

THE PRINCESS AND THE O

by

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Dedication

For Andrea—one heck of a friend and cheerleader
For Barb—even though she'll probably never read this
one—a rock to lean on and a sounding board extraordinaire
Always in memory of my “Patrice”—I just wish I hadn’t had
to learn to live without you, Prim.

Special thanks go out to the pilots of the Professional
Helicopter Pilots Association who responded to my call for
information and help. Any mistakes I made in that
scene are mine and mine alone.

Chapter 1

IS THE PROMISCUOUS PRINCESS PAST HER PRIME?

“Can you believe it? Can you fucking believe it?” The scrunch of newsprint filled the momentary silence as Princess Acelin crumbled the tabloid paper in her hands. With a satisfying heave, she launched the makeshift ball at the plate glass window. It bounced harmlessly to the plush carpet. “I am not past my prime.” In the throes of a full-fledged temper tantrum, she stomped her bare foot on the floor.

A chuckle drew her attention. “Does that mean you’re promiscuous?”

If looks could kill, Acelin’s best friend and confidante, Lady Patrice, would have melted to the floor like the Wicked Witch of the West. Instead, she sat with her feet tucked underneath her, reclining on the overstuffed loveseat, looking none the worse for wear.

“You know damn well that I’m not a slut.” Acelin stalked over to the window and stared out at the heavy gray sky, her reflection looking back at her. The snow had begun in earnest shortly after they’d returned from the slopes, driven in by the threat of the mid-April storm threatening to dump six inches of new powder on the Colorado Rockies. “And aren’t you supposed to be on my side?”

With Patrice’s reflection visible in the large window, Acelin watched as her friend unfolded her legs, stretching like a waking cat. “I am. Even when you’re acting like the spoiled brat the tabloids make you out to be.”

Whirling around, Acelin tried to face her friend down with a withering stare, only to find herself the recipient of a giggle as Patrice cupped her hand over her mouth to prevent the worst of it from escaping.

“Fine. So I am acting like a bitch on wheels. I’ve earned the right this time.” Acelin fought the temptation to stick her tongue out at her friend.

Patrice turned to fluff the pillows she’d been sitting on, ignoring the comment.

“I really hate you some days.” Acelin pouted in her best imitation of a toddler.

“You love me and you know it.” Patrice crossed her arms across her ample chest and silently dared Acelin to contradict her.

She couldn’t and she wouldn’t. She loved Patrice like a sister. Acelin just wasn’t in the mood to be charitable, however, even though Patrice was one of the few people who allowed her to be herself. Even when that particular self acted like a two year old brat.

The rag sheet on the newsstand at the lodge’s gift shop had ruined her otherwise wonderful day. She’d been in a glorious mood when they’d gotten up that morning. Even the threat of a late afternoon snowstorm hadn’t dampened her spirits. Any time spent shushing down the slopes was better than none. Even the ever-present paparazzi lying in wait at the lodge entrance hadn’t put a dent in her perky armor. She’d kept right on smiling as they shoved their cameras in her face and shouted obscene questions. Why did they think her sex life was anyone’s business but her own?

Her smile remained on her face as she darted past the barrage on the way back into the lodge and into the gift shop to purchase the Belgium chocolates her PMS-ravaged body demanded. Only to have the grin wiped from her lips by the blaring headline.

“I’m not some skank of an old crow. I’m not.” She slumped down into a plush chair. “Am I?”

“Of course not, honey.” Patrice reclined on the arm of the chair, slipping her hand on to Acelin’s shoulder. “What you are is fodder for those vultures because your image sells. People want to read about you. So the rags give people what they want, even if they have to make it up.”

Reaching up to squeeze her friend’s fingers, Acelin drew in a deep shuddering breath. “This thirtieth birthday thing has me more creeped out than I’ve been willing to admit.”

Patrice kept silent, but Acelin saw the sparkle in her eye and the you think? grin.

So turning thirty meant more than she’d been able to acknowledge, until now. So her father continued to pressure her to marry—to provide for the continuation of the family legacy by giving him grandbabies to spoil rotten. So she’d promised her father she’d settle down once she turned thirty. She wanted to make her father happy—not because she felt pressured to be the dutiful daughter and everyone knew that King Warrick of Timoria always got his way—but because she’d found the right man for her and she wanted to get married and have children.

One slight problem prevented her from achieving that goal. Finding the right man.

“Is it too much to want to marry a man who gives me orgasms?”

“Not at all. I think it’s a perfectly reasonable requirement.”

“You would think so. A man smiles at you and you come.”

“Hey. Watch it. You make it sound like I’m easy.”

“You’re not easy, you’re multi-orgasmic. I’d kill just to be mono-orgasmic. With a man, and not some battery-operated boyfriend.”

“Honey, you’ll find him. He’s out there somewhere.”

Was he? Doubts plagued her. When she’d turned twenty-one, her parents had given her the freedom to pursue her love life without any pressure from them. Over the last nine years, she’d dated several men of noble lineage. Men her father would approve of if any of the relationships made it that far.

None of them did. No matter how charming or handsome or intelligent or romantic, Acelin refused to marry a man who didn't bring her to orgasm. She wanted to throw away her vibrator, not spend her married life restocking her battery supply.

Her dating habits earned her the unflattering nickname of the Promiscuous Princess. The foreign press corps latched on to every failed relationship with glee—even if it was just a first and only date—trying to ferret out the reason behind the breakup. More than enough pages of tabloid journalism had been dedicated to her allegedly finicky nature.

Her daily page count kicked up a notch six months ago when her father did the one thing he promised he wouldn't do—he interfered by hinting at an announcement to be made at her birthday celebration. The disclosure of an engagement. With thirty hovering around the corner, the vultures circled, waiting to attack. Without knowledge of her agreement with her parents, the press expected an ultimatum—the same unhappy ultimatum she now expected when she returned.

The announcement set her nerves on edge and raised her suspicions. She feared they planned her birthday extravaganza as a matchmaking-palooza. Instead of anticipating her trip back to Timoria, she searched for a way to postpone the inevitable, her forthcoming return by the upcoming Wednesday.

Pacing back to the window, Acelin watched the fat snowflakes fall from the heavy gray sky, her own reflection staring back at her. When they'd first come inside, she'd thought they'd spend the evening in front of the massive stone fireplace in the lobby of the exclusive lodge, sipping hot toddies and enjoying some male companionship. Now she just felt like curling up and ignoring the outside world, especially the one inhabited by her father. What the hell was he thinking when he hinted that a joyous announcement would be made in conjunction with the birthday festivities? As much as she loved her father, he managed to drive her nuts some times.

“What do you say we freshen up and head down for dinner?” Patrice’s voice broke through Acelin’s moment of self-pity.

Wallowing in poor-pitiful-me feelings was not an option. The only real possibility was honoring her promise to her father and facing her duty as Timoria’s future queen. “And check out the drop-dead gorgeous men we spotted when we checked in?” She’d be damned if she’d let anything ruin her vacation, her last hurrah, most likely. Acelin’s instincts warned her she’d be getting married when she returned to Timoria, whether she liked it or not.

“Now you’re talking.”

If the end of her father’s nine-year benevolent streak loomed in her future, Acelin intended to enjoy her present and possibly her last chance to find a man who’d give her that elusive “o.”

* * * *

“Your Highness.” Patrice curtsied as Acelin sat on the couch closest to the fire. For all the grief her friend gave her in private, she played the role of dutiful subject in public, in spite of the fact that Acelin insisted time and time again that it wasn’t necessary. Sometimes, Acelin got the distinct impression that Patrice did it just to piss her off. Given the laughter in her eyes as Patrice sat down next to her, Acelin would bet the crown jewels that Patrice was trying to rile her up in order to snap her out of her funk. Too bad she didn’t pay the woman, or she’d give her friend a raise.

“Yeah, whatever.” Acelin waved a dismissive gesture at her friend. “Cut the crap and let’s check out the pool of available men.” There was sure to be plenty. The exclusive Colorado resort prized its reputation on excellent skiing conditions, premier accommodations, and an outstanding abundance of good-looking men. It was why she’d chosen the establishment when she’d decided not to head back to Timoria at the conclusion of her charity fundraising tour. The necessary distraction for what awaited her at home.

The Princess And The O

Acelin's gaze took in the enormity of the central room. The cathedral ceilings and rough-hewn beams gave the impression of sitting under the trees. The earth tones used in the decorating scheme accentuated the feeling. Sitting next to the roaring fire, she easily imagined herself camping, roasting marshmallows.

Her fitted pants and bulky sweater soaked up the heat, making her wish she'd opted for something a little more lightweight. She'd chosen a demure, casual look for the evening. Taking in the crowd milling in the lobby, she fit right in. Nobody would recognize the "promiscuous princess" as long as Patrice kept her toadying to a

dull roar. Accepting a mug of something steaming from a passing waiter, she settled in to enjoy the precious downtime.

“You look lost in thought, Your Highness. But I wouldn’t dream of insulting you by offering a penny for your thoughts.”

His voice washed over her, sending shivers down her spine, stopping just shy of her pussy. Damn. Double damn. Two weeks ago, when she’d made the decision to take refuge in the United States instead of somewhere in Europe, she’d hoped to lessen the chances that she’d be recognized. No such luck. The paparazzi spotted her within forty-eight hours and had hounded her every move ever since.

“My name is Acelin, and they aren’t even worth a penny, I’m afraid.” She automatically extended her hand before remembering that customs such as kissing her knuckles weren’t necessary in America. Before she managed to snatch it back, the stunningly handsome man brushed his kissable lips across her fingertips. Damn shivers didn’t make it any farther down her lap this time either.

“G. L. Kelly, at your service.” His eyes locked with hers as his fingertips tickled the palm of her hand during the excruciatingly slow separation of their hands. A mischievous glint sparkled in their dark depths.

“What does G. L. stand for?”

He leaned close enough to whisper in her ear. “Great lover.”

His warm breath titillated her, but didn’t cause her nipples to pucker up and rub against the silk of her bra. He smelled heavenly, a combination of expensive cologne and the outdoors. Her lack of response to the loss of his warmth surprised her. She must not have shaken off her morose mood as well as she’d hoped. So much for enjoying a little male companionship this evening.

“A little full of yourself, aren’t you?” She took in his appearance as he settled in the chair across from her. His thick brown hair was cut short, but not so much that she wouldn’t be able to rifle her fingers through it. Brown eyes stared back at

her, daring her to continue her assessment. She did, dropping her eyes to take in his cable knit sweater showcasing broad shoulders and an equally broad chest. His faded jeans clung to impressively muscled thighs, the hems tucked into well-worn cowboy boots. Big feet. He had big feet. The overall picture did nothing for her.

“I’d rather you be full of me.” He arched a challenging eyebrow. “Or are you past your prime, Princess?”

If G. L. whatever-the-hell-his-last-name-was thought to goad her into bed with that ridiculous comment, he was about to learn a lesson in common courtesy. Beside her, Patrice coughed so hard that Acelin feared for her friend’s health.

“Sir, if you think that outrageously disrespectful pick-up line is going to get you anywhere with me, you have another think coming. And it isn’t you with me.” Grabbing Patrice’s hand, Acelin pushed to her feet and strode from the lobby, praying all the while that she exuded quiet dignity.

Once back in the safety of their suite, Acelin allowed her composure to crumble as she paced between the bedrooms. “Of all the nerve. Of all the arrogant nerve. Who the hell does that American upstart think he is? I’m a princess, dammit. I have lineage and heritage and history and tradition. What does he have? What?”

“He has your panties in a knot, that’s what he has. Don’t give him the satisfaction.” Patrice had made herself comfortable on the loveseat facing the window.

The voice of reason. Acelin’s purposeful strides stopped and she shuffled over to sit next to Patrice. She gazed out the window, a crescent moon visible through the dark clouds. The passing of the storm promised optimal skiing conditions tomorrow. It really sucked that they wouldn’t be around to enjoy them. Returning home a few days earlier seemed like a more viable option with each passing minute.

“You’re right. He’s not worth it.” Was the search for an orgasm-giving husband worth all the hassles? “I can’t win, you know? I date and I’m promiscuous. I don’t date and I’m past my

prime. Maybe I just need to head home and face whatever future my father maps out for me.”

“If that’s what you want to do, we’ll pack up and head out first thing in the morning.”

“What I really want to do is marry a man who can make me come.” She winced, sounding like a whining broken record to her own ears. A wishy-washy one, at that. Gawd, what must she sound like to Patrice?

“I know you do.” Patrice reached over and patted Acelin’s hand, a gesture that would have seemed condescending and placating coming from anyone else.

“You think he’s out there, somewhere, but I’m beginning to think he isn’t anywhere to be found. I’ve dated every eligible prince, noble, and otherwise acceptable-to-my-father man out there. If I thought we had something going, I took the relationship to the next level. Except the next level for me always ends up being a big fat letdown. I should win an Academy Award for some of the orgasms I’ve faked. The only men left are old or creepy. I do have my standards, you know. Sexual prowess may be at the top of my list, but it’s not the only thing on it.” She dropped her head to her friend’s shoulder. She didn’t even want to think about what she’d do without Patrice. After twenty years together, she never wanted to find out.

A knock on the door, answered by Acelin’s private maid, interrupted the quiet contemplation.

“I’d like to see Her Highness, please.”

The ever-present royal watchdog, otherwise known as security, blocked the door.

His voice washed over her again, even knowing he was six degrees of a jerk. “Go away, Mr. Kelly.” She called out from her chair, her back to the door.

“Please, Your Highness, allow me to explain.”

The tone in his voice tugged at her emotions. Damn him. Acelin nodded, dismissing both the maid and the guard to allow him entrance. “You have five minutes, Mr. Kelly.”

He stepped into the suite, pushing the door closed behind him. She stood to face him, crossing her arms over her chest and tilting her chin in the air. Her toe tapped, even though he couldn't see it. Reading her cues correctly, he stayed in the entranceway.

"The guys, my buddies, put me up to it. And like an idiot, I accepted the double dog dare. I'm very sorry. Please—"

"You're a grown man, Mr. Kelly." She skewered him with her most imperious gaze. "You didn't have to allow them to challenge you into doing something stupid."

"I realize that, Your Highness. That's why I came to apologize."

Either he had taken acting lessons at some point in his life, or he meant what he said. She'd accept his apology and send him on his way.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but your phone is ringing." Her maid materialized from her bedroom and held up her designer handbag.

"You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Kelly. I need to take this, as much as I hate to end this conversation. Apology accepted. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening." She crossed the floor to her maid and retrieved her purse. Fumbling for the cell phone, she retreated to the privacy of her bedroom. The caller ID display indicated the call was from an old boyfriend, Prince Doyle of Martine. Interesting. She wondered what he wanted given the fact that she hadn't heard from him since they went their separate ways. "Hello?"

"Acelin, darling, it's so good to hear your voice." His clipped, cultured tones reached out to her across the miles, reminding her of all the good times.

"It's good to hear yours, too, Doyle. Although, I admit to being very curious about your phone call." They hadn't spoken in the year since she'd refused his marriage proposal. An offer she wished she'd been able to accept, but at that time, she hadn't been pushing thirty. She thought she had all the time in the

world to find the elusive man who could do what Doyle couldn't.

"I've been giving a great deal of thought to our breakup and your situation."

Doyle was one of only two men who knew about her unfortunate inability—one of only two men she had truly thought of marrying, despite her lack of complete sexual satisfaction. She might not have loved Doyle, but she'd thought she might be able to grow to love him. With one glaring exception, he possessed the qualities she desired in a husband. Okay, maybe more than one, because even though she couldn't put her finger on it, something more stopped her from marrying him a year ago. She had to give him credit, he'd pulled out all the stops and then some in his creative and passionate attempts to bring her to orgasm. It just hadn't been enough to overcome her niggling doubts.

"My offer of marriage still stands, Acelin. I told you that when you left. You are an amazing woman—compassionate, intelligent, beautiful inside and out, sexy as hell. Our combined bloodlines will produce amazing children to rule our united countries for years into the future."

His words seduced her. A year ago, she hadn't been very willing to marry a man unless the illusive Big O made an appearance. She still didn't want to marry without it. However, reality was intruding and forcing her to accept the fact that she may very well have to do just that. Why not Doyle?

She ignored the voice in the back of her head saying why not Doyle?

Misinterpreting her silence as rejection, he pressed his point. "Give me one more chance, Acelin. I've thought of something we didn't try before, something that just might work. Give me a weekend. Please."

Fragments of hope burst to life in her heart, her stomach somersaulted, and she felt other parts of her body tighten in anticipation. "Well, Patrice and I were thinking of leaving here in the morning, even though I don't have to be back in Timoria

until next Wednesday.” Maybe those niggling doubts were just byproducts of serious frustration and not the real deal. There was only one way to find out.

“Tomorrow is only Friday. That gives us Saturday and Sunday. Longer if we want it. But just you, princess. Come to my private villa and send Patrice and your maid on to Timoria. I don’t want any distractions. I’ll have you back home whenever you’re ready to leave, but by midweek at the latest.”

“It sounds so tempting.”

“Give in to the temptation.”

Lord knew she wanted to accept the offer. She owed it to herself to give it one more try. If Doyle had learned a new trick, er, technique, she’d have what she wanted. Maybe this new trick would be just the umph needed to send her into the orgasmic stratosphere. Her pussy twitched at the thought.

“What time do you want me there tomorrow?”

Chapter 2

The rhythmic chop, chop, chop reverberated through Acelin's body as the helicopter began its descent to the Crown Prince of Martine's private Caribbean island. She'd flown in from Aruba, the largest neighboring island, sending Patrice and her staff back to Timoria on the family Lear against the strenuous objections of the royal watchdog. The tense half-hour white-knuckled ride left little opportunity for thought beyond raging fear of plunging to her death in the crystal clear blue waters of the ocean. Her stomach threatened to react in a decidedly unprincesslike manner as the little craft dipped and weaved its way to solid earth. Her blood pulsed in time with the rotating blades. Who knew she had a fear of flying in helicopters?

With the fierce winds generated by the rotary blades laying the grass on its side, relief flooded through her and allowed her the opportunity to think about the encounter awaiting her once she climbed out of this flying death trap. Everything in life was an adventure to the Daredevil Prince, as the tabloids dubbed him, so she harbored no doubts about the excitement level of the weekend. She only hoped and prayed it would finally be enough.

In a brick pavilion at the edge of the field, buffeted by the strong winds generated by the still spinning props, Doyle stood waiting her arrival. The moment the runners touched the helipad, he tucked his head and squared his shoulders, battling his way to the aircraft.

A welcoming smile lit his face, and his dark chocolate brown eyes warmed her as he opened the door. He reached in to hand her down and escort her to the shelter at the edge of the field. Terra firma never felt so good. The ground shifted under

her feet as she wobbled her way toward the brick enclosure. Once she'd made herself comfortable on a high stool, he returned to the craft for her luggage. He tossed a wicked grin at her as he lifted her lone small suitcase and the small bag containing her toiletries from the hatch. She'd been packed for a winter escapade, having mostly ski pants and sweaters with her, since she'd sent the bulk of her wardrobe home ahead of her. She had very little appropriate clothing to bring with her—only a couple of bathing suits, a dress, and lingerie. Besides, if Doyle had his way, she'd probably never see the outside of the bedroom, making clothing unnecessary.

As he closed the distance between them, the helicopter took off, stranding her on the luxury island until she called it back. If it were any other man, she'd call it back now. But she trusted Doyle and was extremely curious about what he had planned.

"Oh, Acelin, you're even lovelier than my fantasies remember."

His assessing gaze raked over her body, pausing at her breasts and the junction of her thighs, stripping her bare. Her pulse sped up and her nipples tingled. She returned the appreciative stare.

"You look good enough to eat, Doyle."

And he did. From the tip of his tousled black hair to the tops of his sockless feet tucked into loafers. Tropical flowers overwhelmed her sense of smell, but she knew once inside, she'd be able to inhale deeply of his light musk scent she remembered so well.

Spreading his arms wide, he gestured to their surroundings. "Welcome to Ma Belle Ile."

A giggle escaped her lips, earning her a cocked eyebrow. "You sound like Mr. Roarke, welcoming me to Fantasy Island."

"Princess, you have no idea." The sensual purr in his voice reminded her that he had promised something special for their weekend.

"What are our plans for the weekend?"

“Such curiosity, my dear princess. You’ll see soon enough.”

Judging from the lack of hovering staff, Acelin surmised grand plans in the making. Private plans. Interesting. Doyle enjoyed the perks of privilege and surrounded himself with fawning servants and an entourage.

Doyle began to lead her up a path through lush green plants and colorful flowers. Through breaks in the vegetation, she caught glimpses of the magnificent sprawling house perched at the top of the slight incline. The white stone glimmered in the sunlight, a stark contrast to the colorful surroundings. Doyle pushed open a heavy wooden door, gesturing for Acelin to proceed.

“This is the ground floor.” Pride infused his voice as he pointed to the different areas. “This is where the weight room, indoor pool, sauna, and Jacuzzi are. The helipad is in back of the property, so this is the easiest way to enter, if not the most impressive. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” The dark wood paneling lent an aura of the outdoors to the area. A pang of longing for her workout clothing swept through Acelin. She was glad she brought her workout clothing along. Maybe she could sneak down here, if Doyle didn’t have too many other exertions in mind. She hadn’t been able to sneak in a workout in weeks, and she missed it.

“If you’ll follow me.” Doyle headed in the direction of a staircase at the end of a hallway. “These stairs take you to the back of the house, so you’ll get to see the kitchen first. I had the chef prepare a light lunch before I gave her the afternoon off.”

“Did you give most of the staff off?”

“Why do you ask that?”

Because Doyle never did anything someone else could do for him. “Because you’re carrying my luggage. Because you don’t have the chef pacing in nervous agitation waiting for your approval of the food.” Entering the enormous stainless steel ultra modern kitchen, he tucked her suitcases out of the way.

“We can leave these here until we go upstairs. My butler, the chef, and the head housekeeper are all on light duty for now.

Everyone else has been given the weekend off. I want absolute privacy for what I have planned for you.”

“Then I’m glad I only have one light suitcase and a small bag for you to haul around.” Or he’d probably have her carrying something.

Doyle pulled her into his arms, setting her pulse racing. The nearness of his body had never before failed to set off a chain reaction of shivers and tingles, and this time was no exception. Desire for him had never been the problem. His muscular biceps pressed her close to the hard wall of his chest. Her nipples puckered. Tipping her head up, she stared into the darkest eyes she’d ever seen, made darker by the desire she read in his expression. Her tongue flicked out to moisten her lips. His mouth claimed hers with startling swiftness that left no time to protest. Not that she intended to do so. Her body remembered him at an instinctive level and responded.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since I first saw you sitting in that helicopter,” he broke the kiss long enough to mutter against her lips. “I couldn’t wait any longer.”

Acelin wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her fingers in his coal black hair, reinitiating the contact. She rose up on tiptoe to align her clit to his swollen erection, rocking her hips forward. Their clothing prevented any real relief from the ache between her legs. With an animalistic growl, he thrust a possessive sweep of his tongue between her teeth. Launching an all-out battle for domination, she stroked her tongue along his. He didn’t play fair, distracting her with strokes of his hands from her waist to her ribcage, never venturing to her breasts. The oh-so-close contact heightened the arousal in her nipples to an unbearable level.

“I didn’t think you were going to get started without me.”

The stranger’s voice tossed cold water on the building flames of Acelin’s desire. She shoved at Doyle’s chest, putting as much distance as possible between them. Assuming her haughtiest I’m-a-princess-and-who-the-hell-do-you-think-you-

are stare, she turned to face the intruder. Only to find herself staring at a blond-haired, blue-eyed version of Doyle.

“Princess Acelin, please allow me to introduce my pain-in-the-ass younger brother, Prince Lucas.”

Lucas bowed to Acelin, royal protocol and deportment evident in his movements.

“I thought you said we were the only ones here.” She glared at Doyle, not giving a rat’s ass if she sounded like a bitch. He’d promised her a weekend of unbridled passion and a chance to finally grasp the illusive “o.” So why did they have company?

“What I said was that I had a surprise for you, something I’m sure will grant you what you wish for and allow us to marry. I said that we had privacy, not that we were alone.”

He had her there. Dammit.

“This is my surprise.” She didn’t like the look in his eyes one little bit.

“Your brother?” Her gaze darted back and forth between the two handsome men, allowing her to observe their shared glances.

“Both of us, actually.”

“Both of you?” She’d never fainted before, but she felt her legs start to give out, and she reached for a nearby stool for support. Was he fucking nuts? What did he expect her to do this weekend? Both of them?

Lucas hustled over to the stainless steel monstrosity of a refrigerator, snatching a glass from a cabinet on the way. He filled it up with water and strode to Acelin’s side. “Here. Drink this.” Shoving the glass in her hand, his brusque tone robbed the gesture of any consideration.

Sips of the cold water did little to calm her rising agitation as she waited for an explanation.

“I thought you’d be happy, Acelin. I may have come up with a solution.”

“I don’t see this as a possible solution, Doyle. So why don’t you explain it to me?”

“Think about it, darling. We tried everything we could think of when we were together. We were quite creative, if you recall.” He fixed her with a very seductive stare that warmed her to her toes. How could she forget? He was her most attentive and inventive lover ever. She looked away from the heat in his dark brown eyes. “Unfortunately, as much pleasure as I found, you were unable to reach the ultimate pinnacle.”

Acelin cast a sideways glance at Lucas. She detested the thought that he knew about her weakness. It was bad enough that someone she’d actually slept with knew about it. Damn Doyle for sharing with him.

“I still don’t see why you had to drag your brother into this.”

“Because I think an extra pair of hands, an extra mouth, and an extra cock will make the difference.” Lucas spoke out, but Acelin chose to ignore him for the moment.

“It won’t change anything, Doyle. It’s not a viable option. I can’t exactly marry both of you.”

“No, but you can marry me.”

Marrying Doyle. She’d given a great deal of thought to marrying him when they’d been together. They’d gotten along famously. So well, in fact, that she still thought about marrying him and giving up the quest. But as much as she felt like she searched for the Holy Grail, she hadn’t been able to give up hope quite yet, despite the nagging thought that maybe she should just quit. The fact that he wasn’t the man—hadn’t been the man—to inspire her to abandon her quest caused her concerns. With any luck, this experiment would either confirm her niggling doubts about him or erase them. Either way, she’d be able to move forward with a clear conscience.

“And go back to an orgasmless existence? I don’t think I’d like that very much.” It was one thing to consign herself to reduced passion in her marriage bed if she didn’t know what she was missing. She had enough trouble convincing herself to do that. There was no way in hell she’d be able to do that if Doyle was right and the two of them managed to make her come.

“You wouldn’t have to, darling.”

“And how is that possible? You and I both know we weren’t able to succeed before. I don’t see that changing.” Behind her, Lucas bit back a laugh. Damn, why did they have to be having this conversation in front of someone?

“You’re assuming Lucas will be out of the picture once we marry. That doesn’t have to be the case. He and I have discussed it.”

Oh, well, fine. Just decide the intimate details of her future without one of the major parties. Acelin’s control-freak tendencies screamed at the idea. “How very nice of you to decide my future in my absence. Even my own father knows better than to do that. Most of the time, anyway.” Sarcasm laced every word.

“We never intended to map out your life for you, Acelin. But before we could present this as an option to you, we had to decide if it was even a possibility for us.” Lucas stepped from behind her. “I have no intention of being an unwanted third party in my brother’s marriage. No matter how noble the cause.” His voice dripped with an indefinable emotion.

“You’re willing to share me?” She pinned Doyle with a demanding look.

“If it means your happiness and marriage to you, the answer is an unequivocal yes.”

“And what of you?” She turned to Lucas. “What if you marry? Then what? I can’t imagine another woman accepting her husband’s visits to his brother’s bed.”

“That is something for me to deal with in the future.” Lucas propped a hip against the counter, looking bored with the conversation. He may have made his decision, but she hadn’t come close.

“Doyle, please escort me to my room. I need time to think this over.” Acelin wanted to exit the kitchen in a haughty rage, but since she had no idea where to go, she’d end up looking stupid. And she hated looking stupid.

“Of course. I should have known you’d need some time alone before proceeding.”

He made it sound like a foregone conclusion when it was anything but.

Lucas retrieved the bags from beside the door and waited for Doyle to lead the way to her suite. A wide, sweeping staircase filled the two-story foyer capped off by a sparkling chandelier. Doyle cupped her elbow as they mounted the stairs. At the mid landing, he paused to point out the finer points of the décor. Acelin admired the view of the light, airy entranceway decorated in shades of white and blue, but with so much swirling through her mind, most of his words escaped her.

At the top, Doyle indicated that his suite and the rooms for the family stretched out to the right, with guest accommodations to the left. “I have made arrangements to have rooms readied for you near mine. However, if you prefer to stay in one of the guest suites, I will notify the housekeeper.”

“Do the rooms connect to yours or Lucas’?”

“None of the rooms are adjoining.”

“Then you don’t need to bother the housekeeper.” Acelin relaxed a little, knowing that if she declined the brothers’ offer, she had her own room until the helicopter was summoned back for her. She appreciated the fact that Doyle hadn’t totally assumed her compliance and expected her to share his room.

Doyle escorted her to a suite of rooms across the hall from his own. Depositing her luggage, he dropped a chaste kiss on her cheek before heading back downstairs. Lucas bowed formally and turned to walk to the far end of the wing, leaving her all alone to debate the proposition.

Acelin climbed up on the high four poster bed in the middle of the humongous room and stretched out. She kicked off her sandals before settling in against the mountain of throw pillows. The mauve and cream decorated room reeked of elegance. For an ocean getaway, no expense or luxury had been spared. Which didn’t surprise her.

Clutching one of the lace and fringe covered pillows to her chest, she began to debate the merits of Doyle's plan.

Two men at one time. Something she'd never done before, despite what the paparazzi hinted. She had dated, and been involved with, several men over the years, but only one at a time. As a result, the royal news hounds had privately dubbed her "the royal slut," even though she'd had considerably fewer romantic—and sexual—relationships than most of the princes she knew.

This wasn't the Middle Ages, after all, and arranged marriages were a thing of the past in Timoria. She'd been free to explore all of her options before choosing a lifelong partner. Nor was she expected to show up at the altar a virgin. Thank goodness for that, or she'd never have learned of her inability to achieve orgasm during sex until after the wedding. Shudders wracked her body at the thought.

But two men at one time? She'd always considered herself a serial monogamist. It didn't feel monogamous to be with two men at the same time, even if all parties agreed to the situation.

First things first. When her father started hinting at marriage and heirs to the Timorian throne five years ago, Acelin reluctantly accepted that the time had come to bear the mantle of her royal upbringing as the oldest child and next in the line of succession. With her father's permission and a little meddling influence from her mother, she began to date with a selective eye toward securing a husband.

Like a battlefield general with a wartime strategy, she'd mapped out a plan that spiraled away from her with stunning speed when she realized that she wasn't finding a man who could give her an orgasm and that the ability was a crucial component in a husband. In addition to the typical requirements necessary in a future royal mate and father of the future ruler of Timoria, a new battle plan emerged. Her goal for the past couple of years had been to find a man with whom she was compatible and was able to make her come during sex.

Maybe she should just search for Atlantis instead. As much as she debated throwing in the towel, she still wanted it all when it came to marriage. She'd begun to think she'd have better luck finding Noah's Ark, but for now, she had to keep trying. Like Patrice kept repeating, she'd find him. He was out there somewhere. Hopefully.

Unless, of course, it took two someones to do the trick. A deep dark part of her began to thrill at the thought of having two handsome, virile men at her beck and call. She tramped down the voice that nagged that she'd be the royal slut the press dubbed her if she went through with this fiasco. She focused on having two penises to satisfy her every whim. Not theirs, hers, because if they entertained thoughts of double penetration, they were in for a serious disappointment. She wondered if Lucas shared the same above average endowment as his brother. She pondered the possibilities of two eight inch cocks hard and ready for her. She wondered what one would do while she was busy with the other. Delicious tingles settled in the pit of her belly as she imagined the potential.

She wondered what might happen if they did manage to bring her to an orgasm. Lucas' cavalier attitude about waiting to see what the future brought didn't sit well with her. Going with the flow didn't suit her. It set off warning bells that her controlling nature didn't want to ignore.

Marrying Doyle, regardless of who actually made her come made perfect sense. The older of the two brothers, he'd be the logical choice, even if they weren't so compatible. But "until death do they part" stretched out in front of them for a long time. What if she got tired of being shared? What if they got tired of sharing? What if a jealous sister-in-law spewed their bedroom secrets to the press?

All the "what ifs" made her head spin until the pressure built behind her eyes. Acelin wiggled against the mound of pillows until she reclined enough to take a short nap. Maybe she'd know the answer when she woke up. Maybe she'd wake up and find the whole thing a dream. Maybe she should call Patrice.

Maybe she should have packed her vibrator in her bag.

* * * *

Doyle knocked softly at Acelin's door. Cook had prepared dinner, and the savory meal, along with plenty of champagne, waited on a dining room table decorated with dozens of roses. He and Lucas planned to pull out all the stops tonight in order to convince her to give their plan a chance. Now he just had to get her downstairs.

When she didn't answer his summons, he tested the knob and found the door unlocked. A masculine swell of pleasure filled him at the knowledge that she trusted them enough not to turn the lock. He slid into the room, his eyes darting around. His cock jumped when he spotted her curled up on the bed. She looked peaceful and childlike amid all the pillows, a startling contrast to her commanding presence.

A discerning gaze raked her body. Damn, but he'd missed her.

The neckline of her shirt slid down, exposing the upper swell of her tit, reminding him of how perfect it felt in the palm of his hand and the upturned deep pink nipple that begged for his attention. He loved to suck her silver-dollar-sized areolas into his mouth. Good God, his cock pressed against the zipper of his pants and begged for relief. He fantasized about greasing up her cleavage and pressing her boobs together while he fucked them. He imagined her parted lips sucking him in, her tongue swirling around the sensitive glans until he shot his load in her mouth and all over her chest.

He needed to wake her up now, before he ripped her clothes off and joined her on the bed—to hell with Lucas. They'd been good together. Hell, he'd never met another woman who fired up his blood and made him horny without even trying. If it weren't for her stupid problem and her stubborn insistence on marrying a man who could make her come during sex, he had no doubt they'd be married by now. In his opinion, if he hadn't managed to flip her switch, it wasn't

going to happen. Because they'd sure as hell tried. And tried. And tried some more.

If he didn't stop thinking about fucking Acelin, he'd have permanent zipper teeth marks on his dick.

Now he'd try again, with his brother's help. Doyle sure hoped his brother knew what he was talking about with this three-way thing. If not for the fact that the influx of resources of her kingdom promised to be the key to financial stability for his own, he'd have given up on Acelin when she refused his proposal and continued with her fruitless search. He had his pride. Besides, willfulness and independence did not make for a good queen. No matter how phenomenal the sex was for him.

He couldn't give up on her, however, since he had too much riding on their marriage.

Alternately cursing and praising himself for getting drunk and spilling the truth behind the breakup of his relationship with Acelin, Doyle thought about sharing this particular woman with his brother. They'd two-timed many women in the past. He loved burying his dick in a tight ass while his brother pumped into a hot pussy. They'd just never done anything like this with the stakes so high.

Of course, those high stakes were the very reason Lucas proposed the idea and Doyle accepted.

She had to marry him. The future of Martine depended on it.

Dinner and romance waited downstairs, and for that, he needed to wake the sleeping princess. Not keep planning the seduction. Propping his hip on the mattress, he stroked his knuckles along the delicate arch of her cheekbone. "Acelin, darling, time to wake up." He feathered his fingers along her neck and over the top swells of her boobs.

She came awake with little mewling sounds and catlike stretches that brought back memories of waking her by sliding into her pussy. Lucas had damn well better keep his promise to let him go first when they finally got her in their bed.

“Come on, beautiful. Dinner’s waiting downstairs for us.”
He’d planned the dessert course for across the hall.

“Doyle?”

“Who else?” No one else, if he had any say in the matter.
Once Acelin married him, he’d get rid of Lucas one way or another. He didn’t plan on sharing her forever. He’d only agreed to the three-way to get her to marry him. It was one thing to share a fling. What kind of idiot shared his wife? He’d keep those feelings to himself for now.

“What time is it?” As she stretched, her shirt shifted even further to expose the lacy top of her bra.

His mouth dried at the sight, and he croaked a response.
“Almost seven. Time for dinner.”

“I didn’t mean to sleep for so long.” She arched her back, thrusting her tits in his direction, as she sat up. “Can I have fifteen minutes to freshen up?”

“Take all the time you need. Lucas and I will be waiting in the dining room.” Before he left, he gave her directions and dropped a chaste kiss on her forehead.

Once in the hallway, Doyle stuck his hand down the front of his pants in order to relieve some of the pressure on his poor, beleaguered dick. She’d better make her decision damn soon or he’d seriously think of taking her in the middle of the night. Except that he knew he’d never dare such an act for fear of destroying any chance he had of marrying Acelin.

Lucas stood propped at the sideboard groaning with covered dishes, a half-empty highball glass in his hand. “I was beginning to think you’d started the party without me. Again.”

“I told you. It was a kiss that got carried away. Acelin and I share a history, so it’s only natural.”

“We all share a future. Make sure you don’t do anything to fuck it up.”

“May I remind you, little brother...”

“May I remind you, big brother, that you’re the one who can’t give her that damn orgasm she wants so badly. If it weren’t for my idea, we’d be forced to resort to the more drastic means

of joining our two countries. I have come up with a way to achieve our goals through a more peaceful manner than military action. Although I am not unwilling to rule out the use of force.”

“You may have come up with a way. Only time will tell if the two of us can make Acelin come.”

“I won’t fail the House of Martine.”

“Are you implying that I have?”

“I’m not—”

“I hope I’m not interrupting a private conversation.” Both men stopped talking as Acelin strolled through the double doors, a stunning beauty in her dress.

Doyle stepped forward to claim her hand and guide her further into the dining room. Brushing a kiss across her knuckles, he delighted in the goose bumps that raced up her arm. He risked a peek at her nipples to judge the depth of her reaction, only to discover a smooth silk front of her sleeveless dress. Hopefully, the material of her bra masked hard nipples and it wasn’t that she felt nothing more than a slight tingle.

“You haven’t interrupted a thing, darling, merely squabbling brothers. You’ve saved us, in fact.” He swept an assessing gaze over her athletic form, admiring the clinging garment and remembering the delights it covered. The dress reminded him of a ripe peach and stopped just above her knees, leaving the lower expanse of her toned legs exposed all the way down to her red-tipped toes. God help him, he wanted to suck on them.

The dragging of a chair across the carpet as Lucas readied the place at the head of the table pulled Doyle back from the edge of fantasy. Guiding her around the perimeter of the room, he did not loosen his grip on her hand until Acelin took her seat. Doyle took a seat to her right and poured her a glass of champagne while Lucas loaded a plate with delicacies. The sight of her delicate fingers wrapped around the flute reminded him of how her hand looked caressing his stiff cock. He hardened to stone under the table, thankful for the long cloth. He didn’t

want his brother to know the powerful effect she still held over him.

