



Dangerous Rescue

By

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Dedication

There were three women, who contributed to immeasurably to making this story better, Missy, Sheila and Tobi. I owe them all for many hours of reading, commenting, and handholding.

Chapter One

Seattle, Washington April 29th 6:00 PM local time

Had anyone ever died of horniness? Ian wondered, thinking grumpily that he certainly didn't want to be the first. How had he wound up celibate in Seattle? This was not him. This was not what he'd wanted. This was absolutely not what he'd planned.

He'd loved sex--what he remembered about it. He frowned at the irritating patch of blue sky visible through the clouds from his office. Working on the seventh floor meant the sky usually looked dark, from being in the shadow of the taller buildings, which surrounded the *Justice Center*.

His phone played the opening notes from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. He reached for it, checking the caller ID. "Hey bud, it's great to hear from you," Ian grinned for no particular reason, other than hearing Clyde's voice.

"You still at work?"

"Damn, you caught me at it again," Ian said with mock chagrin. "So what's going on with you?"

"Headed your way."

"Coming my way from where?" Ian asked.

"SeaTac."

"You're in town?"

"Got in a half hour ago," Clyde said. "Got your computer on?"

"Always, though it's not like you ever email me."

"First time for everything, Romeo. Check your inbox. I'll wait."

"Okay, bud." Ian cradled the phone against his shoulder, clicking on the email from C. Jefferson, which had miraculously appeared in his inbox. "It's blank, Clyde. See, the whole idea of email is actually writing the other person a note. But since you're techno-challenged, and we're already talking, you could always tell me about it."

"Very funny. Isn't there an attachment?"

"Matter of fact there is, but I can't open it because I don't have the right program or maybe the right clearance? What the hell are you sending me, bud?"

Swiveling around, Ian eyed the silver of blue sky still gleaming hopefully, the days were getting longer. Spring was coming, even the rain felt warmer.

"Okay, I faxed it. Did you get it?" his friend asked impatiently.

Turning back to his desk, Ian observed that sure enough the fax machine was slowly pushing out an ink-heavy page. He plucked it, still damp, from the tray, and then dropped it as fast as if it were tainted evidence. "Yeah, the picture of Regan came through fine. Is this your idea of a joke, Clyde? Because if it is ...," he growled, letting the threat trail off harmlessly.

Laughing, Clyde reassured him. "No joke Romeo. And that's not Regan, that's the one and only infamous Princess Halle."

"Who the hell is this princess? Regan's long lost twin?"

"What's the matter, don't you folks get the tabloids out there on the West Coast?"

"I'm sure we do. But I don't read them," Ian said dryly, getting his emotions back under his usual firm control. "Why don't you fill me in?"

Clyde chuckled. "Maybe I should."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You really don't know about Princess Halle--the pampered daughter of Qsani's royal family? When she became engaged to Svensberg's heir to the throne, every detail of their courtship is front-page stuff on the gossip sheets."

"Am I bad, for not keeping up with the Daily Tattler," Ian muttered.

"If you had then you would know the Princess is coming to Seattle."

"The Princess is coming here?" Ian sat straighter, keeping his back to the rapidly darkening sky, as he scowled at the phone.

"I'll talk to you about it when I see you--should be in about ten minutes," Clyde said with another deep chuckle.

After hanging up the phone, Ian rummaged through his wastebasket, retrieving the discarded fax. Aside from the fancy hairstyle and the tiara, he could have been looking at a bad picture of Regan, his ex-partner--easily the most stubborn, infuriating, and seductive woman he'd ever met.

Thinking about her, even now, after eighteen months, made him feel like someone was tightening an iron band around his chest. There was nothing more pathetic than a case of unrequited puppy love. He crammed a lid on humiliating and painful memories, which were best left alone. It was all ancient history, nothing to do with him now. He'd moved on. Gotten over her. Way over.

But his hungry eyes moved toward the faxed image, hoping for one more glance of her beautiful face. Even in a grainy black and white photo the richness of her dark hair, the sparkle in those lovely eyes, and her remote smile gleamed at him infuriatingly. The loss still aching after all this time. And it wasn't even her.

The crack in his control was unacceptable. He was not about to waste his time regretting the past or mooning over any woman. He was a man of action. A man who knew what he wanted and how to get it.

He had always known what he wanted--a worthwhile life. Not all the falderal, which meant so much to his grandmother and certainly not the irresponsible gypsy existence his parents led.

After finishing college, taking a couple of detours, and finally moving back to Seattle, he'd hired on with the Police Department and he'd bought a house. The place was too big for a single man, but he'd never intended to be a bachelor for long. He'd even bought a summer place at the beach. It was past time for him to get married and start filling up those houses with kids.

Regan loved kids. He knew this for a fact. He'd seen evidence of it time and again when they worked patrol together. In some ways, he knew her, knew her better than he'd ever known any woman. Yet, when it came to really understanding what made her tick, he still didn't have a clue.

He stood, and then paced the length of his office. It was past time to put her out

of his mind and move on for real. He'd been alone far too long. Julia, the woman he'd been seeing for a few months, was certainly willing to take care of his needs and he was certainly horny.

But involvement with Julia came with expectations. She shared many of his dreams. She was attractive. Yet he hesitated, was the attraction he felt for sweet Julia enough? It would be if he managed to get past Regan's rejection. A little payback would help--then he'd have real closure. And that was sick. He wasn't a revenge kind of guy. Maybe that was his real problem. Too much nice guy and not enough ruthless bastard.

Damn, he needed to find a way to evict Regan from his head. The idea of having sex with one woman while thinking about another didn't sit well and he was damn tired of not having sex.

Clyde was right, though he'd eat ground glass before he'd admit it. If he had slept with Regan back when they were together then she'd be nothing but a hot memory by now. His pride had gotten in the way, wounded by her refusal of his marriage proposal. Time had cooled his anger but the damn woman stayed lodged in his thoughts, like an itch he couldn't scratch.

It had been his own damn fault. Regan had offered an affair--like sex was a consolation prize-- after she'd turned down his offer of marriage.

He'd showed her. He'd refused, walking out of her life for good. He'd been miserable ever since.

Stupidly, he'd fallen in love with Regan. Much worse than that original mistake-- he'd made an utter jerk of himself. When she'd countered his proposal by suggesting they love making instead, he'd been so stunned by her refusal that he'd barely heard what she'd said.

With his ears still stinging from her flat-out 'no', he'd lashed out at her. He'd said things he wished he'd never thought, let alone voiced. Thanks to his own temper, he'd ruined any chance for them to remain friends.

He wasn't excusing his mistakes. He'd been guilty of poor judgment, poor timing, and plain idiocy.

It was beyond cruel that the first female to turn him down was a heartless ice-queen bitch--one he'd wanted more than he wanted any other woman. He nursed his resentment, keeping it alive with the memory of Regan's cold refusal of his love, unwilling to let the pain go.

Fortunately, his grandmother wielded considerable influence in local political circles. He'd humbled himself enough to ask for her help and she'd been delighted to get him out of patrol and into a high visibility position as the mayor's liaison.

But neither wealth nor power had healed the wounds Regan had carved into his heart. Only by getting even would he ever be able to make it right. He needed to heal his wounded pride before he would ever be able to move on to someone else.

The Princess's uncanny resemblance to Regan had been exactly the wake up call he'd needed to stop moping and take charge.

He'd been going about this all wrong, avoiding Regan when he should have been seducing her. Sex was definitely the answer to everything that ailed him. Then, finally, he would be able to walk away and forget her.

By the time Clyde arrived, the sky had turned gray and sullen--the lovely spring day as over as the final note of an aria.

His friend cuffed Ian's shoulder affectionately. "It's good to see you, Romeo."

Hearing his college nickname made him wince inwardly, painfully aware how undeserved it was lately. "It's nice to see you too, bud. You look great."

A little overwhelming, but then that was Clyde. Memory always normalized him. Seeing him again carried an element of shock. Over seven feet high, more than three hundred pounds and not an ounce of it flab, everything about Clyde was bigger than life. Underneath the daunting exterior was a loyal friend and one of the best men Ian had ever met. Not that he'd ever embarrass either of them by mentioning his admiration.

"I hope we're still friends when this operation is over," Clyde mumbled.

Ian reassured him automatically. "Certainly we'll be. Hell, we've been friends since I found your sorry ass struggling with freshman calculus and threw you a lifeline."

"Yeah, well I taught you about jazz and how to dunk."

"Skills every modern man needs."

Clyde's answering grin was brief, and then he got down to business. "You've heard of the *Sons of Allah*?"

"The terrorist group that claimed credit for the drinking water disaster in Washington DC--the ones that make Al-Qaeda look moderate?"

"Correct. Our sources tell us they want Princess Halle and they're coming to Seattle to get her."

"And you want to get them." It was an easy conclusion. But already Ian felt distinctly uneasy.

"That's what I love about you, Romeo. You catch on quickly."

"Princess Halle is the perfect bait to capture this nasty bunch of bad guys. However, there's one teensy little problem with that excellent plan. The Qsani royal family might be mad as hell at their little girl, but she's still their princess. The Jaeger royal family likewise, while less than thrilled with Prince Peder's betrothed, would still be outraged if anything happens to their future daughter-in-law while she's under our protection. Factor in our need for the oil fields in Qsan, and Svensberg's controlling interest in the North Sea drilling operation, both of which we need a whole helluva lot more than anything they need from us, and you begin to see the problems with using Princess Halle as terrorist bait."

Ian absorbed Clyde's summary, knowing what was coming next and already hating it without bothering to analyze why. While he wanted to torture Regan and make her regret rejecting him--he didn't want her dead. He reached for the remote that controlled the table lamps and turned them on. The electric lights helped chase the gloomy shadows from the room but they did nothing to brighten his mood.

"Aside from all the diplomatic bullshit," Clyde continued with disarming candor. "I've already spent two hours with the Princess and that was way too long."

"When is this royal visit scheduled?" Ian asked, forcing the words through the tensed muscles of his throat.

"Two weeks. I gotta tell you I'm really glad you're going to be my liaison--nice to share the heat. Lots of egos involved, more brass, and plenty of opportunities for royal

snits and every form of cluster fuck you can imagine. Fortunately, the bad guys seem to be strictly an amateur-hour act. I don't think they've ever been within sight of the real *Sons of Allah*. But there's always the chance they're the real deal." Clyde grinned cheerfully.

"Lucky me, it must be all my clean living," Ian commented with painful honesty. "Lay it on me. What's the plan?"

* * * *

Officer Regan Longstreet closed the chief's door, and then glared at the innocent blond wood. She would have slammed it, except it would've been noisy and would've revealed her bad attitude. She wasn't going to let a fit of temper ruin her dream. She was in line to run the new Teen advocacy department. Not just in line, but so close she could smell the imitation leather chair, metal desk and fresh paint of a new unit head's office.

Chief Logan stuck his head out and called after her. "Passport up to date?"

Regan took a moment to study her future boss. It was hard to believe that this man who looked like a kiddy train conductor was really a tough-minded cop and master of all the political games necessary to run the high-visibility police department. His expression was unreadable.

"Yes sir," she said crisply.

"Good." Logan stepped into the hall, closing the door behind him and lowering his voice. "Then stop looking like I asked you to do something dirty. It is two weeks of playing princess--not a torture session. Then you're everyone's hero and your terrible teens get a new advocate."

She'd kept a tight rein on her smart mouth, holding back the angry words that would get her into big trouble. But judging by the chief's expression, she'd failed at keeping disappointment off her face. She sought for something to say that wouldn't make him regret recommending her for the position that she wanted so much.

"It was a let-down," she said honestly. "But you know you can count on me to do whatever job the department needs done." Regan met the Chief's gaze, hoping for understanding and tolerance.

Chief Logan's expression remained guarded as he narrowed shrewd baby blues in her direction. "These things are more complicated than you realize. The department needs team leaders." Then his voice softened. "Don't worry. No one is backing out of anything. Think of it this way: by taking this assignment, you're winning friends for the department and for your unit. Those teens need all the help they can get."

The chief had a point, much as it hurt to admit it. She tended to push too hard, which was not the way to win department popularity contests. A unit head needed to be politically savvy.

Regan swallowed her disappointment. "You're right, sir."

The Chief ignored her admission. "Your ex-partner has been doing his share. He's your biggest cheerleader. Ian is good man. Give him my best."

Ian McKnight was her biggest cheerleader? Since when? Caught off-guard, Regan scrambled for an appropriate response. "You've got it, I definitely will, the very next time I see him, sir."

She hadn't heard a word from Ian in ages. She'd guessed that he'd forgotten she

existed, which was just peachy. It proved she was right. She'd been nothing to him but a post-adolescent crush. She didn't think of him much anymore either--only two or three times a day tops.

"You've waited this long for your unit--you can wait another couple of weeks."

The implied threat in the chief's words snapped Regan's attention back to police business. If she turned down the princess assignment there might well be someone more cooperative heading the unit she already thought of as hers.

She'd been working forever to get the new advocacy unit approved. She knew she could do a great job running it. The assignment was a win/win situation for Regan and for the kids, who desperately needed a break. The kids would get a dedicated advocate and she would get to make a difference, in a good way.

Regan swallowed any further protest. She'd just sat through a two-hour meeting with Secret Service Agents, State Department personnel, and Svensberg's ambassador to the United States. She didn't need extra clues that the high-profile princess assignment was not optional.

Since she *was* going to succeed as the head of the new advocacy squad, she had to make this work. Time for her to get busy mastering the subtle arts of politics and fast, or she'd find herself back in Patrol. Then what would happen to the children, who needed someone to fight for them?

"Well, don't just stand there, go home and start packing." The Chief made a shooing motion.

"Yes sir." *What am I supposed to pack for a princess tutorial? Damn, I'm fresh out of tiaras.*

Ian would know. The thought blew in unbidden, something that happened all too often when it came to thinking about Ian. Time was supposed to make painful memories fade away. She was still waiting.

All too-often, high-definition images of Ian plagued her. The man was a walking temptation, his blue eyes rimmed with sinfully thick lashes, black curly hair, and the body of sex god, he was her fondest dream and her worst nightmare all rolled into one.

