make up my mind.

I don't know what to do but deep down I know I will have to say yes. How can I let our family be disgraced? Tonight, Michael was all over me and I hated it. He's never been like that before and I was aware of Jack watching us. It was agony. I'm so unhappy."

Lara passed a weary hand over her eyes and closing the diary locked it in the safe. So much for that, she thought. Words aren't going to get me out of this. I'm trapped. Really trapped.

She prepared for bed and as she lay looking into the darkness, she felt she would never sleep again. However, she must have dosed because a sound woke her. Startled, she turned on the bedside lamp and looked at the clock. It was two thirty in the morning and Jack was standing at the end of her bed.

"I thought you might be pleased to see me," he said, moving closer. "I mean, I'm making a habit of coming to your bedroom, aren't I?"

"What are you doing here? Are you drunk?" she hissed, pulling the covers up to her chin.

"No. But I feel like getting drunk."

"Why?"

"Because you've let me down, Lara."

Reaching for her robe, Lara hastily pulled it on and sat on the edge of the bed to face him. He looked disheveled with his dress tie loose around his neck and his shirt halfway undone. Disheveled and -- angry.

"I don't understand, Jack."

"Because, my beautiful Princess, you turned down *my* marriage proposal. I obviously wasn't good enough to kiss the feet of Your High and Mightiness, so you hung out for a real prince."

Jack sat on the bed beside her and leaned forward, his eyes dark with bitterness as with a mocking smile, he continued, "And you thought you had him, didn't you? You were comfortable in your own little royal circle with all of your brother's debts paid and occasionally you might think of Jack Whatsisname, that rough Australian fisherman, with whom you had a bit of a fling."

"Jack, that's not true. Why are you behaving like this?"

She flinched as his hand cupped her cheek, his eyes on her mouth. "Princess, I told you I always get what I want and the fact that you don't want me doesn't matter. I have just come from a meeting with your parents and Carl and this time the negotiations are final -- all signed and sealed."

Lara could feel her stomach churning at the contemptuous look on his face. She waited for him to continue.

"They agreed to accept one billion dollars for you Lara, and all things considered, I think we have both got ourselves a bargain."

CHAPTER NINE

Lara placed a hand to her throat, her eyes wide as she tried to take in what Jack had said. He was willing to pay one billion dollars to marry her!

She opened her mouth to rebuke him for what he had said and then decided against it.

"You can always refuse to marry me seeing it goes against your esteemed values and the fact that I don't have any royal blood in my veins." Jack's tone was challenging and Lara felt as if he was cutting her one tiny nick at a time to make her bleed.

"I'm not refusing," she replied quietly.

"No. Of course you're not. How could you refuse and let your beloved brother down. So, you and your parents have skillfully manipulated Michael and me and like two fools, we fell under your spell. Only you had counted on marrying Michael and keeping your royal blood line untainted. You hadn't anticipated that I would make an offer too good for your parents to refuse."

"Why *did* you offer if you hate me so much?"

Jack hesitated and Lara's heart gave a huge leap. Surely it must be that he cared for her -- that perhaps he loved her? She held her breath waiting for his reply.

"I don't hate you, Lara, but I resent anyone trying to trick me. You knew that your brother was in trouble, didn't you?"

"Yes, but--"

"And yet you refused my proposal and accepted Michael's. As far as I'm concerned, that says it all. I feel contempt for you that you think you can treat me in this way and I also pity you because I know you don't have a choice in deciding your own future."

Lara's head shot up as she felt a wave of anger engulf her. How dare this man judge her? He wasn't even aware that it was only tonight that she had been told about Carl's gambling debts and yet he wasn't giving her a chance to explain.

"You are obnoxious," she hissed. "I certainly misread you when I climbed aboard your boat in Port Margaret. You're nothing but a ruthless predator who believes his filthy money can buy anything."

"I've just proved that it can." Jack's smile was arrogant as he ran a sensual finger down the slender line of her throat stopping where the robe covered and protected her breasts.

Pushing his hand away, Lara stood up and moved to the centre of the room. She tried to control her breathing as she faced him -- faced the mockery written clearly within his blue eyes. "You might have bought a Princess and a title and a place in my family but I warn you, Jack, you'll regret what you have done."

"Why? Overall, I consider I've made a good investment. We'll quietly clear Carl's debts out of the way and the rest of my money will correct Challoner's economy. In time I expect to receive a good return."

Lara clenched her fists. "I can't believe we are standing here in the middle of the

night discussing a return on your damned investment," she burst out.

Stepping closer, Jack grinned and for one moment she saw her other Jack -- the relaxed fisherman without a care in the world, not this ruthless business tycoon who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Then the moment was gone but to her horror, her skin burned as if it was on fire at the look of desire in his eyes and she trembled, wanting to feel his arms around her.

"Don't forget the most important return, Lara. I will have you as my loving wife and together we will make beautiful babies."

"I may be obliged to marry you but I don't need to accept you willingly as my lover. I despise you for treating me like some sort of slave girl who can be bought and used for your sexual gratification."

Jack laughed, throwing his head back and she watched as the soft light from the bedside lamp caught the sheen of his dark hair. "How dramatic you are, Princess. You, of all people, should know that royal marriages are still arranged and I would think most of them are reasonably happy."

"Yes -- royal marriages. Not marriage to a commoner like you who barter and trades with human lives. If you think I would ever let you make love to me now, you're sadly mistaken. The only way that will happen is if you rape me." She stopped realizing by the sudden change of expression on Jack's face that she had gone too far.

He reached for her and with a flick of his arm, discarded her robe leaving her exposed and vulnerable in her silk nightdress. She could feel his heart pounding beneath her open hand as he pulled her against his chest.

"Having sex for us won't be a problem, Lara," he said his voice harsh. "I can make you beg me for it. But, like every good royal bride, you should walk down the aisle in virginal white, so as much as I would like to take you now, I still intend to wait until we're married."

Breaking away, Lara picked up the robe and pulled it tightly around her, fighting the tears welling in her eyes. "You have not only bought me, you have made me feel like a whore. I will never forgive you."

"A whore? Well, that should be an education for us both then, sweetheart. But, don't fret, you won't have to wait too long before we indulge our sexual fantasies."

"What do you mean?"

"Your parents have decided on a tight schedule with the wedding in two months time. But don't worry, you don't have to act the doting fiancée because I'm flying back to Australia later today and I won't be returning until a week before the wedding."

Lara was stunned, firstly by the news of the wedding date but more so, that Jack was leaving her. A surge of pride made her utter her next words.

"Good. I'm glad you're going. I don't want you near me."

"Temper, temper. I'm sorry I'm leaving you to arrange all of the wedding plans, but I'm sure you will have an absolute army of people to help you."

Sitting on the bed again, Lara realized that she was shaking, whether from the impact of news of the pending wedding or the bitterness of the words between them, she wasn't sure.

"If we're to get this investment sorted, I have a lot of work to do from Australia," Jack continued, his voice level and calm. "I have excellent managers of my companies but I need to spend time with them so I'll be free to enjoy our honeymoon."

"Is that the only reason you're going back?" She hadn't meant to sound so suspicious.

"No. It's not. If you prefer me to be blunt, I need to keep away from you." The bed dipped slightly as he sat next to her and took one of her hands in his. "I know we don't like each other, Lara, but nothing has changed in regard to our physical lust for each other. When I'm near, I can't keep my hands off you."

She looked up at him, her eyes still glistening with unshed tears. Did he really mean that, she wondered?

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing each finger in turn. "I admit I was jealous of Michael. Just as I think you might be jealous of any woman friend I have, particularly one that would like to marry me."