Doyle sent up another silent prayer that she'd acquiesce to their plan and be in their bed before the night ended.

Acelin stared at the plate in front of her brimming with food and cast a glance in Doyle's direction.

He shrugged, unapologetically. "We're hoping you'll need all the nourishment to maintain your stamina tonight."

"I won't be pressured into making a decision, Doyle." Her back straightened, thrusting her tits forward, as she made her declaration.

"Darling, I would never dream of forcing you to do anything." He'd hoped she'd come to a decision during her time in her room. No matter, he had other ways of ensuring she ended up in his bed this very evening. "But we do intend to do everything in our power to convince you." Short of Lucas' suggestion that they drug her. Doyle refused to listen to any strategy that included taking the ultimate choice out of Acelin's control. Despite their need for her, Doyle refused to start a marriage off on that footing.

"Why are you doing this?" Confusion clouded her eyes.

"For you, darling. It's all about you." Doyle let her interpret that comment any way she chose. Over her head, his brother toasted him with his highball glass.

As Lucas took his seat to Acelin's left, Doyle removed himself to attend to the one hunger guaranteed to be satisfied in the immediate future. Cook had outdone herself preparing the feast spread out in front of him.

Behind him, Lucas began to exert his legendary—if only in his own mind—charm on Acelin. He had been silent until now, allowing Doyle to prepare the foundation of the seduction. The time had arrived, however, for Lucas to win the princess over for himself. She'd never agree to their little escapade if she didn't find him attractive. Despite what the press thought of the Promiscuous Princess, she was highly discriminating when it came to taking a lover.

“I understand from my brother that you are soon to return to Timoria for a rather lavish birthday celebration.”

“Yes, I told my father I’d be back by this Wednesday.”

“Still, why return so soon? Why not wait until closer to the actual day? According to the invitation we received, your actual birthday isn’t for almost two weeks.”

Doyle returned to his seat, wondering if Acelin might share her secret with his brother. He knew she had decisions to make before her thirtieth birthday; that her father expected an announcement at some point during the weeklong festivities that concluded with an extravagant ball on her actual birthday. Lucas already knew this information, but not from Acelin.

“I’ve spent the last six months away from my country doing humanitarian work. It’s time to return.”

Well, fuck. Her lack of disclosure sent a very strong signal to Doyle. And not a good one. At least he and Lucas had planned for this possible scenario, one where Acelin didn’t immediately soften to Lucas. The plan called for Doyle to remain in the background through the evening, allowing Lucas to attempt to soften Acelin’s resistance.

Doyle wished they had the time to win her completely over, before her promised return to Timoria and her father and a decision. His conscience tweaked at him, forcing him to admit the deviousness of their plan. They’d promised they wouldn’t pressure her, but they didn’t promise not to persuade her. Doyle bringing her to the edge of passion and not allowing her to go any further until Lucas joined them smacked of sneaky and underhanded. Unfortunately, it was the only strategy the two of them agreed upon. Lucas had been much more willing to do whatever it took to get Acelin to the altar.

As much as Doyle needed Acelin, not only for his sake, but for his country, he refused to hurt her. Lucas harbored no such sensitivities.

He prayed she’d come to them willingly.

Chapter 3

The jet black sky sprawled above Acelin, twinkling stars breaking the unremitting darkness. With only the dull roar of the ocean to keep her company, she felt like the only person in the world as she rested comfortably in a chaise lounge on the rooftop perch. Only she knew better. Two handsome and virile men waited down below for a sign from her. She polished off her glass of champagne in a single gulp.

At her word, those two men were ready and willing to provide her with her heart's desire—or her lust's desire anyway. But were they able? Did she want to find out?

They'd wined and wooed her over dinner. Lucas did, anyway. Doyle had stayed quiet. She supposed that made sense; she already knew Doyle but needed to get to get better acquainted with Lucas in order to reach a decision.

The differences between the brothers struck her. With his tall, dark, and handsome princely arrogance, Doyle embodied every little girl's prince charming fantasy. Lucas, on the other hand, was a blond Greek god put on earth to look down on mere mortals. Lust swirled deep in the pit of her stomach at the thought of being attended to by both men at the same time. She imagined their lovemaking skills differed as much as their looks. Her clit tingled and her vagina clenched at the possibilities. Especially the possibility of an orgasm with a man.

She knew she was capable of having one—she took care of herself all the time. Unfortunately.

She didn't listen to the criticisms of lovers who called her passionless. She'd learned how easy it was to fake passion to

stroke a man's ego. One constant comment did strike home. That was when a boyfriend told her she'd never be able to be with a man unless she gave up her precious control.

The term control freak described her to a tee. Of course it did. She was a princess. The heir to the Timorian throne. How could she be anything but in control? The lives of too many people depended on her to be just that.

Dammit. The woman in her wanted to let it all go, to leave the princess handcuffed to a post somewhere. To surrender to a man. To these men.

The hedonist in her wanted to agree to Doyle's plan. Wanted to place herself in the capable hands of two men and allow them to bring her to the heights of ecstasy. She wanted to be stuffed full of a hard penis when she came, her muscles contracting around it. She tired of the feeling of emptiness that followed an orgasm brought on by her trusty vibrator.

She'd always been very fond of Doyle. They'd grown up together, since Martine bordered Timoria. Because of the five year age difference, she'd been the annoying tagalong during their teenage years, but all of that changed when she reached her twenty-first birthday. He'd noticed her then. She hadn't been ready to view him as a potential mate until a couple years ago.

Before then, she'd been too busy indulging herself. Instead of rushing her to marriage, her understanding father had allowed her uncharacteristic freedom to explore the world and the men in it. She'd taken to the task like chocolate to peanuts, traveling, dating, and working with various world charities.

As much as they suited each other, if Acelin were honest with herself, she'd admit that something held her back from committing to him. Something more than just the lack of an orgasm. She didn't want to be particularly introspective at the moment, either from the result of too much champagne, or the promise of mutual climax.

Her gaze returned to the heavens and the twinkling stars breaking up the unremitting darkness. The constellations kept her company, along with the crashing waves that soothed her

soul. She chased the dilemma from her mind and absorbed the atmosphere.

The dulcet tones of classical music wafted over her, drowning out the ocean and alerting her to an additional presence intruding on her retreat. Twisting to look behind her, Acelin spotted Doyle framed in the faint glow from the stairway. With a glass of champagne in each hand, he reeked of suave and debonair, reminding her of James Bond. The Pierce Brosnan one. He wore the aura well.

The breeze ruffled his thick hair until it looked like someone ran their fingers through it. He had doffed his suit jacket and tie from dinner, along with his shoes, leaving him looking casual and relaxed. The tailored shirt hugged his wide shoulders and taut abdomen, the rolled up sleeves exposed forearms sprinkled with a light dusting of hair. He was definitely drool-worthy.

“May I join you?”

“You’re here now. Please stay.”

“Are you sure? I know you came up here to do some thinking.” Long strides ate up the distance between them.

And she had only succeeded in confusing herself even more. “I would be an ungrateful guest if I turned down a handsome man bearing champagne.” She reached up to take the offered flute as he sat at her feet.

Taking a sip of the bubbly liquid moistened Doyle’s lips and reminded Acelin of all the soft, wet kisses they’d shared. Of all the intimacies they’d shared. Of how he wanted to include another man in their sexual play.

She didn’t realize he’d set his drink on the ground until he slipped her sandals off her feet and began a sensual massage. Bracing the heel of her foot on his knee, he used both thumbs to work circles on the arch. With her eyes closed, she concentrated on the sensations generated by the deep pressure.

Once both feet had been pampered, Doyle’s hands slid to her ankles and calves. His fingers worked their magic all the way up to her knees. Part of her brain yelled at her to stop him

before his talented fingers made their way above her knees and between her thighs. The other part didn't care. Just the two of them existed in this particular moment in time. For now, she relished the freedom to indulge herself. She didn't have to make a decision about Lucas in order to have some serious quality time with Doyle.

Dragging one leg over his lap—and his throbbing erection—and propping the other foot on his shoulder, he massaged the sensitive flesh above her knee. The last vestige of self-control shattered when he began to nibble at her ankle.

Her legs relaxed and her thighs opened wide, giving him unfettered access to her body. Moisture soaked her panties as she waited for him to press his advantage, one she'd willingly given him. Instead of continuing his upward journey, his hands traveled back to her calf and ankle. He brought the leg pressing into his hard-on up, settling her foot against his chest. So much attention had been devoted to her lower legs that she feared she wouldn't be able to walk if he tried to take her to her room. Or his room.

Maybe they should just stay right where they were. Flat on her back staring up at the sky might be the only time she'd get to see stars while making love.

A whimper escaped her lips when his hands roamed back up once more, this time, sliding dangerously close to her ready and willing flesh. His thumbs massaged the flesh at the edge of her panties, teasing her by pushing at the elastic but not diving under it. The firm stroking motions inflamed her lust and did nothing to satisfy it. He hadn't lost his touch of driving her to the edge.

When Doyle leaned forward, her feet lost their position and her legs dropped to his waist. He shifted his position until his face rested intimately between her spread thighs. She watched his back rise as he took a deep breath.

"You smell so good and so horny."

The darkness prevented her from making out the expression on his face. She hadn't planned on allowing the situation to spiral so far out of control without having made a

decision. But with his mouth poised to devour her, she didn't have the strength to work up any indignation. When he buried his nose against her clitoris, she didn't have the desire to, either.

His tongue traced the recent path of his thumbs, adding to the copious amount of moisture soaking the crotch of her underwear. She jumped whenever his teeth took nips out of her inner thigh. His wicked chuckle vibrated against her skin, sending tingles straight to the area under attack.

Pride prevented her from begging him to work his magic on her throbbing clit, to bring her to an orgasm now. If he succeeded now, where he hadn't before, they'd be able to forgo the threesome she was only ninety-five percent sold on.

A sheen of perspiration broke out on her skin, the rapid evaporation cooling her and dragging her attention back to the tongue lapping at her. Doyle mistook her chilled shiver for one of passion, murmuring terms of endearment into her still panty-covered crotch.

What the hell was he waiting for?

As if he sensed her impatience, Doyle intensified the combined action of his mouth and fingers. All thought fled her mind as she embraced the sensations thrumming along her nerve endings.

Acelin squealed and squeezed her thighs tight when she felt the stroke of a pair of hands over her shoulders and down to her breasts. Since Doyle's hands were busy tormenting her, that left the identity of the second set in question for a split second. Lucas began to caress her through her top, tweaking her nipples until they poked at the satin of her bra.

"I thought...I thought you both said you wouldn't pressure me." The pleasure being inflicted on her body made speech difficult.

"We're not pressuring you. We're pleasing you." Lucas's voice brushed her ear, his hot breath tickling her.

"I call being two-timed pressure."

"You're free to leave at any time." Lucas plied wet kisses along her neck in between words.

Yeah, right, she could leave at any time. If her legs were capable of supporting her body.

“Do you want to leave?” Doyle rubbed his thumb over her passion-swollen flesh, the fabric preventing him from thrusting his fingers inside her.

“I want to come.”

“Then let us worship you the way you were meant to be worshipped.” Doyle punctuated his comment by sliding his fingers under the elastic.

In what had to be a coordinated attack, Lucas’s hands delved under her top and bra to flick at her nipples. The combined sensation of two sets of hands pleasuring her body robbed her of any ability to resist. As if sensing her compliance, the brothers made short work of her clothing, baring her to the elements. And to them. For the first time in a long time, Acelin felt self-conscious about her nudity. She’d never before had four eyes assessing her. What if she fell short of Lucas’ standards?

The prince in question shifted to her side and it was then that she noticed he didn’t have on any clothes. A fleeting thought crossed her mind—had he been naked the whole time or did he just strip? He claimed her attention by plumping the breast closest to him in both hands, stroking at her nipple. Just as he knelt and suckled the puckered tip into his mouth, Doyle sank his tongue deep between her lips, stabbing at her aching hole. The actions only intensified her longing.

Doyle attacked her crotch with passion and vigor, drawing the pleasure out of her. It felt like he coordinated his motions with his brother’s. Lucas took swipes of her nipple with the flat of his tongue, alternating with nips and twists.

A popping sound resonated on the air as Lucas released his lip lock on Acelin’s breast. “Doyle, I’d like a chance to eat the princess and find out if she tastes as good as she smells.”

“Trust me, she does.”

“I’d prefer to find out for myself.”

Doyle rose from his position at her feet and moved to her side. “Treat her well.”

As Lucas rose to change locations, Acelin caught her first glimpse of his erect penis. The dim lighting obscured his light hair, making it difficult to determine if he was hairy or not. Of average length, and shorter than Doyle's, its impressive width made her a little nervous. She bit back a chuckle at a wicked thought—that she'd better make love to Doyle first or she'd never feel him after Lucas.

Doyle hurried out of his clothes before settling at Acelin's side, and took her breast in his hand. Lucas made himself comfortable at the end of the chaise lounge and leaned in, breathing deeply.

"You smell even better close up."

"Wait until you taste her."

Lucas didn't wait. He began dropping biting kisses and flat-tongued licks to her outer and inner lips, taking care to cover every inch of skin. His technique differed from Doyle's.

Doyle attacked, possessed, and claimed when it came to oral sex and sex in general. Lucas sampled and savored. He drew his mouth all over her inflamed flesh almost as if trying to soothe the ache. Instead, it built to a blood-vessel-popping level. Acelin clutched at the armrests to keep herself from lacing her fingers through his hair and mashing his face closer. Doyle's lips suckling at her breast only distracted her from the sensations, so she twisted away. When Lucas tugged her clit between his teeth and sucked on it, she grabbed him by the ears to hold him there. Right there.

And then it happened.

Well, not it. Not the it she wanted anyway. Just the it she always got unless she took care of things herself.

She'd often compared it to someone letting the air out of a balloon. She just deflated, feeling limp and squishy like a balloon that's been blown out of shape by air and then had it taken away.

Dammit. Just once, okay, more than once, she wanted to be like a balloon pricked by a pin. She wanted to explode with such force that pieces of latex scattered around the room.

“So much for that theory.” She rolled on her side, curling into a fetal position to conceal her nakedness.

“Oh, darling, we’ve only just begun.” Doyle climbed up on the lounge, gathering Acelin in his arms until she sat on his lap.

Lucas sat down next to them and stroked along her spine and around the curve of her butt. “You have such passion in you, princess. I felt it. I tasted it.” He twisted them both so that his lips met hers.

She tasted herself on his lips and wondered how that conveyed her passion to him. She decided it must be a guy thing as she gave herself over to the power of his kiss. He savored these lips much as he had the others. The strangeness of the situation made her want to giggle. She sat on one man’s lap, his erection throbbing against her hip, while engaging in a lip lock with his brother. Who would have guessed?

Not her, that’s for sure.

She didn’t protest when Doyle pushed to his feet and took her hand, heading for the door. Without even being told, she knew she was being led to someone’s bedroom.

Chapter 4

“Your Majesty.” Prince Nolan of Bermine bowed low before King Warrick of Timoria. After so many years of military service, the gesture of respect did not come as easily as a salute. Regardless of the long-standing relationship between the two men, Nolan doubted the king would find anything amusing about being saluted.

“You don’t have to bow before me, son. I’ve known you since you were in diapers.”

True. The monarch had been friends with his father since they’d gone to boarding school and the university in England.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, even if you weren’t a king, you’d still be my father’s oldest and dearest friend, and deserving of my respect.” Years of ingrained protocol and education took over, forcing proper social behavior back to the forefront of his memory.

“It is I who respect you, son. How long have you been away with the Royal Air Force?”

“Ten years.”

Ten long years, Nolan mused. Ten years of fighting battles that most of the free world didn’t even know about and never would. Ten years of cooperative missions with the militaries of the United States, England, and Germany, to name a few. Now, those countries joined forces once again to help prevent a plot to overthrow the Timorian king.

Rumors surfaced over a year ago that unknown elements planned a hostile takeover of the prosperous, peaceful country. The rumors had grown in strength until Bermine had to take

action to protect their neighbor to the south and closest ally, a country with no military of its own.

Warrick gestured for Nolan to sit in a chair across from him. "I'm grateful to your father for calling you back. I can think of no one I trust more with the safety of my people and the future of Timoria." The king sat, not on his throne, but rather, on an ordinary chair tucked away in the corner of the massive, ornate throne room. His fingers were clasped as he worried one thumb over the knuckle of the other. "Am I doing the right thing in proceeding with Acelin's birthday celebration?"

Princess Acelin. The subject of many of Nolan's masturbatory fantasies. Her globetrotting serial-dating exploits kept him entertained during many a long cold night. A woman he was soon to see in the flesh for the first time since before he'd entered the Royal Air Force.

"Absolutely, Your Majesty. This unknown enemy cannot know we have learned of the nefarious plot until more details are uncovered." Like the names of the bastards even considering a takeover of the country.

"It seems like such a risk, to expose so many guests to possible danger."

"The bigger risk is cowering in wait. US Special Forces are already establishing a perimeter and preparing security. British and German Special Forces are scouring the continent in an effort to turn up any intelligence available. We won't let anything happen to your family, or your guests."

The older man smiled at Nolan, but deep worry lines marred his face. "I will continue to remind myself that I trust your judgment."

"Your Majesty, have you heard from Princess Acelin?" He'd wanted to strangle her when he discovered she'd sent Lady Patrice back to Timoria without her, only the news that she was "vacationing" on a Caribbean island with an old friend. Even her personal security guard didn't know where she'd disappeared. With a potentially deadly enemy lurking, anyone, even someone Acelin trusted, might turn out to be dangerous.

“You know everything I do, Nolan. Lady Patrice assured me that my wandering daughter will be home by Wednesday. There’s no way to get any information from her best friend without tipping our hand, which you’ve told me you don’t want to do.”

He didn’t, but he also knew how much could happen in five days. Nolan kept his thought to himself. The king had enough worries on his hands without adding fear for the next in line for the Timorian throne. Nolan planned to take that burden on himself. He’d learned all too well over the past ten years that the best way to get at a person in power was to attack their Achilles’ heel, it being one of his favorite methods of attack. “Please let me know as soon as you hear anything.”

Damn, Nolan wanted to ring the little brat’s neck. She needed to be at home, supporting her father and behaving like the heir to a throne. Not gallivanting around the globe to get her rocks off.

She could do that, here, with him.

His libido teased him with visions of the stunning woman he’d seen in so many tabloid pictures. Pictured her spread naked for his pleasure. Pictured himself sliding between those go-on-forever legs.

“Nolan, I understand from your father that you are officially on leave. Am I correct?” The monarch’s wise gray eyes pierced through him.

“Yes, Your Majesty. We decided it best not to tip our hand. As far as everyone else is concerned, I have a month’s vacation.”

“And the soldiers who have accompanied you?”

“They are enjoying the hospitality and beaches of your lovely country on a much needed ‘official’ holiday.”

“I don’t mind telling you, Nolan, that all this cloak and dagger nonsense goes against the very nature of Timorian society. We take great pride in our neutrality and our openness.”

Nolan understood all too well. However, he also understood that “this cloak and dagger nonsense” served its

purpose in the execution of a proper covert operation. Once more, he explained the necessity to the king.

After discussing the details surrounding some of the more mundane aspects of the mission, Nolan bowed once more and backed out of the room as dictated by protocol. As the door shut on him, he spun around on his heel and took a brisk walk back to his room in the guests' section of the mansion. He damned the missing-in-action princess with every step he took. He and his team had enough to do without the uncertainties added by her disappearance, however temporary. He expected to hear some choice language when he reported back to everyone later before they headed off to bed. The wayward princess was a sore spot for all of the members of the team. As much as they needed to know her whereabouts for her safety and the security of the entire operation, Nolan realized the men wanted to see this paragon of princessly passion in the flesh.

And if he was honest with himself, he'd admit that he did, too.

Now, however, was not the time to allow his dick to think it had any control of the situation. Too much depended on the proper amount of blood flowing through the correct head.

No sooner had his hand reached for the door handle, than it was pulled away from him. Standing on the other side of the entrance with a look of utter servitude on his face stood Nolan's new secretary/general, all-around helper. Nolan stifled a groan as the man bowed so deeply, that his forehead all but touched his knees. God, how he despised toadying. He didn't imagine it sat any easier with his "servant." Nolan entered his room and headed straight for the large desk.

His father, King Louis, had insisted that Nolan employ a staff since he was "on vacation" from the military and it was only natural that a prince travel with an entourage. They had argued for the better part of the day until Nolan relented and agreed to accepting one staff member. He just didn't bother to tell his father that the man he'd "hired" was a buddy he'd worked with on numerous missions, a man he trusted with his life.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Your Highness?”

Nothing I can’t do myself, but he kept that thought to himself. The only problem was that Nolan was used to doing things for himself. It sort of came with the territory of being an officer in the Special Forces. He’d forgotten the feeling of having every whim catered to before it even became an itch. Even pretending didn’t sit well.

“No, thank you, Tony. Did any envelopes arrive for me while I was out?” The man pointed to a thin pile on the desktop. “Fabulous. I’d like some privacy to read over them. Why don’t you enjoy the beautiful evening and the even more lovely Timorian scenery?” Good gawd, he sounded like a pussy. The Americans needed to get these rooms cleaned out and soon. He didn’t know how much longer he could act like an uptight prince. It was bad enough in public, to have to do it in private grated on his nerves.

“Thank you, Your Highness. I shall return in time to help you prepare for bed.”

Nolan imagined poor Tony must be ready to hurt someone, being forced to act like a suck up all the time. “That won’t be necessary, Tony. I believe I can manage to get into the dreaded pajama bottoms by myself this evening.” He almost got a smile out of his friend that time.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Then I will see you before breakfast.”

“I look forward to it.”

He looked forward to being able to discuss the situation with his right-hand man without fear of eavesdropping even more. With a glance at his watch, he wondered when they’d have the rooms swept for bugs.

Throwing the correspondence on the desk, he settled down in a comfortable chair. A note from his father snagged his attention. The Berminian king had been pressuring Nolan since his return to leave the military and return to the royal fold, something he had very little desire to do. Not for the first time,

he thanked his lucky stars that his brother Derrick had been born first and smack dab in line for the throne. By some quirk of fate, Nolan had been born the second son—and third child—and free to choose from a list of “princely” professions.

Nolan thrived on his military career. He’d been judged on his own merits, not by some random genetic draw that gave him royal blood. He flew anything and everything capable of getting airborne, gaining the respect of his soldiers-in-arms for his abilities.

He wasn’t so sure he was ready to give that up, despite the empty feeling gnawing at his gut.

He still had time to decide.

Right now, he needed to get up to speed on the task at hand. Tracking down a wayward princess and kicking some serious ass. Maybe even some terrorist ass, too.

Chapter 5

Acelin surveyed Doyle's room as he carried her to the bed. Someone had set the stage for seduction. Candles flickered on every available surface, casting the entire area in their shifting glow. The sheets had been turned down, a calculating invitation when it hadn't been accepted.

Part of her wanted to rail at the pressure being exerted by the brothers when they'd promised to leave the decision in her hands. Another part of her wanted to kick and scream and demand to be put down so she could sulk back across the hall to her room. It was obvious they never intended to allow her a choice, but dammit, she wanted to make one now. She hadn't agreed to a *ménage a trois*.

A small part of her responded to the sensual caresses and wet kisses showering her as Doyle arranged her on the huge bed. The wanton attention stirred her libido, making her curious to learn if their theory held a grain of truth. She'd searched for someone to give her the ultimate satisfaction for a long time, and put off settling down because of it. Despite her reservations, how could she let this chance pass her by?

The brothers intensified their carnal assault, concentrating on her tender breasts, driving the sensible pissed-off part of her into submission. With one last gasp, the level-headed part of her brain tried to reason with the rest of her. Tried to convince her this wasn't the solution, but only the beginning

of longer-term ramifications. Ignored in the throes of passion, her mind retreated to a safe distance to monitor the situation.

This distance allowed Acelin to give herself over to the onslaught of pleasurable feelings coursing through her body. Her body bowed off the bed as both men bent to separate nipples at the same time. She'd never been a big fan of having her partner stimulate both breasts at the same time. But this...oh this...thrill of each nipple captured with wet lips. An indescribable buzz rang along her nerve endings as they tugged and lapped at the hardening flesh. Losing track of the sensations, she focused on the pleasure instead. She looked down to see one dark and one light head suckling at her breasts. The eroticism of the sight added to the sensations coursing through her. Her fingers reached up to tangle in the thick mass of Doyle's hair but stopped themselves just as her fingertips brushed the soft strands. With a jolt of excitement, she clutched at the expensive Egyptian cotton sheets beneath her instead.

The difference in the brothers' techniques extended to this act of foreplay. Where Doyle nibbled and tugged and sucked as much of her breast as possible between his lips, Lucas savored the flesh. He licked at her sensitized nipple and the flesh surrounding it in a manner that reminded her of a cat giving himself a bath, meticulous and thorough. She'd always made it a point not to compare one lover to another, but with both men in the same room, the comparisons came automatically.

And made her uncomfortable.

It's not too late to go back to your own room, her level-headed self intoned, not having retreated far enough to suit her inner tramp.

Except it was, once Lucas snaked a hand over her hip and down the outside of her leg. Stopping at her knee, he skated his fingers to the inside and dragged them back up the length until his hand rested on the thin patch of curls at the top of her thighs. Where he touched, her skin burned for more. He went no further, his index finger poised at the opening to her vagina as if to tease her, not pleasure her.

Well, if he wanted her to beg, he had another think coming. And it wasn't her.

Doyle's hand copied the journey taken by his brother on her other leg. By the time his hand paused to rest perilously close to her crotch, every nerve ending in her body strained for more.

Without a single word passing between them, each man plunged his index finger deep inside her. It was almost too much. The fingers operated independently of each other, wiggling and stroking until her breath hitched in her throat and her nipples felt like exploding. Someone's thumb rubbed circles around her throbbing clit and Lucas' tongue traced lazy circles around her areola.

Pleasure pumped through her body, igniting her system from head to toe and back again. Everywhere but where it counted. Acelin knew they could work their magic all night long and the real magic trick would remain an elusive mystery. An unsolved one at that. Why could she masturbate to an orgasm when a man couldn't manage the same with his mouth, fingers, or penis?

With a forceful shift of her body, she dislodged the men after several interminable minutes when the sensations built everywhere except where they were supposed to be. Her body had had enough of the torment since the desired result wasn't in the picture. She wanted to curl up on her side and die with mortification, but the other occupants of the bed had more interactive plans.

"The night is still young, Acelin." Lucas's hot breath fanned her ear.

"And we have more surprises in store for you." Doyle nipped at her earlobe.

"I'm just not sure this is going to work, especially now." The flush of disappointment stung her. If the two of them hadn't succeeded with their fingers and mouths, why should she think they'd have any luck adding penises to the equation?

"You have to trust us." The whispered voices surrounded her.

She reluctantly surrendered to their charms and the alluring possibility of an orgasm. If they weren't disillusioned yet, she shouldn't be either. Should she?

The bed shifted under Doyle's weight, causing Acelin to roll to her side. He repositioned himself, settling on his haunches and straddling her chest. Her hands came up to caress the wiry hair on his thighs. His penis bobbed at her chin as the muscles under her fingertips bunched and flexed. He'd always taken great pride in maintaining the fitness level of a professional athlete, and it showed. His physique rivaled those of the English Premiership football players she loved to watch. David Beckham had nothing on him.

The tip of his solid erection bumped her lips, a request to enter. Dragging her tongue across to moisten them, she widened her mouth and accepted the hard length of him. She'd always enjoyed doing this for Doyle, giving him a blow job. And he enjoyed shooting off on her breasts. Familiarity calmed her even as it aroused her, allowed her to pretend Lucas didn't lurk somewhere on the bed. Tightening her lips and sucking in her cheeks, she focused her attention on the head of his penis, circling her tongue around the plump flesh. A rumbling groan started in his chest and ended in her mouth, giving her a thrill of feminine pride at the pleasure she provided. At least she could do something right. Wrapping her hands along the part of the shaft not in her mouth, she coordinated her actions to increase the pressure.

She lost herself in the sensations of the blow job. A drop of semen landed on her tongue, the taste as salty as she remembered. His familiar scent filled her senses as she relaxed her throat muscles and took him deep, his coarse curls tickling the tip of her nose. The thick vein running the entire length throbbed against her upper lip. She hadn't forgotten any of the tricks he enjoyed.

Doyle mumbled a string of creative curses as she continued her manipulations. His shivers increased as she picked up the tempo. His fingers tangled in her hair and guided her movement.

Wanting to judge the level of his arousal by something more concrete than jumpy, muttered oaths, she shifted a hand to his balls. Instead of being soft and squishy, they were hard and tight and drawn up close to his body. He rewarded her with a jerk when she raked her nails along the wrinkled skin.

“Oh god, Acelin.” With a loud groan, he pulled out of her mouth, aiming the head of his penis at her breasts. She flinched when the first warm spurt landed near a nipple. After Doyle emptied himself in a burst of orgasmic glory, he rubbed and squeezed the flesh he’d anointed.

“You are nothing short of amazing.” Doyle lifted his leg and slid down by her side.

The compliment warmed her.

Nothing else did, however. Goosebumps erupted on her skin now that Doyle had removed his warm body. His absence allowed her the opportunity to seek out Lucas, oddly aroused by the thought that he’d been watching, even though she’d forgotten about him for a few minutes. Craning her neck, she found him stretched out on the far side of the bed. Propped up on his elbow, he rested his head in his hand. His erection loomed from its nest of curls, reaching up his flat stomach. The shadows hid his eyes, but she felt the lust in them burning her even from a distance.

Her chest rose on a shuddering breath as she waited for a sign from him, not sure what she wanted from him any more than she knew what he expected from her. Except, of course, for the orgasm he’d convinced himself he would be able to give her, with Doyle’s help.

Lucas dropped off the edge of the bed, only to reappear at the foot. Climbing back up, he crawled closer, until he covered her. The scent of expensive cologne invaded her brain and upset her stomach, making her wish she had the ability to hold her breath. His penis nudged at the slick folds, neither providing any pleasure or demanding entrance. He was quite content to stroke along her wet flesh. Or it seemed that way until Doyle wrapped a hand around her knee and draped her leg over his. Then

Lucas's erection began a search and destroy mission, determined to bury inside her. The sensation of two very different hairs collided in her senses—the coarseness of Doyle's thigh and the silkiness of Lucas'—confusing her.

Her gasp mingled with his groan to echo in the silence of the room. Overtaxed vaginal muscles protested the intrusion, tightening in an effort to expel the thickness. Mercifully, he remained still and gave her body a chance to adjust to him.

So this was what it felt like to have sex instead of make love. Previous relationships had always been with men she cared about, thought about the possibility of a future with, knew for more than twenty-four hours; regardless of what the scummy press thought. She wondered if that had been her problem all the while—she had been too emotionally invested in the process to allow herself to relax and come. Well, if they succeeded this weekend, her future rested with Doyle, even if Lucas insisted on showing up in their bed from time to time. Certainly no emotional investment there.

A subtle shift of Lucas's hips drove away thoughts of will this or won't this work as he thrust his erection deeper. She reveled now in the fullness and the stretch of her muscles. He pushed off her body and her lungs cleared, once free from the overwhelming cologne. Settling back on his thighs, he hooked her one leg over his hip, her other leg still intertwined with Doyle's. Lucas' balls slapped against her bottom as he pumped into her.

Doyle's fingers tickled her clitoris and his tongue flicked a nipple. The triple sensations linked her erogenous zones, tightening the pleasure like the winding of a rubber band. It twisted so tight, it doubled back on itself. Her body shifted focus between the methodic pounding of her vagina and the erotic play at her breast and the top of her thighs. For all their efforts, the tension reached the usual level and refused to go any further. She dug deeper, still nothing. She cleared her mind, no go. Her orgasm hovered out of reach, on the other side of a divide she

didn't know how to jump. She felt like a skydiver unable to take the plunge out of the airplane door and freefall to earth.

After what seemed like forever, Lucas' body sped up and then stopped abruptly with an animalistic growl. Pulling out of her body, he rid himself of a condom. Only then did Acelin realize she hadn't even considered protecting herself. Damn. She never got careless and forgot about that. For all her father's understanding, he'd never forgive her if she turned up pregnant before she got married. She took birth control pills to prevent such a thing, but insisted on the extra protection since no method was foolproof.

"I guess I'll head back to my room now." She sat up and tried to climb off the bed, wanting to slink away from the site of what she considered to be a failure.

Doyle wrapped his arm around her waist, snuggling her to his chest. "Stay with us. Allow us to be close to you tonight."

"If you're sure?" The last thing she wanted was to be alone with her disappointment right now, but she didn't care to be an unwanted burden, either.

"We're sure." Lucas stretched out, leaving more than enough room for her and Doyle.

Acelin wiggled between the sheets, wondering what it would be like to have two warm hard bodies pressed up to her in the middle of the night.

She was about to find out.

* * * *

Acelin felt surrounded by the heat and the hardness, still sunk in the depths of a dream. Pleasure surrounded her, drawing her closer and closer to a shattering climax. She floated along, supported by feelings. Her nipples ached, her clit begged to be sucked. Or stroked. And her vagina cried out to be filled by something long and hard—a real live penis, not a plastic substitute.

Creeping upward from sleep's hold, the heat closed in on her until she recognized her surroundings. Doyle and Lucas rested on either side of her, kissing and nipping and licking at her

everywhere but where she needed to be touched. She stifled a yawn as she came fully awake.

“Look who’s finally joining us.” Lucas trailed a finger along the line of her jaw. “I was beginning to think that Doyle and I would have to help each other out until you woke up.”

Surely he didn’t mean what she thought he meant? Doyle didn’t do that, did he? Eww.

“Stop it, Lucas. You’re creeping her out.”

“Can I help it if she doesn’t have a sense of humor first thing in the morning?” His finger traced a path from her jaw, between her breasts, over her belly, and between her legs. “Oh, brother, but she is a hot little thing when she wakes up.” Lucas slid his finger inside her.

A shudder ripped through her body.

“Would you like to take a shower?”

Bless Doyle’s heart. He remembered that she preferred to clean up before making love in the morning. Especially this morning, when two men had been with her the night before.

“I’d love one.”

Lucas removed his finger and rolled off the bed. “Then follow me.” He extended his hand, helping Acelin off the bed.

The chivalrous gesture turned out to be very necessary when her muscles protested the movement. She frowned as her knees buckled. It hadn’t been that strenuous a night.

With Lucas’ arm secured about her waist, she allowed him to guide her to the master bath. Sunlight flooded the spacious room through the wall of windows behind the small pool-sized tub. Or was it a Jacuzzi? From this distance, it was difficult to tell if there was water in it. On the far side of the tub stood a separate shower stall large enough for an entire sports team. Yum, her mind drifted off at the thought of watching several footballers soaping up, the clear wall providing a perfect view.

A part of her pondered the appropriateness of thinking about such fantasies with not one, but two men flanking her. The image tempted her to continue, but she tucked it away for another day.

A persistent pressure forced her to excuse herself to take care of some private business. No sooner did she stand at the sink washing her hands, than both men barged back into the bathroom.

“I’d like to brush my teeth and take a shower, if you don’t mind.”

“We don’t mind at all.” Doyle pulled open a vanity drawer and produced a toothbrush and paste for her. “We just planned on joining you, that’s all.”

So much for being sweet. She should have known he’d have ulterior motives. Especially when she spied both men and their raging hard-ons pointing in her direction like some sort of erotic divining rods.

As she brushed her teeth, Doyle crossed behind her to turn on the water. In the mirror, her gaze strayed to the sight of his toned ass flexing as he walked. She flicked a glance in Lucas’ direction to see if he’d caught her ogling his brother. She choked on the toothpaste when she spotted him fixated on her, stroking his already erect penis. The intensity in his eyes burned her skin where it lingered on her butt.

“When you’re ready, why don’t you go ahead and get in and fix the water temperature?” Doyle called from across the room, breaking the connection between Lucas and herself. “We’ll join you in a minute.”

Figuring the men needed a few minutes to take care of their own morning needs, Acelin finished up at the sink and headed for the steaming stall. Hot water caressed her body from jets scattered all around three of the four walls of the massive structure. A marble bench took up most of the space on the fourth wall. She wondered if Doyle planned to make love to her there, since he hadn’t the night before. Part of her found that strange, since they’d had the previous relationship and would have the future one if this plan worked. She’d expected him to make love to her first, to claim her, so to speak. If she ever found the opportunity to speak with him alone, she’d ask why he hadn’t.

Feeling a little adventurous now that the hot spray had cleared the sleep from her mind, she decided to put on a little show for the peeping Toms, not even pretending they weren't staring. The time had come to take back some of the control they'd robbed from her. She'd have them jerking off in no time. Locating a body sponge and some shower gel on a shelf, she worked up a generous lather. Lifting one arm out in front of her and ran the sponge along the length and repeated the process on the other one. She turned her attention to her breasts, circling first one and then the other. She ran the rough sponge over her nipples, the sensation shooting straight between her legs. Her head tipped back and her eyes closed as she focused her attention on the rock hard tips. Her hand made a slow descent over her stomach before coming to a brief stop at her curls. Propping her leg on the bench, she stroked between her legs, ratcheting the rising tension to a higher level. A self-induced orgasm hovered close by, but as much as she needed the relief, she didn't want it to come at her own hands. Like always. She wanted to be on the edge when she made love with Doyle. And she'd decided he'd be her partner this go-round. She wanted him to be the one to bring her to a climax, if it happened, not his brother. For the first time, she thanked her lucky stars Lucas hadn't succeeded.

The snick of the door alerted her to their presence, Doyle in the lead, as if she'd willed the situation. Long strides ate up the short distance and before she knew it, he'd yanked her against his body. His erection throbbed between them, eager to get busy, already encased in a condom. A vague thrill at having succeeded in driving them nuts raced through her body before being driven out by the hard length of his muscular frame pressed to her. With his arms locking her tight to him, his mouth crushed hers in a brutal, possessive kiss. His tongue pushed its way past her teeth to take sweeping tastes. Her own dueled with his, drawing primitive grunts. The leg that had been braced on the bench wrapped around his hip, opening her up to him and allowing his penis to slip along her soapy folds.

Lucas pressed himself to her back, pushing his thick shaft into the crease between her butt cheeks. She needed to stop him before he got any ideas. Anal sex was not an option and neither was double penetration. The line had to be drawn somewhere. She may have given in to their threesome idea, but that didn't mean she'd be giving in on everything.

Freeing herself from the drugging effects of Doyle's kiss, Acelin turned to look over her shoulder at Lucas. "I don't know what you have in mind, but there's no way in hell I'm having anal sex." As Patrice so indelicately put it, some holes were exit only.

"Fine. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the feeling of my cock sliding along your ass," Lucas practically growled.