At the first red light on the way home, Regan called Kiki, her personal trainer. Paying someone to keep her in condition might seem like a luxury to some, but Kiki and the gym membership were Regan's only big extravagances. As long as she didn't count Starbucks, which Kiki would yell about if she knew, as well as the lingerie, and pedicures, and

Considering she was in her thirties and needed to be in top shape to run down felons, the gym and Kiki were more necessity than extravagance. Pedicures were essential for a woman who abused her feet as much as the average cop. Anyway, who did it hurt if she pampered herself a little? But the sad truth was no matter how much she babied her outsides--her insides were still hideously scarred. She shoved aside the too-familiar depressing thought.

She owed Kiki a call as her fitness coach, but even more as her friend.

"Hi there, it's Regan."

"Hey girl, is this some lame attempt to slack off instead of working out?"

"No." Regan laughed. She couldn't help it. Kiki always had that effect on her.

"But I do have to cancel on you for tonight. I'm going to be on assignment for a couple of weeks."

"Is this more training for the new unit? Team building and all that?"

"Sorry, I really can't talk about it. I'll run as often as I can and keep up with the basics. This is just a head's up that I'm going to need you to whip my butt back into shape when it's over."

"You got it. Take care of yourself out there. Your world can be scary."

Kiki's warm concern made Regan feel uncomfortable.

"Yeah, like your world's not? You better watch out for yourself. I've seen the cellulite under some of those yoga pants. Talk about scary."

"You got a point there, officer."

Regan imagined Kiki's dimples flashing as she listened to her friend's teasing.

* * * *

Within minutes of arriving at home, Regan had finished her packing and had tucked a spare clip of ammunition into her weekend bag. Then she'd indulged in a leisurely milk bath. After patting dry, she'd slipped into decadent silk undies. Hiding the feminine indulgence with a wrinkle-proof pants suit, so severe it looked almost like her uniform. After slipping on regrettably ugly but comfortable walking shoes and pulling her long hair into a quick twist, she was ready.

Prior to leaving the house, she had one more important job, spider patrol.

Regan had a thing about spiders. She didn't like them with their sticky grasping webs and their poisonous mouths, and they didn't like her. Much as she loved her old house, it wasn't spider-proof. She shivered, and then double-checked that all the sinks, shower, and bathtub drain covers were firmly in place. Then she confirmed both toilet lids were in the down position. Finally, she insured every window was locked and firmly sealed.

She'd just finished her inspection when she looked through her living room blinds to see the Queen's stunt double walking to her front door.

"Hi there." Regan stared as she held open the door, curious in spite of her intention to be cool.

The woman on her threshold looked as if she were airbrushed. Not a single speck of dirt soiled her ensemble and not a single silvery blonde hair was out of place. None of them would dare. Not a single rumple of her butter-colored wool coat marred her perfect appearance. An incongruous corsage of faux yellow roses decorated one shoulder. She had on a tidy pillbox hat and her white gloved hands held a beige treasure chest-shaped purse in leather as smooth as a baby's butt. Conservative tan pumps, that probably cost the earth, graced her small feet.

Ian would've been right at home with this royal associate. He came from a world of wealth and privilege as foreign as Svensberg to Regan. Pushing the distracting thoughts of Ian out of her head, she focused on the woman in front of her.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Longstreet. I am Inge Lundstrom--you are to address me Lundstrom. I have worked for Princess Halle since her engagement to His Royal Highness, Prince Peder. It's my job to help orient you and answer your questions. I am afraid we have a rather long journey ahead of us. If you are quite ready?"

Not in this lifetime.

"Sure." Regan shook Lundstrom's hand with a quick smile.

She'd already decided to suck it up and play nice. At the very worst, this assignment would be good practice for all those inter-departmental meetings.

Regan grabbed her small suitcase and her raincoat, relieved to be able skip serving tea and cookies to her royal babysitter. As she locked the house, she asked Lundstrom, "Where are we headed?"

The woman's laughter managed to be both cheery and tasteful, like her wardrobe.

"We're joining the royal family at Paradise on the Island of Tortolo."

"Where exactly is Paradise found in the real world?"

Another trill of tasteful laughter preceded Lundstrom's response. "Paradise is simply the name of the Jaeger family's retreat. It's located, as I mentioned, on Tortolo." She looked back and then expanded her answer in response to what must have been the blank look on Regan's face.

"Tortolo, which means turtledove, is located in the British Virgin Islands."

Lundstrom coughed politely, taking the sting out of her remarks.

"The Caribbean, huh?"

Regan considered the contents of her weekend bag, clean undies, a white silk blouse, a stretchy dress black tee shirt, a versatile black skirt, and her grooming kit. She'd tossed in the blood-red nail polish at the last minute. Just in case there was time for a pedicure. She considered going back for a swimsuit, but shrugged it off. The old Speedo was getting thin. If she got a chance to go swimming then she'd treat herself to a new one, maybe a bikini. Well, why not?

"That is correct." Lundstrom paused at the limousine parked in Regan's driveway. A uniformed chauffeur held the door open.

Did you have more questions, Ms. Longstreet?" she asked, waiting patiently for Regan to respond.

"Hundreds. Call me Regan." She smiled, determined to show she wouldn't hold her companion's stuffy attitude against her.

She glanced back at her narrow Victorian townhouse with a sudden pang, wishing she were staying home. Allowing her bag to be stowed in the trunk, she entered the sleek automobile, and then slid across, leaving plenty of room for her escort. The other woman arranged herself on the spacious backseat with smooth, economic movements, which suggested limo rides were a frequent occurrence in her life.

The chauffeur closed the passenger door and returned to the driver's seat before Lundstrom spoke again. "In point of fact, Ms. Longstreet, I will be addressing you as Your Royal Highness or as Princess Halle in a very informal setting. I will, of course, refer to you as Her Royal Highness, Princess of Qsan, in any public situations."

The woman's voice was low and even. Her accent was cultured and her tone gracious.

Her lecture still felt like a rebuke.

Regan nodded, trying to keep her face blank, and wishing, not for the first time, that she had her brother's poker face. Zack was like a sphinx.

Privately, she considered it a big waste of the taxpayer's money to play princess for three weeks. Even if two of those weeks were going to be in The Virgin Island's, all

expenses paid.

This assignment certainly wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to her. The seven days of pretending to be Princess Halle on an official state visit to Seattle, was bound to be a royal bore. But she'd smile and wave her way through it.

After all, how tough could it be to play princess?

* * * *

Ian finished tying his black bowtie, and then treated himself to scotch. A generous splash of *Malverney's* single malt flowed over the two ice cubes chilling the tumbler. The complex aroma and flavor swirled over his palate, calming him. Regan was all but official as the head of the new teen advocacy department. He knew this, having lobbied behind the scenes to ensure approval of the badly needed unit, yet another example of his misguided instincts. She should be hip-deep in getting the operation up to speed, not pretending to be some silly royal. Knowing Regan, she was pissed about the last-minute assignment.

A smile teased the corner of his mouth. He hadn't spoken to her since the transfer, he'd asked for, had come through. But he'd been tempted a time or two and this was definitely one of those occasions.

He didn't need to look up Regan's cell number. His fingers still knew it. He got her voice mail. "Sorry I can't answer the phone right now. Leave a message."

Hearing her voice was a turn-on. Instantly he was getting hard and losing cool. Ian shifted, suddenly uncomfortable in his evening clothes. Maybe she'd been right--the only thing between them was chemistry. The smart thing would've been to hang up. His home number was blocked. She'd never know.

As with all his encounters with Regan, his pride came into play and the smart thing didn't happen.

He started talking. "This is Ian McKnight. I'm sorry about the princess assignment delaying your new department appointment." He sounded way too formal. Did she have an edit option on her messages? He should hang up before it got worse.

"Clyde does good work. You can count on him to ensure the operation is first rate." *And that you're the ideal target.* "I'll see you in Seattle." He clicked off, regretting the impulsive call.

Why was it that he could speak to hundreds at a political rally, exchange pleasantries with celebrities, diplomats, and presidents without elevating his blood pressure, and yet it was impossible for him to manage a simple call to Regan without tying his tongue into knots?

Next, he dialed Clyde. "I thought we'd agreed I would be receiving regular reports," he gripped.

"Good evening to you too Romeo. I've been a little busy. Your report must have slipped my mind. Don't you have anything else to worry about? Aren't you practically engaged to the mayor's cute little daughter? What's her name? No, don't tell me. Jillian, right?" Clyde ragged on him with humor Ian was in no mood to appreciate.

"Julia," he corrected Clyde automatically. "Don't be ridiculous, Julia has nothing to do with this. Regan was my partner. Her brother's a friend of mine. Plus, you expect me to help coordinate all the agencies involved with the princess's security. Naturally, I

am interested in the operation--"

Clyde interrupted. "Hold it right there. Save your rationalizations for yourself. You're going to need them. The answer to your question is real easy. Regan is fine. She's being treated like a princess."

"You call that a report?"

"What else do you need to know?" his friend asked reasonably.

"I want you to promise me you'll personally guarantee her safety." Although why it was so important to keep her intact, so that he could shatter her heart the way she had his, wasn't something he wanted to explain to Clyde--or anyone else.

"She'll be fine. Quit stressing, man."

Ian knew he should play it cooler, but this was too important. "I need your word on it, Clyde."

"Okay, if that's the way it's got to be, you've got it. Now, lighten up."

"I'm completely light," Ian insisted stiffly.

Clyde snorted. "Listen, the royal tour kicks off at 10:00 AM Monday after next. You're going to be the point man in a couple of weeks. Try to relax."

Clyde's deep laugh echoed in his ears long after Ian hung up the phone.

* * * *

Nine hours after a smooth take off, Regan stepped off the private plane into another world. One of balmy breezes, exotic flora, clear skies and a warm sun. A roomy van picked up her, Lundstrom, and their luggage. A leisurely ride over a twisting road, and then through a guarded iron gate delivered them to the royal compound, Paradise.

The complex was aptly named. Peacocks strolled the grounds. The stately males displaying their dramatic tail feathers and screeching their prowess. Servants were dressed in white, guards in khaki and unidentified guests in colorful resort wear, and a few, like Lundstrom, in tasteful pastels. Dressed in her sensible black pantsuit, Regan felt as out of place as cat burglar at a jeweler's convention.

The ocean, startlingly blue, was bordered by a pale cream beach. The restless tides dominated the view. An impressive lawn and lush, but immaculately tamed landscape, decorated the luxurious grounds surrounding the compound. Several smaller buildings nestled into the green swells, supporting the main structure. Each building sat serenely confident in pink stucco, topped by terra cotta tile roof and surrounded by rosy stone terraces. Giant urns, spilling vibrant floral arrangements, punctuated the gracious tiled steps, which approached the compound's main entrance.

They were ushered into an interior done in cool sorbet colors. The rooms were kept airy with high ceilings and tall windows. The sound of feminine voices burbled over the slow whirling of ceiling fans and the steady pulse of the sea, forming a distant backbeat. The seductive sweet scent of jasmine wafted in from the outdoors.

The openness of the building concerned Regan. Security must be a nightmare. Besides, who knew what kind of lethal spiders lurked in the tropics?

"Aren't insects a problem?" she asked as she rolled her eyes significantly toward the vulnerability of the openings.

Lundstrom dismissed her concerns with an airy gesture. "An electronic net protects the entire compound."

Regan wasn't convinced. But she nudged the insect worries to the back of her mind as she met Princess Halle. She'd seen tabloid shots, but she was totally unprepared for the real woman. Her Royal Highness was dainty, elegant, and exquisite. Whoever had thought Regan could pass as the Princess, was either visually challenged or else had never met the woman.

She dropped a curtsy with one foot behind her as Lundstrom had instructed, feeling ridiculous.

Musical laughter pealed through the airy room. "Do not, please. You are too like me and I would never curtsy to anyone. If I were to do such a silly thing--I certainly would never do so in such an awkward fashion." More of the rippling laughter followed this pronouncement.

"Come closer," Princess Halle demanded.

Her amusement rankled and her lack of tact didn't help matters. Regan complied for her own reasons, which had nothing to do with the rude Princess. She surveyed her assignment. They both had long dark hair, dark eyes, and a similar build. But that's where any resemblance stopped. The princess wore her shiny hair in an elaborate style that Regan had no idea how to duplicate. Her skin glowed. Every word she uttered was in a cultured accent that Regan might learn to mimic. If she had a month or two to work on it.

While she studied Princess Halle, the princess returned her regard--once she'd stopped laughing. "You are not Qsani. Tell me of your people."

Regan was shocked into silence by the politically incorrect command. Lesson one--royalty lives by different rules. After a brief hesitation, she decided there was no valid reason not to comply. "I am Iroquois, French, and English. My mother was a Native American."

"Not Qsani," the princess said, dismissing Regan's heritage. "Yet you could be my twin, except for the awful clothes." The princess rose, moving forward until she encroached on Regan's personal space.

"Lundstrom tells me you are a police officer." The princess circled her. Surprisingly, when she came close it was obvious that she was as tall as Regan and less fragile than she'd initially appeared.

"Yes," Regan agreed tersely, holding herself still with an effort.

"Perhaps you are different kind of royalty--a warrior princess," Princess Halle murmured. The insight both startled and pleased Regan.

Ian had called her his warrior princess. The memory heated her neck. She turned her thoughts about him icy with an iron discipline forged by much practice. What sounded like her own voice issuing from the other woman's mouth made an eerie echo to her private thoughts.

Barring a miracle, Regan was never going to fool anyone into believing she was the Princess. Over the next few hours, she shared her opinion. Several times.

Absolutely no one took her honest assessment seriously.

When His Highness, Prince Peder popped in for a few minutes the Princess's healthy glow became dazzling beauty.

Personally, Regan thought the Prince no great prize. He had skinny legs, a beak-

like nose and a prominent Adam's apple. In spite of these shortcomings, a blind woman could see he did it for the Princess.

Sadness, which she'd never admit to, because she'd never know that kind of romantic bond in her own life, washed over Regan. The feeling lingered as the royal couple cooed.

Once the prince left, the princess beckoned her close, speaking in a whisper. "This whole operation," Princess Halle gestured to indicate Regan and herself, "is so silly. Peder overreacts. He will calm down, and then I will get to go to Seattle and see my cousin Danielle. Try not to worry too much."