"What woman friend? Are you going back because of her?" Lara tried but failed miserably to keep the sound of jealousy from her voice.

"I've told you why I'm going back but you know what we men are like. We like to have, shall we say ... a final fling before tying ourselves down to having a wife and kids."

Lara tore her hand from his grasp. "You are vulgar -- vulgar and crass," she said, not quite believing what he was saying but then, she knew little about him and his love affairs in Australia.

"I'm behaving just as you would expect a common man like me to behave."

"I was willing to give myself to you when we were on the island and here -- yesterday. Why are you saying these things, Jack? Why are you deliberately trying to hurt me?"

"Because, physically you're my pure and virginal Princess and I have set you high on a pedestal even though your morals leave a lot to be desired. There will be plenty of time for you to play the whore when we are married." He leaned forward and pressed his lips lightly against hers before she could reply.

"Now, try and get your beauty sleep. I gather your mother is arranging for some official engagement photographs to be taken in the morning before I leave."

* * * *

"I am so sorry, Lara. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Lara poured her brother another cup of coffee as they sat opposite each other in the sitting room of her suite the next morning. It had still been early when Carl had knocked at her door and asked to speak to her. He looked haggard and disheveled as if he hadn't been to bed and Lara felt her vulnerable heart soften at the anguish etched in his face.

"Please don't worry -- it's done, Carl. I'm going to marry Jack."

Carl took a gulp of his coffee. "But, if I hadn't been such a stupid fool you wouldn't be placed in this terrible position. I can't believe that I let this gambling addiction control me leaving us in such a mess. I'm so ashamed." His face crumbled as he tried to hold back his tears.

Lara rose and held him closely to her, comforting and soothing, her heart breaking for her brother and his weakness. "It's okay, Carl. We can come through this. You are going to get some help, aren't you?"

Carl hugged his sister tightly before looking up at her concerned face. "Yes. Absolutely. I know I have a major problem but it was also part of the deal between father

and Jack that I sort myself out and get counseling for my addiction."

Sitting again at the table, Lara touched and then held her brother's hand trying to ease his agony.

"Can you ever forgive me, Lara? I mean, all I can think about is Michael and Jack fighting over you. It was as if you were wearing a sign saying Princess for sale to the highest bidder."

Lara was silent, not quite sure whether she should laugh or cry at Carl's remark.

"I know you would much prefer to be with Michael and the fact that you're being forced to marry Jack because of me, is a nightmare," Carl continued, his face tightening again with guilt.

"I love him, Carl."

"What?"

"I love Jack. I loved him from the moment I first saw him and I would never marry Michael."

Carl looked astounded as he took in the quiet, calm words of his sister.

"The only trouble is he doesn't love me but I'm prepared to accept that so I can be with him."

Sitting back in his chair, a look of relief swept across Carl's handsome features.

"Well, I'm shocked. I had no idea, Lara. I thought you were having a fling with some hunky, Aussie fisherman."

This time Lara did burst out laughing. "You can't tell me that I don't know how to pick them," she giggled. "Bringing home a multi-billionaire to save us all from ruin."

"Do you think you'll be happy with him?"

"I don't know but it won't be for the lack of trying on my part."

Carl stood up and Lara could see it was as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Trust me, Jack worships you. It's written all over him," he said, with a grin.

Lara stood next to her wayward brother and gave him another hug. "I hope you're right," she smiled, touching his cheek in a parting gesture. "And yes, of course I forgive you."

* * * *

Jack had to hand it to Lara. Not by even a blink or a gesture did she show her true emotions as later that morning they posed for their official engagement photos in the ballroom of the royal palace.

He knew she had to be miserable because he was the person who had caused it, he decided, as he dutifully moved closer to Lara where she sat in regal splendor. At the photographer's suggestion, he placed a hand on her shoulder. He couldn't fathom why he had acted the way he had and if Johann and Francesca had but known, he would have been willing to invest money into Challoner without them forcing Lara to marry him.

After all, she didn't love him. And the way he had lashed into her with his caustic, biting words, he had made sure that she didn't even *like* him. He was still brewing over the fact that Lara would have preferred to marry Michael instead and he guessed that most times he would have shrugged his shoulders and walked away. But, after hearing the way Michael had spoken about Lara and the exposure of his cruel streak, there was no way that Jack would let Lara marry that bastard!

It was going to be a rocky road ahead for them and he was deliberately giving her

some space by returning to Australia for a few weeks. However, if he could swallow the bitterness he felt about Lara's attitude towards him he was sure their feelings towards each other would gradually change. The fact that she was only marrying him to save her family stuck in his gullet like a hard, unmovable stone and he had to get over it to give their marriage a chance.

He looked down at Lara's perfectly styled hair and her straight, slender body dressed in an elegantly tailored suit of palest aqua. You can make up all the excuses you like, mate, but she is beautiful and you want her for your own. The thoughts drummed through his brain as he tightened his fingers on her shoulder.

"Lara, move your hand so we can see your ring." Obviously Francesca was coordinating the photo shoot, Jack acknowledged as Lara obediently turned her hand so that the precious antique engagement ring was prominently displayed. Not *his* ring. Francesca had given it to Jack and Lara earlier explaining that it was a time-honored tradition that this ring is passed from mother to daughter through the generations. Jack had made no comment as he had slipped the heavy ring on Lara's slender finger and lifted her hand to his lips. Her eyes had been downcast and he hadn't been able to tell what she'd been thinking. He wanted to say, "Don't worry, my love. I'll buy you a ring of your own soon, very soon."

"Your Highness, if you could look up at Mr. Lucas now?" The photographer adjusted one of the lights as Lara turned her head to look at Jack. He was instantly struck by the sadness in her eyes and an almost imperceptible quiver of her bottom lip.

"It won't be long now," he said quietly, wishing he could hold her in his arms and comfort her.

"I can't believe this is happening. I feel as if I'm in the middle of a dream."

Jack touched her face, her skin felt as soft as silk beneath his fingers. "At least you didn't say it was a nightmare," he said, his smile warm as his eyes held hers.

"Only because I didn't think of it in time. Otherwise, I would have," Lara replied, her mouth curving into a responding smile not realizing that was the moment that the photographer took the photo which would be sent around the world -- a photo showing a man and a woman supposedly very much in love.

At last the session was over and Jack indicated to Francesca that it was time for him to leave.

"What a pity that you are unable to stay for the Ball tonight," Francesca commented as the three of them walked to the main entrance of the palace where Jack's luggage was waiting to be loaded into the royal car to take him to the airport.

"Ma'am, I apologize again for having to leave but, as I explained to Lara, I have a great deal of business to conduct before our wedding. From here I fly to Hong Kong and then on to Japan for a series of meetings, before going home."

Jack gave a small bow of his head as Johann and Carl joined them, both greeting Jack warmly. Carl was particularly enthusiastic in his greeting as he turned and hugged his sister.

"You will be able to call this palace home in a few weeks."

Jack turned to Lara and only he noticed the cynicism behind her remark.

"Your Majesties -- Carl, please excuse us while I say goodbye to my fiancée in private," he said, catching hold of Lara's arm.

The others smiled indulgently as Jack led Lara into one of the side salons and

closed the door.

"I haven't had the chance to fill you in on the rest of the arrangements that I made with your parents," he said, watching her closely as her body tensed.

"And what would that be? Surprise me, for a change."

"In return for my ... investment and the palaver of a royal wedding, I negotiated that we would honeymoon in Australia and live there for most of the year. We'll return two or three times a year to Challoner and you'll have minimal royal duties."

Lara glared at him. "Thank you, Jack. Thanks for once again consulting me and asking me what I would like."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, sweetheart. Besides, I know how much you love Australia."