Too bad. It was her body and she had total control of what sex she engaged in. "As long as we're clear on this." But she suspected he'd continue to push. Literally and figuratively.

Doyle chose that moment to butt the head of his penis against her entrance, teasing her with the rounded tip. She shifted forward, hoping to force the rest of him inside. He jerked his hips, allowing only the head to penetrate. Not feeling like playing games, she dug her heel into the taut muscle of his ass in an attempt to fill her aching body with what it craved most. He rewarded her efforts with a sardonic chuckle.

"Tell me what you want, Acelin."

"I want your penis inside me." Her voice sounded strained, but she'd be damned if she'd beg.

"Such polite language, princess." He rotated his hips, sending a surge of tingles through her crotch as the head rubbed inside of her. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you to make love to me."

"What do you think, Luc? Should we let her get away with that?"

Lucas tossed her sodden hair over one shoulder to expose her neck to his lips and tongue. Hot kisses scalded her as he traced a path to her ear, the tantalizing contact intensifying her longings. Shivers erupted as his breath fanned the sensitized area.

“What if we want to fuck, princess?” The hoarse whisper sounded for her ears only.

Unable to form a single word thanks to the twin sensations bracketing her body, she nodded. If that’s what they wanted to call it, she’d let them. Anything to get what she wanted. She’d worked herself into a hyper-aroused state even before they joined her; now she feared she’d lose her mind if Doyle didn’t thrust inside her. Soon.

“Is that what you want? Do you want my brother to fuck you?” Lucas grabbed at her breasts, tweaking her stiff nipples, the pain making them even harder.

A moan joined her nod.

“You heard the lady, Doyle. Fuck her.”

With that, Doyle rammed his entire length into her waiting body. Her satisfied groan echoed off the shower walls as her muscles clutched at him in welcome. She buried her face in the crook of his neck as she clung to him for support. Spinning them around, he pinned her to the wall. With her weight supported, he brought her other leg up to circle his hip and clutched her butt in his hands. She felt gloriously full as he bounced her up and down. Little whimpers of pleasure punctuated the movements; her nipples chafed as they scraped along his chest hairs. Sex with Doyle had always been good, even if it hadn’t been orgasmically great.

Lucas moved to the side and slipped his hand between them to stimulate her clit. The combined pleasures focused all of the sensations to that area. Nothing else existed other than the hard slide of Doyle’s penis and the pressure from Lucas’s fingers. The coil wound tighter with every thrust, as she concentrated on the feelings. She pictured the head of his erection caressing the nerve-lined flesh, arousing them both to the point of no return, to the point of orgasm.

A hand reached out to grab hers and she found herself helping Lucas stroke himself. With his hand covering hers, he guided her movements and put pressure to tighten her grip. The vein that ran from the tip to the base of his penis throbbed

against her palm. Judging by his heavy breathing, he was about to come. Acelin tilted her head to watch the erotic sight. With a loud moan, his chin dropped to his chest as he shot his load across the stall.

Hearing his brother climax must have been a trigger for Doyle. His fingers bruised her as he gripped her hard. He pumped once, twice, three times and stilled.

And left Acelin aroused, unsatisfied, and aching for more. One more time.

Chapter 6

Acelin stood in front of the bathroom mirror, towel drying her hair. Doyle and Lucas had finished their showers and disappeared to the kitchen to learn what the cook had left for a late breakfast. Staring at her naked body in the reflection, she tried one more time to figure out what was wrong with her, why her body betrayed her in such an intimate manner.

Physically, there was nothing wrong with her. Discreet inquiries at her yearly examinations reassured her of that. Which left only one conclusion. The problem was psychological in nature. Maybe Patrice was right. Maybe she needed to see a therapist specializing in sexual problems.

She flirted with the idea of marrying Doyle and maintaining a monogamous relationship with him, leaving Lucas out of their bedroom. They had the means to fly in the best therapist in the world to help her find satisfaction with her husband. They wouldn't need an extra penis in bed with them, especially since it hadn't produced any results so far.

But even as she entertained the remote possibility, her rational side discarded it outright. Doyle's actions over the past twenty-four hours disturbed her. He'd seduced and coerced her into a situation when he'd promised to leave the decision to her. That concerned her. She refused to take the chance that he'd continue to behave in such a manner once they married. One day, in the very distant future, she would be responsible for the welfare of her people. She refused to think her opinions might be swayed, or that Doyle would even think of acting in such a manner. But he

had proved that he was capable and willing to do anything to get his way. And that simple fact rendered him unacceptable.

If nothing else, this episode had removed the lingering “what ifs” about marrying Doyle.

Acelin peeked around the corner and into Doyle’s bedroom. They said they were going downstairs, but she’d not put it past them to wait to pounce on her. Sensing she was alone, she ventured out of the bathroom to search for her clothing. She wished she could remember if they’d stripped her in here or up on the roof. Unable to find so much as a shoe, she tugged on the bed sheet to wrap around herself. The linen remained firmly secured to the bed, necessitating a stronger yank. After a brief struggle that left her winded, the liberated sheet doubled as a dress, allowing her to scoot across the hall to her room.

Safely ensconced behind her door, a rude noise escaped her lips as she exhaled loudly and braced herself against the wall. Sheesh, the things a woman had to endure to keep from flashing her hosts and stirring up their libidos.

She flicked the lock before she crossed to her small suitcase and toiletries bag. Grabbing her lingerie and a sundress, she gathered up her makeup and headed for her bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, she felt ready to face her future. At least as ready as she’d ever be.

The first step involved calling Aruba and arranging for the helicopter to pick her up. The next step involved making arrangements to fly home. Home to an uncertain future. She still had to choose a husband—either one who could give her an orgasm now, or would be willing to do whatever was necessary to do that in the future. The upcoming birthday celebration provided her with the perfect opportunity to reassess some of her past lovers. Who knew, given her mother’s extensive guest list, she might even meet someone new.

Retrieving her purse from the nightstand, Acelin snagged the company’s card from a side pocket, right behind her cell phone. She received their assurance that they would send a chopper to fly her to the closest major airport in Aruba as soon

as her family jet arrived. Now all she had to do was arrange to get the Lear to the airport so she could get back to Timoria.

"Hello, Patrice."

"Acelin." Patrice's loud squeal forced Acelin to hold the phone away from her ear, a grimace on her face. "How are you? Are you okay? Your father has been pestering me nonstop to find out where you are. When are you coming home?"

She giggled at her friend's stream of chatter. "If you'll give me a word in edgewise, I'll tell you why I'm calling." She pictured Patrice's expression when she huffed a rude noise. "I need you to tell my father that I'm coming home as soon as it can be arranged. I need the plane to be sent to Aruba."

"Oh thank goodness. Don't you ever put me in this sort of position again. I'm glad I won't have to cover for you for much longer. I've hated lying to your father by telling him I don't know where you are."

The relief in Patrice's voice sent a pang of guilt through Acelin for the unintended worry and stress she caused her friend. And if she was that upset, her parents must be beside themselves. She dropped to the bed, her shoulders slumped. "Tell my parents I'll see them soon."

"I will. Acelin?"

"Yeah, Reese?" She addressed her best friend by her nickname.

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

She didn't even have to ask how Patrice knew the miracle hadn't happened. They knew each other much too well. "I'm not, honey. I'm not."

Tucking her phone back in her designer clutch, she prepared to face Doyle and Lucas. She had no doubt they'd break out every tactic in their arsenal to persuade her to stay, to give them one more chance. She didn't have a clue why they wanted to make her come, but given their efforts so far, it was obvious to her that they wanted to succeed. That wasn't her problem. They'd had more than enough time to do the deed and failed. But they had succeeded in showing Doyle's true colors, so

something good had come of the trip. She straightened her spine, determined to stand her ground this time. Stepping into her casual sandals, her shoes slapped against her heels as she made her way to the door. She screamed as she opened the door, her hand pressed to her heart when she ran into Doyle, filling the frame.

“My apologies, princess. I came up to escort you to breakfast.”

“I was just on my way down.”

Doyle’s gaze assessed her appearance. Yesterday, his passion-heated eyes would have burned her skin. Today, they just gave her the creeps. He extended his elbow. “Allow me.”

She tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and allowed him to lead her to the small dining room. Her senses focused on the man at her side. Forty-eight hours ago, she’d considered him possible husband material. After all she’d learned, he’d been knocked permanently off the list.

Lucas sat at the head of the table, waiting for them, with several silver dome-topped plates in front of him. He pushed to his feet when they entered the room, the gentleman’s facade in place. Although they’d never admit it if one pressured the other over this idea, Acelin suspected Lucas pushed for the ménage, although given how little she’d really known of Doyle, it might have been his idea. Not that it mattered. Fat lot of good it did any of them. Well, except for the fact that at least they came. But men did. Without fail. How unfair was that? She’d never had a partner say, I’m sorry you didn’t come...I won’t either. She’d see pink elephants fly first.

“I’m glad you were able to join us.” His polite words did not mask the look on his face that said, without making us wait for half an hour. So much for acting like a gentleman.

“I was just opening my door when I ran into Doyle.” She changed the subject as she walked toward the empty place setting. “Something smells delicious.”

“We instructed Cook to keep the food simple this morning, so we have eggs, bacon, and croissants. You’ll need plenty of

nourishment to keep up with us today.” Doyle removed the lids to reveal the food, the gleam in his eye leaving no doubt about his plans for the day.

Acelin took the chair Lucas held out for her, not prepared to have this discussion quite so soon, but not willing to forego the opportunity now that Doyle had hinted at their plans. “Actually, I’ve arranged for my plane to meet me and called for a helicopter to pick me up here. It’ll take some time for the Lear to get from Timoria to Aruba, but I’m hoping to be able to leave first thing in the morning at the latest.”

“It’s only Saturday, Acelin.” The chill in Doyle’s voice caused her to shiver. Or was it the fact that the temperature in the room dropped several degrees after her announcement?

“I’m fully aware of what day it is.” She stared down Doyle, who leaned forward in his chair, both palms braced on the table. She reclined against the padded back of her seat, trying to send the message that she’d made up her mind and there was no changing it.

“You said you’d give me the weekend.”

“And you said you wouldn’t pressure me.” Neither man had the good sense to show any remorse when she looked them in the eyes. If she’d been waffling before, their attitudes now would have done the trick. Instead, it strengthened her resolve.

“I did it for you. Always for you.”

“Be that as it may, Doyle, I need to leave. This,” she gestured to both men, “isn’t working and isn’t going to work. There’s no need for me to remain here.”

“You haven’t given us much of a chance, princess.” Lucas perched on the edge of his seat, his eyes wild with an unidentifiable emotion, sending a ripple of fright through Acelin. He’d been the wildcard in the situation all along, leaving her clueless how he’d respond to her decision to call it quits.

“I believe you’ve had ample opportunity.”

“You can stay and enjoy the beach.” Doyle took control of the conversation.

“I’ve been on vacation for the past six months. The time has come for me to face my thirtieth birthday and my future. To do that, I need to go home. Please understand.” The room became even chillier as she continued. “Besides, we all know, even if you won’t admit it, that if I stay, you’ll just pressure me back into bed with you.”

“Would that be such a bad thing, Acelin?”

“For you, no. For me, yes.”

Lucas remained quiet as she spoke, staring at his plate, which was fine with Acelin. She’d rather not see that look in his eyes again. Now that she’d finished, he filled her plate to overflowing. She took tiny bites, pushing most of it around. She’d lost her appetite. After a respectable amount of time, she excused herself from the table and retreated to her room, planning to stay there until the helicopter arrived for her.

* * * *

“We can’t let her go.” Lucas paced to one corner of the dining room, spun on his heel, and paced back to his chair. Repeatedly.

“What choice do we have? Her family undoubtedly knows where she is now and will come for her if she does not return. That is not a risk I’m willing to take.” Doyle pushed himself away from the table and stretched his long legs out in front of him. His younger brother always had been more of a hothead. “Will you sit down? You’re making me nervous.” And that took some doing.

“We have to do something, dammit.” Lucas slammed his fist into the wall, the painting rattling with the force. He slumped forward as he returned to take his place near his brother. “I can’t believe the frigid bitch isn’t able to come. Now she’s forced her problem to become ours. What a crock of shit.” He shook his hand, flexing his fingers.

“You’ve been hanging around with your American friends for too long. You are beginning to sound like them.”

“What do we do now, Doyle? You assured me she’d marry you.”

“And she will.” Doyle checked his manicure, surveying both hands and fingertips.

“Just how do you plan to accomplish that miracle? You’ve been saying that since she refused your proposal last year. My suggestion would have worked on any other woman. She’d have been putty in our hands. But not that fucking frigid c—”

“Watch how you speak about your future sister-in-law and the future queen of Martine.” He sat ramrod straight, fingers gripping the arms of the chair. “A woman would feel very grateful to a man who saved her from almost certain death, don’t you think? Grateful enough to do anything he asked.”

“Just what do you have in mind?”

Lucas smiled as he listened to his brother’s plan to win the princess’ hand. And to himself, he made some changes in the proposed scenario.

* * * *

It had been too easy. She’d expected more coercion. Doyle had followed her to her room after she’d left brunch and attempted to convince her to stay, to let them try again. He’d hesitated when she told him to leave, making her fear for her safety for the first time since her arrival. In the end, he’d left voluntarily, but unhappily. But he didn’t return.

He wasn’t the same man she’d dated last year, the man she thought about marrying, with or without an orgasm, only days ago.

It had been a mistake to try this and past time to return home.

She spent the rest of the afternoon and evening alone in her room, braced for a scene of some sort, until she dozed off in a chair. Instead of the drama she’d been anticipating in light of their seduction technique, she woke to the early morning sunlight streaming through her window. She’d been escorted to the waiting helicopter and wished well. Doyle and Lucas gave her assurances that they wouldn’t dream of missing her birthday celebration but didn’t mention one word about her staying. And then they’d slammed the door shut.

Too damn easy. That's what it had been. It set her on edge.

The rotary blades began their slow rotation, the chop reverberating in her stomach with every pass of a blade overhead. By the time they reached the maximum speed necessary to lift off, her nerves were frayed. Her heart raced, her blood pounded in her ears and echoed in the earpiece that connected her to the man who held her life in his hands. Her palms and her underarms felt sticky and sweaty. The chopper hovered feet above the ground, nose tipped forward, slow to rise into the air. It jerked upward with a sudden dip that almost cost her the few bites of breakfast she'd taken. Finally, they began to put the island behind and below them.

Acelin thanked technology that she controlled the switch between her microphone on her headset and the pilot's. Otherwise, he'd have heard a very unprincesslike stream of curses. She gripped her seat with a white-knuckled intensity, as if that kept the helicopter from plunging into the blue Caribbean water below them. Shark-infested water. Deep water. Far below them.

Oh, lordy, this train of thought needed to derail, or she'd work herself up to a nervous breakdown. God, how she hated to fly. Sitting behind a huge Plexiglas window with the world stretched below had to be the worst, in terms of flying experiences, anyway. At least in the family's private jet, she had enough distractions to allow her to pretend she wasn't miles above the earth with nothing to keep her from plummeting back to the ground but air.

The pilot tapped his microphone, prompting her to turn hers on.

"The flight should take us approximately twenty-five minutes, Your Highness. All reports indicate clear skies and light wind so I anticipate a smooth flight."

"Thank you, Roger." At least now she knew the length of her personal hell.

"If you need anything, just let me know."

She needed something, all right. A plane. To be on solid ground. A Valium. Not things in his power to deliver. Oh well, she'd suck it up and deal with it like she always did. Her position as the heir apparent to a wealthy nation and the charitable head of several international aid organizations made flying a necessity. A necessary evil to be suffered.

She sneaked glances out at the ocean and the tiny islands dotting the endless waves. As they flew over, she wondered who owned them, if anyone. The thought of owning a private piece of paradise appealed to her. Somewhere to take her children, away from the eyes of the prying press who had tortured her since she was thirteen and "introduced" to society. Granted, she needed a husband before she had any kids, but her marital status demanded a change sooner rather than later. That meant she had to make a decision.

Above her, she thought she heard a change in the chop, chop, chop pattern of the blades—just a slight hesitation or stutter for a split second. A quick peek at the pilot calmed her taught nerves. He worked his controls and kept his focus on flying. If he didn't have a problem, then there must not be one. Unless her overactive imagination constituted a problem.

Time to shift her focus to something other than her surroundings. Did she really want to give up her hunt for a husband who could make her come? Giving up now felt like admitting that the past few years of her life had been worthless pursuit of the most frivolous nature. And they hadn't. She'd gained knowledge of what she wanted, needed, and expected in a mate. She'd learned more about herself and her place in the world. She'd seen Timoria through the eyes of a traveler and come to appreciate it more. She'd helped children in Third World countries. She had not wasted her time.

Still, her birthday stared at her with beady eyes and snarling lips and she'd promised her father she'd settle down when she turned thirty.

Settle down, but not settle. Some serious soul searching needed to be accomplished soon.

There it was again. Her heart skipped a beat with the blades. The pilot continued to look as calm and in control as before.

This time, she knew she heard and felt something more than turbulence. And the pilot clutched at the flying stick thingy between his legs more tightly than before. He must have felt her staring at him. He tapped his microphone.

“We’re going through a bit of turbulence, Your Highness. Nothing to worry about.”

Nothing to worry about, my ass, she wanted to say out loud. “I think it’s more than turb—”

The blades sputtered and stalled, and Acelin felt the craft lose altitude with each hesitation.

“Your flotation device is underneath your seat, Your Highness. Reach under you now and grab it. You can slip your arms through the straps and follow the instructions. I don’t plan on going down, but it’s best to be prepared.”

The same speech one of the flight attendants gave before every flight. Thank God she’d listened.

The tight space made maneuvering difficult, causing her to bump her head and her knees. But with a great deal of effort and a bunch of groans, she yanked the fluorescent yellow vest out from under the seat and slipped it on. She clung to it for dear life. A very bad analogy, considering the circumstances. She refastened her seatbelt. The Caribbean Ocean rose up beneath her, closer than it had been just minutes earlier.

Oh, shit, oh shit, oh shit. She was going to die without telling her parents she loved them. Without having an orgasm. Without marrying and having children. I’m too young to die, dammit.

The pilot eased back on the stick between his legs and the nose of the helicopter edged up. He then reached for something on his left side and pulled on it. For a moment, it almost felt as if they were floating above the water and not racing to crash into it. Hope peeked back out.

“Mayday, mayday, this is...”

The Princess And The O

Acelin couldn't listen as the pilot gave their coordinates and heading. She understood what that meant. He wouldn't be giving them if he didn't think they were going down. And if they were going down, they were going to die.

Chapter 7

Time alternately stood still and moved in slow motion. The helicopter pilot worked the controls, cursing and snarling as he did. He banged on gauges. With her sense of time distorted, Acelin felt as if he took too long to do anything at all. She tried to yell at him, demand he work harder, but no sound came out of her mouth. His voice sounded distorted, like the teacher's voice in the Charlie Brown cartoons, as he barked words like "autorotation" and "pop-out floats" at the person on the other end of the transmission.

Her stomach flip-flopped, lurching between her throat and her toes, as the water rose up to meet them. She sucked in a deep breath, bracing for the plunge.

The impact slammed her back against her seat, whipping her head around until she felt like one of those bobblehead dolls. The helicopter rocked once or twice and then made an abrupt tilt to her left. A rotor blade split the water a second before the pilot's door smacked the ocean surface. Acelin hung suspended from her seat, the buckle digging at her hip. Frantic, she struggled with the clasp, scraping her knuckles in the process. She heard the successful sound of a click and dropped into the pilot's seat.

Sputtering, she spun to check on Roger's progress, only to find him hanging limply, suspended by his harness, her body weight pressing him down. A nasty gash snaked from his ear to his hairline, blood covering his face. Water seeped through the sealed door and pooled near his head.

“Come on, Roger, you need to wake up now.” She fumbled to release him from his seat, cringing when he flopped against the helicopter door with a sickening thud and an even more frightening splish.

She couldn’t think about that now. She had to focus on getting him safely strapped into his life vest. They couldn’t both rely on hers to keep them afloat. Pulling herself closer, she wiggled the damn thing until it let loose. Moving out of the way, she rolled Roger over onto his back, wrestling the vest over his head and hooking his arms through the straps. Standing on the edge of his seat, she pushed her door open and out of the way. She’d inflate both their vests once they were free of the confines of the cabin.

Now she had to get them both out of the copter before it filled up like a giant fish bowl and drowned them both. She’d be damned if she’d allow her mother’s plans for an all-out birthday bash to turn into funeral arrangements. Her mother would never speak to her again if she did.

* * * *

“The princess’s helicopter has gone down.”

Adrenaline flooded Nolan’s system and every nerve went on immediate alert when the head of airport security dragged his pasty face into the pilots’ lounge and delivered the bad news. Son of a bitch. Son of a fucking bitch. Bracing his elbows on his knees and lacing his fingers behind his neck, he stared at the floor, seeking a moment’s guidance to gather his thoughts. Assuming the familiar position he always took when he needed to process information helped him shift to his military mindset.

He’d flown the Timorian jet to Aruba to bring the wayward royal home. He was being overprotective, he’d told himself when he’d made the decision to fetch her. She was safe. If he couldn’t find her, the bad guys couldn’t find her either.

He’d never expected to be forced to launch a search and rescue mission to save the pampered princess. He’d only come to Aruba to retrieve her royal ass so he could rip her a new one

for her irresponsible behavior and in an effort to humor the part of him that always prepared for the worst.

He should have been prepared, dammit. He should have expected that whoever had designs on the Timorian throne would do whatever necessary to achieve that goal. He should have listened to the highly trained pain in the neck that inhabited his body and had kept himself and his buddies alive for ten years. He shouldn't have allowed this so-called vacation to lull him into complacency. But no. He'd stupidly assumed the world-traveling princess was safe from danger since no one knew where the hell she was. No one but Patrice, despite her protestations of innocence. He'd deal with the tight-lipped friend once he had the princess safe and sound, glued to his side until the threat neutralized.

After a brief pause, he surged to his feet, prepared for action, years of military training and preparedness kicking in. "I need a rescue helo and a couple of your best rescue swimmers. Dutch navy men, if any are available." He'd call for his own equipment and personnel if it wouldn't take too damn long for them to get here, not an option when every second counted. But a well-placed call might ensure the help of the local military. He patted his back pocket for his cell phone. Once he had a measure of privacy, he'd call in some markers, just to make sure he covered all bases.

"But, sir..."

He didn't have time to deal with locals, any more than absolutely necessary. He shot the security chief a stern look, quelling the man's comments. "As a member of the royal military, I am trained to fly anything and everything. I'll take command of this rescue mission. I need a helicopter and someone to actually go down and get her out of the water once we find her." And they would find her. He refused to think of any other possibilities.

"I'll make whatever you need available to you, sir. I will contact with local military officials and request their best men." The man stiffened, clearly not used to following orders.

“Thank you. Now, if you will excuse me while you prepare a helo for us, I need to speak with air traffic control and see what they know.” The security chief motioned to one of the young men standing at a discreet distance and whispered to him. With that, the boy gestured for Nolan to follow him.

As he headed for the air traffic control tower, he snagged his cell phone and prepared to make two calls. The easier one, to a fellow special ops soldier, took all of three minutes to secure some necessary information. He sucked in a deep breath, preparing to call Acelin’s father. No matter how many bad news calls he’d had to deliver, they never got any easier. Five minutes later, he’d given His Majesty all the information currently in his possession, which wasn’t much, laid out the details of the rescue operation, and promised to call once Acelin was safe.

Fifteen restless minutes later, Nolan sat in the pilot’s seat of a sturdy military style helicopter, prepared to take off. Judging by the coordinates the pilot had radioed before he went down, they had a ten minute flight to the crash scene. If he pushed this baby to the limit, which he planned to do. By then, over a full half hour since the copter went down, Her Royal Pain in the Ass faced a number of possible scenarios. Best case, she’d succeeded in securing her flotation device and was bobbing along in shark-infested waters. Worst case, she’d been knocked unconscious during the impact before she had the chance to dig under her seat cushion and put on her life vest.

He should have been the one flying that copter. He would have been, too, if she’d bothered to tell anyone where she’d spent the past couple of days. But noooo. She had to make all the arrangements so the helicopter picking her up from god knows where left just as the Lear was landing.

He’d have been able to keep her safe. He would have anticipated every danger and acted to prevent it. Hadn’t ten years of fighting covert wars taught him anything?

Yes, it had. It taught him that even an anal-retentive perfectionist of a planner couldn’t anticipate every scenario. Would have, should have, and could have didn’t do him a

fucking bit of good right now. He had to focus on what he knew and what he could do.

The headset crackled in his ear, the permission to take off granted. He signaled to the two ensigns in the back who'd volunteered to go in after the pilot and the princess as he powered up the rotors. They churned with agonizing slowness until reaching maximum speed. Every minute not in the air, not speeding toward Acelin, chafed on nerves anxious to get the show on the road. An adrenaline rush flooded him as he set the bird in motion.

Instinct took over as he steered the helicopter over the endless deep blue water. His fingers clutched at the stick as he maneuvered the bird, his eyes intent on the gauges. As they neared the crash site area, he had to stay high enough to prevent the chopper from churning up rough waters and low enough that they could see a person floating on the waves. By now, the other helicopter probably rested upside down with the landing floats sticking up or on the bottom of the ocean if it didn't have any, and two individuals without any raft or flotsam made for a difficult search. The proverbial needle in a haystack, although the yellow life vest might help. Beginning at the exact coordinates given by the downed pilot, Nolan maneuvered his craft in incrementally wider circles according to the pilot's radio transmissions. The two men in the back hung out the open side door and trained binoculars below them.

"I see someone. No, two people," the elated voice all but shouted in Nolan's ear. "Hold her steady, sir, and we'll prepare to go down."

Checking his own figures, Nolan acknowledged the pilot's quick thinking in calling out his location through every step of their descent. His actions saved their lives by increasing the odds they'd be found.

Once the rescue swimmers indicated their readiness to descend, Nolan slowly lowered the helicopter to the appropriate height. The downward thrust of air that propelled the craft into the air churned up white-capped waves, tossing about Princess

Acelin and her pilot. The aircraft hovered as one rescuer rappelled down to the water's surface with a sling and a stretcher. The minutes stretched by until Nolan watched the winch spin the cord back up. His pulse raced, his nerves stretched thin. Intense concentration and well-honed skill allowed him to keep the chopper steady. Even minute movement could spell disaster and failure on this mission—or any other—and wasn't an option.

Nolan craned his neck as the young man struggled to pull the stretcher on board. He sputtered and bit back a yell when gray hair, not the darker tresses he'd been expecting, rose over the open edge. What the fuck? Why the hell would any man send up an unconscious middle-aged man first and not a princess? Okay, so he knew why they sent him up first, because she was obviously conscious and they were following standard procedures. But he wouldn't rest easy until he laid eyes on Acelin.

The winch crept back down to the surface of the water. If it didn't hook a royal fish this time, he'd personally throttle the idiot seaman and go back down himself. Behind him, the young man covered the pilot with a silver thermal blanket and checked his vitals, relaying them to the waiting paramedics back at the airport.

The cord wiggled, sending the worker in the back to the winch, to bring the bundle at the end up to the helicopter. He pivoted on his seat, only half perched sideways, watching the opening.

And then she was there, being clasped under her arms and being hauled indelicately inside the chopper. She brushed a sodden strand back from her face. Looking at her hand, she winced and shouted to her rescuer. He propped her on a seat and then returned to help his cohort wiggle back inside.

Nolan was unprepared for the jolt of seeing Acelin in person. Dear God, even soaking wet, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. More beautiful than any of her pictures. He had a shit load of pictures, too. He'd been collecting them

for years. Some men jerked off to the Victoria's Secret catalog; not him. His fondest masturbation fantasy now sat in front of him, very much alive and in the flesh. His blood rushed out of his brain and straight to his dick. He almost shot his load right then and there when she struggled out of the life vest. Her clothing clung to her body, accentuating lush curves. He found it impossible to miss the hard tips of her nipples pressed against her top or the skirt showing off well-toned thighs. Gratitude overcame disappointment when the thin silver blanket found its way around her body. He'd have a hell of a time flying looking in the back. Then again, he'd have a difficult time flying if he didn't get the blood back where it belonged.

Once everyone secured their places, Nolan gently elevated the craft and turned for the airport. He still demanded the max from the flying machine; he had two people on board in need of medical attention, one of them unconscious and the other an heir to a throne.

Speaking of which, he flipped a switch enabling him to talk with the control tower. Once he'd informed them of their estimated time of arrival, he requested a phone line to the Timorian palace.

The king picked up the phone on the first ring. "Nolan?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Princess Acelin is sitting in the back, being monitored by personnel until we arrive at the airport and the paramedics can give her a thorough checkup."

"Is she okay?"

"She's conscious and nothing seems to be broken. She may have sprained her wrist. Other than being banged up and shaken, I think she's going to be just fine. Now that I've found her, I won't let her out of my sight until the bad guys have been caught."

"Thank you, Nolan, for rescuing my daughter."

"I didn't do anything, Your Majesty. The two ensigns in the back did all the work."

"Just knowing you were there made me feel better."

The older man's faith in him didn't make Nolan feel any better. If he'd been doing his job the way he was trained to do instead of making assumptions, none of this would have happened in the first place. It wasn't a mistake he planned to make ever again.

* * * *

Despite the thermal blanket keeping her warm, goose bumps covered Acelin's skin and her teeth chattered. She paid close attention to the medical procedures as the paramedics worked on the still unconscious helicopter pilot. It kept her from losing her control. He'd regained consciousness for a minute or so and then passed out, which had to be a bad sign. She'd refused to leave his side as they'd been escorted off of the helicopter and into the first-class passenger lounge turned triage.

He didn't deserve to die. He'd done so much to keep them both alive, she realized now. When she'd first dragged them out of the sinking copter, she'd called him every nasty name she could think of. She'd questioned his parentage and his masculinity, as well as his skill as a pilot. The longer he remained unconscious, the more frightened she became. She clung to him, talked to him, begged him to wake up.

And she prayed. Prayed like she'd never prayed before.

Then she began to reevaluate the life that flashed before her eyes.

What had she accomplished with her life? Nothing, if she were honest with herself. And if she couldn't be truthful when facing death, there was something seriously wrong with her.

Her life had been lived to her standards. She hadn't sacrificed her beliefs or her values for anyone. Twenty-four hours earlier, she'd have taken pride in that simple fact. Now she faced the awful truth that she'd selfishly gone her own way and done her own thing.

What had she done with her life since she'd reached her majority at the age of twenty-five? She'd been on a hunt for the perfect man—one who could make her come during sex. Oh yeah, there was an ambition to be proud of.

Did the people of Timoria care if she only orgasmed when she masturbated? Hell, they didn't even think about her sex life beyond producing the next heir to the throne. All they wanted was a monarch who was a competent ruler of a prosperous country. Did that describe her? Hell no, she spent her time thinking only of herself.

As she bobbed along, battered by the waves, she vowed to be a much better person if she made it out alive. One who advocated for the rights of Third World children because it was the right thing to do, not because she thought she should. One who spent time helping the children and families of Timoria because that was the right thing to do. One who focused on learning to lead her country. One who focused on more than her own orgasm.

And she prayed some more.

For reasons beyond her, those prayers had been answered.

So now, she sat vigil for a man she'd only known for a few hours and mused some more about her future.

A paramedic interrupted her ponderings. "Excuse me, Your Highness, one of the airport security guards thought you might want to change into dry clothes."

"I'd love to, but my luggage is somewhere at the bottom of the ocean."

"She," the young man pointed to a person standing behind him, "brought you an outfit from one of the gift shops." The bag he held out for her shook in his hand. Acelin never grew accustomed to people being nervous around her. For Pete's sake, she didn't bite.

Acelin glanced up to spot a young woman blushing and shuffling her feet. Shrugging off her blanket, she strode across the lounge that had been commandeered for their private use. The woman dropped into a deep curtsy as Acelin approached.

"Thank you for thinking of me." The simple act of kindness tugged at her heart.

"You're most welcome, Your Highness." She wouldn't even raise her eyes to look at Acelin. "I hope they fit."

“Are you from Martine?” The woman nodded. “I thought I recognized your accent.”

“Your Highness,” a deep voice sounded behind her, “if you’d like to change, I’d like to examine you now.”

“How is Roger?”

“He has regained consciousness and is resting comfortably, except for his headache. Now you must let me tend to you.”

Acelin turned back to the young woman before heading for the ladies’ room. “Thank you again.”

Half an hour later, she sat in the luxurious interior of the family’s private jet, having been given a clean bill of health with the exception of some scratches, bruises, and the prediction that she’d be sore as hell for the next day or so. A ruined manicure didn’t bother her at all, where it would have before. Once they were cleared for takeoff, she’d be winging her way back home. At least this time, the ocean remained safely behind window shades.

The ringing phone rattled her already on-edge nerves. “Hello?”

“Darling Acelin. How are you, sweetheart?”

“Daddy?”

The strength and composure she’d been able to maintain all day crumbled at the sound of her father’s voice. She brushed away the tears as she spoke to her parents, reassuring them and wallowing in the long distance comfort they provided. With watery eyes and a stuffy nose, she hung up, fearful she’d break down completely if they spoke much longer. She worried that if she gave in to the gnawing panic in her gut, even the twelve hour flight wouldn’t give her enough time to pull herself back together.

“Your Highness?”

The deep baritone voice snagged her attention. The incredibly edible man standing at the cockpit door kept it. Holy hubba, the man made her forget about everything that happened to her and want to drag him back to the bedroom. His spiked blond hair brushed the ceiling, making him at least six feet tall.

And lean. His tailored shirt and pleated front shorts accentuated his muscular physique, clinging to his bulging biceps and thighs. But his eyes drew her in, even from a distance. They were the most amazing ice blue eyes she'd ever seen.

"Are you ready to get underway?" His accent sounded vaguely familiar, yet she couldn't place it.

Underway, over way, any way he wanted.

"Excuse me?"

"The flight. Should I let air traffic control know we're ready?"

"Oh. Yes. Please do. I'm anxious to return home."

He bowed and returned to the cockpit. Giving her a chance to gawk at his nice tight butt. Damn, he was the yummiest man she'd laid eyes on.

Too bad he wasn't an eligible prince.

What the hell was wrong with her? After everything she'd been through, she shouldn't be drooling over a man. Well, she guessed she could be a better person while still appreciating a fine male form.

As the plane reached a cruising altitude and she had the freedom to stretch out on the bed in the back, Acelin gave more thought to her former selfish pursuits. Before drifting off to sleep, she reached a conclusion she'd begun to think about back on Doyle's island. Finding a man who made her come dropped lower on her list of acceptable characteristics in a husband. Locating one who would love her enough to see a sex therapist now made the list. One who would stand by her as she took her place as Timoria's ruler topped it.

And where better to find such a man? At the end all, be all birthday party her mother had planned, where every eligible prince from around the world would be at her beck and call. The time had come to make a decision and live up to her duty. Her mother had unwittingly provided her with the perfect venue.

Chapter 8

“What’s he doing here?” Acelin whipped around to stare at the fine ass retreating down the corridor. The all too familiar one she’d been fantasizing about since she first saw it retreating into the cockpit.

Okay, there was an image she didn’t need.

“He who?” Patrice stopped several steps ahead of Acelin, making it necessary to back up.

“Tall, blond, and mouthwatering, that’s who,” she said, jerking her head in the direction of the outstanding specimen of male tushes. She kept her voice low to prevent her royal watchdog from overhearing.

“Oh, you mean Prince Nolan.”

“Prince Nolan.” Acelin knew her mouth gaped open like a floundering fish.

“Yeah, of Bermine.”

“Of Bermine.”

Patrice stuck her face directly in front of her friend’s. “What’s wrong with you? Other than the fact that you’re doing a great job impersonating a parrot?”

Acelin swallowed the lump in her throat. That, that magnificent example of manhood was the mysterious Prince Nolan? What was he doing posing as a pilot on the family jet? “What do you know about him?” She forced one foot in front of the other until she managed to get moving in the direction of her father’s study. Best to act normal. If Patrice suspected more than a casual interest, she’d never let Acelin live it down.

“Not much. He was here when I got back. He pestered me about you, wanting to know where you’d gone. Why?”

“He piloted the plane that flew me back here.”

“He did? I wondered where he’d disappeared to. Hell, every woman in this place with a pulse wondered.” Patrice scrambled to keep up with Acelin’s quick steps. “The gossip has been flying since he showed up, from what I understand. He was here when I got back, so I’m not sure when he arrived. He’s a pilot with the Royal Air Force, home on leave, and his father forced him to come to your birthday bash. Maybe he was the only one available to come for you on such short notice.” She watched Acelin’s face as they spoke. “I know that look. What are you thinking?”

Oh, Patrice gave her too much credit. She wasn’t thinking about anything other than the far too masculine, way too powerful, much too handsome for her piece of mind Prince Nolan. On the jet, his potent aura filled the small space and sucked up all the air. Now she understood why he carried himself as if he owned the airspace. “Any clue what he does in the Royal Air Force?”

“No one is sure, except that he’s a pilot, he flies anything and everything, and has for the decade or so he’s been in.”

Ten years. Well that explained why he’d been off her radar of available men. He’d been flying around the world playing G.I. Joe. Her spirit plummeted. Too bad he was off-limits. Anyone who put in that much time at a job had to be devoted to it, where she needed—wanted—a man devoted to her. She didn’t do one night stands or even one week stands and his military career prevented anything more.

She sighed. What a waste. He was even more handsome now than he had been on the plane. His polo-style shirt clung to his wide shoulders and broad chest, showing off his flat abdomen to perfect advantage. The passing glance had her hormones revving up, anxious to see him again.

“I need a nice cold drink before I face my father. I know this brush with death is going to make him feel justified in pushing

me to choose a husband.” That was her story and she was sticking to it.

Still, understanding her father the way she did, she did need time to gather her wits so she’d be able to remain calm. She accepted her father’s position. She’d spent some time coming to terms with it herself. Plunging into the ocean and facing death did that. After her brush with Prince Nolan, she’d be anything but calm, cool, and collected unless she took this breather.

Acelin spotted a maid and requested a pitcher of iced tea be delivered to her in the drawing room. She and Patrice walked to the queen’s favorite sanctuary, where they waited only minutes for the refreshing beverage.

Acelin sipped at her tea in silence, taking deep breaths between swallows. Her thoughts raced a mile a minute and then some, as she debated how to respond to her father. She concluded the best way would be to beat him to the table. She’d tell him that at the end of her week-long birthday festivities, she’d announce her future husband, if not publicly at the ball, then privately to her parents. This solution allowed her to remain in control while making her father a very happy king.

Comfortable with her decision, she rose to her feet. “I’ll meet you back here once I finish my conversation with my father.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me with you?” Concern clouded Patrice’s face.

“No. I’ll be fine. I’m positive my father will be pleased with what I have to say. For a change.” One corner of her lips lifted in a half-smile.

Patrice made herself comfortable in a plush chair. “I’ll be right here if you need me.”