Good to know. But Regan couldn't count on the operation being cancelled.

Chapter Two

Istanbul, Turkey May 1st 5:00 PM local time.

The sea breeze helped a little. As did having his back to the wall. Neither factor eased his nervousness. Mohammed was late. O'Brien shifted on the metal chair, feeling out of place and uncomfortably aware that his lightweight wool suit marked him as a European tourist--at best. The brown contacts, dark hair dye and spray on tan helped obscure his nationality. However, anyone looking closely would recall him as a foreigner. Fortunately, no one paid any attention to him, including his waiter.

Three years ago, he'd applied to Mohammed for help closing the sale of the *In Place*. Due to circumstances beyond his control, he had missed the agreed-upon closing date with the consortium of Middle East businessmen. There was nothing he could do about the unfortunate timing. Mohammed, like a shark smelling blood in the water, extracted a steep price for his help. A charge over and above the bargain basement sales figure that the old pig fucker had named. The extra cost of the mysterious Arab's assistance was three favors.

He'd used the first one last year. The hairs on O'Brien's arms prickled with revulsion as he recalled the ordeal. He did not permit himself to shudder or to show any other reaction to the foul memory.

Last week Mohammed called, once again reminding him of his outstanding debt and instructing him to meet him at this café on this date, at a quarter to five. The demand came at a difficult time. However, O'Brien rearranged his life, arrived in Turkey and made his way to Istanbul, and then to the specific place, and fifteen minutes early. That was--he allowed a glance at his watch--to confirm that his irritation was fully justified, forty minutes ago. He eyed the brackish Turkish coffee with suspicion, and schooled himself to continue to wait stoically.

His disinterested waiter put in an appearance.

"Do you wish for anything else, sir?" The words were courteous enough, though the man's tone was surly.

"Water, bottled. Do not open it." O'Brien dismissed the server without any pretense of civility.

The man reappeared minutes later, with uncharacteristic efficiency, chilled Perrier bottle in hand.

"Take your water with you, Mr. O'Brien and walk from here to the dock, just there." He pointed to make his orders clearer. "Wait there for instructions."

The bitter recollection of the last *favor* returned, chilling O'Brien faster than the sea breeze, which lifted his thinning hair as he strolled toward the pier with deliberate calm--another tourist out to see the sights. He told himself that the-invisible-target-painted-on-his-back sensation was a predictable reaction to being watched.

Dealing with Mohammed made O'Brien almost nostalgic for the old days when that fat little fucker Tony was his worst problem. Not that he'd forgotten, or forgiven, Tony's theft of his five million dollars. In between favors for the mercurial Arab, rebuilding his fortune, and staying out of the legal system, looking for Tony was his primary occupation. He spent many pleasant hours thinking about how to extract the most revenge for his old manager's betrayal.

Thoughts of wrecking havoc on Tony's carefree life when he caught up with his enemy, gave O'Brien an infusion of courage. Whatever favor Mohammed asked of him, it meant he was one step closer to complete freedom.

Stoically, he accepted the blindfold. Next, he was roughly guided into a small boat. The craft took off misting his masked face. After a short cruise, he was shoved and prodded onto a larger vessel.

When the blindfold came off, he was in a yacht's spacious salon, still roomy even while it was occupied by at least a dozen men in traditional flowing Arab robes. The built-in white leather couches swirled like giant seashells, the long sectionals supported Mohammed and several of his cohorts. The rest of the room's occupants stood guard, armed like the guerilla fighters they were. The automatic weapons and bands of ammunition only faintly jarring against the kind of garment Jesus himself might have worn.

O'Brien's water bottle had been confiscated upon boarding. He accepted an offered demitasse, sipping the lethal brew carefully. He exchanged compliments with Mohammed, in the time-honored tradition of doing business in the Middle East.

"Have you found your enemy, Mr. Serrano?" his host asked politely.

"How kind you are to remember my petty problems. No, my old friend, I have not found the man who betrayed my trust," he answered with equal formality.

"It is possible that I could be of some help to you in this matter. The *Sons of Allah* have many friends in many lands," Mohammed said indifferently.

Shit! The treacherous old pig fucker knew where Tony was. What kind of price would the devil's spawn charge for the information?

"Perhaps, since we are old friends, if I were to assist you in locating this piece of pig eating filth, you would do the *Sons of Allah* another kindness some day?"

O'Brien groaned inwardly, but bowed outwardly, agreeing genially. "I am honored to help the *Sons of Allah* and my good friend Mohammed."

As if he had any choice.

"The *Son's of Allah* has only one mission, to bring death to the infidels. Allah smiles at his followers, guiding us in this, as in all our ventures. Indeed, my old friend, Allah in his wisdom brought you to us and showed you the one true path to paradise."

O'Brien listened attentively. All the while trying to guess where the conversation was heading. The last foray involved thousands of miserable deaths from a deadly contamination of Washington, D.C.'s drinking water. Already he felt slightly queasy over whatever part he would be required to play in the next act of mindless destruction that Mohammed had planned.

Killing innocents wasn't O'Brien's thing. At least not innocents that weren't obstructing his plans and that he had no grudge against. He'd tried to avoid participation

in the last debacle by explaining he'd been a police officer in Washington State, which was all the way across the country from the District of Columbia. Mohammed had accepted this disappointing bit of news philosophically, opining that one police department was much like another. His assessment had been accurate. The execution of the mass murder scheme went smoothly.

"Princess Halle plans an official visit to Seattle next month." Mohammed eyed him over the gold rim of his dainty demitasse.

Forcing his fingers to stay loose where they curled around the delicate saucer resting on his thigh, O'Brien spoke politely and waited uneasily for further enlightenment. "Yes?"

He knew who she was--the latest tabloid sensation, and an exotic beauty, the daughter of the Royal House of Qsan. Her decision to accept Prince Jaeger's proposal had raised eyebrows in both royal residences. The Muslim population of Svensberg, cheered her as their savior. The sloe-eyed beauty automatically raised hackles among the elite of Europe when she snagged their most eligible bachelor. When she announced her decision to convert to Christianity, her Muslim supporters wavered in shock. Her parents weren't happy either.

Spoiled, willful, and rebellious royals were nothing unusual. However, Princess Halle was an only child. She stood to inherit the Qsan throne. The small nation was the incredibly oil-rich lynchpin of the Middle East. Coupling their wealth with Svensberg's dominate ownership of the North Sea oil alliance made the young woman a powerful strategic piece in the world of international politics.

O'Brien's mind churned with the few facts he knew about the Princess. He tried to guess how she fit into Mohammed's plans for the destruction of the United States. At the same time, wishing he didn't have to hear another word. However, walking away from Mohammed's hospitality wasn't a sane option.

* * * *

Montego Bay, Jamaica May third, 6:00 PM local time

Sam watched his mother fussing and wondered what she was up to. Already knowing he probably wouldn't like it, he was unable to get upset with either of his well-meaning parents.

"Let me get you a refill," Patsy said brightly, pushing her chair away from the terrace table.

"I'm fine, Mom. Sit down and tell me where you two lovebirds are going now." Sam smiled at his mother.

She perched on the edge of the apple-green cushioned wicker chair. "Your father wants to check on some real estate; I swear that man does not understand the whole concept of retirement. Now, if we had grandchildren ..."

Sam teased his mother. "Hey take it easy, I'm not even thirty. Besides, I'm still waiting for a girl like you."

"Flattery will get you everywhere. But you should be using it on some sweet young thing instead of wasting charm on your mother."

"So what have you got planned while Pop pokes around commercial buildings?"

"The international branch of the *Daughters of Svensberg* is having a coffee hour

at Paradise, you know, the Jaeger family retreat on Tortolo, to welcome Princess Halle to the Caribbean." Patsy beamed as if the ceremony was a celebration of world peace.

"Sounds like a big deal," Sam said, trying to look interested.

"It is to your mother," Tony said with a fond smile for his wife. "Smartest day of my life when I asked this woman to marry me. And the luckiest when she said yes."

Patsy waved her hand dismissively at Tony's declaration. "You want ice tea or something else?"

Tony smirked. "Ice tea is fine--better with a shot of peach liqueur."

"If you're sure it won't hurt your stomach," Patsy said doubtfully as she started toward the kitchen.

"My stomach's fine," Tony said, burping delicately behind his fist. "Much better than it used to be. Okay, then plain tea."

He waited until she had left the terrace before speaking. "It is better, but she's right about the liqueur. Your mother's always had the brains in this family." He reflected for a moment. "And the looks. Lucky, you take after her."

And lucky I take after you too, pop. Sam knew the compliment would fluster Tony. So he didn't say it. "Lucky for me that you found her and won her."

"Yeah," his dad agreed with a pleased expression.

"Guess who I found?" his mother said brightly.

Sam took one look at the blonde and forgave his meddling mother. Long-stemmed pale beauties were his favorites. Maybe it was the opposites-attract thing since he definitely favored his father with his dark hair, eyes, and easily tanning skin. Actually, he'd been lucky in getting a good blend of his parent's best features. He'd been lucky about everything.

Well, almost everything. There'd been another blonde in college that he'd tried to impress by hacking into the university's system. He'd wound up working for two years in the Seattle Police Department's information technology unit, sans salary, as part of his sentencing agreement.

His computer talents were quickly noticed by the head of Vice, O'Brien. The man was as crooked as they come but a savvy player, who blackmailed Sam into several minor techno-favors. Savvy or not, underestimating Sam was a big mistake. One that he'd probably never recognized because Sam looked younger, nicer and a hell of a lot less sophisticated than he was. Sam and Tony had taken O'Brien for five million and made a clean getaway.

Island living was great. He let a little interest sparkle from his eyes as he drank in the blonde his Mom had recruited.

"Melinda this is my son, Sam," his mom beamed at him proudly.

Sam resisted the urge to mumble 'aw shucks.'

"Sam this Melinda, she and Nick are renting the Baxter place for a few weeks."

Huh, Nick who?

Patsy's smile widened. "There you are, Nick! I was just introducing your bride to my son Sam. You already know Tony. Please have a seat. Now, what can I get you two to drink?"

Honeymooners-- very subtle, Mom.

Sam stood, smiling agreeably, and then shook hands with the attractive couple before resuming his seat. He continued to play the dutiful, single son, making polite chitchat for another hour before making his excuses. He understood his mother's strategy perfectly. Nevertheless, it had been effective. Melinda and Nick made a cute couple. He was uncomfortably aware of his status as the lone solo act in a paired-off world, as his mom had intended.

He was still thinking about it when he drove home an hour later. The problem was that Sam didn't want to settle. He wanted what his parents had. He wanted the magic. In the meantime, he was still young and there were lots of playmates to enjoy before he made a permanent connection.

Speaking of which, he spotted a damsel in distress in his right front quadrant. Hard to tell about her coloring from this angle--but she had a great ass. The hood was up on her compact rental and she was stretched over the fender, examining the engine compartment, her upper half hidden by her position.

Sam didn't know a lot about engines, but he could offer her a ride or the use of his cell phone and he was happy to lend emotional support. He liked to think he was the kind of guy who'd have stopped to help even if she'd been grandmotherly, but the cute butt and trim legs had caught his eye much faster than the raised hood.

Parking right behind her, he got out of his vehicle and volunteered his assistance. "Can I help?"

"Not unless you're a freakin' magician," she snapped and backed out from under the hood, blowing long brown bangs off her forehead with a frustrated whoosh of breath. Sam grinned in appreciation because the top half of her body matched her bottom and then some. "Sorry, ma'am I'm only a lowly passerby on the lonely highway of life."

She laughed, wiped her greasy hand on a hankie, and then extended it to him. "Caroline Kennedy, and no, not that one. My grandmother was a big Jackie O fan, so my mom promised to name her first daughter Caroline."

Pausing to eye him carefully, she pushed the bangs away leaving a streak of dirt on her temple. Sam waited for her to make up her mind, doing his best to look harmless and friendly, which he was, basically.

"If you could give me a ride into Kingston, that would be so great," she said appealingly. Her eyes widened and she touched her throat, leaving another dirty mark. He produced a clean handkerchief, and gently wiped her temple, her throat, and finally he cleaned her slender fingers. Moving slowly and touching only the soiled spots, he worked to keep her comfortable but at the same time make her aware of him as a man, one perhaps not as entirely harmless as she'd first thought.

Nothing wrong with being a nice guy, except unless he pushed women had a tendency to dismiss him as too young, too sweet, and not boyfriend material. A guy never got laid being too nice. Sam had learned. Nowadays, if he was interested, he stepped inside the woman's comfort zone and let her take a second look at the man who wasn't too young, or too nice, or too harmless.

Sam's interest level rose along with another part of his anatomy that responded favorable to the curvy Miss Not-That-Caroline-Kennedy. This close she smelled good and her skin was soft and moist. She sighed and leaned closer.

God, he loved women.

Giving her a slow grin, he made a counter offer. "I'd love to give you a ride to Kingston, but would you mind if we stopped by my place first?"

She blinked in hesitation.

Sam pushed the odds in his favor, teasing her. "You're welcome to wait in the car if you're uncomfortable entering my lair."

"No, I mean that's fine, I'd love to see your place. Do you live around here?"

"It's right on our way," he assured her, holding her eyes though he wanted to look elsewhere, he waited, knowing his patience would reap rewards. If it didn't, that wasn't a problem. There were always plenty of willing partners.

The abundance of lovely women in his life was the main reasons he resisted his mother's hints. Exclusivity and commitment were for some time in his future when he found a truly special woman. He never doubted that would happen, but until it did--he saw no reason not to enjoy the variety on offer.

He held the car door for her, buckled her in, keeping his touches light and caring. Again, his restraint was rewarded as she sighed and moved nearer. Lingered, he caged her with his arms. "Do you need to call someone? You're welcome to use my cell."

"No--I mean no, thank you. I tried calling my girlfriend earlier but there was no answer. I'll try again later."

Her eyes drifted shut--her lips were less than inch from his. Sam stroked the side of her head, letting her silky hair tease his fingers. The pink tip of her tongue darted out to trace the outline of her smile. He followed the lascivious journey with his finger, and then she sucked it into her mouth.