He could see Lara's now familiar look of defiance as she folded her arms across her chest. "Aren't you worried about leaving me here for all of these weeks? Aren't you afraid that someone like Prince Michael will take advantage of me?"

There was silence as Jack stared into her stormy green eyes. Would this feeling never go away? This irrational jealousy at the mention of that creep's name. He knew she was trying to get to him -- stir him up and make him react.

"I'll be in regular contact, my love," he said softly, deciding to ignore her last remark. "But, you don't look at all like a forlorn fiancée who has just said a passionate goodbye to her beloved. Come here and we'll change that."

Lara held her hands up in a defensive gesture. "No. No, Jack," she said, trying to break away.

"Too late, Princess," Jack murmured, as his hands cradled her face and he lowered his mouth to hers. She pressed her lips tightly together but he stroked them with his tongue until, with a soft sigh of compliance, she allowed him to part them and taste her. Jack deepened the kiss with a primitive passion, his senses swimming as Lara responded to him. Her hands grasped his jacket as he kissed her with a hunger that he was unable to control.

Drawing away at last, he looked down at her, committing her beauty to his memory for the lonely weeks to come. The delicate flush on her cheeks, the deepening red of her lips rosy for his passion and the glazed, dreamy look in her clear eyes.

His voice wasn't quite steady as he said, "There, that's better. Now you look like a woman who has just known her lover's kiss."

Lara smoothed her hair into place as she seemed to struggle with her feelings. "You flatter yourself, Mr. Lucas," she replied, her defiant attitude in place once more.

Jack opened the door so they could return to the others waiting at the entrance. "By the way, I forgot to mention the last part of the contract with your parents," he whispered.

"What?"

"To produce an heir as soon as possible. I explained that it wouldn't be a problem." Jack gave her a cheeky wink as he placed his arm around her waist and they faced the rest of the family.

CHAPTER TEN

"For heaven's sake, Lara. You need to lighten up. This is your wedding day." Jade made a funny face at her in the mirror as she continued to fasten the tiny pearl buttons at the back of Lara's wedding dress.

"Yeah. What's not to feel happy about marrying a hunk like Jack," Kate chimed in as she tweaked a wayward petal in the bridal bouquet.

Lara turned and faced her best friends. "You're impossible," she replied, knowing that the corners of her mouth were twitching with amusement. "If I'd thought you were going to bully me like you have for the past week, I would have picked two robots to be my bridesmaids."

Jade laughed, her dimples showing attractively in her pretty face. "Well, Princess Lalla," she said, using their pet name for Lara. "Robots we ain't, so let's get this show on the road."

Lara joined in their laughter as Jade and Kate continued to fuss over her. It was wonderful to be together again and Lara blessed the day that she had phoned them when Jack had left eight weeks ago. She had told them everything in absolute confidence, even setting up several three-way telephone calls so they could all listen and talk together.

Jade and Kate had been, in turn, angry, indignant, sympathetic and, when she asked them to be her bridesmaids, excited. To Lara, it seemed as they had talked over the past few weeks that their attitude had softened towards Jack and her parents.

Jack had returned to Challoner only two days ago in time for the rehearsals at the church and an official dinner last night to welcome the many royal and VIP guests arriving from around the world. He had been accompanied by his parents John and Rebecca Lucas and his two close friends Mike and Joe, who were to act as groomsmen, along with Carl.

Things had been so chaotic that she had barely acknowledged Jack, let alone spent any length of time with him or his family and friends. In a way she was glad because it meant she could remain in this warm cocoon of indifference that she had created where no one could reach her. Even when Jack had phoned her every few days over the past weeks, she had managed to remain cool and aloof, leaving most of the talking to him. She had wanted to ask him whether he was enjoying a final fling with some woman, but couldn't bring herself to stoop that low.

When Jade and Kate had arrived a week ago full of laughter and excitement, they had tried to jolt Lara from her hiding place and as her wedding day rushed towards her, she had been forced to face the reality of what her future might hold.

"I just hope I meet someone as gorgeous *and* as rich as Jack," Kate said in all seriousness, flicking back her red curly hair as she bent to check Lara's earrings were in place.

"Doesn't a Prince own the winery where you work, Kate?" Lara tried to take her mind off the thousand or so butterflies flapping in her stomach as she asked the question.

"Yes, but he lives in France and we never see him in Australia," she moaned.

"Well, what about me? When I go back I start my accountancy work at my dad's old property in the Outback and I hear this bloke who's bought it is as rough and tough as they come." Jade gave a louder moan.

"At least you won't have to worry about handling the media, Lalla, which is good." Kate continued her part of the conversation. "Did you see that press conference Jack gave?"

"Yes. The palace media office arranged it," Lara replied, thinking back to the press coverage Jack's conference had received and suspecting he had agreed to it to satisfy the clamoring of the world's media -- and possibly to protect her.

Jade jumped in, her hands waving in the air with excitement. "Honestly, Lalla," she chirped. "I fell for him right there and then and when some stupid journo asked about the rushed wedding and he replied that he loved you and so why wait, I nearly fainted with ecstasy."

Lara couldn't help laughing and the three girls chatted on, teasing each other as if they were giggling schoolgirls once again.

"I'm ready." Lara's statement brought them to a sudden hush as they stared at her. Lara held out her hands for the other two to grasp. "I'm so lucky that you are here and that I have your love and support," she said, her voice shaky, bringing instant tears to the eyes of her friends.

"When we started boarding school and became the three Princesses, we promised we would always be there for each other, no matter what," Lara continued. "And even though I'm getting married I promise you that I'll *still* be there for the two of you."

The three of them hugged each other as the years suddenly rolled away and for precious moments they were eleven years old again -- new girls on their first day at boarding school feeling lonely and shy in a strange and isolated world.

There was a light tap on the bedroom door and the girls turned. Lara's heart leapt into her mouth. Surely it wasn't Jack? He wouldn't come here, would he? She was aware that anything was possible with this man who did exactly what he wanted. This man who was soon to be her husband for better or worse.

The door opened to reveal Queen Francesca. The three young women gave bob curtseys as she approached. Both Jade and Kate knew Francesca well having spent several holidays at the palace when Lara had asked them to join her.

Francesca was in a great mood as could be seen by her broad smile as she surveyed them. "Ah, my favorite people," she beamed. "It will indeed be a wonderful day."

"I'm ready, Mother but there's nearly an hour to go yet." Lara felt her nerves tighten another agonizing notch.

"Yes, I know, dear. I have your dresser, make-up person and hairdresser all waiting outside to perform any last minute adjustments but, if Jade and Kate don't mind, I'd like to speak to you alone."

The two girls rapidly disappeared and after they had closed the door, Francesca indicated Lara should sit on the edge of the bed and she sat beside her.

"We haven't had much personal time together in the past few weeks what with all the details of the wedding to organize," Francesca began. Gazing into her mother's beautiful face, Lara saw the signs of strain with prominent worry lines around her mouth and eyes. She looked tired and drained and Lara recognized much of this had to do with

Carl.

Lara herself had been mortified when she had first been told of Carl's addiction to gambling and the millions of dollars he had accumulated in debt. But, her feelings were nothing compared with that of her parents with their awareness that the royal family would be ruined if they couldn't get financial help. Jack had provided that help. No wonder they thought the world of him.

Francesca caught and held Lara's hand. "I wanted to tell you *before* your wedding how proud your father and I are at your decision to marry Jack."

"But, Ma'am --"

"Yes, I know what you're going to say -- that it wasn't your decision. That it was something that was forced upon you and believe me Lara, I recognize that. I have never told you this before, but I entered into an arranged marriage with Johann. I was nervous and apprehensive, just like you are now, but we have been so happy together, I can't tell you how much I love and admire him."