And Acelin knew that. Her friend’s support meant the world to her. She pulled the door shut behind her to give Patrice some privacy from the wandering guests and headed for the royal chambers.

As she entered, barely pausing to knock, she noticed her father sat in his leather chair behind his massive mahogany desk.

Over the years, she'd come to refer to that as his power play position. Pushing to his feet, a smile lit his face. He hurried from behind the desk, wrapping her in a tight hug.

"Daddy, I can't breathe." Her stiff muscles protested the contact, but she refused to allow anyone to know how much she ached. She laughed as she squeezed back. He had held her even closer when she'd stepped off the plane. So close, that she'd felt the tears on her cheek. Not that she was complaining. She loved her father and his enthusiastic displays of affection. She loved the feel of her parents' life-reaffirming hugs.

"You'll just have to put up with it, darling. I intend to let your mother and you and your brother and sister know how much I love you all the time. I never appreciated just how precious life is until..."

Acelin saved him from talking about her nearly fatal accident. "I've thought the same thing, Daddy. Which is why I've made a decision." She drew a shaky breath and prepared to plunge forward.

"Wait, before you say anything, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

She hadn't realized someone sat in the high-backed leather chair across from her father's. As soon as he stood up, she wondered how she hadn't known he was in the room, when his presence overwhelmed her so.

"You." So much for sounding intimidating when the word fell out on a sigh.

"Princess Acelin." He bowed deeply, the graceful gesture suiting him somehow. "It is a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance."

"Prince Nolan." She curtsied with the best of them. So take that. "The pleasure is all mine." Oh how she wished it were.

She fought with herself, struggling to keep from undressing him with her eyes. If she didn't mistake the gleam in his, he wanted to know what she looked like out of her skimpy sundress. Her gaze locked with his and her wits scrambled, those

amazing blue eyes knocking her senseless. So much for her relaxation time in the drawing room.

King Warrick cleared his throat. "Prince Nolan and his father are here for your birthday, Acelin. And I have asked a special favor of the young prince." Was it her imagination or did the young prince wince at being called that? "He has agreed to be your escort for all of the festivities."

The air suddenly got sucked from the room and the floor shifted beneath her feet. She'd never survive a week in close proximity to this man without taking him to her bed. Brief contact already had her panting after him. As she shifted her eyes to meet his, he cocked a finely arched brow at her, as if the son of a bitch knew what she thought. Of course, he probably had women all over the world throwing themselves in his path. Why wouldn't they?

She had to extricate herself from this, and in a hurry. "While I appreciate the offer, Prince Nolan, I'm sure my father can serve as my escort, whenever necessary." She flashed her most dazzling "princess" smile, honed by years of diplomatic necessity.

"Don't be silly, dearest, your mother and I are the hosts of this soiree and have obligations. Nolan is the perfect man for the situation."

Okay, now she knew she saw the look that passed between her father and the prince. What the hell was going on here? Was her father trying his hand at matchmaking, or had her mother put him up to it? To a career soldier? Her unfortunate tumble into the ocean had scared them all, but this stretched the limits. He'd promised never to interfere in her choice; he'd better not have changed his mind now.

Regardless of any ulterior motives her father may or may not have, she needed to dislodge Mr. Mouthwatering from his duties. She didn't stand an iceberg's chance in the Timorian harbor of scoping out a potential husband with Superhunk at her side, sending her hormones into a rousing rendition of the cha-cha-cha by his mere presence.

Unless that was exactly what her father wanted to happen.

Too bad. She'd made up her mind and no one was going to shake her off course. She had to focus on finding a husband and taking her place as the future ruler of Timoria. A career soldier did not fit into those plans.

"Your Highness, I beg you to allow me to have a private word with my father." She decided to appeal to Nolan directly.

"That's not necessary, Acelin. Anything you have to say, you can say in front of Nolan."

Like hell she could. She could hear it now. Daddy, you have to make this man go away because I want to throw him down and ride him like there's no tomorrow. Any man, with the exception of her father, wanted to hear that. And then where would they be? In her bed with her being ridden like a carnival attraction? Her pulse raced at the thought. "Daddy..."

Nolan's bow to her father could have been recorded and used to teach youngsters how to properly defer to the royal head of a country. Ten years in the military hadn't cost him any of his protocol skills. "Your Majesty, if you will allow me to excuse myself. My throat is parched and I could benefit from something cold."

So could Acelin. A cold shower.

"Of course, son. We'll speak later."

Son? Her nerves went on alert. Had her father gone ahead and made arrangements for her marriage? She had to know what the hell was going on. She pressed her lips tight, bit her tongue, and prayed for patience. Flying into a snit wasn't the answer.

No sooner had the door closed behind the butt from heaven—that she refused to think about right now—then Acelin addressed her father. "Daddy, we have to talk..."

"I know what you're going to say."

Why did parents always think they knew everything? Here she was, almost thirty years old and her father still thought he knew. "Why are you insisting that Prince Nolan puppy dog me around this week?"

Her father waved his arm with all the majestic fury he reserved for the throne room and with none of the love and compassion he bestowed on his family. Stomach dropping to her feet, she steeled herself for a royal decree of the worst kind that followed such displays. His mouth opened and closed several times before his arms dropped to his side and he faced her, his eyes bright with unshed tears.

“Your mother and I feared we’d lost you yesterday, darling. When Nolan called...” His clammy hand reached across the distance to clasp hers and she felt him tremble. Knowing her parents had been frightened and seeing it in her father’s eyes were two vastly different things. Her anger diffused. “We’ve never been so scared in our lives. And we realized how much pressure we’ve been putting on you to find a husband. Even though we thought we weren’t. Pressure that put you smack in the path of danger. No, don’t stop me,” he held out his free hand when she opened her mouth to speak. “I haven’t finished. So I’ve come to a conclusion. You know your duty as heir to the Timorian throne. Your mother and I trust you to fulfill that promise, but we will allow you to do so in your own time. We have no intention of holding you to your promise to marry by your thirtieth birthday.” His fingers squeezed hers but did not let go.

A tear rolled down Acelin’s cheek and plopped on her blouse. The gift her father had just given her strengthened her resolve to do the right thing. “Daddy, I did a good deal of thinking while I was floating around in the water and praying someone would come rescue us. Now, after listening to you, I know I made the right decision. I will be using this week as an opportunity to find a husband, as Mother no doubt intended when she started planning this birthday extravaganza. Not because I feel pressured, but because it’s the right thing for me to fulfill my obligation to Timoria. While I strongly doubt that an engagement announcement will be made at the ball, I hope to have established an understanding by then with my future husband. I’m sure Mother has invited every acceptable eligible

single man on the planet for me to choose from. Most of whom I've already dated."

"Darling, you don't know—"

"No, now it's my turn to talk." She gestured imperiously, having been taught by the best. Flashing her father a smile, she continued. "And if I'm going to have any luck meeting your new son-in-law, I can't have Nolan glued to my side." An utterly inappropriate image of Nolan stuck between her thighs invaded her brain, adding to the already long list of reasons why she needed to dump him.

"You'll have to figure that one out, if you're serious about this husband hunt. I have asked Prince Nolan to be your escort and I have no intention of changing my mind."

Surveying the determined line of her father's mouth, combined with the steel in his eyes and his stiff spine, Acelin saved her breath. She recognized an unmovable mountain when she saw one. She still had no idea why he insisted Nolan be her personal shadow. "Why?"

"I need you to trust me on this, Acelin. I will not change my mind on this one."

So much for getting away from Nolan. She'd just have to figure out how to deal with him and the impact he had on her. She'd slipped away from more nannies and governesses than any dozen royal brats combined when she'd been a young hellion. She'd be able to shake off one pesky bodyguard, no problem. She had to if she wanted to be able to assess the possibilities of any other man. The thought that her parents had an ulterior motive for their insistence on Nolan's presence weighed heavy on her mind. It mattered not. She'd make up her own mind when it came to a husband.

"Fine." She tried not to sound petulant. "I'll allow him to puppy dog me around for a week. I just wish you'd tell me why this is so important to you."

"The King of Bermine has always been a strong ally of ours. It would mean a great deal to me if you would allow me to honor him and his family in this small way. Continued good

diplomatic relations and all that. Do you understand?" She understood, but she didn't believe it for one minute.

Rising to her feet, she hugged her father. "I do, Daddy. Why didn't you explain it to me sooner?" So I could have braced myself. But she kept that thought to herself.

Was it her imagination or did he mumble "Because I just thought of it myself," under his breath? "Excuse me?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you say something?"

"Just that I didn't say anything sooner because I thought you'd agree just because your father asked you to do something. I do occasionally know what's best for you."

Acelin laughed at her father's expression as he tried to be serious, only to fail. "I know, Daddy. I'll play nice with the prince."

"Thank you, darling."

She didn't miss the flare of satisfaction in her father's eyes or the triumphant grin he tried to suppress. Whatever his scheme—or her mother's scheme, to be more precise—Acelin still held the cards. The decision regarding her husband still rested in her hands. That hadn't been taken away from her. Forcing her to spend time with the uber-god she'd kicked out of the room did not mean she had to marry him. Oh, no. Marrying him would mean following him around for his career, putting her duty to Timoria on hold. A duty she'd just decided to wholeheartedly embrace.

Her traitorous body wanted to take him for a test drive, though. Duty be damned.

"Now, you'd best prepare for the extravagant lunch your mother has arranged. And that includes taking a nap. You must still be exhausted from your ordeal." Smiling, she kissed her father on the cheek and headed out the door.

With no further thought than stopping by to retrieve Patrice and retreating to shore up her defenses, she strode into the room. "I'm ready when—" She stopped cold when Nolan rose to his full height from behind a high-backed chair. She

wanted to whine and pout and stomp her feet. To decry the injustice of it all. What did she ever do to deserve this? She'd made her decision, one she felt good about.

Only to have this magnificent off-limits temptation thrown in her path.

Instead of looking uncomfortable and out of place in the middle of the ultra-feminine surroundings, he seemed to blend in somehow, even while his masculine aura dominated everything around him. She tried not to imagine him naked, sprawled out on one of the chaise lounges, ready for her, waiting for her. She didn't imagine him waiting long.

Dammit, she wanted him to look like a sumo wrestler in a frou-frou gift shop, not a Playgirl model.

"Your Highness." His rough-edged voice melted into her veins. And made her wet. "Did you have a nice conversation with your father?" He straightened from a deep bow, his manners flawless.

As she gawked at his spiked blond hair and too blue eyes, she forced herself to remember why the prince in front of her was off-limits. Military, that's right, the man was career military. Not a good fit for a princess who would one day be queen. A princess who had to stay in her country, not bounce from assignment to assignment with her husband. Duty and all that jazz.

"Yes, we came to an understanding. Thank you for allowing us that privacy."

He executed a half bow, his eyes never leaving hers. She'd never seen such an intense, ice blue, before, one that robbed her of the ability to speak and breathe.

"At your service, Your Highness."

Speaking of which... "Since we'll be spending a great deal of time together over the next week, please, call me Acelin." She ignored the flare that lit up his eyes and set her libido on fire. The empty promise of an orgasm must have impacted her in a big way, she'd never before responded to a man on such a physical level.

“Only if you call me Nolan.”

“Agreed.” She found herself being sucked in by his magnetism, unable to control her traitorous body or the train of thought wondering if she still had condoms in her nightstand.

“It might be nice if anyone spoke to me at all,” Patrice chimed in from her chair near Nolan’s. “No matter what you call me.”

Acelin purposely avoided the gaze boring into her. Her friend ascertained her feelings all too easily and she didn’t have the energy to deal with that right now. “Are you ready, Reese? It seems we need to prepare for a lunch my mother felt compelled to arrange.” She adopted her best royal hauteur as she addressed Patrice, hoping to keep her feelings to herself for the time being.

“Of course, Princess,” Patrice responded with her meek subservient charade, the one that never failed to piss off Acelin. “It has been a pleasure spending time with you, Your Highness.” Patrice curtsied for Nolan.

“It’s Nolan, and the pleasure was all mine. Especially now that we understand each other, don’t we, Patrice?”

What the heck did that mean? Acelin made a mental note to ask once she and Patrice were alone.

“Now, if you ladies will allow me the privilege of escorting you?” For a man who’d spent the past decade doing who-knew-what with a bunch of other men, none of the royal polish had rubbed away.

Patrice stuffed her hand into the crook of his offered elbow before Acelin opened her mouth, robbing her of the opportunity to beg off. And it forced her to accept his offer or look ungrateful. She’d get her friend for this one.

The simple touch of her fingertips to his bare skin set off a chain of events, from her nipples to her clit.

Muscles bunched and flexed, teasing her palm, as they exited the room. Real muscles earned by hard work, not let’s-impress-the-ladies workouts on complicated machines. His scent overpowered her, a lethal combination of something expensive

and his own natural being, fresh and outdoorsy and chock full of pheromones that called out to her.

A plan formed as his hip brushed against her. Maybe what she needed to do was sleep with the man, not get what she wanted, and put him behind her. Surely once she'd reduced him to the level of every other man she'd been with, this ridiculous attraction would dissipate. Then, she'd be able to spend the rest of the week concentrating on the important task of finding a husband.

Her step lightened as she regained control of her circumstances. Nolan gazed down at her, a puzzled gleam in his eyes. She simply smiled. No point in giving anything away until she'd launched her attack. When he escorted her back to her room, it would be time to spring the trap.

* * * *

A sigh of relief, accompanied by a creative curse, burst from Nolan's lips as the door shut behind Acelin's delectable ass. Dear God, he'd have blue balls by the time the week ended. The casual brush of her body and whiffs of her pina colada scented hair had him loaded and ready for action. Staying at her side, keeping her safe, and keeping his hands off her just might prove to be his most difficult assignment ever. If he had to give one aspect up for the overall good of the mission, of course, he knew just which one it'd be.

He'd been in lust with the frivolous image the press painted of one of the world's most eligible bachelorettes. He'd wanted to run his fingers through her shoulder length auburn hair. He'd wanted to stare into her brown eyes until he got lost. He'd wanted to cup her breasts in his hands or grasp the flare of her hip as he thrust into her—her subtle curves appealing to him.

He'd collected pictures of her, occasionally reading the articles that went along with them. She'd been his link to the world he'd left behind, the one he was now keeping safe from the bastard determined to destroy it. She'd been nothing more than a jerking-off-to fantasy—shallow and self-absorbed and out of reach.

In a few short hours, he'd learned of the depth of her character. He'd learned that she'd insisted the unconscious pilot, a man she didn't even know, be rescued first while she remained in the choppy waters with only a yellow life vest to keep her safe. When they'd finally hauled her dripping wet form into the helo, she'd been more concerned about the pilot than herself. She wouldn't allow the ensign to check her out until she'd been assured everything that could be done had been done for the pilot. No ranting, no raving, no me-me-me-take-care-of-me-first. When they'd landed at the airport, her genuine words of thanks to them had every last man blushing and feeling like ten foot tall heroes.

Including him.

Sitting in the Lear jet, waiting to depart, in her airport gift shop chic with no make-up and her hair pulled back, she'd remained calm until her parents called. Tears poured down her face as they spoke, yet there'd been no hysterics. Watching from the cockpit door, he'd wanted to take her in his arms and hold her close, to lend her his support. She certainly didn't need his strength, she had enough of her own. He'd risked introducing himself—but only as the pilot—just to check on her. She'd been as gracious to him then as she had been all through her grueling ordeal. Her self-control amazed him.

The woman from the tabloids, the one whose pictures inspired numerous masturbatory thoughts for many years—that was a woman he wanted to fuck.

The woman he'd met over the course of long arduous hours was one he'd be interested in spending the rest of his life with. If he wanted to do that sort of thing.

Just because hopping from crisis to crisis wore on him sometimes didn't mean a thing. Just because hiding in jungles and deserts and urban terror zones no longer thrilled him really wasn't significant. The fact that he thought flying a desk wouldn't be so bad was totally irrelevant. And it sure as hell didn't mean anything at all that he actually missed Bermine and his family. Or that he wanted to start one of his own.

Nolan became aware of his surroundings when a palace guard bowed to him. He had managed to wander back to the royal offices section of the mansion during his musings.

"Your Highness, His Majesty awaits you in the library." The young boy kept his eyes lowered as he spoke. Young...the man was probably the same age as Nolan had been when he'd enlisted.

Nodding, Nolan proceeded to the well-appointed room. Another guard ran ahead of him and opened the door. Damn, he had to get used to people doing things for him, at least for the duration of his vacation. He entered only after he'd been announced.

"We've been waiting for you, son."

Nolan scanned the room but didn't see anyone other than the king.

"Kap! It's about time you stopped making time with the ladies and got back to work." The marine's voice boomed through the speakerphone. Chief Chris Sullivan was one of the first people Nolan had called when he'd learned of the downed helo. The man was the best mechanic in the United States Marine Corps.

"Chief!" When Nolan had first enlisted in the Royal Air Force, his fellow pilot trainees dubbed him The Pilot Formerly Known as Prince, or Kap for short. The call sign stuck. "Are you in Aruba?"

"Damn straight. The recovery team was right behind you, and pulled the helo out of the water. I've only done a preliminary investigation, mind you, but given the nature of your situation," he paused, "I wanted to get this information to you as quickly as possible."

Nolan sat across from King Warrick while the marine detailed his preliminary findings. Several major hoses had been partially cut through, presumably in hopes that one or more of them would snap during the flight and cause a crash. The clutch had been the first to go, rendering the three-blade rotor useless. Unfortunately, the saltwater landing destroyed a good deal of the evidence, which was no doubt what the culprit had in mind. The marine stated beyond a shadow of a doubt that what happened was no accident.

"I'm going to make a wag here, Kap." Nolan loved Chief's wild-assed guesses, which were almost always on target, "and assume the helo was supposed to go down much quicker and much closer to wherever she took off, making any rescue attempt virtually unsuccessful."

Nolan muttered a string of curses. His instincts when the crash occurred had been on the money. He hadn't anticipated an attack on Acelin to be the first salvo, but he should have. It made sense. Her death would plunge her parents and the nation into a

period of mourning, allowing the insurgents to stage an easier takeover. Damn, why hadn't he seen that earlier?

King Warrick stared at him with pleading eyes. Nolan did not need to ask. He knew the importance of the task facing him. He had to keep Acelin safe at all costs, and he'd prefer twenty-four hour protection. The current arrangements left too much to chance in light of this information. He thought of the men already present on the island, ones he'd trust with her life. And he wondered what it would take for him to get into her bed. To provide the necessary nighttime security, of course. Not that he planned on abusing the king's trust.

"You'll keep us updated, won't you, young man?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. Kap has put together a top-rate team to figure out what's going on. You can trust him with your life."

"I trust him with the lives of my wife and children, which are more important."

Nolan continued to be awed by the support he received from the monarch. For all the blame he heaped on himself for Acelin's accident, none had come from anyone else.

Chief signed off with the promise to be in touch.

"You suspect, something, don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir, I do. And I'm pissed as hell at myself for not thinking of it sooner." Nolan spared no details in letting the king know his thoughts about the possibility of using Acelin to weaken or distract in advance of an attack. He respected the man too much to pull any punches. "Their first attempt was unsuccessful, sir. I fear the next assault will be more direct."

King Warrick slumped into the thick leather padding of the chair. "You're not to let her out of your sight." Worry etched his face, making him look older than his sixty-five years.

"No, sir."

"At all."

"I agree, sir."

"At all, Nolan. Do I make myself clear?"

Was Acelin's father really giving him carte blanche to his daughter? So much for abusing his trust. "Crystal, sir."

"I will deal with any nasty rumors that arise as a result of your...efficiency, shall we say. Given this turn of events, I feel the need to share my conversation with my daughter with you."

Nolan sat stone-faced as the king told him of Acelin's plans to secure a husband during the upcoming festivities. He ignored the gnawing in his gut at the thought of her interviewing and evaluating men. Other men. He disregarded the sick turn of his stomach at the prospect of Acelin with another man. He took a measure of satisfaction when he learned that she had wanted him relieved of his guard dog duties because she feared his presence might hinder her abilities. Maybe, just maybe, he distracted her as much as she did him.

He'd throw a grenade in her plans, all right. Especially given the fact that he'd just been given permission by her very own father to spend the nights in her bedroom. He had every intention of making the most of the opportunity to turn some of his fantasies into flesh and blood, with Acelin screaming out his name in orgasmic delight. Besides, any one of the potential husbands might be an insurgent in disguise. He had no intention of letting any man close to her for long.

Nolan excused himself to check in with the other members of the team before he presented himself at Acelin's door to escort her to lunch. First stop, the current soldier watching Acelin's bedroom. He'd arranged for an infrared monitor to be trained on her main window as an extra security measure to allow her safety to be monitored when she wasn't with him. He also needed to check in with the man he'd given the night watch, a man he trusted with Acelin's safety almost as much as he trusted himself. They needed to set up some sort of code so that the monitor was turned off at the appropriate times. The last thing Nolan wanted was his buddies watching him get busy with the princess. Talk about too much information—that was more knowledge than he wanted any of them to have, about either of

them. He'd never divulged any private information before and didn't intend to start now.

He tapped the code into his walkie-talkie to let them know he was on the move and set out to make the rounds.

Two hours later, all members of the team had been brought up to speed, he'd showered, and now he stood in front of Acelin's door, rocking and fretting like a teenaged boy on his first date—not a seasoned veteran used to winning battles. His palms felt damp and his stomach turned flips like it did when he stared out a yawning airplane opening seconds before a planned jump. He shot the security guard at the door a quick look. Fisting his hand, he raised it to rap on the panel.

And thought he'd need CPR when the door swung open. She looked stunning in her casual sundress that hinted at cleavage and curves. Auburn hair fell to her shoulders and framed her face. Her minimal makeup made her eyes look bigger and her lips lusher. He wanted nothing more than to pull her close until they fit together and kiss that lipstick right off. Even in low heels, she fit right under his chin. When lined up, his dick would press into her soft belly. Oh yeah.

"You look beautiful, Acelin." God, he sounded stupid. He'd have been better off keeping his mouth shut. He lifted her fingers to his lips in an attempt to salvage the situation with a bit of chivalry. He offered his arm as she tugged her door shut and bit back a smile when her hand flexed, squeezing his bicep. Either touching him affected her, or she wanted to check him out. Both options worked in his favor.

Now he just had to stay calm, cool, and under control until tonight.

And here he thought overthrowing dictatorial assholes was hard work.

Chapter 9

“She’s back home in Timoria.” Lucas paced the library, anger radiating from him. “How the hell did they manage to rescue her instead of you?”

“You didn’t cut enough of the clutch cable for the helicopter to crash closer to us, that’s how. Not to mention the fact that the pilot who was supposed to have been on our payroll turned out not to be. The fool radioed their correct position to the airport before they crashed, and not on the frequency he’d been directed to use.” Doyle sat nestled in his favorite chair, a snifter of his favorite brandy in his hand. He schemed best in just such a position. “He doesn’t know where the money came from, so at least nothing can be traced back to us.”

“That bitch has more lives than a cat. How did she manage to survive?”

“Interesting question, brother dear, since the accident wasn’t supposed to have been fatal but rather, an attempt to ingratiate ourselves.”

“That was your idea, not mine. Your obsession with the twit is going to cost us, mark my words. Regardless, we have now lost our prime opportunity to invade Timoria with a minimum of effort and bloodshed. And destruction to the country.” His brother shot Doyle a look that left little doubt that this whole mess was Doyle’s fault.

Dammit, it was not his fault. He’d done everything in his power to marry into the Timorian royal family and merge their two countries the peaceful way. It was not his fault the frigid

princess refused to marry him. Stupid bitch, what the fuck was wrong with her that she was incapable of coming?

Lucas had stopped pacing and loomed over him. "I'll take care of discussing new options with our supporters in the military. We'll go to this damn birthday party. Who knows? Maybe her near death experience has had a profound affect on the prickly princess and you can convince her to marry you after all." Lucas chuckled, the unholy sound sending chills down Doyle's spine. "Then you'll be stuck with the bitch. At least I won't have to fuck her anymore."

"I'll make sure to spend some time alone with her. A little compromising position or a little blackmail might make her more amenable to marriage." Doyle's dick hardened at the thought of the pictures they had of the three of them in bed and in the shower. The shower photos were his favorite.

"If you don't do something, I will. Martine cannot continue much longer without an infusion of money and resources. Nor can we keep the situation a secret forever."

Doyle shrugged, too drunk to comprehend the seriousness of his brother's threats.

* * * *

Acelin sat in a quiet corner of the music room with her family and a few guests who had arrived early. She rolled her neck from side to side, forward and back. She flexed and shrugged her shoulders. Anything to get comfortable. The strain of the past forty-eight hours made itself known in every muscle in her body and a headache threatened to break forth behind her temple. All she really wanted to do was relax, not entertain like a prized show dog.

Tomorrow, the influx and the festivities would begin in earnest, culminating in the grand ball next Wednesday night, her actual thirtieth birthday. Tonight, she needed to release the tension and attempt to catch up on the sleep she'd missed the previous two nights.

Postponing her seduction of Nolan sounded like a good idea right about now. A quickie encounter with the removable

shower massage followed by curling up with a good old-fashioned romance novel had taken the edge off. Why then, did she keep staring at Nolan, unable to focus her attention anywhere else?

Her eyes roamed the room, scanning the small crowd. Two former lovers mingled, speaking with each other and shooting her flirtatious glances. She plastered her most polite smile on her face when she acknowledged them. Very nice men, both of them, but not husband material. No need to add them to the list of possibilities. Extended family and close friends composed the rest of those gathered.

She caught her foot tapping a steady beat and smoothed her hand over her knee to help still it. Despite the fact that she longed to escape to the solitude of her room, she needed to be careful not to project an aura of ennui or restlessness.

Her body leapt to attention, acutely aware of Nolan's gaze scorching her skin as he watched her over the blue head of his grandmother, the Queen Mother of Bermine. Sensation skittered up and down her spine, landing smack dab in her clit. Not that she needed any more help becoming aroused. Every courteous touch, every simple brush of Nolan's body over the course of the evening hurtled her further down the path of sexual frustration. No man had ever aroused her with so little exertion. Hell, some men hadn't managed to get her this worked up with a full-forced effort.

So much for the vibrating showerhead. The liquid heat coursing through her body wouldn't be satisfied by a poor substitute. Nolan's perusal, as if he imagined her naked and spread out for him, guaranteed the only path to satisfaction. As much as possible for her, anyway. Not for the first time, she cursed her body for wanting sex when she already knew the end result. Not that it mattered. She intended to sleep with Nolan tonight if she had to grab him by the balls and drag him to her bed. Judging by the heat in his eyes as he stared at her, she'd succeed with minimal effort.

But he wouldn't. And then her body would realize that he was just another man and be able to ignore him. Which needed to happen if she planned on finding her future husband in the crowd. A future she now anticipated, as one day she'd inherit all this.

She admired the simple elegance permeating not only the music room, but the entire palace. The whole estate had been designed and decorated to reflect the traditions of the Timorian culture, not to set the royal family apart by pomp and circumstance and an ostentatious display of money. Cream and gold tones predominated the music room, accented by a smattering of blue and burgundy, allowing the instruments to capture the primary focus.

A smattering of applause drew her attention back to her surroundings and the impromptu piano recital taking place around her. The young girl, an accomplished pianist based on what little she'd heard, dipped a shallow curtsy as she rose from the bench of the grand piano. Lady Debra had all the markings of a magnificent and gifted artist. Something even ten years of lessons hadn't been able to give Acelin. Those years had left her with an appreciation for classical music, the talented people who played it, and a killer rendition of "Chopsticks." Lady Debra returned to her bench to accompany her brother on the violin. Acelin allowed the melodious sounds of the duet to lure her into a world of sound.

As she relaxed, her skin tingled and desire ran wild through her nerve endings. Funny, music usually didn't affect her this way. Her chest rose on a deep calming breath, the scented air inflaming her senses, nipples pebbling in the confines of her bra.

"You look to be enjoying the evening's entertainment." Prince Nolan stood over her, a wicked smile lighting his face. Her stomach tumbled. She studied his face, the soft light casting shadows over the lean cheeks and angular jaw. Everything about him was strong and powerful. She longed to suck on his chin and flick her tongue in the cleft.

I'd rather be enjoying you. "Mozart is one of my favorites."

“I find myself drawn more to the hard driving beat of some of Wagner’s music.”

Hard and driving. Now those were two words she didn’t need to hear right now. Not when his eyes promised to deliver. Not when they were surrounded by others.

“May I join you?” He gestured to the empty cushion next to her.

“Certainly. I’d be an ogre to deny my escort a seat.”

“You’re far too beautiful to be an ogre.”

Acelin felt herself blush. Blush, of all things. “You don’t have to compliment me.” *I’ll go to bed with you without the empty words.*

“Not even if I mean it?”

Nolan’s look of sincerity touched her. “Then I’ll graciously accept it.”

They sat in companionable silence as the duet continued. The music seduced Acelin—her eyes drifted shut and her head rolled to Nolan’s shoulder. It swirled around her, enclosing her in a cocoon where only the two of them existed, a place she longed to stay. As the piece reached its conclusion, he whispered in her ear that it was time to leave, dragging her back to reality with his hot breath caressing her neck.

Helping her to her feet, his strong hand on her back propelled her forward.

“But my parents are still here. We can’t leave.” She dug in her heels, refusing to be prodded from the room.

“You fell asleep on my shoulder. Your father is the one who told me to take you back to your room.”

“Oh.”

He made their excuses to the guests and her parents and he guided her out of the room. Despite his words and her parents’ obvious acceptance of her departure, she guilt tripped about committing the faux pas of leaving before her parents. Acelin wanted to blame her half-awake status for allowing Nolan to take control over her, but she grudgingly admitted only to herself that she enjoyed the feeling. The gentle slide of his hand along

her spine and the upper curve of her butt woke both her and her lust. She wondered why she didn't feel any outrage over being manhandled in public.

Heat from his palm seeped through the silk dress she had worn for the evening. His touch warmed up her crotch and sent a flood of moisture between her legs, making her clit yearn for his touch. Her breasts and nipples swelled, felt heavy and achy. The subtle strokes continued as they strolled down the long corridors to the family wing, ratcheting up her need. She wanted to crawl out of her skin and into his. Or better yet, have him inside her.

Had she actually entertained the idea of postponing this?

As they reached the door to her rooms, he deftly maneuvered them, his body trapping hers against the wall. He kept a hair's width between them when all she wanted was to feel the press of his hard muscles all along her length, yearned to close the minute gap. A long, thick finger traced a path from her wrist to her shoulder, leaving behind a trail of goose bumps. He tangled his fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck, his gaze locked with hers. Nolan's passion-darkened eyes stared at her lips, the intensity causing them to tingle. Her mouth felt dry all of a sudden, causing her to flick her tongue. Desire flared beneath his heavy-lidded gaze and a soft moan parted his lips. Her neck stretched and her chin tilted up, making her more accessible.

His palm cradled the back of her head, holding her steady as his mouth swooped down to taste hers. He brushed her lips, taking nips and licks, keeping the contact light. Her tongue darted out to tease him and encourage more. She traced his full lower lip and sucked on it. With a rumbling groan, he pressed deeper, claiming her with a bold thrust of his tongue. His thorough taste left her breathless, clinging to his shirt for support. Her toes curled. He shifted his body, allowing a thigh to nestle between her legs. Her clit begged her to slump and ride him for all she was worth.

Instead, she focused on a kiss that scorched every thought in her head not involved in savoring their play. Her tongue stroked his, sucking on it and simulating other pleasurable activities. She'd never before enjoyed such a kiss or prayed it would never end. Kissing had previously been a means to an end. With Nolan, it became an act of sexual intimacy unto itself.

He obliterated the whisper thin distance between them and pressed his erection to her stomach. Even through the layers of clothing, she felt him throb with need. Her fingers dug into his shoulders to keep from reaching out for him.

Nolan's hands fisted in her hair, tugging her head back. She groaned when his mouth left hers, leaving behind tingling aftershocks. He kissed a path along her jaw line to the hollow behind her ear. Her scattered wits regrouped long enough for her to realize they needed to take their foreplay out of the hallway before they got caught groping each other by more than just her guard. She didn't need gossip putting a damper on the week, or her prospects.

"Would you like to come inside?"

His hot breath feathered her ear. "Your room, or you?"

The thought of him deep inside her caused her vaginal muscles to clench. "Let's start with my room and then take it from there." She ducked under his arm, close enough to smell his unique scent.

His length pressed to her, the ridge of his impressive erection jabbing at the small of her back. Her fingers trembled and caused her to fumble with the door. Turning a knob had never been so difficult. She heaved a relieved sigh when the door swung in, allowing them to move to a more private location.

A simple push with his foot secreted them away from the rest of the world. His arm wrapped around her waist, securing her to him, her back to his rock-hard abdomen. Sweeping her hair out of the way, he attacked the nape of her neck with a trail of wet, open-mouthed kisses. Skin burned where he traced a path up the side of her neck. His tongue flicked the curve of her

lobe, darting in and out of her ear. Want for something longer, thicker, and harder thrusting in other places built.

She longed for Nolan with a desperation she'd never before known. Hope built that he'd be the one to make her come. Even though she knew better than to dream. Damn him for making her want that, even as she'd moved past it as a prerequisite.

With a tilt of her head, she granted him more access to the sensitive skin. She didn't damn him enough to kick him out of her suite. Right about now, she'd let him eat cookies in bed and not care about the crumbs.

They stood in her small parlor, her bedroom door off to her right. "The bedroom is over there, through that door." She flung an arm out in the general direction.

"What if I want to throw you down on that chaise over there and do deliciously naughty things to you?" His hands skated across her ribs, settling under her breasts. His thumbs teased the sides with light strokes that stopped just short of reaching the puckered areola.

"What if I want to stretch you out on my bed and have my wicked way with you?" She arched against his body.

With a quick shift of his body weight, Nolan scooped her off her feet and strode to the bedroom, setting her down at the side of the bed. She reached over to turn on the bedside lamp, needing to see him. He looked so handsome in his deep blue polo-style shirt and khaki pants, it was almost a shame to strip him, but she had to see him naked.

She tugged the shirt from his waistband and, with a little help, yanked it over his head, mindless of where the garment landed in her haste. Her mouth drooled at the first glimpse of his chest and an abdomen she could do her wash on. He was even more magnificent than she'd imagined. A light smattering of blond hair dusted his pecs with a trail running to his navel and into his pants. Her fingertips slid over the well-defined muscles, feeling his every twitch and jerk. Her palms flattened over the flat disks of his nipples. His heart thundered in his chest. His soft skin contrasted with the hard muscle beneath, tantalizing her.

She skimmed her hands down to his pants and up his sides, wanting to soak up as much of his heat as possible, and then moved back to his abdomen. He sucked in a breath and held it as her hands wandered.

Her fingers refused to cooperate as she struggled to open the waistband of his pants. Thick and awkward, they fumbled with the button and then the zipper. His erection flexing against her knuckles slowed the process. He drew increasingly ragged breaths as she struggled. Somehow, he knew not to volunteer to help. Once she'd managed to manipulate the fasteners, she grabbed both his slacks and his underwear and yanked them to his feet. She'd tormented them both long enough. He braced his hands on her shoulders as he kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his clothes.

As handsome as he'd looked fully dressed, he was mouthwatering in the nude. With his sculpted muscles and tanned skin, he reminded her of a male model. Her eyes refused to focus anywhere other than his amazing erection, pointing straight at her, an erotic divining rod. The number of lovers she'd entertained was far lower than the number the idiotic press attributed to her, but enough for her to make a favorable comparison. She'd never seen a nicer cock—long and thick without being so huge as to be uncomfortable, at least she hoped. Her damp panties got even wetter at the thought of taking him inside her.

“My turn,” he captured her attention, “to see you naked.”

* * * *

Nolan's dick got even harder as he watched a shiver travel down Acelin's body. Her obvious appreciation of his naked body drove his need to unbearable levels. At this rate, he'd never be able to take it slow and easy, not when he wanted her with a desperation he'd never before felt. Hell, they had all night to savor each other's bodies, right? He'd do better with round two.

To start doing that, he had to get through round one, and for that, he had to get her naked. His hand snaked around her back to tug the zipper, the silk sagging as the dress gaped. The

wispy sleeves drooped, sliding off her shoulders and exposing a wealth of soft skin. Bending, he nibbled along her collarbone until he reached the throbbing pulse point at the base of her neck. He pushed the fabric down her arms and free of her hands, his eyes riveted to the miniscule scrap of lace passing for a bra. The cups pushed up and accentuated her breasts, exposing all of the plump flesh above her nipples. Even those were visible through the sheer material, rose colored and puckered. Begging for attention.

His gaze traveled back up to her oval shaped face. Her caramel colored eyes looked almost black with the intensity of her passion, her stare directed at him. Her high cheekbones contrasted with her slightly upturned nose, giving her a decidedly unroyal air. Lips still swollen and moist from their earlier encounter and a shade darker in tone than her nipples, cried out for more kisses. He wanted to oblige, but there was so much more to see and do.

Cupping his fingers in the wrinkled dress gathered at her hips, he shoved it to the floor. Her barely-there panties matched her flesh colored bra and framed the patch of dark hair at the juncture of her thighs.

Standing in her lingerie and high heels, she fulfilled every one of the wet dream fantasies he'd harbored over the years. His cock bobbed in front of him, demanding satisfaction now that she was real and standing in front of him.

"Shall I?" She lifted her hands to the front closure between her breasts.

"Please allow me." He manipulated the clasp, keeping a grip on it so he could peel back the cups to expose the masterpieces. While not large, her boobs were a perfect fit for his hands. Her nipples tipped up from large areolas, giving her a perky look. His mouth watered for a taste, and he'd never been good at delayed gratification. Bracing an arm behind her back, he pulled her flush against him. He rolled his tongue over the top curve of her breast, feeling the shudders wracking her body. His free hand massaged the soft breast not occupied by his mouth. Continuing

the frontal assault, he conducted a very thorough evaluation of the silky flesh with his lips and tongue, studiously avoiding the nipple. Her hands pushed at the back of his head and her body shifted.

Lifting his head, he kept his mouth close as he spoke. "Tell me what you want." He knew what she wanted but teasing her allowed him to regain some of his slipping control.

"You know what I want."

"No, I don't, not unless you tell me."

"Please."

He lifted an eyebrow but did not make any move, not even when she sounded close to whining.

"Suck my nipples."

Ah, the sweetness of victory. He attacked first one and then the other tip, shifting back and forth until she groaned. It wasn't enough. He needed more. She drove him closer to the edge, faster to the brink, than any woman before her. If he was going down, he was taking her with him. He wedged a hand between them and into her panties. His heat-seeking finger dove straight into the white-hot warmth of her pussy. Her jerk almost dislodged him.

"Dear God, you're so wet." He was humbled by the extent of her passion, gratified to know he wasn't alone in the whirlwind of lust.