When she'd finished, he framed her face and then pressed his lips to hers. She softened beneath the onslaught of his mouth, inviting him to deepen the kiss. Instead he reluctantly pulled away, unwilling to start something he couldn't finish.

"Hold tight to that idea, baby. We're twenty minutes from my place," he whispered while placing nibbling kisses up her neck and on the sweet spot behind her ear. She tasted like sun-ripened melon.

Five minutes from home, Caroline cried out. "Oh look, can we stop?"

Sam eyed the seedy bar, really little more than beach shack, with misgivings. "We're almost to my place," he said persuasively.

Caroline coaxed. "It's so cool--like a real local's hangout and I'm super thirsty."

"As your wish is my command," Sam said shrugging off his irritation. The bar had a nice view and a little more get-acquainted time would work in his favor. A drink or two never hurt either, he thought cynically.

"A glass of merlot and whatever the lady wants," Sam instructed the bartender then excused himself to wash his hands. When he returned his glass of wine waited along with a dish of plantain chips. Caroline sipped from a tall glass.

As Sam sat, he pressed his leg against hers. She covered his knee with her hand, and then slid it up his inner thigh.

"Very nice," she whispered appreciatively.

Sam took a long swallow of his wine. "Thanks."

Maybe he should consider settling down, for once the woman was moving too fast

for him. He had another swallow of the merlot and decided he could pick up his pace.

Leaving the bar, he felt a little dizzy. Thankfully, the house was only a few minutes further. Caroline rode with the car, shifting in her seat with each curve of the road and somehow worsening the buzz in his head.

"This is a great car--driver's not too shabby either," she laughed as he sped through the long dusk.

After arriving at his place, he hurried around to Caroline's side to hold her door. She stood with a slow sexy smile, deliberately brushing against him as she passed. He caught her, holding her prisoner in his arms. Then pulled her hard against him, making his arousal plain. Melting into him, she tilted her head to give him access to her sweet mouth. He kneaded the great butt he'd first noticed as he plundered the softness between her lips, letting her feast on his tongue.

When he broke the kiss, she was panting and trembling with need. He wrapped an arm around her waist, keeping her close and safe as he led her inside.

"I need a shower," he said his voice rough with desire.

She kicked off her sandals. "Me, too."

Then he kissed her with more hunger than finesse, suddenly very eager to have her damp softness wrapped around him.

Stumbling toward the shower, he tugged at her clothes. He broke the kiss at the entrance to the bathroom. Her lips were wet and swollen. Wisps of brown bangs drew attention to blue eyes dark with a hunger to match his own. The tee shirt she'd had on the last time he'd looked was gone. Her breasts were milk pale with visible blue veins and rosy nipples, larger and firmer than he'd guessed--an unexpected bounty that more than matched her generous ass. An improbably small waist supported the impressive tits.

"Hang on a minute, baby. I need to get us some protection," he backed away.

Pulling a thin foil packet from her shorts pocket, she held it tantalizingly as she shimmed out of the small pants, revealing a neatly trimmed bush.

"Gotcha covered big boy," she assured him with a throaty laugh.

For a second, Sam hesitated. It wasn't like he'd never scored quickly before. But something seemed a little off or maybe Caroline was too convenient for his taste. But the moment of caution passed while his need escalated.

Then she ran her nails down his chest, lightly scoring him. "Unless you have a thing about using your own brand?" she asked, reaching for his zipper.

His cock leaped into her soft hand, obviously not even a tiny bit put off by her enthusiasm. Quickly, he relieved her of the rubber and sheathed himself with practiced efficiency. "A beautiful *prepared* woman--my dream come true."

Taking a second to turn on the shower and adjust the temperature, he rotated back toward her, finding his cute hitchhiker playing with her big tits. The small room got steamy as he watched mesmerized.

"I couldn't wait," she breathed, "you got me so excited." Tanned thighs parted, giving him proof of her words. She was swollen, dusky, and wet. The musky scent of her arousal adding an erotic aura to the small room. He stepped closer, nudging her with his erection and she parted enveloping him like a glove. Smooth legs wrapped around his hips. He carried her into the shower as she writhed, creating a sizzling friction at the base

of his cock. She arched and ground against him with surprising strength as she climaxed, chanting over and over. "Fuck me, baby."

He never liked to disappoint a woman. He pumped into the soft embrace of her slippery cunt harder and faster, quickly finding his own release. He pulled out of her as tenderly as possible but she clung, rubbing against him. It took more effort than he wanted to admit to stay gentle as he disengaged. He rinsed off, turned to reach his shampoo, and then stopped--riveted.

Caroline's big tits bounced as she fingered her pussy energetically. Her head tipped back, eyes closed, completely oblivious to him as she fought to find release. On one level, her speedy resort to self-service was humbling but on the other hand--damn she was hot. He felt himself thickening in response to her sexy moans and the sight of her swollen vulva as she spread her legs further.

Narrow slits of blue glittered beneath her dark lashes. "Bring that over here to mama," she demanded.

Damn him if he didn't mind like a puppet on a stick. She ignored his jerky approach and wrapped her lips around the head of his dick and sucked strongly. Still sensitive from his earlier climax the sensation was almost too much. He felt his balls tightening in record time. "Hey, slow down baby. I'm going to--." A groan punctuated his protest as he spurted against the back of her throat.

"Come?" she finished for him slyly, letting him pump the rest of his swimmers over her remarkable tits.

He watched, helpless as Caroline smeared his cum to her nipples and then down to her glistening cunt, using two fingers she pushed deep inside and then pulled out repeating the movement.

"I think you've made a mess and you should lick it all up," she said in a tone that implied dire consequences for disobedience.

Chapter Three

Paradise, Tortolo May 3rd 11:00 PM local time

Regan followed Lundstrom up stairs and down halls, trying to note landmarks on a route distinguished only by the repetition of same tasteful terra cotta planters holding the same attractive ficus trees every fifteen feet. The lighting fixtures were recessed and no help. The formal portraits, lining the walls at regular intervals were of different individuals but it would take more than one trek to make them useable as direction guides. After a few minutes, she gave up on the idea of orienting herself in the huge complex on this trip and simply followed her guide's lead.

Curious and bored, she opened the subject that was in the front of her thoughts. "Princess Halle said that the terrorist threat is imaginary. Tell me how this whole crazy princess double scheme got started."

Lundstrom hesitated for telling seconds, her steps slowing. Then she recovered her poise, once again walking at a moderate pace. "I am sorry. I am not the person to ask. Certainly someone, in security or perhaps a member of your State Department, will brief you on all that you need to know at the appropriate time."

In other words--no. Lundstrom sounded meek and mild, but Regan had already learned that was far from the case. Though always scrupulously polite, she managed to evade any question she didn't want to answer. This one was no exception.

After showing Regan her rooms, which consisted of an impressive suite with its own a private balcony, the unruffled tutor left her to her own resources. She indulged in a good stretch, easing muscles tightened from holding perfect posture for too long.

Right after spider patrol--no telling what sort of tropical menaces lurked--she checked out the amenities. Everything she could think of wanting was on hand. Along with a few things that she'd never considered, and one or two she hadn't identified. The largely vacant dressing area was bigger than her bedroom at home and the bathroom was entirely suitable for filming Roman orgy scenes.

Regan helped herself to four extra-strength Tylenols from the well-stocked medicine cabinet, chasing the pain relievers with a couple of full glasses from an elegant crystal carafe.

Crossing the room, she opened the doors to the small balcony. A full moon lit a slice of deserted beach complete with palm trees. The poignant beauty of the tropical scene brought an ache to her heart.

Nothing ever seemed quite as lonely as being on her own in a romantic setting meant for lovers.

Determined to enjoy the moment, even alone, she breathed in the warm night air redolent with relaxing tropical scents. The rich aroma of an expensive cigar clashed with the local flora's fragrance, ringing her alarms. The odor announced she had a visitor before she actually spotted the intruder. He sat in one of the lounge chairs, tipping back

on two legs, his own tree trunk-sized limbs crossed at the ankle and propped comfortably on the balcony railing.

Gently removing her baby gun from its resting place in the small of her back Regan assumed a shooting stance, using a classic two-handed grip.

She barked. "Stand up nice and slow. Keep your hands where I can see them."

"Is that any way for a Princess to greet a guest?" Her intruder asked mildly.

"I'm no Princess and you're no guest."

For the first time since leaving the chief's office Regan knew for sure that she was doing the right thing. It felt damn good.

"You need a little work on those royal court manners." The deep male voice sounded amused.

Regan didn't lower her weapon. "Who are you?" Her comforting doing-the-right-thing feeling ebbed away faster than bubbles in a hot bath.

A deep sigh issued from the hulking form rising slowly from the lounge chair. He kept his arms extended. "How soon they forget."

The wounded voice finally registered with her tired brain. "Clyde?"

"You do remember." His smile flashed white in the moon's glow.

"Up yours, Clyde. It's been a long day. What the hell is the FBI doing here?"

He ran a big hand over his bald skull. "Been meaning to mention, since you're a friend of a friend and all, thing is, I'm not exactly with the FBI."

Sarcastic, menacing, and evil-tempered were Clyde's good points. Regan briefly wondered what her friend Kiki saw in this guy.

"Really?" Regan infused the single word with her best imitation of a royal-pain-in-the-ass-snot. "I'm too tired to play spook games. Being royal isn't as easy as it looks. Why don't you just tell me why you're here?"

While waiting for him to come up with an answer, Regan lowered her gun. She un-chambered the round she'd loaded, ejected the clip, reinserted the unused bullet into the ammunition clip, and then reloaded the clip before returning the weapon to its holster.

"Dropped by to say hello--"

Regan interrupted him. "How'd you get past security?"

"Trade secret. I could tell you, but then--"

"You'd have to kill me?" *Give me a break.*

"You've heard it before." He laughed heartily at his own joke.

He did have a nice laugh. So did Kiki. Plus that girl had a smart mouth too. Maybe they were meant for each other.

"I brought you a couple of critical items." He rummaged inside a black gear bag beside the lounge chair, finally producing a dainty Chanel purse. "This is your official princess handbag, it contains a booster unit built into the frame." He pulled something else from his shirt pocket. "Your copy of the princess's engagement ring, with an important added feature--a built-in transmitting chip. The unit has an extremely limited signal on its own, but as long as you can hang on to the bag then the combination should give us a five-mile range. Not great, but the best the techs could manage, given the time constraints."

Regan accepted the purse, and she slipped the ring on--surprised by its weight.

"Thanks. Anything else?" she asked politely.

"Ian was crazy for you. If you'd said bleed, he would have opened a vein."

Clyde's words were a sneak attack, condemning her without allowing her an opportunity for self-defense.

She didn't bother swallowing a sigh of frustration. "Just cut to the chase, Clyde."

His use of the past tense hurt a whole lot more than it should. She worked to keep all emotion from her expression while Clyde proceeded to ream her out.

"If you had any heart at all you would have at least screwed the poor bastard. Then he might've had a chance to get over you. But not you. No, you had to leave him sliced open, thinking you've got magic between your legs."

Regan flinched at his crude accusation, hoping that the night had hidden her involuntary reaction, resenting how close he was to the truth. She'd wanted to try--had actually offered an affair after Ian had startled her with a marriage proposal. He'd asked for all the wrong reasons and she'd turned him down--too stunned to handle it graciously. She'd simply said no, suggesting they sleep together instead. He'd turned her down, and then he'd walked out of her life for good, or so she'd believed.

Looking back, it had been for the best. Ian had made the right choice for both of them. But that didn't make his rejection hurt any less. She understood that he wanted a wife and family. Sadly, she lacked the necessary equipment to fulfill his dream. Perhaps she should have told him the truth, but she didn't want him to look at her with pity or, even worse, sacrifice his dreams to honor his offer of marriage.

Afterward, Ian pulled strings she didn't even know he could reach. He'd been reassigned to the mayor's office by the time their furlough was over.

"Clyde," Regan swallowed, making an effort to infuse her voice with indifference before she cut him off at the knees, princess-style. "You are fighting a non-existent battle. Ian has no romantic interest in me."

"One of us is either stupid or crazy. I gotta tell you--I think it's you. You're one stone-cold piece of work."

"Are you finished?" she asked in a tone as frozen as her expression.

"Yeah, I was an idiot to think you would care enough to give the guy a break. Julia is nice woman. He could be happy with her if you'd do the right thing and stay the hell out of his life." The cigar bobbed as he clenched down on it. "Oh hell, I'm wasting my breath--forget I said anything."

Regan rubbed her neck, trying to loosen the tension knotting there and wishing Clyde had stuck with giving her the cold shoulder. "You don't know what you're talking about. I haven't seen Ian in over a year." *Who the hell was Julia?*

"Yeah? Then why is Romeo demanding to be assigned as your official escort?"

Before she had a chance to comment, or ask anything else, Clyde clamped the cigar between his teeth, gathered his gear bag, and then disappeared over the side of her third floor balcony.

Regan raced over and scanned the ground--sure she'd see a broken man on the stone terrace. A moment of insanity made her hope Ian was waiting beneath the balcony for his friend. But there was no one in the garden. All she saw was a large shadow with a glowing tip moving across the lawn. Then the glowing tip vanished.

A quick search located her cell phone in a dresser drawer. Regan turned it on, intending to call Kiki. She had ten new voice messages. Four from her brother, Zach, five from her sister-in-law, and one from Ian.

She skipped over the others to hear Ian's message.

"This is Ian McKnight. I'm sorry about the princess assignment delaying your new department appointment. Clyde does good work. You can count on him to ensure the operation is first rate. I'll see you in Seattle." He sounded strained, a little tired, and very cold.

Dear God, she missed the Ian who had a crush on her. Regan listened to the message again. Then one last time before pressing delete.

Prowling around the suite exhausted her, but still left her too restless to sleep. She dialed her brother's number. It was after nine in Seattle. She halfway expected voice mail to pick up the call.

"Longstreet." Her brother's voice was crisp. He'd always woken up instantly alert. It was impossible for her to know if he'd been sleeping.

"Hey," Regan said, suddenly a lump lodged in her throat and she knew her voice was much more emotional than she'd wanted it to sound.

"Reggie?" Zach hadn't called her by her childhood nickname in years.