"I'm so glad, Mother. But you have known Daddy since you were a child. You moved in the same circles and you were both brought up to know what to expect. Jack is almost a stranger to me. He comes from a different world and I know he is marrying me, not just to bail Carl out of trouble, but because Challoner and I, in that order, are good investments."

"That is probably true but I think you underestimate Jack, my darling. You may not have noticed it, but I can see how much he adores you."

Lara grasped her mother's hand. "That's lust -- pure lust, Mother. We hardly know each other."

Francesca gave her a knowing look. "Don't you believe in love at first sight?"

Hesitating, Lara played with the elaborate lace trim at the waist line of her dress. As far as she was concerned, and as she had explained to Carl, she had fallen almost instantly in love with Jack but she knew the same didn't apply to him. "I didn't realize you were such a romantic," she replied, and if her mother noticed that Lara had avoided her question, she didn't comment.

"I had better let the hordes in to check you over," Francesca said softly, her eyes glistening suspiciously as she hugged her daughter. "Not that you need them, Lara. You are lovely, absolutely lovely."

Lara returned the Queen's hug. "Don't worry. Jack and I will be okay," she murmured, with more conviction than she felt.

Francesca opened the door with the first people to rush into the room being Kate and Jade, determined to support their best friend. The others followed to make final checks on Lara's hair and make-up while the dresser ran expert eyes over her dress.

Lara had to admit that she loved her wedding dress, even though it had to be adjusted twice as she had lost weight since the initial fitting. But, now it fitted perfectly and she smoothed a hand over the beautiful white satin which was embroidered with fine pearls and sequins interlaced with tiny pink roses. The long train, which flowed majestically behind her, was also heavily encrusted with pearls and sequins.

"We have to go," Kate said as she handed Lara the bridal bouquet, an exquisite combination of cream and pale pink roses. "We'll see you at the church"

"And don't forget to smile," Jade added. "Remember, Jack will be waiting for you and just because you're being televised live around the world to millions of people, don't

let that worry you."

Lara laughed at the cheeky expressions on the faces of her friends as they left to be escorted to their limousine, which would take them to the cathedral for the ceremony.

As the finishing touch to Lara's appearance, the hairdresser placed a diamond tiara on Lara's golden head setting it firmly in place. Lara touched the sparkling diamond necklace at her throat and the matching earrings -- a wedding gift from Jack, which had been delivered to her this morning. She had been tempted to disregard them and then realized how ridiculous and insulting to Jack that would be. But how she wished that he had brought them to her personally. More and more she realized she was marrying a stranger who cared little for her.

Johann was waiting as she carefully descended the stairs and she could see by the expression on her father's face that he was fighting to keep his emotions in check.

Outside, the ceremonial gold coach drawn by two palomino horses stood in all its glory ready to drive father and daughter to the cathedral. It was a perfect spring day. The snow had disappeared and had been replaced by early spring flowers of daffodils and tulips. My wedding day, she thought as she waved to the palace staff through the carriage window. The beginning of the rest of my life. Oh help!

"You are trembling nearly as much as me," Johann said in an attempt to get his daughter to relax as they reached the cathedral. He tucked her arm in his ready for the long walk down the aisle.

"I wish the Bishop had refused to marry us, seeing that Jack is divorced."

"Well, he didn't and I, for one, am very glad that you're getting married in our cathedral," her father replied. "Besides, it's a little late to think of such things now."

"At least if I faint it will make for great news coverage." Lara knew it was nerves making her chatter and say ridiculous things. She couldn't seem to stop.

Her eyes widened as she looked ahead of her. Was the aisle really that long yesterday at the rehearsal?

"Your train is all correct and in place," Jade announced from behind her as she and Kate moved into their places.

Lara tried to smile as they began the long walk but her face felt stiff and strained with nervous tension. Her thoughts whirled as step by step they made their way to the altar. I don't mind the cameras and millions of people watching my every move but I do mind that I've agreed to marry Jack -- this man who has taken over my life and turned it upside down.

She wondered for a fleeting moment if she should turn and run. What a scene that would cause, fleeing in her golden coach like Cinderella at the Ball. Then she saw him -- her future husband waiting for her. He looked perfect. Tall and elegantly dressed in a deep grey morning suit and at his side acting as Jack's best man, was Carl in ceremonial uniform. You have a lot to answer for Carl Albert Frederick Henri Challoner, she decided, gritting her teeth.

Mike and Joe also stood with Jack. Lara had learnt that they were friends of his from Port Margaret when she had met them last night, together with his parents, making her realize how little she knew of Jack's family and his friends.

At last she drew level with Jack and her father graciously passed her hand into that of her soon-to-be husband. Lara wished she had agreed to a veil to shield her from the scrutiny of those intensely blue eyes. It would have given her some protection and she

could have continued to hide her feelings from him. Jack must have sensed how she felt as, disregarding all protocols, he bent and rested his cheek against hers.

"Hang in there, Princess. The deed is nearly done," he whispered and she closed her eyes at the feel of his firm jaw pressed against her cheek and the elusive scent of his aftershave assailing her nostrils.

His words and his hands holding hers had the desired effect. She had made this commitment and she had to get on with it, she decided, giving Jack a lingering smile as they turned to the Bishop to begin the ceremony.

* * * *

"I understand that there is an especially prepared bridal suite for us."

Jack turned to his bride. She had grown even paler over the past few hours, he thought but they were almost there now. They had made it through the long, drawn-out service when fortunately the parts where he had to respond were spoken in English. He knew a moment of intense satisfaction as he'd slipped his gold wedding band on Lara's finger. The ring that he'd had made, not another family heirloom.

Her hands had trembled as she had tried to place the matching ring on his finger and he had ended up helping her, slipping the ring firmly in place. We belong together now, my love. You might have preferred to marry your Prince Michael but, you are married to me.

The afternoon had taken on an ethereal quality as they had been greeted by thousands of enthusiastic well-wishers driving through the streets of Challoner in an open carriage. The exacting wedding photographs, the greeting of hundreds of wedding guests most of whom he didn't know, the endless banquet, had taken their toll on him, let alone Lara. But, he had to acknowledge that she had behaved with such grace and charm throughout the service and reception that she had literally taken his breath away. His parents had been enchanted with their new daughter-in-law and as he had watched, it seemed that Lara had been similarly taken with them and his two friends.

He would have liked to have flown everyone from Port Margaret to the wedding if he'd been able. What a shock that would have created in Challoner. But he knew very well that most of the people he mixed with would have been ill at ease in this rarefied atmosphere of such a royal occasion. Time enough to introduce them to his bride in a few days time.

Now, they were nearing the end of the reception and he and Lara would be able to politely take their leave. He glanced at Lara again wondering if she had heard his question. The only time he had been able to hold her was when they'd been required to perform the bridal waltz. He had been surprised at how fragile she had felt in his arms -- how narrow her waist was as she had danced holding herself stiffly away from him. She had lost weight over the past weeks and he felt a raw edge of concern worrying at his gut.

"Lara? I think we can safely leave now," he said, moving his head closer to hers.

"Yes. I think so," she responded, her voice sounding dull and lifeless.

Jack frowned. Was this what it was going to be like, he wondered? He had married this lovely creature only to have her transformed into the unhappiest woman on earth. Had he made such a terrible mistake? He didn't think so but ...

It took another half an hour to say their goodbyes before they could finally escape. Tomorrow they would fly to Australia but he puzzled as to whether Lara wanted to go, the way she suddenly clung to her mother.