She was ready and he couldn't wait. It had been too long since he'd been with anything other than his hand for companionship and she was as horny as him, if her squeals and moans and dripping flesh meant anything. He lifted her to the edge of the bed and smiled as she kicked off her shoes. If it were up to him, he'd have told her to leave them on. Next time.

He shifted into the cradle of her thighs, her musky scent hitting him like an aphrodisiac. The heady aroma tempted him to taste her, but he craved the feeling of her contracting around him more. He'd make the opportunity later when he wasn't about to bust a nut.

A dim recess of his mind hollered at him, reminding him to slow down and seduce the woman. The same part insisted he worship her as she deserved to be worshipped. A bigger part of his brain told him to go for it, to enjoy the living, breathing fantasy spread out for the taking. His little head retrieved control of the situation and demanded to be buried in the warm, wet pussy within reach.

With a muttered “Shit,” he realized he didn’t have a condom. He had all the supplies necessary to conduct a successful combat operation—a highly-trained team, enough ammo to turn the Middle East into a parking lot, covert surveillance devices planted just about everywhere—but not that. The irony of it was, nine times out of ten, he had a three-pack of condoms on him as part of his mandatory supplies. He’d come to Timoria on a military mission to help a family friend, not fuck the man’s daughter, so he’d left them back in Bermine.

Nolan gazed down at the face staring expectantly up at him. “I don’t have anything with me.” Of all the damn luck.

He wondered if he’d be able to talk her into a blowjob.

“I do.”

Halle-fucking-luah. She leaned over to the antique nightstand and retrieved a box from the drawer. Within no time at all, she’d retrieved a foil packet, set the package back down, and sheathed him. He loved a woman who took control. His eternally grateful dick jerked its thankfulness.

His dick ached as he rubbed it up and down her glistening pink skin, Acelin’s body quivering at the contact and his pestering him to thrust and get on with the show. He pushed the head inside her, watching as it disappeared. The erotic picture of her taking him into her body sent even more blood to his already rock-hard cock. *Holy shit, she felt incredible.* He inched forward, pausing to glance at her face. Her head tipped back and her eyes closed, shifting her boobs up, giving him a bird’s eye view of the goose bumps covering them. Auburn hair tumbled over her shoulders as she leaned back on her hands, her elbows locked to keep her from tumbling to the mattress. The look on her face

suggested she was concentrating on more than relaxing and enjoying the sensations. She thrust her hips forward and her muscles squeezed as he pushed the rest of the way in. Her body welcomed him completely. Light hairs mingled with dark as he stilled, savoring the feeling.

Incredible sensations overwhelmed him. The reality of having her spread out underneath him surpassed every one of his wet dreams. His fantasy came to life. This time it wasn't his hand pleasuring his dick while he stroked off to some picture. Oh, no. Her tight pussy clung to him as he gazed down at her face.

The female body was an amazing thing, opening up and accepting the invasion of a foreign object, giving incredible pleasure. The sensations buffeting his body right now overwhelmed him more than any he'd ever experienced. He kept his thrusts slow and gentle as he began to move, not only to keep a handle on his rampant lust, but to build hers until they both lost control.

Each slide into the glove-tight fit of her body sent his desire up a notch and his strength down two. He focused on her body, watching for the telltale signs of orgasm so he knew when he'd be able to let loose and pound her but good. His actions also served to help him from shooting off too soon and embarrassing himself. Her pleasure came first. He wasn't an eighteen year old virgin, for fuck's sake. Dear god, his body responded to her as if he were a rank amateur.

Mayday, mayday, something was wrong. Her hips slammed into his, a normal sign of an impending orgasm, urging him to go harder and deeper, his cock protesting when he didn't. Her legs wrapped around his hips, her heels digging into his butt, encouraging him. But where was the slight flush to her skin? Where were the contractions around his dick that sucked him in and drove him over the edge? Warning flares fired off in his mind.

Then she started with yes, yes and more, more. If she banged on the table, she'd have given him a great impression of

the restaurant scene between Harry and Sally. No Academy Award for this actress, however.

Insulted, he pulled his annoyed and quivering dick free. He didn't give a rat's ass if he looked ridiculous. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"That's exactly what I thought we were doing." Her chest heaved. For a brief second, she looked like a deer caught in headlights.

"We were until you pissed me off by faking an orgasm." *Of all the nerve. How insulting.*

Her eyes flashed with something that looked suspiciously like guilt before she averted her gaze. "I did no such thing."

"Like hell you didn't. What I want to know is why." She'd been so aroused, so responsive. She hadn't faked that. What the hell happened?

The silence stretched a heartbeat, then two. It threatened to continue.

"I asked you a question." Maybe he didn't want an answer. "I know you didn't fake the passion between us before your big scene." Strike that previous thought, he did want to know what the hell was going on.

"Because I wasn't going to come, that's why." She fisted her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. Damn, she looked sexy sprawled out on the bed.

"So why bother to fake it?" Not every woman came every time she had sex. An unlucky design flaw, but a fact of life. He'd learned early on to make it up to a woman if she didn't manage to climax during intercourse and he'd never had any complaints from his handful of previous partners.

"Because it's been my experience that men have weak egos and can't handle it when I don't come."

Ouch. He didn't like being lumped with other men. He opened his mouth, a smartass comment on the tip of his tongue, when he saw the tear at the corner of her eye. With a finger on her cheek, he forced her to look at him. The vulnerability tore

his heart out. "Care to explain?" He kept his voice soft. His gut instinct told him she hid something and his gut never lied to him.

"Not really."

"I wish you would." He gathered her in his arms, trying to keep his touch platonic even as his hard-on pressed against her leg. She'd soon discover that they had all night to work this out since he wasn't going anywhere.

She closed her eyes and drew several deep breaths. "I've never had an orgasm during sex."

"Never?"

She shook her head.

Double ouch. Her story poured out of her in between shudders and gasps and tears.

"Well, if you can't come tonight during sex, then neither will I." His dick protested. Vehemently. *Too bad*. He had to do this for her. And not for the sake of the mission, but for purely selfish reasons so he'd be able to stay in her bed for the rest of the week.

Confusion and disbelief warred in her eyes. "That's really not necessary. I don't mind if you finish. It still feels good, even if I don't come."

"It's necessary to me." He'd coax her to a little mutual masturbation if it killed them both.

"Why?"

What a stupid question. His answer frightened him.

"Because I like you." He rolled to his side and stripped off the condom. "Now, sit back on the bed and make yourself comfortable. We're going to have a little fun." He tried not to laugh at the disbelief on her face.

His arousal hadn't diminished one little bit, it still jutted out in front of him for all the world to see. But knowing the way women worked, she'd probably dropped off the horny scale the second they started discussing her orgasm problem. Which meant he needed to ply a substantial amount of skill to get her going again, especially given where he wanted her to go.

Her wiggling naked ass crawled across the white comforter embroidered with large blue flowers as Acelin moved to the center of the bed. Stacking several pillows behind her, she reclined against the simple wooden headboard. Several ideas flashed through Nolan's mind as he took notice of the carved posts. For the first time, he noticed the four poster bed and the hangings wrapped around the upper frame. Some interesting possibilities grabbed him by the balls.

Time for that later. Right now, he had a mission to complete. One that mandated success. Failure tonight was not an option. He climbed up on the bed, settling himself next to the sinfully sexy princess. She eyed him warily. Reducing her to a mindless state needed to be his first priority. Shuffling her onto his lap until his dick rested as comfortably between them as possible, he brushed his lips to hers. She opened for him, but he declined to accept the offer right away. He followed the line of her jaw with his mouth, sucking and kissing and licking the soft skin until he reached her ear. He worked his way down the line of her neck, applying the same erotic pressure. Her delectable ass ground against his thighs, making him wish she straddled him and his cock. How could someone so hot and responsive not be orgasmic?

Mewls and whimpers drove him on, forcing him to capture the sounds in his throat. He traced the bow-shaped curve of her full upper lip with his tongue, her shivers tickling him, and repeated the pleasurable task on her lower lip. Soft lips met his as he melded his mouth went to hers and explored its depths. Holy fucking shit. She tasted like heaven on earth. Swallowing her throaty groan caused more blood to race to his already swollen groin. The small part in the back of his mind that clung to sanity wondered if it might explode from too much pressure. And not in a good way. He had to get her off his lap and fast, before he impaled her and blew it with her.

Breaking the lip lock, he rearranged her so that she sat between his spread legs, with hers draped over his, leaving her exposed and vulnerable. Hell, yes, he loved the passion-dazed

stare on her face. Her breasts rose and fell in time with her quick, shallow breaths, flushed with a blush-colored tint.

He covered her hands with his and drew them down to her glistening pussy. His guided hers, encouraging her to stroke herself, to show him what felt good. As she warmed to the play, he removed his hands and enjoyed the show. Her fingers parted her plump wet flesh to tease her clit.

“Oh, that’s it, baby, show me what’s good for you.”

Oops, wrong thing to say. Her finger froze.

“Come on.” He slid his hand back to cover hers, to coax her to continue.

“Are you kidding me?”

“Are you telling me you can’t...or you won’t?” If she couldn’t, she had bigger problems than even he could solve and might need to hang it up.

“I beg your pardon.”

“You’ll beg soon enough.” Her blush extended from her hairline all the way down to her nipples. Could a man die of chivalry?

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I most certainly can. Just not with a man.”

The fire in her eyes kept his lust pumped. “Prove it.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you.” He loved the defiant tilt of her chin accompanied by the thrust of her chest.

“Prove it.” He crossed his arms and leaned back against the pillows. If he’d learned one thing about this princess, it was the fact that she had to be in control. He’d bet on that need to push her to do precisely what he wanted. She’d lost control when he’d figured out that she was faking it, now he’d give her a chance to reclaim it.

“Only if you do, too.”

Oh, yeah, a challenge. “Count on it. Ladies first. It won’t take me long at all.”

Nolan expected her to break eye contact as she began to dip her finger between her legs, moistening it. Instead, she stared deep into his soul as she circled her clit with her middle finger.

She concentrated the pressure on the side of the sensitive nub, rubbing and flicking.

The force in his dick threatened to blow the top off if he didn't do something to release the buildup in his balls. So ready to explode, he'd bet he didn't even have to touch himself. His hand stroked up and down the shaft, lingering on the head. He had too much practice at this for it to take long.

When Acelin gasped, he noticed her attention had shifted to his actions and decided to give her a show. Watching her get herself off caused his nuts to draw close to his body, ready to shoot their load. Relaxing his grip, he slowed his tempo, determined to wait for her. He wanted to be able to focus on the telltale signals of an impending orgasm. Those clues were vital to his mission—he'd be the first one to fuck her to oblivion.

As he watched, he noticed the tiny shivers coursing through her body, spreading goose bumps. The flush on her breasts deepened, her nipples became more pronounced. And then it happened. Her hand jerked, her head tipped back, her lips parted, and she moaned. A belly-deep moan of pure satisfaction.

That was all it took. His cock twitched in his hand and spewed his load all over the place. He felt her eyes on him, taking in the scene. The heat from her kept him hard and pumping longer than normal.

Who knew masturbating could be so much fun?

Chapter 10

The red glow from the clock on the nightstand read four twenty-six. Despite the ungodly hour of the morning, every cell in Acelin's body thrummed with energy. The sensation was a direct result of the man dead asleep next to her.

No man had ever spent the night in her bed. Especially not her bed in the palace. Hell, she'd never even had sex in her bed in the palace. Which just proved that the man scrambled her brains. At a time when she needed every neuron properly firing.

The only thing firing right now was her libido. The man sent it into high gear. Kilns weren't as hot as he made her.

How the hell had he figured out that she'd been faking? She had that routine down pat. Where were those pink flying elephants she always swore she'd see if a man ever offered to stop having sex just because she wasn't having an orgasm?

Perhaps the more pertinent question should be why the hell had she spilled everything? Just because the man had cared enough about her and her pleasure didn't mean he deserved to know the truth about her sorry state. But it did, and she'd shared her embarrassing problem, crumbled in his arms and bared it all. Hell, she hadn't even worried that he'd sell her story to the tabloids—one of her biggest fears. It had to be the stress of recent events. That had to be what weakened her and allowed him to breach her defenses.

His unexpected response had floored her. He'd been sympathetic and understanding. He been determined to watch her come. And she'd done it. She'd actually masturbated in front of a man. While he did, too. He'd snatched control of the

situation right out from under her. He'd cajoled and she'd surrendered. Sweet surrender.

Just the memories of the whole erotic episode made her breasts ache and her crotch tingle. When it was all over, he'd gathered her up in his arms and held her until he went to sleep, as if he'd earned the right to stay in her bed with the sex play.

Had he? She hadn't kicked him out. More of that post traumatic stress weakness.

No man had ever even noticed her acting ability before tonight. Let alone pushed aside his own orgasm for hers. That had to be worth something.

Damn him, damn him, damn him. The son of a bitch was supposed to be as lacking in bed as the others. He was supposed to roll off, hop out of bed, and show his true colors. He was supposed to make it easy for her to ignore him and concentrate on finding a man suitable to stand by her side.

A man who might be interested in therapy to help her finally have an orgasm during sex. Except that he'd be away on some top-secret military assignment instead of at her side.

Damn, damn, damn.

But since he was next to her right now and distracting her from sleep, she might as well take advantage of the opportunity to explore that magnificent body some more. Never look a gift horse and all that jazz. Rolling back to the middle of the bed, she cuddled up to his side, flinging an arm across the broad expanse of his chest. Once again, his scent blanketed her, an elemental combination of him and his sandalwood scented soap.

He rolled to his side, dragging her arm with him, trapping her hand around his very obvious erection. With her other arm locked beneath her, she wasn't able to smack his back like she wanted to.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough."

"To what? Get excited again?"

"Princess, I went to sleep wanting you and woke up like this." With a growl, he flipped her over his side, sending her

sprawling flat on her back. She bit back the giggle that tickled her throat. "Unfortunately, I need to leave before it gets any later and the staff starts their morning routine. As much as I loved sleeping with you, I won't cause you any embarrassment." He kissed her eyes and her nose and then pushed out of the bed.

She gazed at his erection leading the way, longing for him to return to bed. "Don't you want to, um, take care of that?"

He looked down at the hard on. "The only thing I plan on taking care of is making sure you have a mind-blowing climax. Unfortunately, we don't have time for that now." His eyes locked with hers, dark and potent, sending every cell in her body into a fit of unbridled lust. Walking to the window, he peered through the blinds. "The sun will be up any time now."

A pathetic whine slipped past her lips as she watched him cover up his drool-inducing body with clothes. Popping down on the edge of the bed, he dragged her across his lap. His hot breath lashed the side of her neck as he nuzzled. Her head fell to the side, granting him unlimited access. She loved the little growl he made as he nibbled on her ear.

"I'll come and get you in time for breakfast. Get some sleep until then." He kissed the hollow beneath her ear and then tucked her back under the covers.

She followed him with her eyes until he shut the door, but not before he winked and blew her a kiss. What was it about the man that had her sighing and giggling like a freaking schoolgirl? He was so not her type.

Who the hell was she kidding? Tall, blond, and fucking gorgeous was the embodiment of her fantasies. If not for the military career, she'd be all over him like paparazzi. But he was, so she wouldn't.

Except for the promise of a toe-curling orgasm.

Damn, damn, damn. Not even forty-eight hours into her resolve to search for an acceptable husband, leaving sexual satisfaction out of the immediate equation, and the man managed to reduce her back to a single-minded, climax-hunting sack of hormones. Son of a bitch.

Well, so much for going back to sleep. She had until he showed up to escort her to breakfast to find a way to steel herself against his charms.

* * * *

A day and a half later and not only had Acelin not managed to figure out a way to immunize herself from Nolan's charms, but she found herself slipping further and further in lust with him. It couldn't be anything more. She'd only known him for four days, and she didn't believe in love at first sight. Lust at first sight, oh yeah, but love, no.

Throughout the course of the day, he'd been attentive. From the moment he'd shown up at her door for breakfast yesterday looking yummy in navy blue knee-length shorts and a light blue button-down, he'd been at her side. For a man doing a favor for her father, he gave every appearance of being a besotted suitor. His touch lingered whenever he stepped close—nothing overt or sexual, but sensual brushes of his fingers that kept her frustration level at a constant simmer. His eyes followed her if she wandered away, deep-sea blue with banked passion. He met her slightest whim, whether she needed a glass of water, or a distraction from a boring companion, as if he read her mind. Or her body language.

Why the act? He guarded her body, not possessed her heart.

Sure, he found her sexually attractive. He'd proved that for the past two nights. He didn't have to flirt with her to get back in her bed. Last night, they'd spent the evening exploring each other's bodies, culminating in another mutual masturbation session. She wondered what he had in store for them tonight.

Unfortunately, his possessiveness and her acceptance of it drove off real potential besotted suitors. Oh, they were polite enough. They bowed over her hand and kissed her fingers. They made small talk about the weather and the events of the week to come. But, they kept eyeing up the competition and took themselves right out of the running without knowing that they didn't have to worry about any challenges from Nolan.

She ignored the clench in her gut at the thought that Nolan wasn't a threat to potential suitors. No, he was only a threat to her heart.

Tonight, during pillow talk, Acelin intended to ask him to back off just a little bit. To look more like a bodyguard and less like a chosen companion. After all, he was just supposed to be an escort.

Her stomach lurched again.

Across the large formal parlor, Nolan sat talking with her father and a man she didn't recognize and hadn't been introduced to. Interesting. Nolan faced her, the intensity of his gaze scorching her. Her pulse raced, the increased blood flow agitating her breasts and between her legs. Her bra constricted her stiff nipples and her damp panties were becoming increasingly uncomfortable. With a furtive glance to the antique grandfather clock, she wondered just how soon they could make their escape.

In his black dress pants and black silk shirt, he exuded a royal aura. The dark color of his clothing accentuated the light blue of his eyes, adding to their piercing quality. As she sat ogling him, she attempted to decide whether he looked more like a prince pretending to be a soldier, or a soldier masquerading as second-in-line to a throne. He possessed the smooth diplomatic skills of those born royal and schooled in protocol from the cradle, moving with ease among the gathered dignitaries and jet set. His muscled body and cocky swagger told of a man who trained hard and knew he was the best. He was a soldier and a prince, both parts elemental to him.

With a start, she admitted to herself that she'd hoped the princely side of him dominated. How easily she might fall for him if they had a chance.

"He's positively edible."

"Who?" Acelin pasted on her best innocent face as she turned to address Patrice, who sat down beside her.

“‘Who?’ My ass. The two of you have been all over each other yesterday and today. Did you do him yet? Did he do it? Is that why you keep looking at him like he’s primo chocolate?”

Oh shit. She hadn’t realized she’d been so obvious. She’d never been caught daydreaming over a man. “Shh, someone might hear you.” Any gossip would shoot her matchmaking plans to hell and back. “Has anyone said anything?”

“No one else has even noticed anything beyond the attention he’s paying to you. I just know you too well.”

Truer words were never spoken. She might as well spill the beans. Patrice would hound them out of her if she didn’t. “He spent the last two nights, but I didn’t, so he didn’t...” She stopped on the off chance big ears hovered close.

“He didn’t?” Patrice shot an incredulous look in Nolan’s direction. “He certainly looks virile enough. Was it performance anxiety? What the hell happened?”

“He, well he, figured out I was acting. So he didn’t finish.” She found herself unable to tell Patrice what transpired after that. It was too personal, too special. She’d never kept pertinent details from her best friend and chose not to think about why she wasn’t divulging now.

“He didn’t because you didn’t? Damn. He’s a keeper, Acelin.”

Didn’t she know it. “He’s in the Royal Air Force, Reese. There’s no future for us.”

“What if he left?”

What if he did? She refused to entertain that scenario. Her heart might never survive if he chose flying planes over her so she preferred to continue to think of him as career military. “Why would he? He’s been in for ten years now.” Better to keep her emotions out of it and find a suitable spouse.

“Why wouldn’t he? He’s been in for ten years now.” Patrice made an excellent devil’s advocate. And pissed her off some days.

The second hand on the grandfather clock spared Acelin from coming up with a response as it closed in on midnight.

Noting the time, King Warrick rose to his feet and gestured for his queen. They made their way to Acelin, who stood to embrace them. This was one of the things she loved most about her parents—they never hid their love for any of their children behind a royal facade. The couple made their departure, signaling an end to the evening's formal activities. And the beginning of her very erotic informal ones.

"I could come just watching that man walk toward me. Fully dressed." Patrice drooled as Nolan swaggered across the room with his loose-hipped walk, his goal clear to everyone present.

"Would if I could." Acelin muttered to herself. The man made even a casual stroll a sensuous event. The drape of his pants hinted at the bulge she knew hid behind the zipper. The material shifted as he moved, pulling across his muscled thighs. She jerked her gaze up from its x-rated location.

He paused in front of her, bowing respectfully. Only she noticed that his gaze went straight for her chest. His appreciative glance made her breasts tingle and swell in their B cups and feel more like Patrice's Ds, which Nolan ignored. "Your Highness." He extended a hand as he rose. "May I have the honor of escorting you and Lady Patrice to your rooms?"

Oh, he was good. She had to give him that. The offer sounded so innocent now. To leave with both women deflected some of the possible gossip and suspicion. She placed her palm on his, allowing him to tug her to her feet. Sparks coursed between them, sending a current of electricity up her arm. She thanked her lucky stars for the audience or she'd launch herself at him right here and now. She swallowed twice in rapid succession. "Thank you for the offer." As he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, he assisted Patrice to her feet. He led the way out of the parlor.

"So, Nolan, do you plan on making a career out of the Royal Air Force?"

One of these days, Patrice was going to force Acelin to hurt her. The woman was too damn nosey for her own good.

“I’m not sure yet. My father is pushing me to come home and resume my duties. But as a second son, there’s not much for me to do. With the Royal Air Force, I feel useful and needed.”

Excitement tinged his voice at the slight mention of the military.

“But if you had something useful to do at home. Or someone who needed you. What then?”

Some day was rapidly becoming tonight if Patrice didn’t quit nosing around.

Nolan gazed down at Acelin. “Then I’d have to make a decision, wouldn’t I?”

He caught her as she tripped over her own two feet and kept her from sprawling to the floor in the middle of the corridor. Her stomach dropped to her ungraceful feet and her heart lodged in her throat.

He had to be speaking hypothetically. He couldn’t be having feelings for her yet, could he?

She didn’t hear a thing as Patrice and Nolan chatted. What ifs ran through her brain at lightening speed. What if he did have feelings for her? What if he was willing to leave the military? What if she’d finally found everything she thought she’d been searching for? She wondered if she should take the risk and begin to think of him as potential husband material.

When they arrived at Patrice’s room, Nolan brushed a polite kiss on her cheek.

“I am so going to kill you.” Acelin hugged Patrice, whispering in her ear.

“You are so not.” She had the nerve to look smug as she pulled away. “Good night, Your Highnesses. Sleep tight.” Acelin swore she heard the little bitch laugh as the door clicked shut, leaving her alone in the hall with Nolan.

Guiding her around the corner to her room, Nolan slid his arm around her waist. She should care that a potential husband might see them, even in the relative privacy of the family wing. Or that her ever present royal guard could watch. She couldn’t

work up the strength to push him away. The hand on her hip burned through her dress and branded her.

He didn't even pretend to kiss her good night in the hallway. He simply opened the door and followed her inside.

"I didn't invite you in." Her nipples poked against the fabric of her sheer blouse, making a mockery of her haughtiness. She had to once again regain her footing before he stripped her of control.

"Why stand on formalities?"

Everything threatened to spiral out of her grasp as he maneuvered them to her bedroom.

"There is such a thing as polite behavior." Crossing her arms over her chest, she attempted to hide the obvious from him when she caught him staring at her breasts.

"What I'm going to do to you tonight will be anything but polite." He put his hands on her forearms, uncovering her body to his gaze. "Your reaction to me is as clear as mine is to you." He yanked her close, pinning her arms behind her. His rock-hard erection pressed to her soft belly when she wanted it rubbing lower. Deeper inside her. Releasing her, he folded his arms across his massive chest. With his feet braced apart, he looked every inch a royal tyrant. "Now strip."

And acted like one, too. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Strip. Don't make me tell you again."

What the fuck? Her lips parted, a smartass comment on the tip of her tongue. Until she caught the look in his eyes. He dared her to defy him, to challenge him. Well, she'd show him. She'd give him a striptease that would have him jerking off and begging her to make love to him.

She backed away from him, angling for the poster of her bed, a makeshift pole if there ever was one. She shimmied and swayed, humping the post, watching for a reaction from Nolan. He dragged a dainty chair from the corner and sprawled in it. Fabulous. Right where she wanted him.

Turning her back to him, she reached for the zipper of her linen dress, wiggling her hips to force it to her feet as it came

unzipped. Her thumbs hooked in the sides of her thong, she shook her butt at him and pretended to take off her panties.

Instead, she turned to face him clad only in a matching pale pink bra and undies set and high-heeled sandals. The look on his face had her clinging to the pole, her breath forced from her lungs. Pure, unadulterated lust radiated off him in waves. His pants unzipped, he stroked his penis as he watched her. A feeling of power sent chills down her spine. This man would do anything she asked right now.

“Suck me off.” His eyes bore into her.

So much for doing what she wanted. Or was it?

“And if I don’t?”

He shrugged his shoulder as if a refusal meant nothing to him. Too bad his eyes disagreed with his body. Deep blue with desire, they betrayed how much he wanted her, wanted this. “Come suck me off.”

She ignored the voice that told her to kick him out, to refuse to be ordered around like some cheap skank. She’d never taken orders from a man but wanted to fall to this man’s feet and take his penis in her mouth. She wanted it as much as he did.

“Now, Acelin.”

Her knees wobbled as she uncurled her fingers. So much for a sexy slink in his direction. Kneeling between his legs, she tugged his pants and boxers to his calves, pausing to remove his shoes and socks, and stripped him bare from the waist down. He looked so sexy with his shirttails framing his erection. The light from the bedside lamp cast long shadows on his face, accentuating the angular planes that hinted at the Teutonic blood in his lineage.

The trembling flesh beneath her fingertips as she stroked his muscular thighs sent a thrill through her. Despite his demands, she still had control over him. Catching the thick hard length of him between her palms, she rubbed the flesh and relished the throbbing of the veins running through it. Her fingers pulsed around him, so hard and so soft. Her mouth watered for a taste of him.

Looking up, she parted her lips and flicked out her tongue. A deep-chested groan reverberated through his body, his eyes begging her to take him in her mouth. She didn't disappoint him. The drop of fluid on the tip of his head tasted salty. She wanted more and set about to make it happen. Relaxing her jaw, she lowered her head. He touched the back of her throat when she tickled the tip of her nose in the crisp hairs at the base. A different smell teased her nose—muskier, sexier—and it inspired her to give her all. One hand gripped the base of his penis, its movements coordinated with her mouth in an effort to drive him insane. The other hand massaged his balls, enabling her to judge the level of his arousal as they drew close to his body. Her tongue flicked and licked the sensitive skin of the head as she pulled back on the upward stroke. The erratic racing of his heart beat against her lips as she hollowed her cheeks and pleasured him.

The hands tangled in her hair tugged at her, attempting to draw her away. His balls were clenched tight to his body, hard as rocks, and his breath came in ragged puffs but there was no way in hell she planned to stop now. Not even with him trying to dislodge her. The teasing taste of him at the beginning whet her appetite for more. She pushed away the nagging thought that she didn't generally like to do this with the anticipation of feeling him come in her mouth.

"You need to stop, Acelin." He growled at her.

She shook her head and increased the pressure of her lips and tongue.

Mumbling incoherently, he poured a stream of warm fluid down her throat. She swallowed several times in rapid succession, but some still managed to leak out the corner of her mouth. She felt his hands shake as he cupped the back of her neck, the other hand caressing her cheek. He softened in her mouth before she released him.

"You are amazing." His soft slurred voice and his words shot straight to her heart. He may have sounded like a macho asshole when he demanded a blowjob, but he really wasn't.

No sooner did she press her cheek to his thigh than he hooked his hands under her arms and dragged her up to sprawl across his chest. He claimed her lips, stabbing his tongue between them to taste every inch of her mouth. She met his thrusts with her dueling tongue. The raw, possessive kiss on the heels of swallowing his come should have made her feel cheap, but instead filled her with deep satisfaction and contentment. No other man captivated her senses and inspired her the way this man did.

Without breaking the lip lock, Nolan shifted his body and bore both of them to the bed. The soft mattress pressed to her back and the hard length of aroused man pressed to her front. Her body chilled when he pushed away to strip off his shirt, giving her a chance to admire his body and the revived erection waggling in front of him. He returned to the side of the bed, arranging her to his satisfaction before stretching out to her side. Lifting her arms over her head, he stroked the flesh of her inner arms, sending shivers coursing through her body. Who knew that was an erogenous zone?

Straddling her waist, he plied his talented mouth to her nipples. He drew first one, then the other into the warmth of his mouth, his tongue swirling around, causing her to buck beneath him. All the while, he continued the delightful torture of her arms.

It didn't dawn on her that something was different until he crawled off the bed, bracing himself against the poster. The aura of pure masculine dominance that radiated from his body enveloped her. She stretched with catlike grace in an effort to entice him back to bed.

And then it hit her.

She tried to bring her arms down to her sides. Only she couldn't.

Son of a bitch. "What the fuck have you done?"

* * * *

Damn, but she looked angry. He'd expected that.

What he hadn't expected was the revival of his spent cock at the sight of her stretched out on the bed, her arms above her, tied to the headboard. He'd hoped the blowjob would take the edge off of his lust long enough to allow him to take his time preparing Acelin without his cock demanding he pick up the pace. No such luck.

The soft golden glow of the bedside lamp illuminated her body as she writhed on a background of large blue flowers. Muscles flexed and bunched with the effort to free her clasped hands. The ultra-feminine decor of the room contrasted sharply with the triple-x rated picture playing out before his eyes. Her breasts heaved with indignation as she moved right past angry into livid. Gold sparks flashed in her eyes, her hair an untamed mess splayed on the pillow as she thrashed her head.

If his little plan succeeded, she'd forgive him. Hopefully. She'd better fucking get back down on her knees and worship him if this worked, dammit. Even more blood rushed south at the memory of the nut-busting blowjob she'd treated him to. She'd enjoyed working him over, the movements of her hands and mouth in response to his every moan told him that.

The sexy minx was going to be the cause of some serious brain damage at this rate. Most of his blood pumped through his dick whenever he got near her. The lack of oxygen to his brain had to be a dangerous thing. Not to mention thinking with his little head never amounted to any good. Well, maybe now it did. His gaze skimmed over the most interesting captive ever under his control. He'd never tortured anyone before, but he'd enjoy making this hostage squirm and beg for mercy.

A theory had formed last night as he held Acelin close while she slept. He suspected her need to be in control hampered her ability to let loose and enjoy all aspects of sex. He planned to change that. She'd submit to him by the time this week was over and she'd be rewarded by her first orgasm.

A very male part of him jumped and shouted at the idea of being the man to give her that.

He stuffed it away and ignored it.

Twice now she'd responded to the dare and submitted to his demands. He debated if that same technique would work in this case. He couldn't exactly order her to have an orgasm and just expect her to comply. He suspected a huge part of her problem now hinged on a self-defeating prophesy. She feared she wouldn't, so she micromanaged sex, remaining in control and not allowing herself to experience it in all its lush fullness. He had his work cut out for him. Tonight, he'd take the first baby step.

She thrashed on the bed like a fish on a hook. Now, wasn't that an appropriate analogy? Time to reel her in.

"Is the cord too tight?" He knew he'd made the binding as comfortable as possible.

"You know it is. Untie me immediately."

"I'll do no such thing. You're mine," her cafe-au-lait colored eyes shot sparks at him, "and I'll do what I want with you."

"I'll scream and bring the guard in here."

"Go right ahead. I'm sure he'd enjoy the sight of you tied to your bed in those scraps of lace you dare to call bra and panties." Not that he'd let another man see her naked.

Her breasts continued to heave with her rapid breath, the throbbing of her pulse visible in the hollow of her throat. He'd had terrorists show less grit than this woman. He knew he could love her if he let himself.

Blasting that thought out of his mind, he climbed up on the bed, straddling her thighs. His dick rested on her belly, clamoring to be inside her. Too bad, it had all it was getting for the evening. This particular engagement had to do with establishing the parameters and shaking up expectations. Keeping the target off-guard increased the chances for success.

Pushing his hands under her, he made short work of her bra, pushing it up to expose her knee-weakening breasts to his hungry eyes. He palmed them, once again marveling at the perfect fit. He molded the pliant flesh in his fingers, kneading it, getting off on the stiff tips boring into his skin. He worked his

way around until he cupped the sides of her boobs, pushing them together, flicking her nipples with his thumbs. He watched as her areolas puckered, pushing her nipples higher.

Her back arched with every squeeze and pinch. Purring sounds escaped her parted lips. Thanks to the twisting of her head, her hair spilled beneath her in wild disarray. The wanton sex goddess look ramped up his desire. What he really wanted was to see her face when he made her come.

With every thrust and wiggle, she telegraphed her desire to have him use his mouth on her hard peaks, but she refused to ask. No such luck for either of them. He'd mapped out a battle plan and he was sticking to it. He moved down her legs instead, draping her thighs over his shoulders. Her tense muscles pressed his ears in anticipation. Dipping his head to her belly button, he fucked his tongue in and out, kept his hands at her sides. Her whimpers grew louder, music to his ears. He kissed a trail to the elastic band of her panties and opened his lips to cover the patch of fabric over the hair. Releasing a hot breath sent her knifing off the bed with a loud ooh.

His tongue licked a path to the delicate ribbon that connected the front scrap of lace to the back "t" and left the curve of her hip exposed to his heated gaze. Gripping the ribbon in his teeth, he shredded it and ripped the undies off her.

"What the hell did you just do to my underwear?" Yes. He'd made her mad. That should take some of the edge off her desire and distract her.

"You don't need them anymore."

"You could have just taken them off."

"You don't need them anymore and I don't feel like moving."

"I'll have you know, those expensive designer panties matched my bra."

"Buy another pair." He'd be as mean as he had to be to wrest control from her.

"Get off me, you son of a bitch."

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Such language from a lady. I think I approve.” He buried his nose between her thighs, the scent of her arousal overwhelming him. Had he actually told her he didn’t feel like moving? What a doozy. He needed to pump his cock into her until he exploded. Right now, he’d settle for dry humping the mattress.

“I. Said. Get. Off.” She flung her thighs wide, granting him the space to move. And gracing him with an uninhibited view of her lips spread wide, plump and glistening. He’d taste that flesh, just not yet.

“No such luck, princess. I’ll get off when I’m damn good and ready.” The flare in her eyes told him she’d grasped his double entendre. He pushed up her body, his face even with her boobs, allowing his breath to fan over the sensitive flesh.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

As long as she sounded mad, he still had hope. In his experience, anger frequently caused a loss of control. He planned to take advantage of that to sweep her to an orgasm. She’d probably beat the crap out of him once he untied her, but he had to take that risk. Now was not the time to think about why making this woman come meant so much to him on a personal level.

“You need a man, Acelin. A real man. Not those wimpy royal wannabes you’ve been chasing all this time.” After so much time in uniform, he considered himself more a soldier than a prince—a soldier on a mission—but even as a prince, he’d never been a pussy.

“And I suppose you’re that man?” He swallowed a laugh at the defiant tilt of her chin and the chill in her voice. Even tied naked to her own bed, she managed to look down her nose at him. Her body betrayed her hauteur with its subtle shifts and flushed skin. He was going to enjoy taking her down.

“I know damn well I am. And so do you.” With that, he devoured a breast, pulling as much of it into his mouth as possible. The flat of his tongue pushed against the nipple, laving it with long strokes. Backing out of his lip lock, he suckled her

entire areola until her hips began to undulate. He released his hold only long enough to lavish attention on the other breast. She hooked her legs around his hips, gyrating in time to the tugs of his lips and teeth. He loved doing the horizontal mambo with this woman. When they got around to making love again, the pleasure would probably blow the top off both his heads. And hers.

With her soft feminine heels rubbing along his spine, Nolan wormed his body lower once more, prepared to feast on her flesh. She'd suffered long enough. He pushed her thighs wide, settling his shoulders between them. His hands kneaded her legs as he braced them back against her chest, spreading her for the plundering to come. And he prayed she did.

It was time to put his money where his mouth was. Literally.

Focusing his attention first on the hollow where her leg met her torso, he kissed every inch of skin, taking tiny nips along the way. His fingers shifted to rest on her pubic bone, his thumbs on either side of her clit. Applying subtle pressure to the plump folds on either side, he ignored direct contact with the hard nub, exposed and begging for attention. Her hips shifted as she attempted to force his mouth where she wanted it most. Instead, he kept her pinned to the mattress with his forearms and his hands.

Determined to keep her on edge just a little bit longer, his tongue jabbed at her opening but didn't penetrate, allowing only the very tip to trace her flesh. Her moans spurred him on and he paid close attention to her whimpers, for they held the key to unlocking her full passion. For two nights, he'd paid exacting attention to the signs of her approaching pleasure. The time to test his knowledge had arrived. As the intensity of her vocalizations increased, he set himself to feast on her clit, to pour every bit of talent he possessed to the task.

The musky smell of her arousal intensified as he stroked her with the flat of his tongue. Her moisture poured from her body to coat his lips, the heavenly taste jacking up his own arousal

until he craved relief. Except now was neither the time nor the place. He shoved the thought from his mind—she deserved all of his concentration. As her trembling began and goose bumps crawled over her flesh, he suckled her clit between his lips and gave the fleshy nub the workout of its life.

Tuned in now to every shudder and whimper, he made love to her with his lips, teeth, and tongue. He remembered the stroking caresses of her fingers from the night before and imitated them to the best of his ability. His thumbs pulled back on the flesh, allowing him to take even more of her into his mouth.

The tenor of her cries became desperate. The violent jerks of her hips might have dislodged a lesser man. He watched her breasts and belly for the telltale signs he'd seen yesterday and pumped a mental fist when he noticed her nipples elongate, harden. Her belly rippled, the muscles contracting. Incoherent mumbling reached his ears, his hearing not as acute as normal with his blood pounding in them and her thighs pressing against them.

Powerful, tiny jerks of her hips rocked her into his mouth. The delicate hairs stood on end. A very distinct ohshitohshitohshit echoed off the walls. Her body stilled for a split second and then began to tremble as she struggled to catch her breath. He slowed the motions of his tongue, drawing out the sensations for as long as possible. He covered her pussy in light kisses then rested his cheek on her thigh.

And pumped another mental fist in the air.

Chapter 11

Crown Prince Doyle stepped off his private jet and into the glaring Mediterranean sunshine. His brother Lucas followed steps behind him. They paused, perched on the landing step of the rollaway stairs, surveying the tarmac and the scenery beyond.

“Timoria’s a beautiful country, isn’t it Lucas?”

“And prosperous.”

“This will all be at our disposal, once I marry that bitch, Acelin.”