She cleared her throat. "Yeah, it's me."

"You okay?"

"Is that Regan? I want to talk to her." Ciara's breathy voice informed Regan they hadn't been sleeping.

Even pregnant? Definitely too much information.

Regan was truly happy Ciara, her best friend, and Zach, her wonderful impossible big brother, had found their magical once-in-a-lifetime-soul-bonding love. Hearing them, knowing how happy they were, made her glad.

But she hated the tiny bit of envy that whispered--why not you? She'd never admit a part of her still dreamed of the kind of love that would last a lifetime. Deep inside she was scared she'd already found the love of her life with Ian, a man she'd never be able to make happy.

Knowing she'd interrupted their lovemaking, Regan didn't stay on the phone too long. Though she talked to both Zach and Ciara before saying good night, she needed the comfort of familiar voices to keep the ghost of might-have-been at bay.

After she'd said good night and hung up, Regan was still in need of more comfort. So she followed through on her original intention, calling Kiki. Besides being lonesome, she owed it her girlfriend to point out how seriously flawed, and just plain old mean, her boyfriend, Clyde was. She should count herself lucky the big creep was off her continent.

"Hey girl," Kiki answered the phone.

"Hey, yourself. I just had a lecture from your boyfriend. My ego is still dripping all over the tile floor. So I figured I'd call you."

"What's that bad baby boy up to?"

"More than seven feet from where I stood."

Kiki laughed delightedly.

After she'd whined about Kiki's bad boyfriend and let herself be distracted from her hurt feelings, Regan settled down enough to sleep.

She was drifting closer to unconsciousness when she was startled with the realization that Clyde had circumvented the compound's supposedly impenetrable security. First thing tomorrow, she would make it a point to get acquainted with the royal protection team.

When she woke the next morning, the headache from the night before had scaled down to a dull knot of pain in the back of her head. She knocked back another couple of Tylenols, and then splashed cold water on her face. As she reached for a towel, the sound of the bedroom door opening erased the last trace of her morning grogginess. Her hand was already on her gun before she recognized the maid.

The woman smiled shakily.

Regan couldn't blame the maid for being nervous. She must look a sight. She'd slept fully clothed, except for the jacket she'd tossed on a chair when she'd first come into the room. Wrinkle-resistant apparently had limits that didn't extend to sleeping in your clothes.

The maid sat the breakfast tray down and scurried out.

Regan poured herself a cup of coffee and inspected the rest of the tray. The princess ate lightly. Regan sipped her coffee in between nibbling on a disgusting dry cracker and cursing the lack of ice. She needed an instant caffeine injection, but the coffee was too hot to guzzle. No yogurt. The small bowl of fresh tropical fruit compote was inadequate compensation. She gave up on the strange cracker. Regan lifted the pot to pour a second cup of coffee. The first cup of hadn't kicked in with the needed lift. Before she got a second, Lundstrom arrived.

Her instructor was followed closely by four maids. All of them weighted down by armfuls of clothes. Behind them a woman, who only escaped dwarfism on a technicality, hitched along with a peculiar uneven gait. The small person, clad in a formless black dress, wore a yellow cloth measuring tape around her wrinkled neck and sported a tomato-red wrist pincushion.

"Good morning, Your Royal Highness," Lundstrom said politely. She and her entourage curtsied in unison, even the dour-looking seamstress.

Regan automatically looked behind her to see if the Princess had sneaked in while she was nibbling crackers and sipping the too-hot coffee.

Then it all came flooding back. She was playing princess. "Right. We'll do the princess thing in just a little bit. First, I need to talk to the head of security."

"Of course, Your Royal Highness. It will be arranged immediately after your toilette and fittings. It simply wouldn't do to keep Bernice waiting." Lundstrom waited patiently for Regan's agreement.

"The fitting can wait, I need--"

"Excuse me, but Her Highness would never ignore a fitting appointment."

"I'm not ignoring it." Regan aimed a friendly smile at Bernice. She worked to stay reasonable, determined not to lose control. "Just postponing it."

Bernice peered at Regan through half-open eyes, not bothering to disguise her horrified disapproval of Regan's rumpled appearance.

Regan stared back with equal, if different horror.

Even armed and dangerous, Regan was no match for the combined polite, but implacable will of Lundstrom, Bernice and her assistants. The next two hours, which seemed much longer, were spent on measurements, fittings, and then grooming rituals Regan had never experienced.

Afterward, Lundstrom finally held up her end of the bargain. She led Regan to a conference room where a security meeting was underway.

Clyde's rich baritone rumbled over the lighter male voices, which explained a great deal about his ability to walk freely through the impenetrable security surrounding the compound.

"Good morning, Gentlemen," Regan greeted the big boy's club assembled around a gleaming mahogany table and made a beeline for the coffee service set up at one end of the room.

The conversation about a reception honoring the princess, slowed down to nothing when she entered the room. From the edge of her vision, Regan saw two men start to rise then retake their seats in response to an unseen signal from their leader. Apparently, pink print dresses exuded their own form of power. The garment proved effective even for imitation royalty.

She accepted a cup of black coffee and thanked the white-jacketed server before scanning the table for an available chair.

There was one unfilled, directly across from Clyde.

Setting her coffee in front of her chosen seat, Regan paused, still standing.

"Thank you for including me in your planning session." She flashed them a big friendly smile with an extra nod toward Clyde. "I trust you slept well, Mr. Jefferson?"

"Well enough; how about you?"

"Like a baby," she lied smoothly, letting her gaze sweep the room. Finding the head of security and holding his gaze she asked, "What can you tell me about the threat against the princess?" she asked routinely, knowing one of the secrets of wielding power was acting as if you were entitled to it. While waiting for his answer, she seated herself, and then picked up her cup with casual confidence, sipping the still-hot coffee.

Twenty minutes later, after a lengthy discussion of where, when, and how to secure the planned reception, the meeting wound down. Regan loitered while the room cleared, except for Clyde and her. Rising, she minced her way toward the door, practicing the princess's restricted gait. Just before leaving, she turned back to where her enemy still gathered papers. "Tell me something Clyde, what did I do to you?"

"You made my friend miserable," he answered promptly, without bothering to look up from his paperwork.

"Fair enough, but you might want to consider that I really saved him a lot of misery. What if I'd encouraged him? What if I'd married him?" she challenged him, trying to forge a truce with Ian's impossible friend and wondering why she bothered.

Clyde narrowed his eyes, assessing her before responding. "What if you'd been nice to him?"

Not an option.

But she couldn't explain that to Clyde. Or anyone, not even Zach or Ciara. Even

though they'd never asked and she knew they'd try to understand.

When she'd been growing up, she'd always confided her fears to Zach. Her bother stood like a force field between her and every danger, real or imaginary. Though Zach was only a few years older than she was, in her childish mind he was ten feet tall. She'd believed her big brother could do anything. The one time he'd failed to protect her, it had nearly destroyed both of them.

For that reason alone, Regan wasn't about to share any of her residual fears with her brother. Zach had already paid too high a price to protect her. She was all grown up. Now, it was time to fight her own demons.

* * * *

By the third day, Regan was resigned to being dressed, but not with all the Princess's fashion choices. What a waste of an unlimited clothing allowance! All that money, just to look like a professional baby-shower coordinator.

There wasn't a single mini-skirt, flirty, sexy, or even just fun outfit in the royal closet. In Regan's opinion, the Princess dressed like a choir organist--a classy one, but still ... the royal wardrobe had a wow factor of minus five. Every outfit made Regan want to wrinkle her nose. Except for an evening gown. A glorious concoction of silk and satin, which reminded her of innocent dreams of glamorous balls and handsome princes.

The Princess partially redeemed her poor fashion sense by sharing Regan's weakness for extravagantly feminine lingerie. The apparently limitless royal purse moved her intimate apparel selections to a new level of indulgence Regan had never enjoyed. She'd adjusted with frightening ease to luxurious fabrics, flawless fit, and exquisite handwork.

Regan ran her fingers lightly over the sheer silk panties she'd just pulled on. Tiny hand-embroidered daisies added tactile pleasure. The fact that neither the panties, nor the matching bra, were going to be seen by anyone qualified as a crime, maybe not a felony, but certainly a misdemeanor.

Did she get to keep this stuff?

"So what's on the agenda today?"

"Breakfast with Her Highness, a stroll on the grounds, followed by your Svenska lesson, then deep pore cleansing ...," Lundstrom droned on in her properly modulated, cultured, and boring voice.

"Peachy."

She stood still, arms extended over her head as the pretty undies disappeared under a proper day dress of pink linen.

Her own lingerie remained strictly a private indulgence. There was one man she'd imagined modeling pretty things for Ian's chiseled features zoomed into her head. Something he did all too often. She dislodged him with a shake. The statute of limitations had expired for them before they'd even met.

"Her Highness never says peachy," Lundstrom informed her primly.

"Of course not," Regan agreed mildly.

Ian was the first man she'd propositioned. The few times in the past that she'd tried sex had been unmitigated disasters. And those encounters were with guys who'd

been interested starting a carnal relationship. With this solid record of unremitting humiliation, she'd given up on the idea of intimacy before she'd met Ian. He'd changed everything when he'd hauled out the heavy guns and proposed marriage.

She'd had no choice, except to say no. Then he'd gone and left her. Mule-brained man, as if he were the only one who understood about honor. Regan shoved the door shut on thoughts of men who were too stubborn and good-looking to be tolerated.

She let out the breath she'd been holding in an irritated whoosh.

"Oh dear, did I catch you in the zipper?" Lundstrom stopped mid-zip.

"No, you're fine," Regan assured her.

Being a princess was more high-profile than being a cop. Everyone in the compound studied the Princess as if her blink rate held the secret to world peace. Some of that scrutiny had already transferred to Regan. She found it incredibly restrictive. Most people avoided cops--they looked away, rather than at her.

Ian should have been married by now. The thought of it sliced Regan's heart, but she had to be fair. That's what he wanted--a wife and babies. He would make a wonderful husband. Just not for her. She could never be the wife and mother that he wanted. She refocused her attention to the unfortunate linen dress Lundstrom insisted on zipping for her. Another insipid number in the Princess's favorite pink. Regan never wore pink, at least nothing visible. Pink lingerie was another matter.

"Please hold still," Lundstrom requested.

"Yes ma'am," Regan murmured.

"Her highness does not address me as *ma'am*"

Regan tuned out the rest of the lecture and let her mind flirt with memories of Ian while Lundstrom worked her magic with hairpins and cosmetics. Hearing his voice the other night had brought back feelings she'd hoped would fade. But now that she wasn't working to the point of exhaustion, thoughts of him slipped in, permeating her mind. Worse, images of him crawled under her defenses and lingered seductively, teasing her with erotic fantasies.

She'd always had a weak spot for him. Fortunately no one, except for Kiki and Ciara, knew just how weak. Especially not Ian and that was the way it had to stay. She would never be the right woman for him. Besides, she had a job to do. There were kids who needed a second chance for happiness and she wanted to be there to ensure they got the do-overs they deserved.

Focusing her thoughts on her current assignment, she had to admit the operation seemed plain silly. But she still had a role to play and she'd never failed on an assignment. She wasn't starting now. She'd accepted the mission. Therefore, she was going to be the best damn imitation princess ever.

* * * *

After ten days of intense tutoring and countless long hours of practice, and some truly unpleasant cosmetic procedures, Regan wanted to scream with frustration. Ian haunted her thoughts night and day, fracturing her concentration and raising her frustration level with little opportunity for exercise to ease the tension.

On top of that, she'd only managed to memorize a few passable phrases in Svenksa. She understood practically nothing of what the staff said. Even in English,

there was no way anyone would ever believe she was Princess Halle if she had to speak. She repeated everything the Princess said, mimicked her every movement, and still she heard the difference in tone and accent and felt her awkwardness with every move. Her lack of being like a princess was humiliatingly obvious.

She was miles from passing for the princess, and almost out of time. Regan and the princess had been practicing for hours. Her Royal Highness looked as serene and relaxed as when they'd started.

Lundstrom moved closer to Regan, instructing her in a voice pitched low. "You're trying too hard. Think tiara, think fairy tales, look at Princess Halle. Really look--see what I see. She's having fun."

Regan nodded, not relaxing a single muscle. She had one day left. She didn't need to lighten up. She needed to work harder. She needed to focus. Her attention was always divided between channeling regal-ness, keeping her senses alert for any threat, and trying not to think of Ian. The combination guaranteed frustration.

The house and grounds had excellent security. Regan had tested the systems herself, but it didn't pay to get complacent. There was no such thing as impenetrable.

What if the threat to kidnap the Princess turned out to be real?

The extremist group claiming credit for the threat had little history with the intelligence community. Never the less, they had managed to deliver their demands inside the compound. Twice.

Princess Halle leaned over, whispering encouragement. "You're doing very well. Try to imagine an apple balanced on your head when you walk, like this." The Princess stood and illustrated by walking across the room, her back a straight line that somehow looked natural.

Regan pictured the imaginary apple as she dutifully replicated her steps. All the while, a part of her mind, which she couldn't turn off, continued to work on finding the weaknesses in the compound's security.

Minutes after they'd sat down, Simpson, the princess's dresser discreetly whispered in Regan's ear. "His majesty awaits. He said to be sure to wear the pearls." Regan kept her serene expression. A sidelong glance showed the dresser averted her gaze. A blush crept up the woman's pale, thin neck.

Simpson, the woman who knew the Princess best of everyone present, had mistaken her for her mistress!

Impulsively, Regan seized the opportunity. Barely tipping her head, in one of the Princess's trademark gestures, she stood. "Please continue without me."

Everyone bowed, except the real Princess, who watched her with a quizzical frown. A dozen of her best swaying steps brought Regan to the entrance into the royal chambers. No one stopped her.

She opened the door praying there was a hallway. She wasn't interested in surprising the Prince au natural--a treat he should definitely save for the real Princess.

After only a few steps into the deserted passage, Regan executed an abrupt u-turn and then hurried back to the sitting room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Several heads turned, surprised expressions from the royal contingent, questioning her speedy reappearance.

"Gotcha." She smiled, sketching a brief courtesy.

After a few seconds of tense silence, Princess Halle led the applause.