The bridal suite within the palace was warm and inviting. An open fire roared in the huge fireplace taking the chill from the cold evening. There was a magnificent four-poster bed with soft, subtle drapes surrounding it and beyond the bedroom, the suite expanded into a lounge plus two adjoining bathrooms and walk-in robes.

"This is normally kept for visiting royalty," Lara remarked as she tossed her tiny jeweled bag on to the bed.

"Well, you *are* visiting royalty." Jack smiled at her as he loosened his tie. "God, I'll be glad to get out of this suit."

Lara stood silently in the middle of the room as Jack checked out the bottle of champagne set in a silver ice bucket on a side table together with a plate of beautifully arranged strawberries.

"Would you like a glass of champagne, Lara?"

"No, thank you."

He turned to stare at her. She appeared to be frozen in time. His Ice Princess. Was she afraid of him and if so, why? What had changed so much? Sure, it had been a rough few days -- well, even weeks he conceded, but they were married now. He decided attack might be the best method to jolt her out of this strange mood.

"What's the matter? We can legally have sex now, Lara. I thought you would be leaping into bed waiting for me."

Faint color rose in her pale cheeks but her words were cutting when she replied "you'd better get on with it then. The sooner you impregnate me and we produce an heir, the sooner we can be divorced."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lara bit her lip at the expression on Jack's face. He was shocked. She had horrified him by her rude and callous remark. Oh, Jack, I didn't mean it. I only want you to love me -- just a little.

"I think we'll forget you ever said that," he replied at last, moving towards her. "Are you tired?"

"Yes."

He touched her arm and she flinched, immediately regretting her action when she saw the fleeting hurt in his eyes.

"Lara, we are both exhausted. It's been a long and nerve-racking day. How about we just go to bed ...to sleep."

Almost sagging with relief, Lara nodded. Jack was right, as usual. She *was* exhausted. Every muscle ached with tiredness and tension. She would have a shower and lie in that bed and sleep. Glancing at the bed, she saw her nightdress, all lace and frills, arranged carefully across her pillow. It was a huge bed. They could sleep without touching besides, she could see her tiredness mirrored in Jack's drawn face.

If she had found the day a trial, then what must it have been like for him -- a straight forward man who, today, had faced every royal protocol imaginable, plus meeting hundreds of strangers all of whom would have been surreptitiously analyzing him. Jack had handled everything with eloquence and dignity. She had been so proud of him, the handsome man who was now her husband.

"I can't undo my dress. I'll need to ring for a maid," she said, reaching to pick up the telephone.

Jack placed a hand over hers, stopping the action. "No. You don't need a maid, Your Royal Highness. I'm quite capable of undoing a few buttons. Turn around."

Obediently turning her back towards him, Lara closed her eyes as she felt the light touch of his fingers against her neck as he began to undo the tiny pearl buttons.

"When we're in Australia, you won't have a personal maid waiting on you hand and foot, Lara."

Was she being told off? She wasn't sure. His voice was certainly aimed at putting her in her place.

"I'm quite happy to live without servants."

"There's a housekeeper and a gardener at my place in Port Margaret but other than that, I prefer to look after myself."

As he finished undoing the buttons she turned, holding the dress in place over her breasts. "Well, bully for you, Jack. Although, you might need to add one or two security people to your list unless you'd like to pay out another billion dollars if I'm kidnapped."

Jack's expression was thoughtful as he studied her. "I look after my own," he said, as he reached to touch the diamond necklace around her throat. "Did you like my present?"

Lara felt flustered. His scrutiny was unnerving and she was horribly embarrassed

that she hadn't had chance to acknowledge his gift. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

"It matches your personality. Fire and ice, which are two of your many fascinations. And at the moment you are all fire and want to pick a fight with me, don't you?" He smiled and she caught her breath at the wonderment of this magnificent man.

"Yes," she admitted, moving a few steps away from him.

"You are still mad that you've had to marry me instead of some puffed up royal. You thought you would put me in my place, as befits a commoner like me, when you challenged me to have sex with you."

"I ...I didn't --" Lara floundered, unable to form the words to reply to such an accusation.

"But, my beautiful wife, I'm quite happy to bide my time no matter how long it takes. So, you can stand there and argue with yourself for all I care. I'm having a shower and going to bed."

Lara managed to close her gaping mouth as Jack proceeded to strip off his clothes down to his underwear and disappear into one of the bathrooms. Moments later she heard the sound of the shower.

Well, that's that, she thought, pulling off the heavy wedding gown and carefully hanging it in the walk-in robe. Jack didn't want to argue with her -- he didn't want to make love to her -- he wanted to sleep. Fair enough!

She took her time in her bathroom allowing the hot water to pummel away at her tense body as she reflected on her wedding. What a day it had been. She supposed it was what every young woman dreamed of and yet it had passed in a blur as she had made every endeavor to look happy and relaxed. It had certainly been different. She dried her hair and then spent time brushing the long, heavy tresses allowing them to lie around her shoulders in a golden cloud. Slipping into the lacy nightdress, she studied herself critically in the mirror. Yes, she had all the trappings of a bride on her wedding night, except for the pale face and faint shadows under her eyes. She patted her cheeks to add some color.

Nervously she opened the door to the bedroom and then almost laughed aloud. So much for worrying what Jack might think of how she looked. He was already sound asleep, the covers drawn neatly up to his chin.

Lara tip-toed closer and peered at him. His face looked much younger in repose, his dark eyelashes protecting her from that blue gaze and his sensual mouth was relaxed - - inviting. Hastily, she turned off the bedside lamp and making her way around the bed, pulled back the covers and climbed in. Jack didn't stir. Staring into the darkness, Lara determinedly swallowed the lump forming in her throat and waited for sleep to overcome her.

* * * *

She was warm and comfortable as she stretched against a man's body. Not just any man, she realized but her husband, as her cheek rested against Jack's chest. Going very still, she listened to his quiet breathing. He was still asleep but at sometime in the night he had wrapped an arm around her and was cradling her. Oh, it felt so good! A faint light from the window told her it was nearly dawn and in a few hours they would be on their way to Australia -- and her new life.

She hesitated and then pressed closer to Jack, her hand lightly examining his chest feeling the sprinkling of dark hair beneath her probing fingers. She followed the hairline

down to his waist and then stilled. Jack was naked. Her heart began to pound as she daringly slid her hand over his flat abdomen until she felt his sex and gently encircled it.

She jumped as Jack's hand grasped hers. "You're playing with fire, sweetheart," he said softly, his voice rumbling in her ear.

"I want that fire," she replied, pressing her lips against him, savoring the texture and clean smell of his skin.

She felt him tense. Please don't deny me this time. I'm your wife, your very virginal wife. Leaning away, she pulled the nightdress over her head just as Jack turned on the lamp. They stared at each other and Lara could see the desire blazing in his eyes as he lowered his gaze to her breasts.

Drawing the sheet further from her, he seemed to be drinking his fill of her naked body. Under his gaze her nipples hardened and her breasts seem to swell in anticipation of his lovemaking. Jack's hand caressed the curvaceous length of her, dwelling on her narrow waist and the flare of her hip. He moved closer and slid his hand between her silky thighs, resting there -- not moving.

Lara stroked his strong jaw line and traced the outline of his sensual mouth. She wanted to feel that mouth on her breasts, sucking and licking her. She wanted him so badly.

As if he had read her mind, Jack bent his head, capturing one nipple in his mouth and teasing it with his tongue. Lara gasped as the sensation he was creating spiraled through her body to her woman's core. Almost as if he sensed her every feeling, Jack drew her breast deep into his hot mouth and suckled her -- hard. She held his dark head to her as she fought to breathe, the beginning of an orgasm overtaking any other thought.