“This will all be ours, brother dear, whether or not your plan to compromise the cunt succeeds. Given your previous failures, my backup plan is crucial.”

“Don’t forget, you failed in the last attempt as well.”

* * * *

“Stop the tape. I’ve heard enough.” King Warrick slammed a meaty fist, rattling the objects on his massive cherry desk.

“They were our friends and allies.”

Nolan clicked off the surveillance recording and turned to the monarch sitting slumped in his chair. His hair seemed grayer, the lines in his face deeper. The disbelief he’d expressed earlier, when Nolan had first come to him with their possible culprits, had vanished, replaced by a soul deep pain, evident on his face and person. Betrayal cut deep.

Nolan wasn’t any happier about their schemes than the king. Hell, he’d known the men since they were all in diapers. He especially resented the reference to Acelin as a “bitch.” He’d kill the man himself for calling her a “cunt.”

He'd hoped the news he'd received a few hours earlier had been wrong. Even though it came from one of the best in the business.

A mole in the Martine military learned that the princes were behind the threats to Timoria and had set plans for military action in motion. The soldier relayed it to his contact, who had waylaid Nolan while on his morning jog. Surveillance equipment had been hastily arranged to cover the men's arrival and for the last fifteen minutes, Nolan and King Warrick had been enduring the unpleasant task of pouring over the video.

"I had hoped," the king held his head in his hands, elbows propped on his desk, "that your intelligence was wrong. That no one really wanted to hurt Timoria." He heaved a sigh. "Thank you, Nolan. I'm grateful you're here, and in charge."

"Don't thank me yet, Your Majesty. We still don't have any hard evidence to implicate them in anything, but now that we know where to look and who to watch, our job just got easier."

"Why would they want to hurt us, Nolan? I don't understand."

If there was one thing that Nolan knew, it was that evil didn't need a reason. At least not a reason that made sense to anyone else. "We may never know, Your Majesty. But I hope to find out." Even as they spoke, strings were being pulled to allow for access to the intimate details of the Martine monarchy. Legally or otherwise.

"Please, son, don't let Acelin out of your sight. These men have no love lost for my daughter and God knows what they have planned for her."

"At times when I can't be with her, a man I trust with my own life is watching out for her. No one will get near her. I also plan to intensify the guard around you and Her Majesty and the other children."

"I know you've spent the past three nights with her. Thank you for doing all I've asked of you."

Sneaky old man had some tricks of his own. Nolan didn't respond to the statement. He didn't need to and suspected Acelin's father didn't actually want confirmation.

"I will admonish you, though, to take care of her heart, as well as her person. She's not as tough as she thinks she is."

He had no clue what to say to the man sitting in front of him. Whatever else he may be, he was a father looking out for his daughter. "Your daughter is an amazing woman, Your Majesty. I respect you and her too much to do anything to intentionally hurt her." The truth of his words echoed in Nolan's soul.

The king nodded. Closing his eyes, he rolled his head from side to side. The events of the last several hours had emotionally drained the monarch. "What do I do when I see the duplicitous bastards?" His anger welled up again. A good sign.

"It is essential that we act as if everything is perfectly normal." Nolan had to personally keep from throttling the shit out of the men. King Warrick blew a burst of air through his lips, making a rude noise Nolan understood all too well.

"That won't be an easy task. If you'll excuse me, son, I need to be with my wife right now. Will you escort Acelin to lunch?"

"I have every intention of finding her." An easy task, actually, considering all Nolan had to do was radio Tony for his position.

"I'll see you shortly then."

Taking the cue, Nolan rose and bowed, leaving the room. Long strides ate up the distance to his room, where he took a quick shower before calling Tony on his combination cell phone and walkie talkie.

As he strolled to the tropical garden when Tony watched her from a discreet distance, the blood in his veins thrummed in anticipation of seeing Acelin. When she hadn't as much as budged as he climbed out of bed, he'd hoped to speak with her before breakfast. Instead, duty called. After the unfortunate delay, the moment of truth was at hand.

* * * *

The bright sun rose high in the sky, the strong rays heating Acelin as she sat on a marble bench next to a bubbling fountain. Surrounded by a group of young women about her age, she had never felt so alone. They spoke of families and children, obligations to charities that went beyond signing a check once a year or showing up at a fundraising event.

Unbidden, an image of a miniature Nolan running through the garden and splashing in the fountain sprang to mind.

Where was the son of a bitch, anyway?

He'd held her all night long, after she'd recovered from an orgasm—achieved without the aid of a mechanical device—and after he'd untied her. She tried to work up a good mad at him for trussing her up like some submissive slut in a bad porno movie, but failed miserably. The man had made love to her with his oh-so-talented mouth and made her come. How could she possibly stay mad? Even now, twelve hours later, the memory sent a warm flush coursing through her veins. She knew she'd been missing out on something fucking incredible, but she just never knew how incredible. How could she? Her only basis for comparison was self-induced orgasms. Not even the shower massage competed on the same level as Nolan's tongue. If it were up to her, she'd insure that mouth with Lloyd's of London.

After kissing her awake this morning as the first rays of light hinted on the horizon, he'd peeked out the window and told her he was going for a run. She'd wanted to roll over and talk with him, but the lethargy zapping her body refused to let her. He promised to meet her before breakfast. Like a sap, she'd waited. When a faint knock sounded on her door, she'd pounced like a lovesick sixteen year old. Only to find a stud muffin named Tony filling up the space. A week ago, she'd have drooled all over him. Instead, she'd struggled to remain polite while he introduced himself as Nolan's secretary, requesting to escort her to breakfast while the prince handled an urgent business matter.

Her anger and frustration built as Nolan remained absent. Only the not-so-subtle glances of Lady Kellye, one of her minor ladies in waiting, threw at Tony kept her from flipping out and

demanding he return her to her room. Why make the woman miserable when she was obviously having fun scoping out the fine male form who was trying to be discreet while surrounded by women and flowers? *Poor guy*. Nolan owed his employee big time for this.

“Good afternoon, ladies. Your Highness.”

Had she conjured him out of thin air? He looked edible, standing beside her in an ab hugging T-shirt tucked into knee length denim shorts. Damn, she’d like to eat him alive. She blushed when she remembered that she’d done just that last night.

“I apologize for interrupting your discussion, but I need to steal Princess Acelin from your charming company.”

Tony hopped to Nolan’s side, the two of them speaking in a low voice. *Hmm*. The secretary bowed to Nolan, an awkward gesture that had the prince laughing. Acelin suspected there was more to this relationship than the obvious but she brushed away her concerns.

Nolan held out his hand for her. Slipping her fingers in his grasp, she allowed him to tug her to her feet. With her hand secure in the crook of his elbow, he guided her in the direction of the family’s private dining room. His nearness sent her hormones racing. She flicked her gaze down to make sure her puckered nipples weren’t visible through her shirt. At least he couldn’t tell her panties were damp.

Damn. Why did her body have to respond to him even when she was annoyed with him for dumping her this morning? Waiting for a private minute to rip him a new one, Acelin walked in silence. Her anger dissipated with every step, overwhelmed by giddiness at his nearness. Giddy, of all things. Maybe she would have been better off with partners who couldn’t make her come. She’d been able to keep her wits with them. This man robbed her of coherent thought with just his presence.

“I saw your father earlier and he requested I join you and your parents for an informal lunch.”

An informal family lunch. The significance didn't slip by her. Funny, the thought of her parents playing matchmaker didn't bother her near as much as it did when she'd first arrived home, even if they were pushing her toward a possibly impractical Royal Air Force pilot. "That sounds lovely. Thank you for finding me." Good fucking grief, how lame did that sound? It was official. The combination of Nolan at her side and the orgasm had sapped her brain.

No doubt about that, because she should be running in the other direction. Climax or not, Nolan was the wrong man for her. So why did the old Acelin push her way to the front? The one who was dead set on marrying the first man who made her come. Why was that Acelin trying to take over the more mature Acelin? The one who learned the importance of duty and family; the one who wanted to marry a man based on his personality, his commitment to her and Timoria, not a man who wielded his penis—or his tongue—with amazing skill but would fly off without any warning.

She hadn't even turned back into the old Acelin, if she admitted the truth to herself, but a new and unimproved version. One who allowed a man to spend the night in her bed and ditch her in the morning. One who allowed orgasmic afterglow to turn her to mush.

Why the hell had she found a man with the ability to make her come now, after striking that criteria from her list?

Maybe the better question to ask was why did the man who made her toes curl and the tips of her hair explode have to be so wrong for her? A professional soldier did not have the makings of a good king.

Damn, damn, damn.

Nolan jerked Acelin back to her surroundings, pinning her in an alcove. His body pressed her to the wall. The contrast of the cold plaster at her back and warm male at her front fired her blood. She'd have melted into a puddle of lust at his feet if he weren't supporting her.

“I’m so sorry I bailed on you at breakfast.” He gripped her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “An emergency came up and I had to take care of it.” A mixture of sincerity and regret colored his eyes. Yep, he’d turned her to mush. “I’d much rather have been with you.”

Her palms slid up his chest of their own free will, unable to be so close and not touch. “Did you manage to resolve it?”

“Not completely, not yet.” He buried his face in her neck and nibbled at the base of her throat. “How was Tony?”

“A perfect gentleman.” Wits began to scatter as he trailed his lips up to her ear.

“Good, or I’d be forced to beat the crap out of him.”

A violent shiver raced down her spine. Acelin attributed it to his tongue in her ear and not the thrill of his words or the possessive growl in his voice. Hot air tickled her ear as he muttered a creative curse and put a scant distance between them.

“I don’t think we should keep your father waiting.” He lifted his head to stare into her eyes, the ice blue color warmed by his passion.

“You’re right. My father prides himself on his punctuality.” Instead of letting go, her arms wrapped around his waist, hugging them closer together. He watched her lips as she spoke, his heated gaze drying out her mouth. Flicking out her tongue, she found it trapped between his lips, caught in a deep kiss. A long slow one, tender and full of emotion.

He released her with more creative curses, grabbed her hand, and dragged her in the direction of the family dining room. She dragged her heels along the polished floor, attempting to slow him down. A wasted effort if ever there was one. He was a man on a mission.

“Let’s just go back to my room. You can send a message to my father that you couldn’t find me.”

He stopped short, and she slammed into his side. “Don’t tempt me, sweetheart. But I have no intention of disrespecting you, or your father like that. Now, after lunch...”

The delicious thought filled her mind and sent her hurrying along their way. The sooner they got there, the sooner they could finish lunch. And the sooner she got to have her second-ever man-induced orgasm for dessert.

The meal dragged on forever. She'd never experienced such an interminably long event with her parents and siblings. She always enjoyed spending time with them. Even the chocolate dessert on her plate held little interest. She wanted hot, wild monkey sex with the man sitting across the intimate round table from her. A man seemingly content to chat away the afternoon with her parents instead of getting sweaty in her bedroom.

Time to take control of the situation.

Slipping off her open-toed pump, she tapped her toes on Nolan's foot. He quirked an eyebrow at her, challenging her to continue. Stroking her foot along his shin, she worked her way up to his knee. The wiry hairs tickled her instep, forcing her to bite back a giggle. Even sliding marginally lower in her seat, her toes reached only as far as his inner thigh at the edge of his shorts. So much for a lap massage. She watched as his eyes deepened with his passion, the warm blue gaze driving her lust up another several notches. Not that she needed any help.

He gripped her toes, his fingers tracing them, tickling them. The man always managed to set her off balance.

Just like last night when he'd bound her wrists together and secured them to the headboard. He'd forced her to allow him to set the pace, to control the experience. And what an experience it had been. As if he followed the direction of her thoughts, a finger slid between her big toe and the one next to it, pumping back and forth.

"Mother." Oh, dear god, she hoped her voice didn't sound as breathy to her parents as it did to her. "Will you excuse me please? I'm suddenly feeling very tired. The past events tend to catch up with me at unexpected times. I need to go rest before the evening festivities."

"You'll see she gets back to her room safely, Nolan?" What the hell was that look that passed between her father and Nolan?

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Of course, my dear.” Her father turned his attention back to her. “We’ll be down on the beach if you care to join us later.”

Snatching her foot from Nolan’s lap, she shoved her tingling toes back in her shoe. As she rose to her feet, Nolan and her father also stood. Her knees wobbled, her bones turned to a gelatinous goo thanks to the man standing in front of her. He waggled his eyebrows as she flattened her palms on the table, the corners of his lips curling up ever-so-slightly. As if he knew he’d turned her into a blob of desire.

A deep breath helped her regain her composure long enough to hug her parents and stroll from the room with her vexing problem tagging along behind. Hmm, there was an idea. Nolan, at her beck and call, a slave to her commands. She’d never considered a little light bondage as part of sex play, but since last night’s foray proved so successful...

“I’d have thought you slept the sleep of the sexually satisfied last night.” Instead of coming from behind her, his breath caressed her ear as he whispered.

She blushed from the roots of her auburn-tinted hair to somewhere below her scooped neckline and felt warm in her sleeveless cotton dress.

“You must feel very proud of yourself.” At some point over lunch, she’d decided to forgive him for standing her up for the entire morning, but that didn’t mean she planned to let him off easy. Oh, no, he needed to squirm.

“Well, now that you mention it...”

“It’s not every day I get stood up by a man I let share my bed.” The only man to spend an entire night in her bed.

“I explained that it was unavoidable.”

She stopped short of pushing him too far. The fire in his eyes warned her that she didn’t want him for an enemy, for more reasons than one. “Yes, you did. Which is why I’ll let you make it up to me. Maybe.” With that, she quickly stepped down the hall, ducking to avoid his grasp.

Several times, his fingers grasped for her, only to have her spin or dip out of his clutches. Belly deep laughter erupted as he voiced his complaints. Truth be told, he had the ability to catch her and drag her to her room. His not doing so told her he enjoyed the game as much as she did.

Just shy of her door, in a burst of speed, he swept up behind her and hauled her off her feet. He joined in her fit of laughter as she looped her arms around his neck and snuggled close to the hard expanse of his chest. With each shuddering breath, she inhaled his fresh clean scent, a combination of soap and the outdoors and musky male. No coy cologne or aftershave to mask him. He made her feel soft and feminine locked in the security of his embrace.

Before she calmed her breathing, Nolan had her flat on her back on her bed, his hands skimming the inside of her legs, without her even realizing how they got to her bedroom. She missed his warmth when he pushed to his feet, shedding his shirt and pants with quick, jerky motions, then rejoining her. His almost naked length pressed to her side, setting her skin on fire through the skimpy barrier of her dress. Strong fingers stroked her cheek, along her hairline, down her neck, and all the while, his eyes never left hers. The traveling fingers played with the neckline of her dress, dipping underneath the bodice to tease the tops of her breasts. Her bra rasped along her hypersensitive tips and she yearned to remove it, to allow him unfettered access to soothe the ache he stoked higher and higher. All of her senses focused on the soft fingertips exploring her. Breath hitched, snagged in her lungs, unable to go further as she anticipated his next move.

Not content to allow him to dominate yet again, she hooked her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down to her. Pulling herself up, she met his lips halfway. Her heart pounded in her ears as she traced his bow shaped upper lip. His moan sent vibrations from her mouth all the way down to her toes. Thrusting her tongue deep, it sparred with his. The beating

in her brain grew more insistent with each delicious taste and swipe.

“Fuck.” Nolan jerked away from her and jumped off the bed, startling her. “You’d better get that.”

Gathering the scattered bits of her sanity, Acelin realized the pounding hadn’t only been in her ears, but at her door. She smoothed her hands down her dress and swiped her thumb over the corners of her mouth.

This had better be good, she grumbled to herself, or she was going to have someone’s ass.

“Who is it?” She pressed a palm against the door, her shaking nerves and raging desire making her weak.

“It’s Tony, Your Highness.”

She was really beginning to hate the man. Pulling open the door, she fixed him with her haughtiest look. A lesser man might have crumbled.

“Is Prince Nolan here, Your Highness?” He could have at least looked sorry, but no, he stared back at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

Desire tempted her to lie. Knowing that it most likely concerned whatever kept him busy earlier in the day, she gestured for the secretary to enter. If there was one thing she understood, it was duty to your country, no matter how sucky the timing.

“Tony, what’s up?” He emerged from her bedroom looking calm, cool, collected, and yummy. Damn him. She felt like a limp, washed-out hormonal mess.

“I need to speak with you, Your Highness.”

The two men exchanged a wealth of nonverbal communication, pissing her off. If he was going to interrupt a stellar round of lovemaking, she deserved to know the whole deal. But she didn’t, not really, and she knew it.

“Acelin, please forgive me. I’ll return as soon as I’m able.” The look of abject misery in his eyes told her he hated this as much as she did.

“Fine,” she tried not to pout. “But now you really owe me.”

Did she just hear Tony snicker?

“It’s a deal.” He brushed a kiss across her cheek and rushed out the door.

What the fuck was going on?

* * * *

Acelin curled up on an oversized chair in her library-study-office, an unread book on her lap. Normally, the bright sunlight spilling through the picture window lit up not only the burgundy and gold room, but her spirit as well.

After Nolan’s ill-timed departure, she skulked about her rooms in search of something to occupy her time. Catching up on correspondence held little interest. Taking a nap only served to remind her of what she’d rather be doing in bed. She half-considered joining her parents and guests on the beach but wasn’t feeling very sociable.

What the hell was wrong with her? She didn’t mope and pout over men. It wasn’t her style. The reins stayed firmly in her hands whenever a man piqued her interest. She made the decisions. She called the shots. More than one man joked that she wore the pants in the relationship. Or at least she’d thought they were joking at the time.

Except for Nolan. The man had her off balance from the very first time she saw him standing in the doorway of the family jet. He’d seen her cry—seen her at her absolute weakest—and had offered to comfort her, but had returned to the cockpit and brought her home when she declined his help. Why hadn’t he told her who he was then? More important, why had he been piloting the jet instead of one of the regulars? They hadn’t discussed the incident at all, maybe because he was waiting for her to bring it up. So why hadn’t she?

Then, to find the object of several fantasies in her father’s office and be told that he was to be her “escort” rocked her world. If she were honest with herself, she’d admit to being secretly thrilled to have him by her side. His attention made her feel special. She enjoyed his company.

When he was around.

Damn. She hated it when she sulked. She tried to chalk it up to PMS but knew otherwise. She suffered from MNS, Missing Nolan Syndrome. Not good. He'd managed to worm his way under her skin far too quickly for her peace of mind.

She clutched her book in her hand. It made a satisfying thunk when slammed against the arm of the chair. Why—thunk—did the one man—thunk—who managed to give her an orgasm—thunk—have to be—on the “do not marry” list? She banged it a couple of extra times for good measure.

Having vented some of her frustration, Acelin realized that Nolan wasn't a potential husband based simply on his stellar lovemaking abilities. Even though what she experienced so far was exceptional. Thoughts of a future together danced around because of what she was learning about the man every moment they spent together. He honored his responsibilities, whether to her father, or to his country—or whatever Tony needed from him—without complaint or hesitation. People were drawn to him. She'd noticed talent when he'd mingled, working the room like a politician, except in a good way. His smile lit up his eyes when he engaged in a conversation. He made her laugh. He made her feel.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about him was the way he treated her, as a woman—not as a princess or some means to an end. He listened to her, talked to her. He teased and tormented her in and out of bed. In bed, he was nothing short of amazing. Their first night together, he'd figured out she'd been faking and been insulted. Then stopped. Stopped, for crying out loud. If that didn't brand him as unusual, nothing did.

Just the memories of their bed play had her body clamoring for the shower massage.

A knock on the door temporarily derailed that erotic possibility, the first activity to grab her interest in an hour. Hoping and praying Nolan had returned and she didn't need a variable speed showerhead, she hustled to respond to the summons. Giddy and light, she felt like a teenager waiting for her first date. Her heart raced as she opened the door.

“Your Highness, His Highness Prince Doyle of Martine wishes to see you.” The guard, one of the many official royal security personnel stationed around the mansion, announced her visitor. Was it her overactive imagination, or did he resemble Nolan’s secretary, especially around the eyes? No, too many thoughts of Nolan had her seeing reminders of him everywhere.

Her mood sank like a brick in a pool when she turned her attention to her guest.

“Try not to look so happy to see me again.”

Oops. She schooled her face to her “interested royal” look, but not before Doyle caught the surprise on her face. “It’s good to see you. Are you well?” Memories of her departure rushed over her, leaving her feeling as helpless as she had that day when her flight turned out to be more than eventful. She needed some of Nolan’s comfort right about now.

With a grand gesture, she waved Doyle into the main room, determined to shove aside the memories of the crash. He settled on the loveseat, propping his ankle on the opposite knee and adjusting the perfect crease in his pants. The contrast with Nolan struck her. Doyle sprawled on a chair, every movement, every gesture calculated to show him to his best advantage. When Nolan shared this room with her, he sprawled on the couch, filling the space and dominating her senses. Doyle didn’t even cause a blip on her radar screen.

“I heard about your tragic accident on your way to Aruba. Lucas and I were relieved to learn you’d survived.” He stretched one arm along the back of the couch, no doubt wondering how he looked.

“And yet you didn’t bother to come and check up on me or call to inquire about my well-being, not at the airport and not since I arrived home.” She sounded bitchy and didn’t give a flying fuck. She wanted the man out of her life.

“I wasn’t sure I’d be welcomed.” He examined his perfectly manicured nails in an effort to avoid her angry stare.

He patted the couch, encouraging her to sit next to him. Instead, she chose the chair facing him. Yanking on the hem of

her skirt, she tugged it over her knees in an effort to prevent him from thinking she flirted with him. He set her on edge, making her teeth hurt as she clenched her jaw shut.

He had her there. "I'm not in the mood for company right now, Doyle." Except for Nolan's.

"I hope you'll forgive me for intruding on your solitude. Your mother informed Lucas and I that you were resting this afternoon. I decided to take a chance and speak with you alone."

Swallowing slowly, she prepared for the worst. Given the earnest look in his eyes, he was preparing to pitch marriage one more time. The only thing that could make matters worse was to have Lucas show up at the door. Stomach lodged in her throat, she waited.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out on the island." A brief flash of something indefinable flared in his expression, only to be replaced with a contrived, pained face.

"I'm not. If it had worked out, I don't think I could have done that for the rest of my life." She was a one-man woman, all the way. She supposed she should thank them for teaching her that about herself. Nah, she wasn't feeling gracious.

"Be that as it may, I hope our failure didn't change your feelings for me."

Not having an orgasm hadn't affected her feelings for Doyle one little bit. Doyle's actions impacted her opinion far more. "The accident forced me to reassess my life, Doyle..."

"Please let me finish, Acelin."

There he went again, thinking only of himself. If he dug his hole any deeper, she'd start shoveling the dirt back on the coffin.

"By all means, continue."

He either didn't hear or chose to ignore her sarcasm. The first toss of soil landed on the lid with a resounding smack.

A heavy hand knocked on her door, causing her to jump in her seat and her heart to race. Please, please, please, she prayed it wasn't Lucas. Excusing herself, she rose to her feet and answered the door. Her heart soared and cartwheeled in her chest at the sight of Nolan filling the frame. He leaned forward,

the desire to kiss her sparkling in his eyes. With a hand to his chest, she prevented the gesture. The confusion and hurt in his eyes stabbed through her. As much as she wanted to kiss him, she had company.

“Who’s there?” Doyle demanded, as if he had a right to question her.

Rage contorted Nolan’s face as he stepped around her to take a close look at her guest. “What is he doing here?” His voice bristled as he turned on her, looking angrier than she’d ever seen.

Of course he’d know Doyle—royal circles weren’t very large.

Imperious as usual, Doyle answered for her. “I stopped by to visit an old friend.” If Doyle were a dog, the scruff on the back of his neck would have been raised. “What are you doing here?”

“I came by to visit a new friend.”

Good grief. Enough testosterone sparked in the air to gag a dinosaur. One of them had to leave. Doyle had moved behind the loveseat, hands gripping the back. A mask of outraged hauteur mottled his face, a look only he could pull off. He might be royally pissed that his opportunity to propose had been thwarted, but she was ready to kiss Nolan. He stepped just inside her room, proclaiming his right to be there by not waiting for an introduction or an invitation. Concern and possession flashed in his eyes as he watched her, keeping a careful guard on Doyle as well. As he stood there, feet braced shoulder width apart and his wide shoulders pressed back, she caught her first glimpse of the military man.

She sensed Nolan didn’t like or didn’t trust Doyle. The negative emotion radiated from him in waves. For a brief, panic-stricken minute, she feared he knew about her trip to the private island and her reason for being there. It was impossible. The only two people who knew—aside from herself, Doyle, and Lucas—were Patrice and the helicopter pilot.

“Doyle, thank you for stopping by to check on me. I’m glad you’ll be here for the festivities.”

“I would prefer that we finish our rudely interrupted conversation. Our important conversation.” Doyle aimed his comments at Nolan in a pathetic attempt to persuade the other man to leave in his place. Stupid man. Acelin hated being talked about as if she weren’t in the room. Even if Nolan could be persuaded to leave, which she doubted, she’d see pigs fly before she’d be alone with Doyle.

“Nolan and I were rudely interrupted, as well, before your visit.” She’d rather get back to getting down and dirty with Nolan then fending off a marriage proposal from Doyle. Now, a marriage offer from Nolan...

Holy hell. Where had that thought come from?

“Acelin?”

She turned her attention to Doyle. An ugly rage colored his face and his fingers dug into the couch. He had no intention of leaving until he spoke his mind.

“I do believe the lady made a request.” Nolan cleared the doorway for Doyle’s departure.

“Acelin, please. We need to finish our conversation.”

Hmph, now he decided to aim his request at her.

Nolan shifted several steps in Doyle’s direction. “A gentleman honors a lady’s request.”

“Fuck you.” Doyle flew around the couch and took a flying leap at Nolan. The battle-trained man neatly sidestepped the attack, sending Doyle sprawling to the floor. When Doyle tried to push to his feet, Nolan planted a foot between his shoulder blades.

The sight made Acelin giggle, earning a half-smile from Nolan. With his leg bent and his hands on his hips, he looked like a triumphant explorer ready to shove a flag in Doyle’s butt and claim the land in the name of the King of Bermine.

“I trust now, that once I remove my foot from your back, you’ll remember your manners and leave Acelin alone.”

Doyle grunted what she hoped was a yes. She had no doubt Nolan would hurt him if he didn’t beat a hasty retreat. As much as she wanted him gone, she didn’t want him seriously injured.

Nolan removed his foot, allowing Doyle to push to his knees, then to his feet. With his back to her, she missed the look Doyle shot Nolan. The answering glare was murderous.

A blank face greeted her when Doyle turned around. He executed an informal, almost insulting, bow. And left without a single word.

As she turned to Nolan, he advanced on her with an unreadable expression clouding his eyes. And made her wonder just what she'd gotten herself in to.

Chapter 12

Nolan's brain knew he was acting like a Neanderthal. For once, he couldn't blame it on the fact that all his blood had rushed south, leaving his little brain in charge. He didn't give a flying fuck that gut-churning emotion drove him to act like a complete moron. He'd even name the emotion if forced. He looked damn awful in green, if he did say so himself.

When Tony'd radioed him that Doyle was paying the princess a visit, he'd burst out of the meeting like a man possessed. So much for calm and detached. He didn't even pause to worry if Tony's cover had been blown when Acelin saw him trussed up like a Christmas goose in the royal guard costume. Seeing Doyle sitting in Acelin's room had rattled him like he'd never been before. Swooping in to extract men under heavy fire didn't cause his palms to itch and sweat to break out on the small of his back. He trained and trained for scenarios like that until he could produce results in his sleep.

Nothing prepared him for the jolt to his heart that nearly dropped him when he realized she'd been alone with a man out to hurt her, her family, and her entire country. Or the jealousy that sucker-punched him in the gut. She'd had a relationship with the bastard. He'd read enough about it in the tabloids. It shouldn't have bothered him, the thought that the slimy rat had put his hands on Acelin in the past. Seeing them together, in the flesh...he shuddered.

The way she'd handed Doyle his sorry ass on a stick kick-started his heart with a relief he shouldn't have felt.

Not unless she meant something to him. The pressure to put a name to his feelings intensified.

Pushing that thought aside, he closed the distance between them the second the door slammed shut. A brief panic flashed in her eyes as he advanced, then flared into passion as he scooped her in his arms. He didn't stop until he carried her into her library and settled them both in the leather chair-and-a-half by the window. She curled against him, the other half to complete his soul.

Sooner or later, he had to face his feelings.

He chose later. For now, all that mattered was holding Acelin in his arms.

The rush of adrenaline seeped out of his cells, his heart slowing to normal and his nerves stepping back from the edge. His senses remained on alert even as his body relaxed and soaked up every nuance of the woman nestled on his lap. A light floral scent mingled with her natural soft fragrance to nudge his dick to attention. He wanted to make love to this woman in the worst way. *Okay, not the worst way*, he chided himself, she'd suffered enough of that in the past. He yearned to be inside her the next time she came, and she most definitely would, to feel the tight muscles of her pussy squeeze his own orgasm out of him.

Dammit to hell, now was not the time. Once he had her naked on her bed, he had no intention of letting her go for hours. With obligations to her guests this evening, he'd just have to wait until later. Part of him protested that decision and tried to issue a new order, one involving draping her over his lap here and now and thrusting home. Too bad. It wasn't going to happen. Yet. Dicky boy could mutiny all he liked. Serve him right to learn he wasn't always in control.

Speaking of control issues, he needed to scheme up a new way to force Acelin to give in to him and surrender her control. She'd be on the offensive if he went for her hands again. He didn't want her tense and on guard when they made love. That battle plan spelled disaster plain and simple. She needed to be putty in his hands. Once she'd learned to trust him with her

body, he relished the idea of handing her monumental control back to her. Graphic images of her riding him like a prize stallion all but sent him over the edge.

Attempting to bring his wayward body to heel, Nolan wondered what Doyle had wanted with Acelin. That was enough to shrivel his poor dick. Whatever it was, he wanted it so bad, that he'd tried to attack Nolan to get it. Nolan made a mental list of things he wanted bad enough to fight for. Acelin topped the list. The idea of Doyle putting the moves on Acelin had Nolan seeing green all over again.

Speculation was a moot point. Before long, they'd have all the information they needed on the yahoo princes. If Doyle and Lucas talked to each other or anyone else in the privacy of their rooms, the bugging devices would get it on tape. Tony also let him know that the mole in the Martine military reported that several crack special forces units had been put on alert. In response, Nolan placed several kick-ass units from key allies into position. The Martine pussies didn't stand a chance.

The fuckwad princes concerned him more. Nolan needed a new plan for when he had military business to attend to. Infrared cameras and a watchful guard a hundred yards away didn't provide enough protection. Even Tony right outside the door wasn't secure enough for his peace of mind. Locking Acelin in her room under twenty-four hour guard might give him some, but he doubted it. Getting rid of the threat was the best solution. Nolan just had to keep her safe until they succeeded.

He turned back to Acelin, staring down at the auburn hair flowing over her shoulders. She'd wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him close. Doyle must have rattled her cage. Nolan hadn't seen her this quiet since the flight from Aruba to Timoria. What the fuck had he wanted?

Nolan savored the fact that she felt comfortable enough with him to sit in companionable silence. It tugged open a hole to his heart. A hole filled with love for her.

Where the fuck had that come from? Obviously, his feelings chose now to appear—laughing their ass off at him for thinking he could control them.

Even as it startled him, it didn't scare him. He waited for the urge to run to strike him down. He waited for his stomach to turn and his dick to shrivel.

Instead, a calm blanketed him.

Now came the bigger dilemma. What to do about it? Even a dunderhead like him knew Acelin needed a husband by her side, not flying all over the world on top secret missions. She obviously didn't consider him husband material since she wanted him out of the way of her spouse hunt. Not a chance of that happening now.

Acelin wiggled in his lap, tightening her arms around his waist.

He needed a clear head to work this out, and he had anything but that whenever he was around her. Maybe he'd be able to think about this later. He'd been blindsided enough for one day, thank you very much.

"I'm glad you arrived when you did." She stretched her neck to look up at him.

For the first time, he realized a dark black ring circled the gold-flecked caramel of her eyes. A smile warmed them, and his heart. He noticed the freckles on her nose and the mole on her cheek. Still, the command to retreat never sounded.

Think calm, think cool, think nonchalant, he chanted to himself. "Why was he here?"

"Doyle and I go way back and not so way back. I have a sinking feeling he was here to propose. Again."

Propose? Again? If anyone was going to propose to her, it was going to be him once he figured out why she didn't consider him husband material.

Whoa! How the hell did he make the jump from sex to love to marriage at mach speed?

"I take it you've already told him no?"

"Twice before."

Nolan pumped a mental fist.

“The first time was just over a year ago, when we were dating. The most recent time was this past weekend.”

That piece of information stopped Nolan short. For all of the intelligence gathering specialists he had on his side, no one had been able to pinpoint Acelin’s exact location prior to her disastrous helicopter ride. “A private island” was the best anyone learned.

Doyle’s private island, as it turned out. If that didn’t beat all and put one hell of a spin on things. Adding all the facts, Nolan doubted the prince loved Acelin at all, but saw her as a means to an end.

Blind fury erupted behind his eyes. How could anyone not love the beautiful, sexy control freak in his arms? If Doyle had anything to do with the helicopter crash, Nolan planned to make him pay.

Time to shift back to prince-half-in-love mode and away from military team leader mode. “You spent some time with Doyle?”

“Just the weekend. The one night, actually. I spent the second night waiting for the helicopter to arrive.”

“Why’d you go?”

“Doyle convinced me I needed to give him a second chance.”

Nolan quirked up a grin. It must not have worked. *Poor bastard.*

“I’d rather not talk about last weekend.” He nodded his assent as she spoke. “I’d much prefer to thank you again for your timely arrival.”

She tipped her chin, putting her mouth in perfect position. Her hand unwound itself from his waist, gliding up his chest, flicking his nipple, and stopping once it cupped his cheek. Her thumb traced his lower lip. She mimicked the action by running her tongue along her own full, succulent lip. The gentle pressure of her fingers encouraged him to close the distance between them. He molded his lips to hers, soft and pliant to his caress.

With a flick of his tongue, he coaxed her to open to him and plundered inside. She tasted of passion and forever.

He wanted, needed, more of both. They battled for control of the kiss with dueling thrusts and parries, his pride willing to cede victory to her this time, but only after a valiant fight that left them both panting. He rested his forehead against hers, sucking in huge gulps of air. The ragged rise and fall of her chest informed him she hadn't emerged unscathed.

With a delightfully naughty wiggle, she tormented his poor cock. His hands dropped from her waist to her hips in an effort to still her movements. As much as he wanted her, this was not the time.

"Holy shit, woman, you drive me wild." A smile spread across her face. "But if I haul you into that bedroom now, I'm not letting you go until morning."

"Is there a problem with that?" Damn vixen had the nerve to flutter her eyelashes at him like some freaking innocent.

"The problem is that I'd rather not piss off your father." That sobered her up.

"Quickies are nice." She looked up at him with big hopeful eyes.

"For me maybe, but I suspect not for you. When I do have you sprawled out beneath me on that monster of a bed of yours, I intend to make your satisfaction my top priority. And I don't plan to be rushed."

Judging by the simmering passion on her face, she grasped his unspoken challenge. "Fine." A pout flitted briefly across her face as she slid from his lap.

He understood her need to distance herself from him, but his body, his being, called out for her return. His dick was ready to beg, plead, grovel, and promise his left nut to get her back on his lap. Snagging her hand as she turned to walk away, he hugged her close, her body cradled between his spread thighs. Her perky breasts, which just happened to be at eye-level, called out to him. Not strong enough to resist the siren's song, he settled for dropping a kiss on each upper swell. The light smell of her

perfume tempted him to bury his nose between them. With thoughts of delayed gratification, he steeled his body and let her go, bereft at the loss of her warmth and touch.

“Man, I need a cold one.” He didn’t realize he’d actually said the words aloud as he popped to his feet until she questioned him.

“Shower, or a beer?” She stared pointedly at the tent in the front of his shorts.

“Shower. Beer. Either. Both.”

“You’re welcome to use my bathroom unless you want to walk down the hall in that condition.”

Yeah, sure, he’d hop in her shower, she’d hop in behind him, and they’d boff like bunnies. Not yet. “Only if I can lock the door.” But he had to do something or he’d run the risk of sporting an inappropriate stiffy all night.

“Don’t you trust your virtue with me?”

He hadn’t known it was possible to look innocent and seductive at the same time. “Not any more than you trust yours with me.”

Her laughter filled the air. “Touché.” With a graceful spin on her painted toes, she motioned for him to follow her. *To the ends of the earth, if necessary*, a voice inside of him piped up.

Oh yeah, he had it bad.

* * * *

The black sand beach contrasted with the clear blue water lapping at the shore. A hint of a breeze whipped up loose grains and tossed them into the salt-tinged air. Acelin reclined on her low-slung beach chair and enjoyed the warmth of the afternoon sun beating down on her as she relaxed on her favorite beach in the world.

She enjoyed the sight of Nolan leaping and lunging after the volleyball even more. With his knee length swim shorts riding low on his hips, he looked more like a California beach bum than second-in-line to a throne. Who knew watching beach volleyball could be so entertaining? A thin layer of sweat coated his muscles, teasing her with thoughts of how he must have looked

in her shower all naked and wet. She'd tried to join him, but he'd gone and actually locked the damn door, the bastard.

With a flick of her gaze in the direction of Nolan's mother, Acelin felt a twinge of guilt for all but ignoring the woman who had been nothing short of wonderful to her since her arrival earlier in the day. She'd stayed clear of the queen out of purely selfish reasons. Acelin feared she'd learn more about Nolan's past from her and end up further entangled with him. She also worried about liking his mother and assessing her as a potential in-law when she hadn't even decided if Nolan could be husband material.

A loud cheer from the pit recaptured her attention. Nolan must have made a dive for the ball judging by his face-first sprawl in the sand. He pushed to his feet in one smooth motion, enduring the good-natured taunts from his teammates. Tiny particles of sand clung to him. Her hands itched to dust off his well-defined muscles, to trail her fingers over hot skin, to...

"Rumor has it that you and Nolan are quite a pair."

Acelin didn't even turn in Patrice's direction as she answered. "Lots of rumors have been spread about me over the years. You know better than anyone not to listen to them." Hadn't she worried that Nolan's constant presence would be noticed and deter any potential suitors? She dug deep and couldn't dredge up an ounce of the once overwhelming concern now. What she did manage to work up was a good head of jealousy. She didn't like the other women staring at Nolan as he played, not one little bit. Green was so not her color.

"I'm not listening to this one. I'm spreading it."

Acelin turned on her supposed best friend. "Explain."

"Ha. That got your attention away from Prince Charming for a micro second. Honey, he's perfect for you."

"I wish." Boy, did she wish.

"I've watched the two of you together. It's enough to make me sick the way you coo over each other."

"I do not coo." Did she?