"You're ready." Her Highness beamed then quickly excused herself to respond to the message her dresser had inadvertently misdirected.

* * * *

In another eight minutes, Regan would make her first public appearance as Princess Halle. Ready or not. There was no way to reschedule the public reception with its hundred unlucky guests. At least, the majority of them were meeting her highness for the first time--as Lundstrom always reminded her--people saw what and who they expected to see.

From her vantage point, poised at the edge of the private entrance to the grand salon, Regan observed the colorful scene. The room had been freshly decorated in Svensberg's official colors. There were numerous arrangements of white and yellow roses, specially imported from the royal greenhouse for the occasion, on every available surface. Despite the décor, the space still seemed large and airy--even with so many guests, servers, and attendants assembled. The security contingent was discreetly invisible, keeping apart from the rest of the crowd.

Regan took a deep, calming breath, and then let it out slowly before entering the room from a secured passage. The princess's pink trademark suit and stilettos restricted her stride, forcing her to maintain the royal mincing gait.

Dressed in an identical outfit, the real Princess, just out of sight in the passageway to the grand salon, waited. Ready to step in as backup in case Regan failed.

Ignoring the huge potential for disaster, Regan concentrated on rehearsing her welcome-to-Paradise speech. But it was already obvious that the female audience, expatriate daughters of Svensberg, were more interested in her appearance than they were in listening to her remarks. The attendees sized up every detail of the décor with the steely-eyed analysis of professional appraisers. She rubbed away a sudden prickle of goosebumps. There was a definite downside to royalty.

Then the attaché introduced her and the audience clapped enthusiastically, Regan minced her way to the podium, tuning into princess-zone. The royal smile and the practiced words came smoothly to her grateful lips. The expatriates seemed to warm to her as she spoke and Regan relaxed enough for the flow of speech to continue.

Amazingly no one pointed, yelling 'impersonator.' The women actually giggled over her one timid joke. For the first time, since arriving at Paradise, Regan believed she might be able to carry off an impersonation of the high-profile royal.

A loud pop interrupted her moment of triumph, snapping her attention. Something flashed by Regan's left shoulder. The entire crowd froze, including the Princess, who was still waiting in the private passage.

Then real Princess began screaming.

Chapter Four

Paradise, Tortolo May 13th 2:00 PM

One good tug hiked the pink skirt high enough for Regan to run. She covered the distance separating her from the princess in a couple of loping strides. Tackling her royalness, she took her down easily, rolling them both behind the first turn in the hallway.

Thankfully, the Princess quit screaming about the same time Regan knocked her down.

Armed security guards streamed into the salon.

"You may release me," Her Highness panted.

Regan rose to her feet, and then turned to offer the Princess a hand.

Before she had a chance to question anyone, Clyde strode toward them. Brushing past Regan, he helped the princess stand, escorting her to her guards.

Regan adjusted her skirt, smoothing the abused fabric.

Satisfied that that princess was in good hands, Clyde turned his attention to Regan. "Are you trying to blow this operation?"

She took a step away from the glowering agent, stunned by his anger.

Clyde ranted on. "They weren't aiming at the real princess. That attack was aimed at you, playing Princess Halle. They bought the act. But, if the perpetrators had hung around long enough to watch you tackling the princess then the whole plan of having a double would have been in the toilet. From now on, you stick to your imitation princess lessons and let me handle security. Got it?"

Regan nodded pointlessly, Clyde had already marched past. The head of security stood quivering with what Regan assessed as a combination of indignation and fear. He took out his frustrations on his cap, rotating it with a series of jerky tugs. Then he took off after Clyde.

Regan could relate to the man's frustration. But, having no hat, she was reduced to twisting her hands, thoroughly chastised and vividly reminded that her role was as imitation royal bait. Nothing more.

Prince Peder hurried toward the still shaken princess. "Halle! Are you injured?"

"Peder!" Princess Halle scurried toward him, moving much faster than Regan had ever seen her move before. She threw herself into her prince's arms.

"What happened?" Peder looked over his Halle's head, seeking answers.

"She had a scare. I'm sure she'll be fine," Regan reassured the prince. Princess Halle gave a soft moan and instantly commanded the Prince's full attention. Prince Peder stroked her and whispered endearments. The princess responded favorably, welcoming his attentions with such enthusiasm, Regan felt like a voyeur. A glance around showed everyone else had discreetly vanished. Quietly, Regan backed away as the royal couple continued to celebrate the princess's safety.

* * * *

Clyde caught up with Regan a few minutes after she'd left the lovers. He moderated his stride to keep pace with her. They walked for half of the hallway's length in silence.

"I know you were trying to protect the princess," he admitted grudgingly.

"Thanks," she said dryly, shutting the door on the need for further conversation.

Ian's best friend had never bothered to hide his disapproval of her. Privately, Regan agreed with his low opinion of her treatment of Ian, almost as much as she resented it. He was correct. She wasn't the right woman for his friend. Still, she was human enough to resent his assessment and to feel hurt by his attitude. She reveled in every chance she got to knock him off kilter.

"If you'll excuse me," she said, not waiting for his response before letting herself out onto one of the terraces. She'd kept a sharp eye out and so far not a single spider had shown its hairy body inside the compound. An empty chaise lounge, in a deserted corner, beckoned and she stretched out in the shade, soaking up the rare moment of peace in Paradise.

When she re-entered the salon an hour later, she took advantage of the hum of gossip to inspect the area where she'd been standing. She found a small dart lodged in the fabric hung behind the podium, heart-stoppingly close to her original position.

Apparently, Clyde was right. The attack had been aimed at her. So her impersonation fooled more than the just palace gadflies. But now she worried that she'd blown the impersonation by acting on instinct. Ironically, there was no way to know without another attempt.

She used a piece of notepaper to dislodge and secure the tiny weapon, until she handed it over to the chief of security a few minutes later.

* * * *

Ian paced in Boeing Field's sparsely populated passenger waiting area, preferring movement to sitting on one of the modern black vinyl couches. The primitive style artwork seemed cheerful at first glance, but the longer he waited the less friendly and more hectic the vividly colored paintings became. Then suddenly Clyde filled the doorway.

His friend spotted him instantly in the nearly empty terminal and covered the distance between them in a couple of strides. Ian met him halfway, and then got engulfed in a friendly hug, which made continued breathing a serious challenge.

"Good to see you, Romeo." Clyde released him, taking a step away.

Ian inhaled gratefully. A stray thought about protesting the use of his college nickname crossed his mind. He dismissed the idea, saving his limited breath for more critical arguments.

"How's life been treating you?" Clyde asked rhetorically, not waiting for a response. He kept up a steady stream of cheerful, irrelevant small talk until Ian couldn't take anymore.

"How's Regan?" he asked with careful indifference.

"Amazing. She's done a hell of a job. I can't tell her from Princess Halle, unless she wants me to."

Ian clamped his jaw and waited. Clyde was bigger, but he wasn't more stubborn.

Finally, Clyde gave in with a disgusted snort. "She's healthy, well-groomed--what the hell do you want from me, Romeo? Regan and I have never been chummy. She sure as hell didn't confide any of her girly secrets to me."

Clyde stopped as they left the terminal, lowering his head to clip, roll, and light a cigar that looked and smelled suspiciously like contraband.

Ian waited for him to finish his task, scanning the sky. The crescent moon made its first shy appearance while he fought for composure and patience.

"How about her security?" he asked his tone sharper than he intended.

His friend scowled at the horizon. "Yeah, I remember. You don't have to tell me how to do my job, man."

Ian swallowed his frustration. Someday Clyde would wind up on the slippery end of a relationship gone wrong. He hoped he was there to enjoy the spectacle. His Grandmother always said, the bigger they are the harder they fall. If she was right then Clyde was going down like a snapped elevator cable.

"Turns out, it was a good thing I went down to Paradise. There was an actual attempted assault on the Princess. It worked out great. They aimed for Regan, believing she was the real deal." Clyde grimaced in reluctant admiration.

"Really?" Ian asked in a convincingly bored tone, which, for some reason, didn't seem to fool his friend.

"Relax, man. I said attempted. They missed her. The thing is--it was perfect. I couldn't have planned it better myself. It cinched having Regan fill in for the Princess. Up until the attempt, Princess Halle was still carrying on about wanting to get in some shopping time, see her cousin, that kind of thing. You know how royals are."

Ian didn't know any royals. He barely heard the rest of his friend's comments because his head was spinning over an attempt on Regan's life. One Clyde thought had worked out well.

"What kind of an attempt?" he interrupted Clyde's monologue, desperately needing more information before he killed his friend.

Clyde snorted. "A lame one, an itty-bitty dart treated with a sedative. It was nothing--might've made her sleepy."

That didn't sound too lethal. Maybe Clyde could live.

"What prompted the attack? Who was behind it? Was there any warning?"

"Slow down man." Clyde narrowed his eyes at him. "You said you were completely over Regan. You told me--she meant nothing to you."

"She doesn't, not the way you mean it. Her brother's a friend of mine, that's all," Ian muttered in an ineffective denial.

He didn't want Regan to mean anything. And soon that would be reality. All she was to him was unfinished business, which he planned to take care of very thoroughly.

Clyde read too much into everything. Except attempts on a good cop's life. But they had been friends since college. He could always kill him later.

As they approached his SUV, Ian used his key fob to unlock the vehicle so that Clyde could stash his gear bag. The conversation paused while they settled into the big car and buckled up their respective safety belts. He took advantage of the lull to change the subject. "You're staying at my place, right?"

"I'd rather stay at Granny's." Clyde grinned.

Ian shot him a stern look of warning. "Not if she hears you call her Granny, you wouldn't. She'd eat you for breakfast and feed any crumbs to the seagulls."

"Ms. Duncan then. As long as Andre feeds me and Carlton brings me coffee. Why'd you ever move out?"

Ian shrugged off his friend's question. "There's more to life than French chefs and English butlers." *Or at least I want there to be more to mine.*

"It's a life style most of us poor slobs only dream of and you turned your back on it. I don't get you, Romeo."

"Money isn't everything," he muttered.

"It is when you don't have it," his friend spoke with cold certainty.

Instantly, Ian was ashamed of his lack of sensitivity. His family might have been emotionally distant, but he'd certainly had every advantage their money offered. He'd temporarily forgotten Clyde's background had been a grim struggle to survive.

Rather than tendering Clyde sympathy, which he would have resented, or an apology that he would have swept aside. Ian clapped his friend's shoulder, and then made him an offer he'd never refuse.

"I'm sorry, no Andre at my hovel. Let me make it up to you--I'll buy dinner."

"Really?" Clyde's grin widened to impressive dimensions.

Ian grinned back. "Certainly, bud. Whatever you want on the Jack-in-the-box menu. Come on, my treat. Sky's the limit."

"We split the bill. I pick the restaurant," Clyde grumbled.

"You're a hard man to please, but okay. Now tell me about your new job and your rough assignment in Paradise. And don't leave out any of the good parts," he cautioned his old friend affectionately.

* * * *

The butterflies in Regan's stomach had taken up bodybuilding and were pummeling her insides as the royal Gulfstream approached Boeing Field. The familiar impressive backdrop of Mount Rainier was both reassuringly familiar and a nerve-wracking reminder her princess debut was approaching at something like three hundred air miles an hour. Okay, maybe a little slower, but still way too fast.

She took a deep breath and let it out slow. Mentally, she tightened her inner strings. Limiting the range of motion on all gestures, in addition to the imaginary balanced apple, were the keys to playing princess.

"Do you remember everyone?" Lundstrom fussed while she put the final touches on Regan's transformation.

"Yes," she snapped, and then softened her tone. "Don't worry, you've done a super job--I know my lines."

Lundstrom nodded nervously. "I'll go on ahead and get us checked us into the hotel."

"Thank you, Lundstrom," she said regally.

"Your Royal Highness does not thank me," Lundstrom corrected her.

A dictum Regan had already decided to ignore, at least when they were in private. Thanks to her tutor's expertise, her hair and makeup were perfect. The royal

seamstress had furnished her with a princess wardrobe, including the incredibly lame pink suit she was wearing. Her left hand was weighted down with an impressive faux version of the Princess's engagement ring nestled between cubic zirconium paved bands. She even had a tiara carefully packed in its own velvet bag.

Showtime.

She paused in the doorway looking over the screened greeting committee. Her smile matched Princess Halle's exactly. It didn't involve her eyes.

Regan tilted her head attentively and waved.

All she had to do was keep smiling, waving, walking, talking, and breathing royally for the next week. Not a problem. She had a lock on playing princess.

The Governor stood at the head of the greeting committee. Regan would've recognized the popular Mac McDonald even without Lundstrom's coaching. To his left, Mayor Bergman, another familiar figure, waited to greet her.

Next to the Mayor was the incredibly handsome Ian McKnight. She'd forgotten how great he cleaned up. Her step faltered. She steadied herself with the handrail, continuing her serene journey down the temporary stairway. Hoping no one noticed her brief hesitation while she chided herself for getting distracted, which had endangered her performance. She should've been prepared to see him. After all, he was the police department's special liaison to the mayor's office. Coordinating security arrangement for visiting dignitaries was part of his job description.

Regan forced her eyes past Ian to the contingent of Secret Service agents flanking the greeting committee. Ten yards across from the official crowd, a small well-behaved press corps waited. A line of Seattle Police Officers contained the media, who were capturing every step with intimidating cameras while jostling each other in an orderly fashion for position. Reporters waited with microphones at the ready.

None of the dignitaries or media types made her half as nervous as Ian.

The Princess's personal security guards had preceded her down the ramp steps. Now they waited at the bottom, one on either side. The guards, Ulric and Rolf were so well-matched that she had trouble telling them apart. Both were blonde, tanned and devoted to the Princess. They were unaware of her impersonation, a decision she understood, but didn't like. Again, no one asked for her opinion. Now, she had to be especially careful not to slip out of character when they were present.

Reaching the ground, Regan paused to smile and wave regally, turning her head slowly to acknowledge both the press and the politicians. Then she navigated the short distance across the tarmac to the welcoming committee with all due pomp, extending her hand to the Governor for the royal three fingered shake. "Governor McDonald, I'm delighted to be in Seattle. How kind of you to allow me to visit your state."