She didn't know how to tell him what she wanted, but he knew. Suddenly he pushed her thighs apart and placed his mouth on her sex, his tongue moving and stroking the sensitive nub.

"Jack. Oh, Jack!" Whether she shrieked or not, she didn't care as she climaxed violently grasping his head as his tongue continued to stroke her pulsating sex until the trembling had stopped.

He kissed his way up her stomach and stopped to caress her breasts and then looked into her glazed eyes. "You are unbelievably responsive," he grinned, his delight obvious.

Lara covered his face in a flurry of kisses. "I want you inside me, Jack," she said, uncaring how forward she seemed. Moving her hips, she could feel his arousal pressing against her stomach.

"Shall I use protection?"

Lara shook her head. "I want your baby," she whispered and was gratified at the look of satisfaction on his face.

He placed a gentle finger inside her, massaging her already sensitive nub and she jerked involuntarily against him, not believing she could feel such longing. "I need you, Jack," she encouraged and he moved over her. She grasped his sex, guiding it into her, tensing as she felt his great size.

"Am I hurting you?" Jack hesitated but Lara immediately pushed against him, realizing the stab of pain she felt had ended her virginal state for ever.

"No. I love it," she said, making Jack laugh.

"You are beautiful, my Princess," he murmured, suddenly serious as he pushed

again and fully entered her. He waited for a moment and then began smooth, rhythmic thrusts into her welcoming warmth.

Lara couldn't answer. She had to be in heaven, she thought, concentrating on the wondrous feel of Jack inside her as her muscles stretched to accommodate him. No one had ever told her that making love would be like this. It was the sun and moon and stars rolled into one.

Jack was also lost for words as she caught his rhythm, moving with him, urging him on. He thrust harder and faster, his breath coming in great gasps as he tried to control his climax. She arched again him as her orgasm took hold and clung to his shoulders, sobbing as waves of ecstasy flowed over her.

"Ah --Lara!" He shouted her name as he came seconds later, exploding inside her, filling her with his seed. She held his shaking body, loving the feel of his sweat slicked skin and the sound of his heart hammering against hers.

"I'm almost speechless," she said as they slowly recovered in each others' arms.

Jack pulled her closer. "I've waited so long for you. I think we may have made six babies just then."

She laughed, feeling the joy of his lovemaking at last. He had made her truly a woman and she wanted to burst with happiness. However, she was calm as she replied. "You are certainly a very physical man, Jack Lucas."

"You'd better believe it. And now we have broken the ice, so to speak, I shall want you at least a dozen times a day."

"Even thought you don't love me?" There! She'd said those dreaded words. She'd had to spoil everything. She hadn't meant to -- she couldn't help herself.

"You don't love me either," came the smooth response. "This is a physical thing, Lara. It is the pleasure we gain from touching and tasting and creating sensations for each other to enjoy."

"Meaning, you can feel this way with any woman?"

"Don't analyze everything. We have lusted after one another from the moment we met. Physically we are very compatible. We have just proved it but I don't intend to spend our honeymoon being quizzed by you over impossible emotions."

Impossible emotions. So that's what he called it. She had heard that many men were like Jack. As long as they could have their sex when they wanted it, to hell with other emotions such as love, commitment, caring.

Jack stroked her face with a tender hand and she turned her head pressing a kiss into his palm. Perhaps he was caring -- she didn't know any more. Right now she wanted this man again. She wanted to feel him loving her, taking her, creating sensations within her that she had never before experienced.

Leaning towards him, she brushed her breasts across his chest. "Would you like me now?" she asked with a cheeky smile.

"You know I would, little devil."

"I want you to teach me everything about sex, Jack. Everything!"

He placed his hands around her waist and lifted her so she sat astride him, looking down into his face. "You flatter me, sweetheart," he said, maneuvering so he could enter her, causing her to gasp in surprise.

"Oh, Jack," she murmured, her eyes like saucers as he pulled her hips tightly against him, at the same time thrusting into her, then lifted her from him and repeating

the movement again and again creating the most wonderful sensations as Lara's strong, internal muscles tightened around him.

"Oh, Lara," he mimicked, his hands caressing her breasts, his thumbs rubbing her sensitive nipples.

She began to move, realizing that she could take control of the rhythm and of Jack and then laughed in delight as he groaned under her teasing. Suddenly his passion took over leaving her breathless as with several fierce thrusts, Jack reached his climax. He watched with a strange feeling of pride as Lara gyrated above him and flinging her head back, reveled in every moment of her orgasm.

* * * *

"Dear Diary,

We're on our way to Australia in Jack's plane. He is in the conference area making business calls and I'm using this chance to catch up with you. I'm sorry I've missed a few days, but things have been pretty hectic.

My wedding is over and honestly, I feel someone must have slipped me a valium, as it passed in a complete haze. HMs are ecstatic and Jack's parents were very happy at the outcome, as well. Jack has paid for them to have a second honeymoon in Europe.

The most important thing is that I've lost my virginity at last --and how! It was the most wonderful experience of my life and I can't get enough of Jack. I'm constantly on fire for him and he must feel the same way as he can barely keep his hands off me.

The saddest thing is that from his point of view, it's pure lust. From the beginning he wanted me, while I know I love him. I could never let another man touch me and yet he could have sex with another woman and think nothing of it. I can't bear to think about it.

We're going to Port Margaret where Jack says we will have some deep and meaningful talks. I don't quite know what he means. I just wish he loved me and that we could be like a normal couple."

"What are you writing?"

Lara hastily closed her journal as Jack stood in the aisle looking down at her. "It's private."

He shrugged and sat down next to her. She was an extraordinary woman, his beautiful wife. Quiet and shy one moment and the next, fiery and argumentative. He still couldn't pick her true personality. What he *did* know, to his absolute delight, was how sexual she was. There was no shyness involved in that regard and he had been intoxicated with her when they had made love that morning as the dawn had broken.

Worried that she might feel sore with such sudden activity, he had run a bath, filling it with oils and bubbles he'd found in the huge marble bathroom. Lara had drifted back to sleep and he had picked her up and gently placed her in the warm, perfumed water. She had stretched languidly and then held out her arms to him.

"Come in, the water's fine," she had joked and he'd watched the bubbles clinging to her rounded breasts as she moved. He hadn't needed to be asked twice as he joined her and she was instantly in his arms.

"I've never done it in a bath," she whispered, stroking the bubbles across his chest.

"You'd never done it," he replied, hardening with desire as she floated against him.

"I thought you said you'd want me at least a dozen times a day?" Her look was deliberately provocative as she pressed her lips against his.

"Well, this will be number three today and it's not even seven o'clock in the morning," he murmured, his hands moving over her slick, wet body. "Seriously, Lara. You could become very sore."

"We'll have a rest ... after this," she said. He'd been unable to resist her, and hadn't wanted to, as he pulled her on to his lap.

"Did you finish all your calls," she asked politely as he brought his mind back to the present with difficulty.

"Pretty well. But next week there's an important meeting in Sydney, which I'll need to attend."

"I'll come with you, if you like."

She slipped her hand into his and he studied his gold ring on her slender finger. He wanted her with him, he realized. He wanted her with him every moment.

"I have an apartment in Sydney overlooking the Harbor Bridge. I think you'll like it." His throat tightened with unknown emotion. Was this what it was like to be in love? To want to share everything with your wife? Why hadn't he felt this with Julia? Probably that was why their marriage hadn't lasted. They'd never really loved each other. But what did it matter when Lara didn't love him. Sure, she was enjoying this new sexy adventure but it would wear thin. She had already mentioned ending their relationship. Barely married and she had talked of divorce. That had hurt him. He would never divorce her and allow Michael to have her. Never!