“You do over this one. And he worships the ground you walk on. It doesn’t get much better than that. Or does it?”

Acelin knew what Patrice was asking her. A blush tinged her skin all the way to the top of her modest one-piece suit. Unable to look her friend in the eye, she focused on a patch of sand. She’d always shared the details of her romantic encounters with Patrice. They’d dissected every last act in an effort to discern the problem. Not this time. What had happened with Nolan felt too special to share and didn’t need to be offered up for an autopsy. Still, she owed her friend something, so she nodded. Patrice’s squeal drew everyone’s attention.

“Sorry, just got a grain of sand in my eye. Nothing to worry about.” She made a show of rubbing. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Oh. My. God. Ohmygodohmygod. I want details. Not here, of course, but I want details. Now what?”

Now what? The same question Acelin asked herself over and over. She was half in love with the wrong man, the one man who managed to do everything right. Even if he didn’t make her come during sex, she suspected he’d do all he could to make it happen eventually. Which was what she’d decided she was looking for. Plus, she’d seen many facets to his personality in the few short days they’d been together. He was everything she’d dreamed of finding wrapped up in one unbelievably handsome man. He embodied everything she wanted in a husband and a king. With one glaring problem.

She searched those gathered around the net for him, not having to look hard. He stood out among the men with his blond military haircut and tall stature. Even from a distance, his self-confidence came through. Not an I’m-a-royal-so-you-have-to-listen-to-me swagger, or an I-think-I’m-better-than-you strut. No, it was more of an I-know-what-I’m-capable-of air with a hint of been-there-done-that. His muscles rippled and contracted as he jumped to spike the ball. With a victorious whoop, he high five’d his teammates. The hint of mischievous little boy made her smile. As if he felt her eyes on him, he focused in on her

with laser beam accuracy and winked. Her heart tumbled over and landed at his feet.

"I rest my case." The only thing worse than Patrice thinking she was right was when she actually was.

"You're forgetting one not-so-small thing. He's in the Royal Air Force." Patrice fixed her with a look that said, big-fucking-deal. Well, it was. "That doesn't exactly make him good husband material." That comment earned her a what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about frown. Patrice played dumb really, really well. "You know, the military, moving, fighting, putting your life on the line, that sort of thing. The military has to come first. I understand that. I, however, need a king who puts our country first."

"Have you asked him? Broached the subject with him? Maybe he's ready for a change. Maybe there's something he could do that would allow him to stay in the military and stay in Timoria. His father is the freaking king of a damn country. Something could be worked out. Something that would allow him to put you first. But you'd have to stop making excuses, stop running, and allow a man to get close to you."

Ouch. Patrice was dead wrong on this one. "You're wrong for once, Lady Know-It-All. I've been trying to find the right man since my twenty-first birthday."

"More like rejecting every man since then."

"I was just trying..."

"To find the right one. I know, honey. All I'm saying is that I think you've found him. Grab him with both hands and don't let go."

Acelin didn't understand the laughter in Patrice's words until she felt herself being tugged out of her chair and tossed rather inelegantly over Nolan's shoulder. As he jogged down to the edge of the water, he shifted her until he cradled her in his arms. She clung to his shoulders, his damp skin making it difficult to get a grip. He'd been playing hard, sweating, and a musky scent filled her senses. That sand she'd longed to brush

off earlier abraded her skin where their bodies rubbed together. She almost forgot they had an audience and snuggled closer.

Water splashed up, striking the back of her legs and her bottom as Nolan's long-legged stride carried them out into the water. When it began to wash up over her dangling rear end, he paused. Eyes as blue as the water surrounding them stared down at her. The world would have shifted beneath her feet if she'd been standing. He licked his lips, making her want to feel them pressed to hers, wanting all of him pressed to her.

Time to go on the offensive before she did something stupid like kiss him in public and seal her fate. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Playing volleyball worked up a sweat. I’m hot and needed to cool off. And judging by the way you were drooling over me, I figured you could stand to cool off, too.” Humor and a hint of the devil flashed in his eyes.

“I was not drooling over you. I was admiring your skill.”

“If you say so.” Laughter imbued every word.

“Put me down.” Acelin felt a combination of lust and anger and embarrassment pound through her. If he’d noticed from a distance, while supposedly absorbed in a game, others probably had as well.

“Anything for you, Your Highness.”

She should have been prepared. Nolan never acquiesced so easily. Despite the warmth of the water, the shock of being dropped unceremoniously into the ocean caused her to gasp as she went under. Sputtering, she found her feet and stood up. She exhaled a forceful breath of air to force the salt water from her lips, but it did nothing to move the sodden strands of hair plastered to her head. Pushing her hair away from her face, she fixed him with a furious glare. His playful smile deflated some of her righteous indignation; the kiss he brushed against her lips obliterated the rest of it.

Did he know what he was doing? Did he understand that by kissing her in public he’d declared his intent to court her to both their parents, moving their relationship well past the escort service her father had trapped him into? Judging by the depth of emotion in his eyes, she’d have to say the answer to both those questions was a resounding yes.

Her breath left her on a whoosh. They needed to talk tonight. Preferably after they made love. Damn, it majorly honked her off when Patrice was right.

“If you want to go back to your sunbathing, I’ll join you after I take a lap or two around the island.” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Why don’t you just come with me now?” Surely he wasn’t having second thoughts about their statement-making kiss and leaving her to face the wolves alone.

“Because if I walk out of this water right now, your father is likely to either kill me, or drag us straight to the nearest church.” He flicked a discreet downward glance.

Oh. Oh. “I’ll be waiting.” Tipping her head back into the water, she ran her fingers through her hair and then turned to fight her way against the outgoing wave, back to shore.

“I sure hope so. I’d hate to think I made an ass out of myself a minute ago.” With that, he made a shallow dive into deeper water. His sleek, muscled body cut the waves, giving her a primo view of his fine butt.

Squaring her shoulders and tilting her chin, she returned to her chair, mindful of the stares and whispers. Before she had a chance to sit down, Nolan’s mother motioned her over with a subtle wave of her hand. Butterflies threatened to take over her stomach as the conversational possibilities churned in her mind. The short distance turned into the longest mile as Acelin crossed the gleaming sand.

Though she remembered curtsying to the queen, she didn’t recall much of their conversation. Except for the fact that Nolan’s mother had smiled and warmly held her hand. Her acceptance washed over Acelin on a comforting wave. Not that she had a clue yet what she was going to do about Nolan, but judging by his mother’s behavior and the beaming smiles on her parents’ faces, they wouldn’t be facing any opposition on those fronts. In fact, the grin on her father’s face outshone the sun, making her wonder if he’d orchestrated this from the very beginning.

Bouncing in her seat with unconcealed excitement, Patrice waited for Acelin’s return. With a soft word, Acelin silenced her best friend, not in the mood to listen to I told you so. Patrice snapped her lips shut, allowing Acelin to return to her chair and take in her surroundings.

The afternoon sun struck the beach at an angle, its rays lending the black sand an iridescent glow. The expanse of sand tapered to the intense foliage of the Royal Gardens, a lush tropical blend of flowers, plants, and trees landscaped around walkways and fountains, arbors and mazes, even a playground—a breathtaking five acre oasis. The shining cream colored stone of the one hundred and fifty room mansion rose at the far edge of the garden. Timorian monarchs had never called their home a palace or a castle, feeling it put too much distance between them and the people they governed, preferring the more accessible term mansion. Not that any other Timorians lived in a mansion even half the size. From the back, the three-winged layout of the structure was obvious—a family wing including a small dining room and parlor, the Royal wing housing the throne room, the ballroom, and official offices, and the guest wing, which boasted a gym and an indoor pool.

This was all her home, her legacy, not a duty to be avoided until the last possible second, but one to embrace as the Timorian people embraced their monarchs. They deserved the best from her and from the man she chose to be their next king. Her father was still a relatively young man, having just turned sixty, who had much to teach her once she settled down and listened.

She owed it to herself, first and foremost, to stop running. To face Nolan and find out if he could be the one, and not just because he'd made her come. She could make excuses for him until she drove him away, or she could face him head on. She'd never know if he was the right man for her and for Timoria unless she asked.

As if she conjured him out of thin air, he spread out a blanket and sat down beside her. "It's beautiful."

He must have followed her gaze. "Can you read my mind now?" She felt the smile on her lips.

"I don't have to read minds. It's written all over your face. All of this," he swept his arm in a wide circle, "is important to you." He sounded so matter-of-fact, so accepting.

“I didn’t realize how important until the accident.” Her voice caught in her throat.

“You don’t have to talk about it. I was there.”

No, she didn’t have to talk about it. He’d seen her, knew what she’d gone through. But she also knew, with gut-deep certainty, that if she needed to talk, he’d listen, for the very same reasons. How was it possible that she’d come to know him in such a short period of time? How was it possible that she’d come to have such deep feelings for him so quickly?

His large warm hand reached over to lace his fingers with hers. The strength in his grip bolstered her. His thumb fluttered along the heel of her palm, sensitizing the skin. She turned her head, looking in his direction, only to find his blue eyes gazing back at her. The depth of emotion startled her, scared her almost as much as her own uncharted feelings.

With Patrice’s words thundering in her ears, running was not an option this time.

Chapter 13

“Well, it would appear, brother dear, that your plans to woo that bitch of a princess have failed.”

The steady pound of pacing feet echoed in the silence.

“I still have a chance.”

A bark of laughter reached the hidden microphone. “That preening jackass of a wannabe soldier kissed the little slut in front of two dozen people. Surely even you can figure out what that means.”

“It means I’ll need to compromise her, that’s what it means. Or blackmail. We still have those pictures of the three of us together.”

“No.” The shout rang out, resulting in a sharp acoustic screech that hurt the eardrums. “The time has come to put my plan into action. The troops are ready, awaiting my command.”

“And will this plan work any better than your plan to kill Acelin and take advantage of the chaos resulting from her death?”

“My plan would have worked if the fucking pilot hadn’t been so enamored of the cunt that he radioed their position to the rescuers. But not to worry. My troops are more than prepared to launch a surprise attack on Timoria, chaos or not. They won’t fail. Unlike you.”

“Forty-eight hours. Just give me forty-eight hours. If I can’t get Acelin to marry me, one way or another, then we’ll do it your way. We need the Timorian people behind us. Violence won’t accomplish that. Marriage will.”

“Fine,” Lucas sighed. “I have no idea why I keep listening to you.”

“Because I’m the older brother and could have you arrested for treason if you don’t.”

Nolan flicked off the tape. “I’ll have you both arrested,” he grumbled to no one in particular. “After I rip both your balls off and stuff them up your asses.”

He knew his objectivity was shot to hell. He knew he should remove himself from command. Unless someone called him on it, however, he had every intention of seeing this mission to the end.

The leadership elements of his team surrounded him in his suite in the guest wing. Tony, his second-in-command and right-hand man; Jocko, in charge of intelligence; Mike, in command of the special forces assembled all around the island, a master at managing the multi-national crew. He’d worked with these men before on top-secret missions. He trusted them with his life, and governments trusted them with their countries.

Men who now knew that the princess—the woman he cared for—had been involved in a ménage a trois a few short days ago. Fuck. Nolan didn’t know what to make of that revelation. Except to feel a surge of pure masculine glee that the two dumbfuck princes hadn’t been able to achieve what one preening jackass of a wannabe soldier accomplished with the flick of his tongue.

He’d sort out his feelings about Acelin’s weekend bedroom Olympics later. For now, he had to trust that the men in this room wouldn’t disclose her secret.

They sat waiting for him to start. “All right, Jocko. What’s the dirt? Why are Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber trying so hard to get into Timoria’s pants?”

The United States Army major dropped a portfolio of documents on the table and launched into a detailed description of the sorry state of Martine. Evidently, the brothers spent more time partying than tending to matters of national importance. Infrastructure was on the verge of collapse with foreign banks unwilling to help. The country needed an infusion of cash or respectability to acquire help from the outside. Timoria

presented an easy mark with its doctrine of neutrality and nonaggression combined with its lack of a military. With its prosperity, it could provide the necessary funds to restore Martine, either through being a guarantor with the banks or forcing King Warrick to pony up funds.

Over a year ago, Doyle started his campaign to peacefully unite Timoria and Martine through marriage, only to be continually rebuffed by Acelin. As his efforts failed and the situation in Martine worsened, Lucas put forth a more radical plan involving military action. Fortunately, the National Security Agency picked up some chatter and passed the information along, with the promise of assistance if necessary.

For now, vigilance and patience prevailed. The Martine princes had to be allowed to plot and scheme. Once the troops made a move on Timorian soil, they could be rounded up and taken into custody, along with Doyle and Lucas. The tapes they had so far provided damning incriminating evidence. Given enough rope, they'd provide Nolan and his team with more than enough to put them away for a long time.

Nolan wanted them behind bars now, wanted the threat hanging over Acelin's head gone. But he knew the drama had to play out in order to snag all the players.

Part of him wished one of the men sitting around the table would call him out and force him to step down. He hated his job right about now.

* * * *

The entire evening had been one long foreplay session, a fully clothed and very public exercise in frustration and delayed satisfaction. Acelin feared the heat building inside her would send her silk dress up in flames. She needed to escape the gathering and be alone with Nolan. She'd tried to feel her mother out in an effort to learn when she and her father planned to ditch the impromptu shindig, but Acelin got the distinct impression her mother was enjoying seeing her squirm.

Hell, she'd done nothing but squirm since the moment Nolan arrived at her door to take her to dinner. He'd shrugged

off his beach boy look and traded it for the suave, debonair most-definitely-one-of-the-world's-most-edible men look. He wore black pleated pants and a soft-to-the-touch blue collarless shirt that accentuated his eyes. Simple, timeless. It enhanced his appearance from his wide shoulders to his narrow hips and cute butt.

He'd taken one look at her and growled his approval. Grasping her hand, he spun her around, admired the view and then kissed each of her fingertips. Her strapless dress hugged her torso, the built-in bra giving her cleavage. The dropped waist accentuated her figure and the full skirt stopped just above her knees. Sexy, strappy three-inch heels matched the turquoise dress, completing the outfit, at least as much as he could see in public. She'd chosen a barely-there turquoise lace thong in anticipation of the moment he slid down the zipper and left her naked to his gaze.

Thank goodness for padded bras that kept her hard nipples from poking through her top the second he splayed his hand possessively at the small of her back. Her panties grew damper with each passing second. The flare of his nostrils as he gazed down at her made her wonder if he could smell her excitement.

It continued all through cocktails and dinner. The I-need-you look in his eyes, the lingering oh-so-innocent looking touches that charged her libido faster than anything she'd ever known. The whispers in her ear that went straight to her breasts and her clit, all of which throbbed with the need to feel his lips. She sizzled and crackled and yearned.

After dinner, a guest offered to play the piano if any of the other guests wanted to dance. The floor of the music room had been swiftly cleared and they'd spent the evening enjoying a wide variety of music. Acelin sat out the faster dances, not sure her top would stay in place, not having dressed for much activity. Even though she encouraged Nolan to circulate, he stayed glued to her side. His mood puzzled her. He seemed tense, on alert, extremely possessive. When other men requested a spin on the floor, she expected Nolan to bark and

bare his teeth in full scruff-up mode, yet he smiled as she ventured out. His eyes burned her each time she partnered someone else. Until Doyle approached, Nolan hadn't said anything. When Doyle crossed the room in their direction, Nolan rose to his full height and bowed when requesting the honor of a waltz. Doyle glared as they walked past, Nolan's hand at her waist.

When she'd been out dancing with the others, she'd wondered why Nolan hadn't partnered her himself. The moment he took her in his arms, even at a respectable distance, she knew. The passion simmering all evening exploded as he guided her in the turns. Her body instantly craved horizontal action.

Her steps faltered when he kissed her forehead, then the top curve of her ear. His lips quirked up in a mocking smile while his arm tightened around her. She shot him a look that shouted, *You try dancing backward in high heels*, not willing to let him know how much even innocent contact affected her. "You shouldn't kiss me like that."

"Why not?"

"People will think we're falling in love."

"Aren't we?"

Were they? She knew she was halfway to head over heels. Was he trying to tell her that he was, too? Talking was a priority once they were alone. After she fucked his brains out. She lowered her eyes, unwilling to have this conversation in public. She focused instead on the broad wall of his shoulders and chest—shoulders strong enough to bear the weight of leadership, to support her. She saw a tiny baby propped on that shoulder as daddy paced the floor trying to get her to sleep.

No. She couldn't go there yet. If he wasn't willing or able to work out a compromise with his military career, giving in to such longings would break her heart.

The music slowed to a stop, Nolan stepping back to bow, so formal and polite and royal, playing to the crowd. She answered

with a curtsy. His hand settled in on the small of her back, just shy of being indecently low.

Patrice caught their attention, sending them in her direction. With a subtle flick of her eyes, Patrice indicated that she wanted to speak to Acelin alone. She tried to step away from Nolan, but he fisted his hand in her skirt. Shooting him a dirty look, she shook her head at Patrice, who settled for a discreet whisper.

“Your parents and Nolan’s parents watched the two of you for the entire dance. I think they hear wedding bells.”

“Maybe, just maybe, they do.”

Patrice’s eyes widened, a smile turned up the corner of her lips. Acelin loved her friend, a friend whose whole face lit up at even the possibility of happiness. “So this means you’re going to talk to him?” She peeked around Acelin to find Nolan staring at her with a bemused smile.

Acelin nodded, “If we ever get the chance to be alone.”

“May I join the conversation, or aren’t you two finished talking about me yet?” The laughter in Nolan’s voice caused Patrice to giggle.

“What makes you think we’re talking about you?” Acelin leaned into him, savoring the dark tang of his cologne.

“Call it male intuition. I see some friends. Shall we?”

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Nolan never let her out of his sight and always maintained some form of physical contact. He worked the room with the consummate grace and ease of a man who’d been doing it all his life, not one who’d had a ten year respite. The ease with which he resumed a cloak of royalty encouraged her, bolstered her for the conversation to come.

By the time Acelin’s parents retired for the evening, Acelin feared for her sanity from lust-induced dementia caused by six long hours of foreplay. Despite her overwhelming desire to bolt from the room, she managed to carry on conversations for another half hour before Nolan made their excuses. She couldn’t help but notice how he’d controlled the entire evening, guiding

her here and there, sometimes with a smooth subtlety and others, more direct. Never before had she allowed a man any control, yet she'd ceded so much to Nolan.

As they wound their way from the guest wing to the family wing, Nolan kept his touch light and appropriate when Acelin wanted nothing more than to leap into his arms and wrap her legs around his waist. She needed to feel the ridge of his erection pressed to her, to feel him pressed deep. As much as she hated the distance, she understood the need for it. He'd put them center stage this afternoon, so they had to be mindful of the show they put on. Right now, as tight as he'd wound her, if he touched her in just the wrong place, any spies would end up witnessing a show of triple-x proportions.

Her step lightened as her door came into welcome sight. Nolan pushed it open for her and gestured for her to enter. She brushed against his straining erection as she slid past him, the innocent contact setting fire to her simmering lust. The door had barely clicked shut behind him when she jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist like she'd been dreaming about. His foot shuffled back to keep them both from toppling to the ground and his hands clasped her bottom to support her.

"Bedroom, now," she mumbled between kisses all along his jawline. The lightness of his blond hair masked the nighttime stubble, but she felt it brushing her lips.

For once, he didn't argue.

They tumbled to the bed in a heap of arms and legs and way too many clothes. She fumbled with his belt buckle before yanking his shirt free. As soft as the shirt felt, his skin felt even better as she slid her hands up under the fabric. Her fingers traced the delineated lines of his abdomen muscles, loving the way he jumped and twitched, loving that she affected him as much as he affected her. Focusing her attention on ridding him of his clothing, she unbuttoned the shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. She reached for the zipper on his pants, squeezing and massaging his erection as she hunted for the tab, only to have his hand grip her wrist.

“They stay on for now.”

“But I can’t make love with you if you’re not naked.” She purred as she wiggled her fingers, making contact with his erection.

“You first.”

That worked for her, as long as one of them was stripping. She presented her back to him and he tugged down the zipper, his fingers trailing along each inch of skin as it became exposed.

“Mm. Lovely.” He bent forward, his lips following his fingers, tracing a line of kisses down her spine.

Fighting the urge to roll over, she pushed to her feet, wanting to show off the panties she’d picked out just for him. With her arm under her breasts to keep her bodice in place, she looked like she had more cleavage than she actually did. Keeping her back to him, she allowed the top to fall. She cast a coy glance over her shoulder, wishing she could see his face. They hadn’t stopped to turn on a light, and she didn’t want to break the mood now. The nightlight shed enough of a glow to allow him to see her and that’s what mattered. Sensuous wiggles of her hips accompanied a gentle push and the dress shushed to the floor.

The groan behind her told her all she needed to know.

“You really are trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

“Does le petit mort count?”

She pivoted on one foot to find Nolan stretched out on the bed, looking like a *Playgirl* model. His laced fingers supported his head. Who knew armpits could be sexy? One leg was bent, the sole of his foot flat on the bed, his bare toes peeking out from the cuff of his pants. In between, he was hard muscle and even harder erection.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” His body jackknifed to a sitting position with a well-executed sit up. “Come here.”

She sashayed the short distance to the side of the bed and straddled his thigh. Not what she wanted between her legs, but at least it gave her something to grind until she got what she really wanted. Draping her arms over his shoulders, she hooked her fingers behind his neck and pulled him close. His arms

circled her waist, locking her to him. He attacked her mouth, violently possessing her. She answered with equal ardor, urging him closer, deeper, accepting the plundering in all its glory. His tongue traced the curve of her lips and then thrust to duel with hers. Each stroke, each glide, triggered an avalanche of sensations. Her hard nipples bore into the unyielding muscle of his chest. The fabric of his pants abraded her clit. Her internal muscles spasmed, clenching air.

Tugging his mouth from hers, he lifted her, settling her in the middle of the bed. He braced his hands under her arms and stroked up, encouraging her to lift her arms over her head. Wet kisses tickled from the crease where her arm met her torso to the bend of her elbow, then to her wrist. When he reached her fingertips, he moved to her other arm and reversed the path. His thighs straddled her chest as he tormented her, his erection throbbing between her breasts. She tried to imagine pressing her breasts close while he slid his erection back and forth, close enough to her mouth to allow her to lick at it. Hmm, if she brought her hand down, she might be able to free him from the confines of his pants and...

"Grab hold of the rail." There was a gravelly edge to his normally whisky-smooth voice. A roughness that rubbed at her nipples and her clit.

Doing as he asked, she enjoyed a massage starting at her shoulders and moving toward her hands, the strength of his touch melting her. Until she felt the cold metal circle her wrists and heard the click click click as the bands tightened.

Dammit, he'd done it to her again.

Did she really want to struggle? As much as it galled her, he'd accomplished a pretty amazing feat the last time he'd trussed her up like a Christmas goose. So, she'd play his erotic game and reap the benefits. Sitting back on his haunches, he stared down at her, waiting for her to erupt, judging by the look on his face.

"What do you have planned for me tonight?"

She'd thrown him off guard with her acquiescence. Good.

“This.” He drew a scarf from his pocket and dangled it in front of her eyes. “I want you completely at my mercy.”

She hesitated. As she stared up at him, she realized she trusted him enough to take this step. She nodded.

Nolan secured the strip of fabric over her eyes, ensuring her comfort. Plunged into darkness, Acelin was forced to rely on her other senses as she turned control over to Nolan.

She felt the mattress shift as he climbed off the bed. She heard the rustle of fabric, and wondered if he decided to take off his pants. Her imagination filled in the details of his erection rising from a base of dark blond curls, the throbbing vein running the length of the underside, and the deep red head. She wondered if a drop of pre-cum rested at the tip. Her tongue longed to flick out and taste it.

The distinctive rip of a condom packet caught her attention, her body immediately going on alert, more than ready for that part of his plan. She spread her legs in anticipation, hungering for his weight to cover her, for the heat from his body to burn her skin, for his scent to fill her head.

Instead, he stretched out beside her, almost touching her. Nerve endings cried out for contact, reached out for him, but he denied her. Something skimmed the surface of her body, brushing the tiny hairs but not giving her what she craved.

“Please,” she whimpered before she even realized she’d opened her mouth.

“Shh.” The breath fanning her ear startled her. She hadn’t realized he was so close.

His hand cupped her breast, dragging a groan from her belly. A finger traced circles around the outer edge of the areola, heightening her longing for direct stimulation. He tormented the other breast instead of giving her what she wanted.

Then even that contact disappeared.

Her body thrummed with electricity, on edge, waiting, wondering. She didn’t know how much more she could stand before exploding into flames.

The heat between her legs skyrocketed as his fingertips brushed at her curls and her lips, not touching. A finger teased at her opening, flicking all around but not penetrating. She struggled against the handcuffs, cursing herself for going along with his ridiculous plan, cursing him for doing this to her.

“You’re so wet, so hot. You’ll burn me if I get close enough.”

Even his words threw fuel on an already raging fire.

The mattress dipped as he left the bed again. She wanted to scream at him, rage at him. What the hell did he think he was doing?

And then, without warning, he was there. Settling into the cradle of her thighs and thrusting home with one smooth stroke. She cried out as he gripped her butt and tipped her hips, settling himself deep within her. His body settled over hers as he fumbled above her. She heard the snick as the lock let loose and the handcuffs released their hold. As she gently moved her arms, he slipped the blindfold from her eyes.

“I want to watch your face as you come and I want you looking at me. I want you to know it’s me giving you this.” The intensity in his eyes sent a shiver running down her spine, the emotion overwhelming.

He rose above her, shifting his knees and pulling her closer. A first, experimental thrust took her breath away. Setting a rhythm, he claimed her body with long, hard strokes, drawing out until only the head remained inside her and then slamming home. Each jolt reverberated in her clit, each slide energized the nerve endings inside her pussy. The buildup began, step by erotic step, taking them to the top.

No man had ever dragged such incredible sensations from her body. No man had ever filled her so completely.

She gasped when his thumb stroked her clitoris in unison with each plunge of his hips. The combined sensations sent her to the edge, left her teetering, yearning. Her body started to tense, ready to be stranded there, like every other time.

“What do you want, Acelin?”

"I want to come," she panted.

"Tell me what you want."

She'd already told him.

"Talk dirty to me, Princess, I know you can do it."

She shook her head.

"Yes."

She looked in his eyes, the fire lighting them demanding she give him everything.

"I want you to fuck me until I come."

With a ferocious growl, he plunged harder, deeper. His thumb worked her clit with the same smooth strokes she used on herself. The combination pushed her forcefully over the edge to the place she'd hungered after for so long. A cry echoed in her ears, but whether hers or his, she didn't know and didn't care. She soared in a free fall of color. She shattered, clinging to him as her world spun gloriously out of control. With a deep-throated growl, he pistoned faster, until, with a trembling sigh, he stilled.

He collapsed on top of her, his ragged breath joining hers as they both struggled for air. Shifting slightly to the side, he tugged the sheet over their sweat-dampened bodies. A gentle hand brushed the hair out of her eyes.

She wasn't just halfway to head over heels, she was completely and totally, ass over tits, in love. Not that she planned to tell him that yet. "You are pretty damn amazing."

"I'm glad I was the one." He looked smug and satisfied, but since she was satisfied, she'd let him be smug.

It was worth all the waiting and the disappointment to get to this moment with this man.

The slam of the door sent him flying out of bed, crouched in front of her, on alert.

"I'm sorry, Sir." Tony froze at the bedroom door, looking everywhere but at the naked couple in front of him. "I banged on the door, but no one answered. Given the situation, I deemed it necessary to break in."

"What situation?" Nolan rolled out of bed.

Acelin couldn't help but notice the tension in his shoulders as he pulled on his pants.

"The Martine troops have made their first move, sir."

With a string of curses like Acelin had never heard before, Nolan bolted from the room, Tony trailing behind him.

Chapter 14

Grabbing the first thing she reached when she pulled open the dresser drawer, Acelin threw on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and hustled through the door behind Nolan and Tony. She'd heard Nolan mention her father's name as they ran from her room, so she decided to take a chance, heading toward her father's private study. She intended to find out what the hell was going on, one way or another. Military personnel in Timoria? As its future leader, she needed to know exactly what that meant. Given the looks on Nolan's and Tony's faces, she feared the worst. Doomsday scenarios raced through her mind.

Her pulse pounded in her ears, not as a result of a heart-stopping orgasm minutes before but from a numbing fear that had her blood racing so fast, she had difficulty breathing.

With her bare feet making very little noise on the cold polished floor, she was able to hear the faint fall of footsteps ahead of her, reassuring her that she wasn't chasing a wild goose. By the time she reached the half-open door of the study, Nolan and her father stood in a grim circle with Tony and two other men in military camouflage uniforms. Shit. This did not look good.

"What the hell is going on out there?" Nolan's voice rang out, sharp and in command.

"Approximately half an hour ago, what looks like a platoon moved closer to the main house, taking up positions." A stocky man with dirty blond hair spoke.

"What countermeasures have we initiated?" Nolan was obviously in charge of whatever was going on.

“Twenty-five rangers have taken up positions behind them and the soldiers in the house have been put on alert. In addition, fifteen pj’s are in the air and waiting for your command.”

“Okay. For now anyway.”

The room fell silent. What the hell was going on in there and why was Nolan calling the shots, not her father? He looked perfectly calm and confident with Nolan in charge.

“I had hoped they wouldn’t go through with this.” The anguish in Nolan’s voice mirrored the look on his face.

“I think your display this evening upped the stakes for them, forced them to make a move. Would you like to listen to the recent audio?” The man with light red hair spoke.

Display? The only thing Nolan had done this evening was spend time with her. And give her a toe-curling orgasm. Not that she’d been able to enjoy the afterglow. Acelin’s stomach plummeted to her feet. The perfect place for Nolan to stomp all over it, from the sound of things.

“Just give me the highlights.”

Acelin’s overwhelmed brain had trouble following the conversation beyond the facts that Doyle was pissed because of the attention Nolan had paid to her and called for an attack of some sort. Since her father didn’t look or act surprised, she concluded that he had known about this long before tonight. They’d all known for some time and made a conscious decision to keep her out of this. Of all the possibilities that churned in her mind, this wasn’t one of them.

Now it was her turn to be included. She slammed open the door, the resulting bang as it hit the wall made all five men jump. Good.

“Gentlemen.” She wrapped her royal airs around her, hoping they would respond to her aura of command. She raised her chin and looked down her nose at them.

“Dammit, Acelin, what are you doing here?” Of course Nolan wouldn’t fall in line.

“Tony made it sound urgent when he rudely burst into my room and since I’m next in line for the Timorian throne, I

decided I needed to be included in whatever this is.” She gestured to the group.

“Acelin, please go back to your room,” Nolan ground out through clenched teeth.

“Not until I get a few answers from you.”

“Acelin, I don’t have time for this, dammit.” He moved toward the door.

She blocked his path. He’d have to move her out of the way to open the door she’d shut. As mad as they both were, she knew he wouldn’t touch her in anger. She couldn’t have been that wrong about him. Then again, she’d totally misjudged Doyle and Lucas. Good grief, how stupid had she been? What had her self-absorption cost her country?

“Acelin, you shouldn’t be here.” Finally her father spoke.

“If this has to do with Timoria, I have every right to be here.”

“Nolan and I decided—”

“Out. I want everyone out of this room except for Nolan.”

She pointed toward the door in case they didn’t understand the command.

Her anger soared when the other men looked to Nolan for direction. Dammit, she was the princess and they needed to listen to her.

Displaying a supreme amount of intelligence, Nolan nodded.

“Are you sure, Major?” Figured Tony wasn’t a secretary.

“Positive.”

Nolan’s three military cronies fled the room single file, leaving only her father with them. She’d confront the both of them before she made him leave, too.

“Nolan’s not on a month long vacation, is he?” She addressed her father.

“Yes and no. He is assigned to Timoria until further notice, but he hasn’t been working the whole time.”

“Acelin, please, I don’t have time for this.” With his clenched teeth and tight jaw, Nolan was difficult to understand.

“You don’t have time for me? Is that it? Well that’s just too damn bad.” Angry, as long as she stayed angry, she stayed in control.

“Fine, what do you want to know?” With a pout worthy of a two year old, he settled on a nearby chair and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Why are you here?”

She didn’t want to believe her ears when he laid out the details of the plot to take over Timoria. It sounded like something out of a bad fairy tale, not real life. With some toe tapping and a pointed look, he admitted that his month long vacation had been coordinated to allow him to take command of the military action designed to protect the country.

“Why you? You’re a pilot.”

“It was felt that with my background and knowledge of the area and people, I’d be able to infiltrate unnoticed.”

“Whose idea was it that I needed round the clock protection?”

Nolan scuffed his toe against the floor and fixed her with a powerful look. “It was a mutual decision. Your father and I both agreed you needed a guard. After the helicopter crash, he requested it be continuous. You needed to be protected from the threat, especially once we learned that Doyle and Lucas were behind it.”

Wonderful. How comforting to know the one man she’d finally fallen for had ended up in her bed because her father put him there. This night just got better and better.

He must have read her mind again. “Your father didn’t tell me to sleep with you. I would have ended up in your bed regardless.”

Acelin heard what sounded like a snort coming from her father. She lacked the time and the energy to deal with that man. She had enough on her hands with the one in front of her.

She didn’t know what to believe right now. She’d been so wrong about Doyle. What if she was wrong about Nolan, too?

Just because he had her father's blessing really didn't mean anything.

She struggled to reconcile what she'd been told and pieced together on her own. She didn't know who made her madder—she had so many choices—Doyle and Lucas, her father, Nolan.

“Acelin, please, go back to your room. There will be guards at the door and at the windows. You won't be allowed to leave until I come back for you. But I don't have time for this right now. I need to be with my men, assessing the situation. That's why I'm here.”

She shot her father a look and he made his excuses, leaving her alone with Nolan at last. She was so confused, not knowing what to think or feel or believe. She questioned everything she thought she knew about him, about them. She'd been a duty, an assignment, his reason for being in Timoria. That knowledge left her wondering if he'd told her the truth about anything and if any of his actions had been real.

The door clicked shut behind Acelin, leaving her alone with the one man who'd reached clear to her soul. In more ways than one. She had to know if any of it was real on his part.

“Why did you sleep with me?”

The way he'd made love to her rocked her to her toes and not just because he'd been able to coax an orgasm from her body. She'd felt a connection to him, a closeness. She'd enjoyed his company. Dammit, she'd gone and fallen in love with him and imagined a future with him.

She didn't think she could handle it if he turned around and told her that it was all a part of his mission.

Regardless of what he told her, she had to know.

“Acelin, I don't have time for this.”

Well, that's not what she expected to hear from him. “So you've said, repeatedly. What do you have time for?” She hated that she sounded like a spoiled brat but couldn't seem to help herself. “Certainly not me.”

“Honey, I have no idea what’s going on outside these walls, but I need to find out. Now.” Four long strides brought him to the door. “Please. Don’t make me choose.”

Pride pushed Acelin to the door, determined to be the first one out of the room since Nolan was determined to leave without any discussion. No, she wouldn’t make him choose, she’d make the choice herself. If she left the room before Nolan, it would appear that she had the upper hand. Right now, all she had were appearances.

He reached out and clasped her arm as she passed him.

With his body so close to hers, his heat warmed her and his cologne tantalized her. Her body went on alert, aware of his presence. Her nipples hardened and her internal muscles clenched with want. She hated that she responded to him on such an elemental level even when she was so mad and unsure. That she wanted him even if she didn’t know if he wanted her.

Stepping out of the way, she reached out to open the door. Nolan appeared at her side, loosely wrapping his arms around her. He bent to kiss her, but she turned her head. She felt the warm press of his lips to her temple and her cheek instead. The tenderness caused more pain to her battered and bruised heart.

“I’m doing this for you, for Timoria. For us. I need you to trust me for a little while longer. Please.” As quickly as he’d appeared at her side, he moved back, allowing her the space and freedom to leave the room.

The door swung open to reveal his cronies in war, plus an extra soldier she didn’t recognize, fully equipped for battle with a huge gun slung across his back. The reality of the situation smacked her in the face as she gazed around. Nolan was in charge of this group and they needed him to proceed. He really didn’t have time for her to act like a spoiled brat princess. *Dear God in heaven, this was serious shit.*

“I’ve arranged for guards to be stationed at your door and windows until this is over. I want you to stay in your room. Doyle and Lucas are dangerous. I have no idea what they’re capable of at this point. Frank is waiting to escort you back.” He

gestured to the soldier with the big gun. "If you need anything, he'll get it for you." He paused, tilting her chin up to force her to look in his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was a soft rumble meant for her ears only. "I'll be back for you as soon as I'm able. And then I promise you, we'll straighten this out." He looked so earnest staring down at her, his eyes crowded with so many emotions that she had trouble distinguishing them all. "Promise me that you'll do what he says." His eyes pleaded with her.

Overwhelmed by everything, she could only nod.

The well-muscled, well-armed man about her height walked over and introduced himself. With his military camouflage uniform and the large gun slung across his back, he exuded confidence and made her feel safe. But not as protected as she'd feel if Nolan stayed by her side...

That thought stopped her cold. For almost a week, he'd been by her side making her feel cherished and safe, and she hadn't even realized it. If only she could be sure he'd meant it, that it hadn't been part of a top-secret mission. Or undercover mission. She snorted at the thought.

Snapping a salute, which Nolan returned, Frank faced her with a questioning look. She waved off any inquiry and motioned for him to take her back to her room. She wouldn't make a scene in front of Nolan's men. Even if she had the strength, it was decidedly unprincesslike. Instead, with all her regal grace in place, she walked off without another word to Nolan.

As she trudged along at Frank's side, she wondered about the change in her that allowed her to follow Nolan's directives without so much as a kiss-my-ass. She wondered what that said about her feelings for Nolan, regardless of what just transpired.

Too tired and too emotionally drained to think straight, Acelin shut the door to her room behind her and climbed into bed. Nolan's scent surrounded her, clinging to the pillows and sheets. Burying her nose in the plump folds of the pillow and pulling the blanket up over her head, she cocooned herself with

the little piece she had of him for now. Maybe all she'd ever have.

* * * *

Acelin woke to the red-orange rays of the rising sun slipping around the slats of the Venetian blinds covering her window. With her face pressed to a pillow, she took a deep breath and wanted to cry. At some point between the time she fell asleep and now, the lingering remnants of Nolan's presence in her bed had faded.

Please God, she whispered to the empty room, don't let that be an omen. She might not know what she wanted from Nolan, but she knew what she didn't want. She didn't want him gone from her life. She wasn't ready to analyze what that meant, not with so much in turmoil.

The silence outside her window frightened her. She wanted to venture out and see what was happening, but she knew the soldier positioned in front of her door might have something to say about that. She half wished for the sounds of battle, gunfire, booming cannons, anything that gave her a sense of the world out there. It would give her some idea of what Nolan was doing.