"We are honored to have Your Royal Highness grace us with your presence. Allow me to welcome you on behalf of the people of Washington." The Governor grasped her extended hand holding it for a few seconds to give the press a chance to capitalize on the photo op. In the background, a buzz of carefully modulated professional voices described the scene, while tapes rolled, and cameras flashed.

"Your Royal Highness, may I present Mayor Bergman."

Regan performed her meticulously rehearsed greeting ritual, acutely aware of Ian,

who was waiting slightly to the left of the Mayor. She felt the base of her skull tightening, signally the onset of a headache.

Her regal smile remained fixed as she met a way too-familiar pair of blue eyes. The Mayor introduced Ian. Regan channeled serene royalty for all she was worth, while she fell headlong into his gaze. For a moment, she thought she saw hot glints smoldering in the depth of his dark eyes. Her heart beat faster and her body temperature rose.

"An honor, Your Royal Highness," he said, taking her hand, and then giving it a gentle squeeze. His behavior was all perfectly correct.

Her heart accelerated into an aerobic range and every drop of moisture left her mouth to settle down south. "It's my pleasure Mr. McKnight. Are you responsible for the security arrangements?" she said, managing to sound cool and regal despite her parched tongue.

She secretly reveled in the hot sparks now definitely shooting from his eyes. She kept her face serene--reminding herself that she'd fooled the royal dresser. Ian couldn't know she wasn't the real Princess Halle.

Victor, the Secret Service Agent in charge of security had assured her details of the operation were on a need to know basis. Clyde had left for the mainland well ahead of the royal entourage--so he wasn't in the loop and therefore neither was Ian.

"All I did was make a few phone calls, Your Royal Highness." Ian's eyes met hers and this time there was no doubt about the heat sparking between them.

Much as she hated to admit it, the explanation was obvious. Princess Halle was an acknowledged beauty. Lots of men looked at her with non-politically-correct interest. She hated the idea that Ian's heated gaze was for the glamorous Princess with the boring wardrobe. Maybe someday she'd laugh at herself for being jealous of her own princess impersonation. But right now, jealousy worsened her tension, making the threatening headache a certainty.

"You phone well, then. Thank you for such a smooth welcome." Regan tugged her hand away from his. Thank God, Ian was only part of the greeting committee and she wouldn't be seeing him again. The Mayor was acting as her official escort for the next week. If it had been Ian, she wouldn't have a chance of making it through the assignment with her sanity intact.

He smiled charmingly. An unwanted memory of how cold those eyes were after she'd said 'no' to his offer of marriage flashed into her mind, shaking her hard-won poise.

"It is my great honor to act as your official escort while you are in Seattle, Your Royal Highness."

Grimly, she maintained the royal façade. She'd see what she could do about having an escort reassignment, but nothing would make her risk her career. Certainly not an impetuous sex-god, who had proposed recklessly. He should count himself lucky she'd turned him down. She'd rather wear white cotton panties than give him another chance to break her heart.

As Ian bowed, and then handed her back to his boss, she held her polite smile, inclining her head slightly--feigning rapt attention while the mayor presented her with a ceremonial key to the city. When the cameras stopped flashing, a schoolchild in a wheelchair rolled forward, holding a bouquet of pink roses on her lap.

Impulsively, Regan dropped to one knee, heedless of her fancy suit and hosiery. "Hello, I'm Princess Halle. What's your name?"

"I'm sorry I can't curtsy, Your Royal Highness. I'm Marcia Bennington, with a C, the Marcia not the Bennington," the girl blurted out nervously, her heart-shaped face pink with excitement.

"It's my pleasure to meet you, Marcia. How did you get here? Did your parents bring you?" Regan infused her regal accent with as much warmth as possible.

"My foster mother did. I won an essay contest at school," Marcia confided.

"Tell me about this contest. What was the prize?" she asked.

"The essay was five hundred words on why I wanted to meet Princess Halle. I wrote about what a great friend you've been to me. The prize was meeting you." She paused, beckoning Regan closer, and then whispered in her ear. "I know you've been too busy to write me back. But you're still my very best friend. I'm going to keep writing to you every single week, just like I've done since last Christmas."

Ever since Princess Halle's engagement to Prince Peder was announced. Why hadn't the Princess mentioned Marcia?

"I'm honored." Regan swallowed, trying to dislodge the lump of tears threatening to block speech.

"Could you come to my school? Otherwise no one is going to believe you're my friend," Marcia admitted sadly, searching Regan's face with such naked hope that her royal composure was threatened.

Regan caught one of her guard's frown from the corner of her eye. She whispered hurriedly to Marcia. "Which school?"

"Lincoln Park," Marcia supplied, her eyes shining with hope and excitement.

Her guard leaned in, speaking rapidly in Svenska. "We must leave now, Your Royal Highness."

The only words she'd understood were *Your Royal Highness*, but she gathered his meaning from the man's tone.

Regan rose, and then formally accepted the roses. She gave Marcia a genuine smile. "I'll try," she mouthed, over her shoulder as her guards hustled her away.

Quickly, she was herded along to the next photo op. She performed her princess act on cue, shaking hands and uttering the diplomatically worded phrases for leave taking while she was edged steadily toward a stretched limo decorated with Svensberg flags. State troopers on motorcycles preceded and followed her limousine. Behind her pose of royal serenity, she couldn't help being a little impressed with the celebrity treatment extended to even imitation royalty.

Regan slipped into the splendor of the luxurious car's passenger compartment. But she couldn't totally relax, even though she had a few minutes reprieve from having to guard every word, every movement, and if she were smart--every thought. The darkly tinted windows afforded her a rare moment of privacy.

The moment she let down her guard, Ian's face filled her mind. His deep voice replaying the brief words of greeting they'd exchanged endlessly in her head. Her mind reeled with the prospect of being tethered to him for a week. It was hard to know whether to weep or giggle. So she did neither, carefully maintaining her royal façade.

He couldn't be her escort. She'd complain--get him reassigned. But who was she going to whimper to? Not Clyde, he was Ian's best friend and he hated her. She knew it was insanely dangerous to think about him, in anyway other than in his official capacity. But she lacked the will to resist.

Seeing him again slammed home how much she still cared. Her feelings were as strong and sharp as the day he'd walked out of her life. And just as hopeless.

Before she had time to get completely maudlin, her guards joined her.

All too soon, they arrived at the front entrance to the hotel. She ran through her mental checklist--maintain her posture, keep the imaginary apple balanced on her head, relax her hands, and walk at a precisely measured sedate pace. One of the blonde guards, Rolf she thought, held open the door. The other man stayed slightly behind them.

Her guards were to keep pace with her, except in an emergency. In that event, they would surround her, protecting her with their bodies. The guards' function was to position themselves between her and any source of threat.

According to Princess Halle, who'd turned out to be Regan's best source of information about the assignment, the actual danger was slight. It was a matter of overreaction by His Royal Highness, Prince Peder of Odin. All traced back to an insignificant breach of security and a few unsubstantiated threats by an extremist faction with no real history or credibility.

The dart Regan had recovered in Paradise, plus a few impassioned notes, were the only evidence of an intangible threat. The tiny missile contained such a small dose of sedative that the only potential danger would've been to the Princess's nap schedule.

With Svensberg holding the swing vote in the powerful North Shore Consortium and her homeland, the tiny kingdom of Qsan's vast oil reserves, even imagined threats were taken seriously.

Regan smiled regally, trying to relax into her role, deliberately avoiding her automatic cop scan of the area, which would ruin her impersonation.

Chapter Five

Seattle, Washington May 15th 10:00 AM

At first sight, Ian hadn't been certain the switch with Princess Halle had actually happened. He'd never met the controversial royal, but the woman waving to the crowd looked convincingly regal. But the instant they touched--he knew Regan. Nothing could disguise the electric connection arcing between them.

As tough as he thought seeing her again would be--the reality was worse. He'd seriously underestimated the difficulty factor. She was more beautiful than he remembered even painted, powdered, and dolled up in the kind of clothes his grandmother wore. Seeing her, touching her hand, hearing her voice--fake accent be damned--her affect on him was huge. She hit him like a taser blast. While she remained as icy as ever--for a second he doubted his ability to seduce her. Then his misgivings faded--she had responded to him. He knew it, even if she hid it well. This time he'd use that electric connection between them to do what he should have done a year and half ago. Get her out of his system.

When the Svensberg limo headed toward downtown, he followed. His luggage was already in the back of the SUV.

Clyde had been disappointed in him. But he would have to learn to live with it. Knowing his friend, he'd probably thought he was doing Ian a disservice by allowing him to act as the point man for the Princess's goodwill tour. Normally, he would have agreed. To be next to Regan all day, to be within touching distance, but never ... he clamped a lid on the images flooding his head. This time would be different and an entirely different kind of restraint would be involved.

It wasn't as if there was any real threat to her safety. Clyde had filled him in on the background. The entire operation was political posturing to humor an overly protective Prince. While Ian sympathized with the man's protective instincts, he was well aware that he shouldn't be personally involved.

After all this time, the memory of his thwarted intentions still rankled. Rashly, he'd proposed to Regan, the last night they were together. She'd refused him brusquely--emphatically, saying 'no' immediately. No thinking it over or hesitating for his princess. She'd walked away, completely unaffected, after stomping all over his heart. Asking her to marry him was a mistake that he'd regretted every day for the past year and half. The only upside of the ego-crushing disaster was the rock-solid assurance that he was too smart to ever repeat the worst mistake of his life.

Seeing her again was exactly what he'd needed to get her out his system. With grim determination, he kept his SUV behind the official motorcade all the way to the Plaza. He might as well finish his official charade and make certain she arrived safely. He stopped his rig in a no-parking zone, flashing his badge at the State Trooper, who was directing traffic away from the royal entourage.

The motorcycle escorts peeled off as Regan exited the limo. Ian watched as she and her security guards--a pair of over-sized blonde jocks, whom he'd mentally, nicknamed Dumb and Dumber--entered the hotel lobby. He hung back, losing sight of the trio after a few seconds. Telling himself it was past time for him to leave.

An overly honed protective instinct impelled him get out of the SUV. Deciding he'd bluff it out if she spotted him, he rushed through the entrance. Rapidly scanning the room for Regan, he caught a glimpse of pink moving toward the elevators. Then a loaded-to-the-hilt luggage cart blocked his view.

Once he'd cleared the obstruction, the pink suit had vanished.

Ignoring the fear chilling the back of his neck, he dropped all pretense of being casual and sprinted for the elevators. The door to number five was almost closed. An extra burst of speed, and his long arm, kept it open. A jab of the call button reversed the direction of the mechanical doors.

His jaw hardened at the sight of Regan alone with an assistant manager, if he were naïve enough to believe the man's breast pocket pin.

"Seven please." Ian bared his teeth and pulled up the corners of his mouth in what he hoped looked like a friendly grin for the man standing next to the elevator's control panel.

"Afternoon ma'am." He nodded toward Regan.

Her eyes flickered over him so quickly he might have missed it if he hadn't been glued on hers.

"Good afternoon sir, Mr. Hitman, isn't it?" Her voice retained the phony upper-class accent, her tone was low and even, giving no indication she was upset.

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid you've got me confused with someone else. Killzone's the name."

So she wasn't running away with the assistant manager. Ian wondered what the hell had happened to dumb and dumber.

The suspected terrorist punched the button for seven without saying a word. The movement revealed an underarm bulge that hadn't been visible earlier, ratcheting Ian's tension even further. He had a gun of his own, but he never drew it unless he was prepared to use it. He shuddered to think of the damage a shooting match in the small steel cage could do. Ian wouldn't chance it--not with Regan there. He could use his knife, but bloodstains were so hard to get out. He really liked the tie he had on and the shirt was good--practically new.

He'd have to take him out the old fashioned way.

He fumbled through his pockets giving an imitation of man looking for something. The elevator doors opened on the seventh floor.

"Damn plastic cards. They never work for me anyway." Ian opened his wallet, and then extracted his gas card, dropping it into his jacket pocket, hopefully simulating a room key.

On his way out the elevator's door, Ian deliberately stumbled, bumping into the man. Quickly he slammed the phony assistant manager's face into the elevator wall. He followed up with a locked, two-handed blow to the back of his neck, putting the bad guy out of commission. He caught the guy's limp body as he crumpled. While disarming

him, and then extracting his wallet, Ian paused to flash Regan a reassuring grin.

The wallet held a high quality fake driver's license, and a couple of twenties. Ian dropped the billfold and pocketed the gun.

"Killzone's the name?" Regan arched a questioning eyebrow at him.

"Hey, it worked. It seemed like the simplest way to say message received, princess," he defended his choice of code name.

"You're such a guy."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. You wouldn't happen to have cuffs?"

"No."

"Damn. Me neither," he admitted regretfully.

Ian stripped off his tie and bound the man's wrists behind his back. "Good tie," he muttered.

"I'll buy you a new one." The dry tone was vintage Regan, not a trace of princess. It made him grin.

"Thanks," he said, inordinately pleased by her offer.

Regan reached for the penthouse button. Ian blocked her, shaking his head no.

"There's no way of knowing who's waiting for us. We're getting the hell out of here."

He started to punch in the first floor, and then changed his mind, holding the door open button to keep them stopped. He scanned her prim suit. If they stepped into the lobby with her in that outfit she might as well be wearing a neon headpiece that flashed, *Princess here--take me hostage.*

"Can you do anything about the princess outfit?"

Regan raised an elegant eyebrow. "Not with the doors open."

Ian released the button he'd been pressing. The elevator resumed its downward journey. He knew he should offer to turn away. But he wasn't about to miss a free strip show, starring Regan.

"Get me his jacket," she ordered.

Ian nudged the terrorist with his shoe, "Sure."

Placing his knee in the guy's back, Ian undid the tie he'd used to bind the man's wrists. The suspect moaned, but didn't open his eyes. Ian tapped the back of the scumbag's head with the butt of the Berretta he'd confiscated earlier. No point taking chances. He stripped off the blazer and tossed it to Regan.

She caught it. When he looked up the pink suit was missing in action. He clamped his jaw to avoid drooling and thus ruining his tough-guy image. Besides she was the one who needed to beg for his favors.