"I know so little about you, Jack." She interlaced her fingers with his. "I don't know about your work, or your family and friends. I don't know what you have planned for our future."

He turned to her and to his dismay, her eyes filled with tears. She bent her head but he'd seen her weakness and it tore him apart to see her agony. Was this what their life was going to be like? A total lack of communication except in the bedroom.

And it was his entire fault, damn it!

He brushed away a wayward tear from her cheek with his thumb and then cradled her against him, gently kissing her forehead. "It's not the right place to talk about such matters here where we might be overheard. As I said, when we get home to Port Margaret, we're going to talk and plan our future."

It sounded reasonable and logical the way he'd phrased it, he decided. They did need to sort things out. He hoped to hell that he could persuade her she could be happy with him.

"We'll be in Australia in about nine hours. How about we go to bed?" He buried his lips into her sweet-smelling hair.

She looked up and he knew his desire for her was written in his eyes. He couldn't help it. She was everything he had ever wanted in a woman.

"I'd like that," she replied. "I guess I must be pregnant by now, but it's a very enjoyable way of making sure."

She reached for her bag and made her way along the aisle to the bedroom at the back of the plane. Jack followed, his thoughts spinning around in his head. These odd, throwaway lines of hers full of sarcasm just didn't seem to fit. This wasn't the real Lara. Or was he totally misunderstanding the situation with Lara waiting to have his baby to

fulfill her part of their contract, so she could leave him?

* * * *

"It's a beautiful home, Jack." Lara looked out of the huge windows that ran the length of the house, which was set high above the bay in Port Margaret.

"I like it. It's a bit smaller than your palace, but still ..."

Lara decided to ignore that remark. "The sea is very rough today. Is it an autumn storm coming in?" She jumped as a great gust of wind rattled against the panes of glass. Jack stood behind her and she leaned back enjoying the protective feel of his arms around her.

"It's forecast to be stormy today and fine tomorrow. I don't have a fleet of boats out at present so I'm not too concerned."

"Have you been out in weather like this?" She turned to look up at him, noticing his eyes narrow as they swept the horizon.

"Yes, many times. Before I returned to Challoner I went out for a week and worked a session with the tuna cowboys."

She turned back to the window, covering his hands with hers where they encircled her waist. "I don't know what that means."

"We work under water in diving suits driving big catches of tuna into huge holding pens, and then the ship gradually tows them several hundred miles into shore, where they go into fish farms. The trouble is, some times sharks follow the tuna in and break the nets so we have to drive them away and mend the nets. If we lose the catch, then we also lose around two million dollars. It's dangerous but pretty exciting."

Lara shuddered and Jack's arms tightened around her. She continued to stare at the pounding sea as she said, "You could have been killed."

"Then you wouldn't have needed to marry me." Jack laughed as he twirled her around to face him. He was taken back when he registered her distressed expression and said more gently "its part of what I do, Lara. Who I am. I'm a fisherman first and a businessman second."

Lara's eyes sparked into his as she grasped the lapels of his jacket. "No! You're my husband first and the father of the baby we will have. How can you be so uncaring as to what might happen to you?"

"Don't try and change me, Lara. I will always take care of you and if you have a baby, I will love and take care of that child." He looked puzzled by her outburst but his manner remained cool.

"I want you to love me, Jack. You said you would love our child. I want to be loved too."

His brilliant blue eyes studied her pale face as he analyzed what she had said. Lara waited her heart in her mouth. At last she had the courage to bring this into the open. She mustn't fail now. She had to know how he felt.

"I care for you, Lara."

She pushed him away. "That's not good enough. I want more."

"What if I can't give you more?"

"Then our marriage will be over." She flung her head back as she stared him out.

"I love you, Jack Lucas. I *love* you and I'll accept nothing less in return."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I don't believe you."

"What?" Lara stared at him. She had just revealed the most significant and painful revelation to this man. She had swallowed her pride, deciding to declare her love, thinking it would break down this final barrier between them and ... she was wrong.

So wrong.

"I don't believe that you love me," Jack repeated.

"Why not? I deserve to know why you've reached that brilliant conclusion."

She watched as Jack sat in one of the luxurious leather chairs. He looked calm and relaxed as he crossed his legs at the ankles and folded his arms over his chest.

"There are a couple of very obvious reasons actually, and I think you know them already, if you would but admit it. Firstly, because of Carl you didn't have much choice when I made the offer to bail him out and you were part of the equation. Sure, you would have preferred Michael, but I'm wealthier and beat him to it.

"Secondly, why would you fall in love with someone like me? It doesn't add up. A man you barely know and although I have the advantage of money, as far as your world is concerned, I am still a commoner -- a mere fisherman."

Lara felt that she was going to explode, she was so furious. "If you think that, why was I so taken with you on the island? I literally begged you to make love to me."

Rubbing a hand across his jaw, Jack gave a wry smile. "I'm not denying that we have something going between us, which began on the island. It's called physical attraction and we both excel at it. But, I'm talking about a different kind of love. The sort of love that will last a lifetime. All I have heard you mention is divorce. On our wedding day, you asked me to get on with it and make you pregnant so we could divorce sooner. That doesn't sound like a declaration of undying love to me."

Lara was silent. Jack was right. She had said those terrible things, but only because she thought he didn't care. She'd been protecting her stupid pride. Now, she had no pride left. She wanted him to believe that she loved him, and she didn't care if he didn't feel the same way.

"I loved you from the very start, Jack. You can say all the hurtful things in the world, but it's true."

Jack stood up, suddenly restless as he stared out at the raging sea. "It doesn't matter. I have bought a Princess and made a good investment in her country. I don't want to talk about whether you love me or not. We're not going to get a divorce. It's immaterial."

Lara blinked away the tears welling in her eyes. She wouldn't let him see how his words had hurt her. She wouldn't!

"I'd like to visit the island tomorrow."

Jack raised a dark eyebrow. "Whatever for?"

"I don't have to explain why. Please can we go -- just for an hour?"

Jack's expression was thoughtful as he studied her. He nodded his head in

agreement. "Okay. As long as this storm has passed and the weather is suitable. We'll go in my motor launch."

"No Jezebel?"

He smiled and she felt her insides melt with love for him.

"No, not in Jezebel. Now, I'll go and make a few business calls and catch up on some emails. The housekeeper has left us some dinner in the fridge, if Your Royal Highness doesn't mind heating it up?"

Refusing to let the terse words between them spoil this special time, Lara crossed to his side and, placing her arms around his neck, reached up to kiss him. "Jack Lucas' wife doesn't mind at all," she breathed and had the pleasure of seeing the passion flair in his eyes.

* * * *

"It's a bit choppy, but we should be alright. At least the sun's out, which is more than can be said for yesterday."

"I think it's the most beautiful day ever," Lara replied, leaning into Jack's side as he steered the launch towards the island. He placed his free arm around her, kissing her cheek as he did so.

She was particularly serene today, he thought, glancing at her delicate profile as she held her head up towards the autumn sunshine, her hair streaming behind her in a golden banner. She had made no further comments about their strange discussion yesterday when she'd insisted that she loved him.

How he wished it was true. But, in so many ways Jack recognized that his bride was still very naïve. Because he had woken this extraordinary sexual awareness within her, she had mistaken it for love. No sweetheart. It isn't just that kind of love that I want from you. Perhaps it will come in time. I pray that it will.

He glanced behind checking that the security boat was following. He hadn't told Lara, but he'd been forced to make a lot of changes since making Lara his wife. His home was now sealed up like a fortress and he'd arranged for two security men to be on constant guard against intruders. Whether this was the media, who were still frantically trying to get photos and interviews, or more sinister strangers who might try and harm Lara in some way, he needed to make sure they were safe.