Sitting up in bed, she swung her feet over the edge, letting them dangle. Her mind flashed back to the mornings he'd climbed out of bed and peeked out the window, to the kisses they'd shared before he snuck back to his room to protect her reputation. Had he used that time to do whatever military commanders did? Was there ever a time when he wasn't on the job?

She dropped to her feet, casting a glance over her shoulder at the bed she'd just left. Her heart urged her not to leave, knowing what little remained of Nolan would be gone by the time she returned. The pissed-off bitch part of her wanted to smack her silly for being such a ninny. A shiny flash caught her eye as she surveyed the rumpled sheets. Reaching behind the pillows, she latched on to a cold metal chain and pulled.

Her eyes filled with tears when the fake fur-lined handcuffs Nolan had used the night before came into view. He'd stripped

her control from her, forced her to allow him to take control of her body. He'd taken responsibility for her pleasure from her and took it on himself. By restraining her, he forced her to let go, to trust him. She'd been scared spitless, but she had placed herself in his capable hands and the reward had been magnificent. Just thinking about the orgasms he'd given her sent tingles dancing on her nerve endings.

Dammit, she'd trusted him like she'd never trusted any man. Until now. If she found out he'd abused that, she'd hurt him so badly, that he'd never be able to have sex again. Which was only fair, because she'd probably never again trust a man enough to go to bed with him.

She blinked rapidly, hoping to ward off a crying jag. Once she let go of her iron-fisted control of her emotions, she'd never get it back. Swatting away a drop of moisture rolling down her cheek, she tossed the cuffs on the bed and headed for the bathroom, tossing her shirt and shorts in the hamper along the way.

With a flick of her wrist, she turned on the water in the glass-enclosed shower stall, adjusting the temperature until steam curled out the top and spread along the ceiling. Turning back to the sink, she brushed her teeth as the warm air seeped into her muscles. When she finally stepped under the scalding spray, it pounded the tension from her body.

As the water poured over her body, her tight control on her emotions shattered. Bracing her forearms against the tile, she dropped her head onto her arms. Tears flowed freely from her eyes, mixing with the shower. Sobs bounced off the glass, reverberating around her. Her chest heaved with the effort.

For so long, she'd searched for a man who could play her body like a grand piano. That man, she always told herself, was the man she'd marry. The encounter with Doyle and Lucas started her thinking about her commitment to Timoria and her people. But in the aftermath of her accident, she faced some very hard truths about herself. She hadn't been searching for a

husband all these years, she'd been running from her fate, a future she couldn't ignore, no matter how hard she tried.

Fate being a fickle bitch, she threw her perfect man at her at an imperfect time. Acelin didn't even think about running, but turned and faced her future head on.

Only to find out that the man she thought she loved might not be who she thought he was.

Oh, yeah. Fate was in full fucking fickle bitch mode, all right.
And Acelin was not amused.

She had no idea how long she stood under the punishing jets, how long it took the gut-wracking sobs to subside. As she finished her shower, she came to a conclusion. She'd wait in her room for Nolan to come once the situation was resolved because that was her choice. She harbored no doubts that he and his team would kick some serious Martine ass all the way back to their country with their tails between their legs. Nolan accomplished what he set out to do.

When he finally showed up, she'd demand answers to her questions. She'd find out just how much of their relationship was part of his cover and how much had been real. If he'd been giving an Academy Award winning performance, his would be the next ass to get a kicking. Then she'd move on. Her father would just have to understand why she hadn't settled on a husband by her thirtieth birthday. She'd search for an acceptable husband while she learned from her father how to lead her country. If he'd meant everything that had passed between them, then they had some considerable decisions to make about their future together.

With a towel wrapped around her hair and another wrapped around her body, Acelin padded back to her room to find something to wear. Opting for casual, she pulled on a utilitarian matching bra and panty set, then pulled out another pair of shorts and a shirt. Normally, she only wore her exercise attire when headed for the weight room, but she didn't see any need to dress to spend time confined to her room. Sitting down

at her vanity, she combed out her hair and secured it in a ponytail.

Venturing to her library, she made herself comfortable at her desk and began to tackle the mound of correspondence piled in front of her. Normally, the arduous task of answering the mail was the stuff of procrastination. Now, it kept her focused and busy. A definite plus.

When Acelin looked up at the clock on the wall again, she was surprised to learn that an hour had passed and she had made a significant dent in the pile. Rolling her head from side to side, she laced her fingers together and stretched them over her head. Her muscles thanked her for the stretch.

A commotion in the hall sent her scrambling to her main sitting area in an effort to hear. Her stomach knotted as the thumps and bumps and groans escalated outside her door. Stumbling backward, she moved as far away from the noise as possible. A short shriek escaped when her door flung open and banged the wall.

Doyle strode into the room, his hair and clothing disheveled and blood splatters on his shirt. Fury raged in his eyes. He advanced on her.

“You’ve made this very difficult on all of us, my dear. Now come with me like a good little princess.”

Acelin’s back flattened against the wall, any retreat blocked. She had no intention of willingly going with the madman in front of her. If she could only get to the door to her bedroom, she might be able to lock him out and buy some time.

“I’m not really dressed to be going anywhere. Perhaps if I had a minute or two to change clothes...” Her knees wobbled as she took her first few steps.

“Do you think I’m fucking stupid?” He lunged at her but she managed to side step his grasp. “You’ll lock yourself in your bedroom if I let you go in there alone.” She squeaked as he grabbed for her leg and sent her toppling to the floor. He struggled to his feet, pulling her with him. “I’ll go with you.”

The air whooshed out of her lungs as he slung her over his shoulder. Her head pounded, blood rushing to pool in her skull. More than anything, she wanted to kick him in the nuts, but she didn't dare risk antagonizing him in this position. Not yet. She bounced as he tossed her on the bed. His eyes widened appreciatively as he watched her sprawl across the mattress. Oh, god, she never should have mentioned the bedroom.

Stalking to the bed, he stripped off his shirt and began to work on his belt buckle. "I think we can spare a couple minutes."

Scrambling sideways, she struggled against uncontrollable shakes to get to the other side of the bed and out of his reach. Her mouth dried out and her pulse thundered in her ears as a clammy hand gripped her ankle, preventing her from putting any distance between them.

Time for a new plan, if only she had one. "If you'll just turn your back, I'll slip into something presentable and we can be on our way."

"No. I think I like you on your back. After I fuck you, we can go announce to the wonderful citizens of Timoria that you've decided to marry me." He dropped his pants and underwear to the floor, his erection bobbing obscenely in front of him. "And while I'm fucking you, you'd better make sure to tell me how much better I am than that pompous idiot you've been screwing lately. Now strip."

Oh, no. No way in hell. Her stomach lurched at the very idea. "I'm not going to have sex with you, Doyle, and I'm not going to marry you, either."

The nylon fabric of her jogging shorts gave way with a violent rip, shredding under his forceful grasp. She winced as he splayed his hands on her inner thighs and squeezed. "Oh yes you are. And I'll tell you why. Because the fate of your country and your people depends on how well you satisfy me." His fingers dug into delicate skin. "My military surrounds this house and key buildings even as we speak. They are prepared to attack. Do you want to be responsible for the loss of life and property that will

accompany a full-fledged assault? With no military of your own, you can't hope to succeed."

Doyle climbed up on the bed, positioning himself above her. His erection pushed at the entrance to her vagina while he yanked her underwear out of the way. Her body braced for the invasion, prepared for the pain of being forcibly taken.

"Just think," he rambled on, oblivious to the tension in her body. "We force your father to step down and jointly, we rule the combined kingdoms of Timoria and Martine."

"My father will never step down."

"Then I will just have to kill him."

Acelin's stomach churned, throwing up a real possibility. She refused to let fear overtake her body. If only she could get to the window to signal for help. She knew none would be coming from inside the mansion. The blood spatters on Doyle's clothing told her something awful had happened to the guard in the hall. She kicked and hit Doyle anywhere her limbs reached, anything to give her enough time to get to the window, where Nolan had indicated an additional guard would be stationed.

"Damn you." Doyle roared as Acelin made contact with his balls. He drew back his hand and slapped her face. "Lie there and take it like the slut you are." He shifted his hips in an effort to plunge deep, but the lack of wetness slowed him.

Stunned and dazed from the blow to her cheek, she clenched her teeth, closed her eyes, and prepared for the worst. Instead, she felt his weight lift off her body. He fell to the floor with a sickening thud. Looking around through half-closed lids, she saw a man in a military uniform straddling Doyle, pummeling him with closed fists.

Not wanting to expose herself to a stranger, she yanked a sheet over her nearly naked body. The sound of bones crunching compelled her to sit up and open her eyes.

"Nolan."

He drove his fist into Doyle's jaw with enough force that Doyle's hands fell to the floor. He climbed off of the

unconscious man and sat gingerly on the rumpled bedspread. He tugged her into his lap.

Fury flashed in his eyes as he traced his fingertips along her cheek and jaw. "The son of a bitch hit you." A growl erupted from his throat.

"I'm okay."

"The bastard raped you and he hit you."

"I'm okay." She cradled his cheek with her palm, staring deep into his eyes to reach past the rage radiating from him.

The tension evaporated as he looked into her soul.

Gathering her in his arms, he cradled her to his chest. The fabric scratched her cheek, but she didn't care. Nothing mattered but being close to Nolan, feeling the erratic beat of his heart against her hand as she settled it on his broad chest. His strength filled her body with every stroke of his hand down her spine. She calmed him with her soft caress.

"What are you doing here?" She all but purred as she snuggled closer.

"I received a transmission that someone matching Doyle's description was seen sneaking in. I radioed the guard on duty to warn him but wasn't able to make contact. So I double-timed it. God, I should have been here sooner..." His grip tightened, rocking her in his lap.

"You got here just in time."

"He didn't..." Tears of fear filled his eyes.

"No, he didn't." She turned her head in the direction of Doyle's body, but Nolan tipped her chin, his eyes fastened on her.

"Thank God."

His lips lowered to hers, a soft and gentle caress that conveyed a wealth of emotion. Her heart wanted to jump for joy at the affirmation of his feelings for her, but she tempered the thought. They still needed to talk. She broke the kiss, not ready to progress any further until she heard his side of the story from his lips.

“We need to get out of this room and move to the library. I have to radio in and once I do, this place will be crawling with people.” He pulled the comforter off the bed and tucked it around her. Scooping her in his arms, he bundled her off to the other room.

She tried not to whimper when he deposited her in her favorite chair, but her body mourned the loss of his touch. In spite of wanting to yank him back down to her, he was right. Doyle had to be arrested, first and foremost. Plus, Nolan needed to return to his command.

“If I can just get something to wear out of the closet...” She leaned forward in an effort to climb out of the overstuffed chair.

“I’ll get it. What do you need?”

She needed him, filling her, thrusting inside her, telling her he loved her. “Just grab a dress.”

“I’ll be right back.” He pressed his lips to hers in a butterfly kiss, fast and fleeting.

She heard him talking, his voice muffled from the other room. Had Doyle come around? Kicking her legs, she freed herself from the bedspread. As she rose to her feet, she stretched her arms and rotated her torso. A few aches and pains greeted her exploration. Aside from a headache and a sore jaw, she’d escaped unscathed. A shudder tore through her at what might have been. A girl could get used to Prince Nolan charging in on his white stallion to save the day. Hell, she already had.

The white knight in question clomped back into the library with her favorite sundress draped over his muscular arm. A little dressier than the day called for, but she wasn’t about to send him back to try again. His feet stuck to the floor when he saw her standing. The flash of lust in his eyes reminded her that she wore only her bra and panties.

“You might want to put this on. And fast. I radioed Tony, so it’ll be a matter of minutes before they arrive.” His hand shook as he held out the garment.

Misguided modesty reared its unnecessary head and demanded that she turn around or make him turn around so she

could dress. She shrugged off the ridiculous notion given that he'd seen her naked and slid the material over her head. Reaching behind her back, she located the bottom of the zipper and went to tug it up. Nolan's hand nudged hers out of the way, completing the task for her, his knuckles grazing her skin as he pulled tooth by tooth.

"What happened to the guard who was outside the door when Doyle burst in? Is he going to be all right?"

Nolan backed away from her. When she turned around to look at him, he wouldn't make eye contact. Her stomach churned. Her heart beat wildly. She wanted to throw up. She had to hear it from Nolan. "What happened?"

He slipped back into soldier mode, his face passionless and his eyes shuttering out any emotion. "He was a young man in the Berminde Army. He put up a struggle before Doyle killed him."

Acelin wanted to cry. A man had given his life to protect her. She replayed the sounds she'd heard before Doyle burst through the door. She remembered the struggle between Doyle and Nolan.

"You could have been killed." She launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and clinging.

"Shh," his big strong arms held her close, "I'm okay. Doyle didn't stand a chance even before I saw him trying to hurt you.

His heart galloped, its rapid beat matching her own. She pressed her soft curves closer to his hard body. With a noise that sounded more wounded animal than human, he set her back on her feet. A rueful smile quirked up one corner of his mouth as he raked his gaze from her head to her toes.

"I don't exactly want to greet my men with a woodie." The man behind the uniform made an appearance.

"Oh, oh." Time to change the subject. "What's going to happen to Doyle?"

Drastic shift back to soldier.

"Doyle will never hurt you again."

"Will he go to jail?"

"Where he's going, he'll never hurt you again. As soon as my men arrive and I have a chance to fill them in, I'm going to take you to your parents. I want you to stay there until I come back."

She nodded her agreement. "Is this almost over?"

"We'll locate Lucas and explain the situation to him. Hopefully once we do that, he'll call off his dogs."

"I hope so. Do any of the guests know what's going on?"

"No. We've had them surrounded and even have some female soldiers on the inside keeping an eye on them. So far, they are blissfully unaware of the drama."

"Thank goodness."

"Sir, sir." Tony's frantic entrance prevented any further conversation. Four or five men loitered in the hall awaiting word on how to proceed.

The Princess And The O

The men spoke in low tones, squelching Acelin's attempt to eavesdrop. Ten minutes later, Nolan escorted her to her parents' spacious suite of rooms. With her hands demurely resting on his chest, she kissed him goodbye, then watched and waited.

With her future and her happiness on the line, she'd never done anything more difficult.

Chapter 15

More than twenty-four hours had passed since Nolan secured Acelin with her parents and returned to his command. Twenty of those hours had been awake and productive hours. Lucas had been run to ground after an exhaustive and extensive search. Nolan had hoped he'd surrender once cornered in a beachside cave.

Instead, the bastard brandished an envelope, claiming to have pictures of Acelin in some very compromising positions and offered to tell Nolan, along with all of his soldiers, about the recent weekend they'd spent together. Nolan guaranteed Lucas's silence by pounding him senseless after confiscating the envelope and tucking it away until it could be destroyed. Lucas' blustering stopped when he learned of the death of his brother and he caved like the puss he was. He now sat in a Timorian jail awaiting his fate. It wasn't Nolan's job to determine punishment, but he'd love to get his hands on Lucas one more time. His men had to pull him off the fuckwad the first time.

Nolan didn't regret killing Doyle. The scum deserved what he got for trying to rape Acelin. For trying to hurt his woman.

No doubt about it. Acelin was his heart and soul. He'd move heaven and hell to prove that to her. The confused and wary look in her eyes when he'd finally been able to brief her and her parents last night broke his heart. He preferred to remember the way she clung to him when he saved her from Doyle. He hoped her emotions in the aftermath of the trauma were the real, unguarded ones, that she'd been too shell-shocked to hide them.

Standing alone in his room, he picked up the envelope off the dresser, where he'd left it when he'd undressed to shower. His finger slid along the flap, testing the strength of the glue. With a shake of his head, he retrieved a pack of matches and marched to the bathroom. Striking one, he lit the corner of the white square and dropped it in the bathtub. Whatever Acelin did or didn't do with the scumwad princes was in her past and her business. If she wanted to tell him, she would. He watched until the fire consumed itself in a blaze of red and orange and black before he followed his heart to the woman he loved.

A week ago, she'd hoped to have a fiancé by the night of her birthday ball. By tonight, after the gala, he hoped it would be him.

But first, they had to talk. He steeled himself with a deep breath and set off to face his future.

With a nod to the guard at the door, Nolan knocked lightly and entered. As he suspected, Acelin sat eating breakfast with her parents and had been joined by her younger brother and sister. Her father expected his breakfast at the same time every morning and kept the routines in the face of chaos to preserve a semblance of normalcy for his family, his guests, and his staff. He bowed politely to her parents, startled when her mother popped out of her chair and embraced him.

"Oh, Nolan. We don't know how to thank you."

He straightened to his full height and gazed down at the older woman, a graceful, attractive picture of what Acelin would look like in thirty years. He bit back his first response, not wanting to give Acelin any ammunition in the upcoming battle by acknowledging that he'd only been doing his job. Some things had been part of the job. Falling in love with her hadn't been. When it came to her, he'd been following his heart, pure and simple.

"No thanks are necessary, Your Majesty. Knowing Timoria is safe," he turned to stare at Acelin, praying she correctly interpreted his as-long-as-Acelin-is-safe gaze, "is all I need."

“You dear, dear boy.” She reached up and patted his cheek. “You aren’t bound by protocol in here, you don’t have to call me...”

“Yes, he does, dear.”

Nolan laughed at the interruption. King Warrick had given up trying to get Nolan to address him in anything other than a formal manner. Now, if he were a son-in-law, he’d change his tune.

“Your Majesties, if I may have a moment alone with Acelin?”

She looked like she’d rather eat shredded glass than talk to him. *Too fucking bad. The air needed to be cleared. A proposal needed to be made.* He only hoped she’d give him the time to clear up his current obligations and chart a new path for his military career. He wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to do yet, but he knew what he didn’t want. Acelin deserved more out of a marriage than a husband who was gone three hundred out of three hundred and sixty-five days a year. His days participating in top secret missions all around the world would be over if she agreed to marry him. He had to convince her to give him the time to work things out. He mentally patted the envelope tucked in his jacket pocket, which contained some information that might help her realize she’d been on his mind long before he’d showed up in Timoria. He was willing to embarrass himself in order to prove himself to her.

He extended his hand, palm up, when she pushed back from the table. Her small delicate fingers sent sparks of electricity up his arm and straight to his dick. Thank goodness the idiot knew better than to get hard in front of her parents.

“You may use Her Majesty’s parlor.”

He expressed his thanks and bowed once more. With his hand resting on the small of Acelin’s back, he followed her to the queen’s room and straight into a pink and fluffy masculine nightmare. Offering up a silent prayer of relief that Acelin was much more practical, he perched on a chair that didn’t look

sturdy enough to support his bulk. A sigh escaped his body when she sat on the loveseat close to him. A definite good sign.

“We need to talk...”

“I have something I want to say...”

They laughed as they spoke over each other. He’d let her go first. That way, if she had any objections, he’d have the opportunity to pound the crap out of them when he told his side of the story. He gestured for her to proceed.

“I need you to explain, from the very beginning, how you came to be here.”

That he wasn’t expecting. To be yelled at, yes. To have to defend himself, most definitely. But he’d never expected to be calmly asked for the facts. She never ceased to amaze him, this princess of his. At least he hoped she’d be his once all was said and done.

So he started all the way back to the very first hints of trouble, the chatter picked up by the United States National Security Agency. NSA passed it on to military intelligence, who contacted Nolan. He was chosen because of his pre-existing ties to Timoria. It was assumed that if any of the chatter turned out to be true, his royal status would allow him access and provide him with a cover.

With the easy part behind him, Nolan drew a deep shuddering breath and prepared to lay his heart on the line. He’d faced terrorists less frightening. “As the chatter grew in intensity, my team and I, along with your father, decided that your birthday gathering provided the perfect opportunity for an attack. Your father wanted you under twenty-four hour protection. After the helicopter crash, he didn’t trust anyone but me to provide it. But your father didn’t push me at you. Well, maybe he did, but he couldn’t have known that I’ve fantasized about you for years and was only giving me what I wanted in the first place.”

Reaching in his pocket, Nolan withdrew the envelope containing some of the articles he’d clipped over the years. He didn’t bring the whole stack for fear she’d label him a freaked

out stalker if things turned sour. The manila package wobbled as she reached for it. Her trembling fingers flipped through the articles and pictures.

“You’ve been following my supposed exploits?” The look on her face was one of curiosity. Much better than disgust or revulsion, giving him the courage to continue.

“Something about you called to me, even when I didn’t know anything more than what the tabloids printed. I was pumped when I got the call about the assignment. I was psyched when your father ordered me to guard you. It gave me a chance to learn the real you.”

“You don’t really know all about me, all the things I’ve done.”

The look of trepidation creasing her brow gave him a good indication of what she planned to say. The simple fact that she trusted him enough to reveal her secret satisfied him. He didn’t need to hear the words unless she needed to say them. There were more important words to be said and life-changing decisions to be reached. “Acelin, anything you did before we met doesn’t matter. All that matters is what’s happened since you’ve come into my life.”

“And what’s that?”

“I discovered that the flesh and blood you is one hundred percent better than the tabloid created version. So much so, that I fell in love with you.”

It was all out there now. Even body armor lacked the ability to protect him if everything went to hell in a humvee.

“You love me?”

“Ass over tits in love.”

When she smiled, he released the breath he hadn’t known he was holding. He fought the urge to scoop her into his arms. She needed to come to him this time.

“Then we have something in common. Because I love you, too.”

“Halle-fucking-luiah.” He opened his arms and she crawled onto his lap, curling around him as if she belonged there. Which

she did. Cupping her chin, he gazed down into caramel brown eyes that allowed him to see all the way to her soul. He feathered his lips along hers, smiling when she parted her lips for more. Not yet. He had one more thing to do first. "Marry me, Acelin. I can't imagine my life without you by my side."

"There's nothing I want more, but..."

"No buts. None. I know you need a husband, not an I-could-be-anywhere-tomorrow-pilot. I'm prepared to do anything it takes to make that happen. I've never taken advantage of the fact that my father is the king and in charge of the military, but I plan to do that now. For us."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, but gave him no indication of what her answer would be.

"You'd do that for me?"

"For us. We're worth it."

She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him until she all but cut off his breath. "Yes, yes." She backed slightly out of the embrace, her hands resting on his shoulders, her pert little ass riding his erection. "But I don't want to rush this. We've really only known each other a week. I want us both to be sure before we make such a huge commitment."

"I won't change my mind."

"I won't either. But a long engagement won't kill us."

"If you keep bouncing on my dick, it just might."

He groaned as she ground against him, laughing and wedging him in her butt crack. If she continued to wiggle, he'd shoot his load in his pants. Not a good thing when he had to walk past his future in-laws to get back to his room.

"So, what do you plan to announce tonight at your ball?" He remembered how important it was to her to reach a decision by this time.

She blushed at the memory. "The only people who know that are you, Patrice, and my father. I think I can count on you three to keep your mouths shut." She shot him a pointed glance.

"Let the paparazzi think what they want. As long as our families know the truth, nothing else matters. Just don't make

me wait too long before you put me out of my misery and marry me.”

“How about we seal the deal with a celebratory lovemaking session?”

“Have I told you lately how much I love you? Especially your way of thinking?”

“Maybe, but tell me again.” She rubbed her breasts against his chest. She was going to kill him.

* * * *

The grand ball capping off Acelin’s week long thirtieth birthday celebration wound down with agonizing slowness. She’d been by Nolan’s side every possible moment when duty and protocol didn’t dictate otherwise. Now, she wanted nothing more than to throw him down and jump on him. She’d been aching to do so since he’d swept her off her feet with his unexpected marriage proposal.

She must have squealed when Nolan slipped the traditional Bermine engagement ring on her finger because her father burst into the room, followed by her mother close on his heels. They’d been caught in a royal whirlwind ever since. The marquis cut two carat diamond flanked by a band of channel-set small rubies glittered on her hand, catching the light and the eye of everyone present.

“Nolan?”

“Hmm?” His lips brushed her ear as they waltzed.

“My father is pointing at his watch. I think he’s finally ready for us to leave.” Both royal couples, along with Nolan’s parents, would leave together.

“In that case, we need to go pay our respects to my team.” Nolan secured her hand in the crook of his arm and guided her from the dance floor.

Acelin had dreaded meeting the members of Nolan’s team. She knew she needed to thank them for all they’d done to protect Timoria but she dreaded Nolan telling them of his decision to leave the military. She needn’t have feared. To a man, they were happy for the engaged couple, in spite of their

sadness at losing a valuable team member. She'd made sure each of them was properly fêted at the ball. The arrival of handsome single men in military dress uniforms guaranteed none of them watched from the sidelines. Acelin smiled at the sight of Patrice enjoying their company. Maybe, just maybe, she'd find her own hero tonight.

None of them held a candle to Nolan in his dress uniform, with gold braids and a chest full of ribbons. His dark blue military tuxedo complemented her strapless deep purple fitted gown. She was more than ready for Nolan to strip off the gown and see the flesh colored lace panties and thigh-high stockings.

"Your Highness." Tony bowed as they approached, then he saluted Nolan. The gesture appeared much more natural to the officer. Acelin realized it must have been difficult for all the men to adopt the gestures necessary to blend in. The other men followed suit.

Nolan spoke in soft tones, then escorted Acelin to their waiting parents. His parents hugged her again in a public show of welcome and acceptance before all three couples left the ballroom.

"If you will excuse us, I'd like to take a stroll through the gardens before the night is through." Nolan's intense gaze let her know he had more in mind than a simple moonlit walk amid the roses.

"Of course." King Warrick dismissed them with a casual wave, signaling for the guard to remain inside. "I'm sure you can handle Acelin's safety without benefit of a security officer. I believe the old fogies will share a nightcap and allow the women to plot more wedding details before we turn in."

Nolan whisked Acelin away before she had any chance to say her goodnights. As he guided her out the terrace door, he wrapped his arm around her waist. "I thought we'd never be alone."

The heat of his hand on her hip and the warmth of his breath on her neck ramped up the desire banked all day. "I had hoped for a more private venue."

“Are you suggesting that I should have just dragged you to my room and leave our parents staring after us?” His hand slid up her side, stopping just short of her breast. Her breath hitched as passion coursed through her veins.

Oh. She hadn’t thought of that. It amused her to see the master strategist in action. “How soon until we go back inside?”

“Our mothers should be busy planning and driving our fathers crazy by now.” With that, he laced his fingers through hers and led her down the path to the door leading to the guest wing. “And most of the guests won’t have left the festivities yet, so we should be able to sneak inside without being caught.”

“I for one, don’t care if we get caught. If I can’t make love to my fiancé, who can I make love to?”

He stopped short, causing Acelin to slam into his side. “No one but me, that’s for damn sure.”

“As long as you don’t fall into bed with anyone but me.”

“It’s a deal.” He headed for the door.

Nolan’s long stride forced Acelin to run, her strappy stiletto heels making it difficult. She clutched at her top with her free hand to make sure the bodice stayed in place. She wanted to be naked with Nolan, just not in public. As they reached the French doors, Nolan braced an arm in front of her. His head jerked side to side, then he reached for her hand again. She giggled as they strolled down the corridor. He tried to look calm, but she saw his pulse throbbing at the base of his neck and his chest rising and falling with rapid breaths.

He fumbled in his pocket, drawing out a key as they stopped in front of a door to one of the most luxurious suites in the wing. He gestured for her to precede him into the small living room. A small lamp perched on an end table illuminated the room with a faint glow.

Acelin had one thing on her mind once the snick of the lock indicated that they had shut out the rest of the world. She pivoted, pinning Nolan to the wall with her body. Threading her fingers through his hair, she tugged his mouth to hers. Her body tingled all over at the long awaited contact. She nibbled at his

lower lip, sucking on it, tracing the plump flesh with her tongue. The tingles increased in intensity until they erupted into flames burning her from the inside.

Her heart soared as their kiss deepened. She poured her heart and soul into the contact and felt his in return. She felt the depth of his love in the gentle stroke of his hands up and down her back. He teased and cajoled her, tasted and tormented her. He kept the kiss tender and passionate even as she attempted to allow their lust to spiral out of control.

The hard ridge of his erection unfurled, pressed along her belly. She rubbed against it, just like a cat in heat. A groan rumbled in the back of his throat when she thrust her tongue past his teeth to explore the sweetness of his mouth. She pumped in and out of his mouth as she wanted him pumping in and out of her.

By degrees, he pulled back from the kiss until their lips brushed. Her gaze flicked up, locked with his. His eyes were dark and unreadable so far from the light. "I love you." His hot breath fanned her mouth, his words wrapped around her heart.

"I love you, too."

He swooped back down, possessing her lips. Bold and assured, he swept deep inside her mouth, exploring and tantalizing. She needed him with a soul-deep urgency, not just physically but emotionally as well. Every stroke of his tongue along hers deepened the desire. Her breasts swelled and ached for his touch, for the feel of his palm cupped around them. Between her legs, moisture flowed freely, preparing her body for the welcome invasion. Her clit throbbed, yearned for the touch of his tongue.

Her heart longed for the contact as much as her body.

She broke away from the kiss, his whimper of displeasure bringing a smile to her lips. She traced a path across his strong jaw to his neck, dropping moist kisses as she went. His fingers plucked at the pins holding her French twist in place until her hair tumbled about her shoulders. Twisting his fingers in the loose strands, he tugged her head to the side, exposing her neck

to his plundering mouth. Every place he touched burned for more. His fingertips stroked the length of her shoulder and sent her skin sizzling.

Battling back for control, she pushed him away from her, needing the time to regroup. "Strip."

"Excuse me?"

The look on his face was comical. Nolan was a man unaccustomed to taking commands. Too bad.

"You heard me. Strip."

Acelin knew the exact moment he realized she was serious. His hands went to the buttons on his jacket as he stepped back several paces. The light shining behind him cast an exotic shadow around him. Shrugging the dress coat from his shoulders, he draped it across the back of the chair. He worked at the bowtie while he toed off his shoes.

Her heart racing in her chest, she understood why some men found strippers so arousing. The slow reveal of Nolan's body had her on the edge of an intense sexual cliff. He riveted her attention when he popped open the cufflinks and studs on his crisp white shirt. The garment fell to the floor, revealing the broad expanse of his chest. Her fingers itched to feel the warm skin and hard muscle.

Nolan slipped off his socks and stood before her, not nearly naked enough. He propped his hands on his hips and cocked his head. "Your turn."

"Not quite yet. You see, the only thing I have on under my gown is a pair of panties.

"So?" He skewered her with his gaze.

"You show me yours and I'll show you mine."

He held his pants in his hand so fast Acelin scarcely had time to admire the sleek play of his muscles as he stepped out of his clothing. The expectant look on his face and the tent in the front of his dark colored boxers made it clear that he waited for her to reciprocate. The sexual electricity arcing between them made resistance impossible.

Sashaying past him, she moved out of the shadow to stand by the light. With her back still toward him, she tugged at the zipper. As the teeth let loose, the fabric gaped to expose the length of her back. She heard his ragged breath as the upper curves of her butt came into view. Releasing her grip on the bodice, she allowed the dress to slither to the floor. She turned her head to see what Nolan thought of her see-through barely-there panties only to find him standing directly behind her, his boxers nowhere to be found.

The sight of his erection jutting strong and proud had Acelin ready to drop to her knees. Before she managed to do so, Nolan gathered her in his arms and lowered his lips to hers. Her heart stuttered, stopped completely, and then slammed against her ribs. Each caress of his lips robbed her of more of her sanity until she collapsed into his arms, a weak-kneed bag of desire. He took his time exploring her mouth, stroking her passion to new heights with each sweep of his tongue. His hands roamed over her body, never landing in any one place long enough to sate the urges he stirred.

Her fingers claimed him, her palms possessed him. As much as she was his, he was hers. She gripped at his muscular butt, pushing him closer, branding her flesh with the heat of his erection trapped between them.

It was too much. It wasn't enough.

"Bedroom, now." Her voice sounded thready and breathless to her own ears.

She'd expected an argument. Instead, Nolan scooped her in his arms and cradled her to his chest. Capturing her gaze, he laid her down in the middle of the large bed. Love and lust combined in his eyes. He swept an admiring glance over her, her body on fire every place his eyes looked.

"These have got to go," his hoarse whisper sounded in her ear seconds before he stripped her panties down her legs, leaving her exposed. His hands slid up the inside of her legs, parting her thighs. "So beautiful." He knelt between her spread legs, his

thumbs massaging gentle circles all around her pussy, everywhere but where she needed his touch. "You're so wet."

"I want you."

"What exactly do you want?"

If he thought she'd never express her deepest desires to him, he'd underestimated her. "I want you to eat me."

Before he had a chance to settle himself, she caught him off-guard and flipped him to his back. Straddling his shoulders, she lowered herself to his waiting mouth. He feasted on her. Lips and teeth and tongue tasted every inch of her from her mound of springy curls to the strip of sensitive flesh between the opening of her vagina and her ass. He sucked at the delicate hollow of skin at the top of her thigh where it met her body.

"I intend to make you scream."

His tongue flicked at her clit, drawing a moan from her throat. She felt the vibrations of a chuckle just before he launched a coordinated attack. His lips closed around the sensitive bundle of nerves, two fingers thrust inside, and the tip of his pinky toyed at the entrance to her ass. She was helpless to do anything but comply with his demand. A cry burst from her lips as her orgasm consumed her.

Sated to her toes, she slid down his body and stretched out on top of him. His erection nudged her, reminding her that while she got part of what she wanted, he hadn't gotten anything at all. Yet.

She wiggled her boneless body back, the head of his cock slipping between her wet folds and inside her. Large hands caught her hips, held her steady. With a fierce growl, he rocked up, thrusting deep. He guided her to an upright position, forcing him all the way inside her.

He touched her soul as she sat there, impaled and stretched wide by the man she loved. He'd given her everything she ever wanted. With a playful wiggle of her hips, she moved on him, guided in her motions by his strong grip. They moved together to quench a mutual desire. His hands shifted, one capturing a breast and the other stroking at her clit.

It had never been like this for her before, making love. Not only because Nolan freed her body to experience all the joys of sex but because he loved her. And she loved him.

Staring down her body, she watched him slide in and out. Watched him fuck her. The waves of pleasured pressure built. She no longer fought them, a drowning victim caught in a riptide. She rode them as he taught her to. She cried out his name and her love for him as the wave broke over them both.

For thirty-six hours, they reveled in each other's company. The only interruptions came from the kitchen staff bringing food. As the second morning of their seclusion dawned, both of them acknowledged the need to venture back out.

"Hell yes!" A hearty chuckle drew Acelin to the living room, wondering just what Nolan found so amusing.

She found him holding up the latest edition of one of the trashy tabloids she hated. Except this time, the headline, and Nolan's answer, made her heart jump and put a smile on her face.

HAS THE PERSNICKETY PRINCESS FINALLY PICKED A PRINCE?

Epilogue

One year later...

“This is not how I imagined spending my honeymoon.” Nolan tugged on the cord that secured his fur-cuffed wrists to the headboard.

“I believe, Your Highness, that turnabout is most definitely called for.”

He stared at his wife—his wife—posed at the foot of the bed. Her hair fell around her face in wild disarray, framing her kiss-swollen lips and passion-fired eyes. The black bustier pushed her boobs together and up in an enticing, mouth-watering display. His gaze drifted down to the delicate nip of her waist, her pussy covered by a wisp of fabric that didn’t deserve to be called panties—but probably still cost him a hefty penny—and her thigh-high stockings. While her feet remained hidden from view, he had no doubt she still wore her black strappy come-over-here-and-fuck-me-now shoes.

She hadn’t managed to kill him yet, but she kept right on trying. Damn, but he loved her.

“So tell me,” she leaned over and twirled a perfectly manicured nail around his navel, sending shock waves to his cock, “how did you plan to spend your honeymoon?”

“I planned on making my wife pay for forcing me to wait a year to marry her. I also planned on fucking her into an oblivious mess.”

“And what’s stopping you from doing that?”

Certainly not the knots she’d tied. Any Special Ops soldier worth the patch on his sleeve could get out of the binds. He

doubted the handcuffs themselves presented a problem. Still, he intended to stay put until she released him—no point in ruining her fun and his. “The fact that my wife isn’t close enough to me, for starters.”

She threw back her head and laughed, the upper swells of her boobs wiggling as she did. She’d always been a sensuous woman, but when he’d freed her to completely enjoy sex, she’d come alive. He benefited from her enthusiasm and their battles for control on a regular basis. As regular as they’d been able to manage while he juggled his new position as an advisor and consultant to the multi-national training academy being established in a remote area of Timoria. The arrangement allowed him to be a weekend warrior and a full-time husband, satisfying both their needs.

“Is this any better?” She climbed on his body, crawling until her pussy lined up with his dick, her oh-dear-god-in-heaven-they’re-crotchless panties not providing any barrier to where he needed to be.

“Almost.” He jerked his hips in an effort to slip inside the heat of her body.

“Tell me what you need.”

He growled, fighting the urge to free his hands to grab at her hips. “I want to be inside you.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” She ground her hips, scalding his cock with her wet lips.

“Dammit, woman.” He’d waited almost a year to marry this woman. If it had taken any longer for their mothers to plan the perfect wedding, he’d have gone stark raving out of his mind mad. He would never forget the sight of her gliding up the center aisle of Timoria’s main cathedral in her custom-made gown or how beautiful she’d looked in the ballroom of the Bermine palace at the official reception in his country. Those moments made it worth the wait to give her what she wanted.

But he refused to suffer one more minute of the sexual torture she dealt. It was time to get what he wanted.

The Princess And The O

She must have heard the tension in his voice, or noticed the vein about to pop in his neck. Rising on her haunches, she guided him into her body. Guided him home to the only place he wanted to be. Inside her. Beside her. With her. For the rest of their lives.

Oh yeah, life was good.

One final thought formed in his mind before the sensuous wiggle of her hips obliterated all rational thinking. He couldn't help but wonder what the headline would read if the tabloids could see them now.

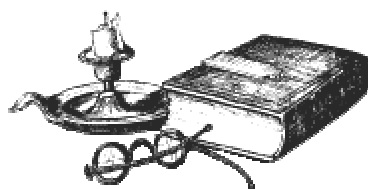
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicia Forella began writing in grade school with the help of a friend. She quickly gave up trying to be the next Carolyn Keene when she realized that she gave away the who-done-it by the third chapter. She became hooked on romance in high school when her mother bought her a (now autographed) copy of "Ashes in the Wind" by Kathleen Woodiwiss. (See what you started, Mom!) A long hiatus from writing began in college when she realized no one cared if she became the next Margaret Mitchell. She began writing seriously again in the late '90s and her New Year's resolution for the new millennium was to become a published author. She is proud to say this is one New Year's resolution she actually accomplished.

Felicia is a former air force brat, which might explain her obsession with men in uniform, who lived in Spain and all over the South. She now lives in PA with her hero husband and her hero-in-training teenage son, although, given her choice, they would be living somewhere down south as close to the ocean as humanly possible. They have a middle-aged beagle/border collie mix affectionately known as the Supermodel beagle, who is the only female in the house who responds to her husband's every beck and call.

She loves to hear from her readers! Please visit her web site at <http://www.feliciaforella.com>.

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