"Do you think the spiders will have come back and be hiding in the bed?" Lara asked with a cheeky grin as she touched his face, her fingers tracing the outline of his strong, chiseled jaw. He caught her hand and pressed a kiss into the soft palm.

"You have a one-track mind, my Lara," he smiled in response. "I think the cottage will be pretty grubby. If I'd known you wanted to go there, I would have arranged for my staff to go out and tidy it."

"I don't want it tidy," she replied, resting her head on his shoulder. "I want it to be just as we left it."

"In chaos, if I remember correctly." Jack slowed the engine as they approached the tiny bay. "I can't get any closer but the water's only a few inches deep. I'll carry you over," he said, throwing a short rope ladder over the side.

Lara clung to him as he lifted her and waded through the shallow water to the beach. He could feel his body harden with need for her as she nuzzled his throat, covering him with tiny, butterfly kisses. Okay, so she might not love him as he wanted to be loved, but he'd settle for this any time, he decided, lowering her gently to the sand, his hands

caressing her slender frame as he did so.

To his surprise, she turned and ran across the beach, disappearing through the trees towards the cottage. He guessed that she was living her own romantic dream of when they were last here and their awareness of each other had gradually consumed them.

When he walked through the open door, still hanging on by its rusty hinges, Lara was sitting in one of the old arm chairs frantically leafing through a book.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" He was intrigued.

When she looked up, he caught his breath in wonderment. Her face was alive with an ethereal beauty that he knew he would never forget no matter what the future might bring.

"You say I don't love you, Jack" She held the book out to him. "Before you deny me yet again, I want you to read this. It's my diary and I wrote in it when we were here on the island after we'd made love on that last night. I hid it under this cushion and when the police arrived, I was in such a state that I forgot and left it here."

He took the book from her, his eyes going to the words she had written weeks ago when they had first met -- first been intimate.

Whatever happens in the future, I shall never, never stop loving him. He is the man with whom I would want to spend the rest of my life, if I could. I have to find a way back to him, somehow ...

The words danced before his eyes as he captured their meaning. Lara had written this believing him to be Jack Lucas, her fisherman. She had fallen in love with him then. He looked into her shining face, alight with joy, and felt the tears rising in his eyes.

She gently removed the diary from his hands and placed it on the table. "I hope you believe me, Jack," she said and when he didn't reply she continued nervously, "I know we're from different worlds and that our circumstances are extraordinary, but I don't think you would have been so determined to pay that money and take me away from Michael if you hadn't cared about me."

Still Jack was silent so she plowed on, her hands unconsciously twisting together as the tension shot up several more notches.

"What you need to understand is that I didn't want to marry Michael. I don't even like Michael very much. It was only when my parents told me about Carl's debts that I realized I had little choice -- and I swear I was only told on the same night that you came to my room. I thought you didn't want me, and I could hardly contain my joy when you said we were to be married."

"Lara, I -- "

"Shh. Let me finish or I'll lose my courage. Then you became so hard and cynical and kept pointing out the differences between our worlds. I couldn't understand why you'd want to marry me except for the prestige of a title and the right connections and ... a good investment."

"Lara. Shut up a moment." He managed to speak at last, although he still felt totally stunned. His wife loved him. Had loved him from the beginning. He wanted to climb on this cottage's old roof and shout it at the top of his lungs so the whole world could hear. God, he felt good!

"Have you removed your ring since the wedding?" He contained his feelings with difficulty. Two could play at the show and tell game, he decided.

She looked shocked, and he noticed her bottom lip quiver. He was upsetting her -- badly. It was time to come clean.

"No. Of course not. Why?"

"I suggest you take it off and read the inscription on the inside."

He watched her fumbling and, taking pity on her anxious state, he reached for her hand, removed the ring and held it out to her. Her eyes widened as she twisted it around and read aloud *To Lara -- my love until the end of time - Jack.*

"Oh my. *Oh my!*" was all she could say, her mouth forming a delicious oh of astonishment.

Laughing, he drew her close. "I thought you might have noticed it much earlier than this, Princess. Now, you know how I feel," he said, kissing her with great tenderness.

"Jack! You really love me." Lara could hardly speak as the joy shone from her eyes.

"From the moment I first saw you and I always will for the rest of our lives. Truly, madly, deeply. I worship you"

"Even though I can be a snobby, royal pain in the butt?"

"Particularly because of that."

"And do you promise faithfully to give up being a ...a tuna cowboy?"

Jack hesitated for a second to tease her before he said "Yes. I promise. But I don't promise not to go messing around in Jezebel."

Lara laughed, her eyes dancing. "What a pity Jezebel isn't here. She would complete our reunion."

With a wicked smile, Jack took her hand and let her towards the door. "Come with me, sweet wife. I have an extra wedding present for you."

Mystified, Lara let Jack lead her to the beach and there moored just off shore was Jezebel. Lara shrieked with excitement as she saw the old boat's now gleaming hull and strapped to it, as if gift wrapped, was the biggest pink ribbon bow she had ever seen. On Jezebel's mast flew a majestic flag, carrying Lara's coat of arms, flapping in the cool breeze.

"I've had her completely re-fitted while we were in Europe. New interior, engine, decking -- the works." Jack felt his heart swell with pride at the look on Lara's face.

"You did this for me?" she asked in wonderment.

"Absolutely. Rather than stay in the cottage, I thought we might spend a few days on our boat. I had planned to bring you here anyway but not quite so soon."

Lara hugged and kissed him, barely containing herself as the staff member who had brought Jezebel to the island ferried them in the motor launch over to the old boat.

Jack had issued strict instructions to keep Jezebel well hidden until he and Lara were in the cottage so that he could surprise her -- and he'd certainly done that, he thought.

"Come on, Princess. Jezebel awaits your pleasure." Jack helped her on board and laughed as Lara rushed to explore. He was pleased with the new fit-out which now included an updated galley and a luxurious, if rather narrow, double bed.

"I love you so much, Jack Lucas." Taking a sip of the champagne that Jack had

poured for her, Lara's eyes said it all as she stood in the shelter of his arms.

"I adore you, Lara Lucas," he replied, kissing her soft mouth. "I guess the next job will be to make Jezebel child safe."

"Pardon?"

"For all those babies we're going to have."

Lara eyed the bed and then determinedly removed her husband's glass from his hand, placing it on the tiny table beside them.

"Time for practice." She smiled.

EPILOGUE

*"Dear Diary,
Sorry it's been a while.*

This is our fourth summer on the island and it gets better every year. The weather is glorious and we have at last finished the extensions to the cottage just in time for Jade's and Kate's visit tomorrow. I can't wait to catch up with their news. And next month, Jack's parents are coming to stay, and so is my darling Greta.

From here I can see my husband walking along the beach with our precious son. Daniel is three years old today. I can't believe it! The time has gone so quickly. They're searching for shells to put on Daniel's sand castle.

We have been in Challoner for the past few weeks and I attended several charity functions in my role as their patron. Carl told us he had set the date for his wedding to Emily. This is fantastic news and given time, hopefully Daniel will not be required to become Crown Prince.

Jack has constantly refused to accept a title from my father and says as long as Daniel and I are with him, then he's happy. He did go out with the tuna fleet last week but said it was quite safe. I'm not sure I believe him but Jack insists it's important that he doesn't lose sight of his heritage and I understand that. We had quite a reunion when he returned!

Our love for each other grows every single day and soon Daniel will have a little brother or sister to play with. I'm so happy.

I have to go now, dear Diary. My family's calling me."

The End.