She was barely covered by a pink satin slip trimmed with blonde lace. His eyes widen to maximum diameter as she pulled off her stocking and unhooked a lacy confection. God almighty, it was a garter belt.

"Better tie him." She tilted her head toward the man on the floor as her hands wove through her hair plucking and discarding wicked-looking pins.

He'd worked with the cool efficient cop. He'd met the serene aloof princess. He'd never seen this Regan.

She was a fierce warrior princess, magnificent, barely civilized, and dangerous to his sanity. Her beauty took his breath away and tightened his balls.

Ian reached for his tie to rebind the man's hands.

"Use these," she nudged him, draping sheer stockings, still warm from her skin over his hand. "Then I won't owe you a tie." She smiled sweetly.

Shrugging the man's blazer on, she rolled back the sleeves, and then discarded his fake employee pin. "Shades?"

Ian handed over his best pair of sunglasses without a whimper.

After extracting a slim wallet from the satchel, she deposited it in a blazer pocket. Then she tucked her backup weapon into the other outer pocket. After a second of hesitation, she discarded the handbag. Leaning close, she checked her outfit in the elevator's shiny brass trim.

"It'll do." She shook her head, giving her hair a final fluff. "I hated that suit anyway. But damn, I had the princess act nailed."

Before Ian came up with a suitable response, the first floor light glowed and the elevator doors retracted. Regan took his arm as they stepped into the lobby, leaning into him and laughing huskily.

"What happened to Dumb and Dumber?" he asked his lips inches from a delicate shell-pink ear.

"My guards?" Regan laughed warmly, pushing his glasses carelessly atop her dark hair.

"Yeah," he bantered back.

"I don't know. There were a bunch of suits, at first I thought--" She paused to snuggle convincingly, slipping her hand into his pocket. "That they were part of the Secret Service security detail. They had the ear pieces, dark glasses, and the kind of Brooks Brothers' quasi-uniform look down cold."

Her voice was so sultry and the snuggling so convincing--it took Ian a few seconds to refocus on the subject. "Would you recognize any of them?"

Regan gave a tiny shake of her head. "It happened too fast. We were all taken off guard. One minute they were holding the doors and whispering into their lapels. The next minute, Ulric and Rolf were gone."

"How about the guy in the elevator with you; was he one of them?"

Regan started to shake her head again, and then reconsidered. "Probably. He caught my arm and hurried me toward the elevators. At first, I thought he was with the hotel. I stayed in character, not sure what was happening or why."

"Sounds like a pretty slick operation. How'd they get a hold of your itinerary?" he asked, speaking more to himself than to Regan.

Shit, a real threat changed everything. He needed her safe so that he could seduce her and break her heart. But by God, no one else dared to hurt a single cell of her beautiful body or they would be answering to him.

She responded to his question anyway. "I don't have a clue. I was sure glad to see you." She flashed him a dazzling smile. "Nice timing."

Ian's jaw was still locked as they strolled past a couple of middle-aged women heading for the bank of elevators.

The women's screams followed them outside.

He wanted to grab Regan and run. They were in an open area with hardly any

firepower. Neither he nor Regan had any idea which players were on the other team. The Svensberg limo was long gone. Thank God, his Land Rover waited.

Ian tilted his head, half-listening to Regan as she laughed, flirted with him, and murmured a running assessment of their situation in his ear. All during their endless trek to the car, he scanned the area for potential threats, planning alternative exit strategies.

"Here, you wear them." Regan placed the sunglasses on top of his head, playfully tugging at his hair. "Maybe they'll hide those cop eyes."

Ian pushed the glasses in place, managing a feral grin.

"Come on Ian, lighten up. They're looking for Princess Halle. We're a couple on a date. Act like you're into me."

Ian drew her hard against his side, speaking into her ear. "Wait till we aren't being stalked by terrorists and I'll be glad to play, princess."

Was that a blush? He'd made Regan blush? Hot damn. His ego swelled almost as fast as another part of his anatomy.

Finally, they reached the SUV without any further incidents. It felt like hours since he'd entered the hotel, but a check of his watch confirmed only twelve minutes had elapsed. Ian held the passenger door open, fully appreciating the length of leg revealed when Regan hiked up the slip to get into his rig.

As he slid behind the wheel, he noticed the bad guy's Beretta lay snuggled in her lap, partially concealed by one hand

Regan's eyes scanned the area. "Let's roll."

She didn't so much as flick a glance in his direction, but he felt the old bond with her slipping into place, fitting him perfectly, like a well-worn pair of jeans. It was as if they'd never been apart.

Good God, the woman still turned him on like no one else ever had. Niggling doubts about his plan to seduce, and then dump her started to eat holes in his rock-solid scheme. Revenge, the kind he'd had in mind, might backfire.

"You gotta plan?" she asked--not sounding worried, merely checking.

"Yeah, I'm getting us out of town. How's the beach sound?"

"Smooth sand, pounding surf, and spectacular sunsets versus terrorists, kidnapping, and not knowing who the players are?" she asked deadpan.

"Seriously, I don't even want to use the cell to call Clyde. Mine's not secure--with the right equipment, it could be traced in a minute. I'll call him from a pay phone when we've got a little space between us and the mess in there." Ian jerked his head toward the Plaza. "So far all we've got is a five minute head start and no one on our tail."

"Do you have some place specific in mind where we can regroup?"

"My beach house," he volunteered, suddenly, gut-wrenchingly aware this might wind up being a hell of a dangerous rescue.

* * * *

Shame I never got around to buying that bikini, Regan thought. Right on the heels of that irrelevant mental detour, she wondered if she'd done the right thing when she ditched the princess purse. Who was monitoring the locator? Clyde or someone else? And could they be trusted? She'd kept the ring--a sensible compromise or a careless mistake? Only time would give her the answers she needed now.

She had more urgent problems. Since Ian, the one man who revved her motor big time, was sitting next to her, she figured she had all of ten seconds to pull out a plan to deal with the problem. Her options were limited. The only way to go was to be totally professional and ignore the attraction.

Should she fail to pull off her new ice-princess role, her life was going to get a whole lot more complicated. Ignoring the heat flowing through her veins was the smart choice. She should do that, definitely. In fact, it was mandatory. She could handle a little acting--look how well she'd mastered royalty.

If, by some remote chance, her plan to become an icicle failed, a remote possibility, then she'd go into princess mode, which she had down cold. Plan A and Plan B--she had it handled.

Regan drew in a deep breath, inhaling Ian's scent--the fresh mossy smell of his soap layered over hot male skin. Immediately, her breasts perked up, begging for his touch. She pulled the terrorist's blazer more snugly across her front and thought deep, dark, iceberg thoughts. Mainly about sinfully good-looking men, who acted like complete Neanderthals and stubbornly insisted on a lifetime commitment.

If there were any fairness in life, she wouldn't be attracted to Ian--but her body refused to pretend he wasn't a living, breathing, walking, talking sex-god. The best she could hope for was a carefully maintained illusion of emotional distance.

Her body might've forgotten that Ian was an all-or-nothing kind of guy. But she hadn't. She wasn't interested in another round of misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Just because he appealed to her on physical level, there was no guarantee that sex would work with him any better than it had the other times she'd tried it. The humiliating memories of her attempts to slay the dragon of bitter experience added a layer of resolution to her decision to keep things on a professional basis with him.

After all, she owed him. He had stuck his neck out and come to her rescue.

Not that she couldn't have handled one lousy terrorist--but still, he definitely deserved her gratitude. Too bad, she didn't have the courage or the sophistication needed to handle an appreciative gesture with panache.

What should worry her, even more than Ian's proximity, was the question of who was behind the operation that took out her guards. The only person involved, who she was absolutely, one hundred percent positive she could trust, sat next to her.

She'd counted four suits, all wearing earpieces and dark glasses. More disturbing, they had to have had advance information about where and when to take out the Princess. The bad guys were real and well-funded.

Silently, Regan asked for Prince Peder's forgiveness. He hadn't been overly protective or paranoid or any of the other things she'd thought about him. Except homely as a pregnant spider.

Had she made the right decision, tossing the princess purse with its built-in tracking device--she still had the ring. She twisted it, and then decided to let go of the unanswerable questions--for now.

The tension flowed out of her neck and shoulders with each mile and each cleansing breath. She shouldn't be relaxing--she needed to figure out who the bad guys were and fast. She hated being dependent on anyone, but she had to admit she'd been

damn glad to see Ian's too handsome face when he'd shoved his way into the elevator. He was her perfect backup man.

There'd only been one guy. She could've handled him one-handed. If she'd been there as herself. But as the princess, she'd been at a big disadvantage--no cuffs, no radio, and no back up. She hadn't wanted to pull her gun on him. Of course, she would've--if Ian hadn't shown up to save the day.

Privately, she had to admit, there was something about a man coming to her rescue that made her feel all girly. It wasn't the kind of nice warm feeling a cop got to experience all that often.

Though Ian was a few years younger, it didn't dim any of his charms. The man oozed sex appeal like no one else. Ciara thought Regan's brother was hot stuff, which was fair--since she was married to him. Regan thought Zach looked okay and he was a great brother, but hot? Come on. But even gaga newlywed Ciara, admitted Ian was pure eye-candy.

When he'd first joined the force, he'd still blushed. His ears used to get red ... Regan swallowed a sigh.

Heroic or not, sexy or not, he was a major distraction. She would have to work overtime to keep her guard up or she'd wind up making a fool out of herself and she was definitely old enough to know better.

Once again, the memory of the last time she'd tried sex slammed back full force. The panic, the sweating, the crying like a damn baby--it all worked better than a whole bathtub of ice cubes for cooling her overheated hormones.

It would be a snowy day in hell before she'd even think about repeating that mistake--especially not with Ian. She cared too much what he thought of her. Besides, mayor's office or not, he was another cop. That kind of choice could ruin her career. But she was definitely thinking about it--a measure of the strength of the attraction. Scary.

To reinforce her determination, she thought about the first time she knew what she wanted to do. When Zach became a police officer, the pieces fell into place and she was sure that was what she was meant to do, too. She'd dreamed of the day when she would be able to help other victims of sexual assault, giving them the safety and understanding that made healing possible. After all these years, she finally had the chance to help the damaged children--the victims without champions. An opportunity to transform her history of pain and violence into a new legacy--of hope.

Nothing was going to interfere with that dream.

No one beyond Zach and Ciara knew how personal this job was for Regan. As close as she felt to Ian, even when they'd spent so many long hours together during his field training, she'd never shared her personal history of abuse.

Though she never acted on it, she'd been aware of him as a man from the moment they met. The electric attraction between them was one more reason she'd never told him about her secret fears. She couldn't bear for him to see her as a victim.

Maybe she could allow herself to enjoy being close to him for a few hours. What if she made it clear, and he understood, that it was just sex? Other people did it all the time. Friends with benefits--it didn't have to hurt their relationship. They could still be friends. After all, the proposal was a long time ago. They'd both changed. That was

then and this was here and now.

Could stealing a little happiness be so wrong?

She didn't have enough nerve to risk rejection by asking him directly. Maybe a hint, as attuned to her as Ian usually was--surely, it wouldn't take much more than a look in his direction to send the signal. Just the thought raised her pulse rate. Anticipation bubbled through her veins, spreading a wildfire of yearning through her body. The heat whispered this time would be different. Ian was different. She felt safe with him.

She thought too much. She should let go, just react. *Ian was different.* They would be different. Her body responded to him. If she could turn off her head for just a little while--let herself feel--she inhaled his unique scent, mossy, clean man, safe, and oh-so hot.

Ian checked Regan out of the corner of his eye. She was awake--apparently lost in her own thoughts. She hadn't said a word in over an hour. Her being quiet for too long was not a good sign. Yet so far, she'd gone along with his plan.

Around dusk, he pulled into a mini-mall parking lot. Stopping to get condoms was insanely optimistic. But that was him, or at least it was him when he was with Regan, crazy and hopeful. Besides he needed get fresh food and coffee, he hadn't forgotten her preferences for coffee. He hadn't forgotten anything.

The small grocery store still offered a better selection and better prices than the Ocean Shores market. No point being extravagant.

He angled his gaze toward Regan. "You want to come in?"

She shook her head, but didn't turn to look at him. "I'm good. Maybe I'll stretch my legs a little."

Ian scanned the elegant taut line of her neck and shoulders, which screamed tension, swallowing a sigh of frustration. His optimism faded, replaced by determination that this time things were going to be different. He would take any terms she offered. Life had given him a second chance. Whatever it took, he wouldn't blow it.

Twenty minutes later, he left the store, striding toward the car. With his arms full of groceries and his mind busy with hopes for the evening, he'd failed to stay vigilant.

She must've thought of something she wanted, because she was hurrying toward him. Her confident stride slowed by her high heels. The setting sun's fiery rays bounced off her breasts, gilding her extremely long, extremely bare legs. Alarms started blaring in Ian's head.

Four punks ambled their way toward her, jostling each other for supremacy. The kids sported high-tops, seriously baggy pants, and enough heavy metal to make rust a health hazard.

Ian's jaw hardened, primarily with anger at himself for letting them get this close to Regan. He should've never left her alone. He narrowed his eyes assessing their threat potential and found it minimal. Four kids in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Ian had already had a very bad day and he'd have loved to work off a little frustration, but beating up children wasn't his style.

"Hey guys, do yourselves a favor and take a detour. I hate to see men get humiliated by a woman." Ian sat down his groceries and widened his stance, letting his hands hang loosely at his sides. "Especially when she's my woman." He tilted his head

toward Regan, driving his point home.

She angled her head in a shorthand response. Ian knew she was assessing the situation in exactly the same way he had. Their shared understanding warmed him.

"Thanks, but I was kind of looking forward to having a little fun," she said with an exaggerated pout.

Her right hand disappeared inside her borrowed blazer pocket.

"You kill them, you do the paperwork," he said through locked jaws.

"That bites," she grumbled.

Ian kept his lips pressed into a straight line to suppress a grin. It was like old times.

Then tallest of the group deliberately jostled Regan as he ambled past her. Ian covered the ground between them in two strides. He grabbed the punk, twisting and shoving the kid's arm hard behind his back before the boy found his balance.

"Sorry your mama died too soon to teach you manners, son. Today's your lucky day. You get a free lesson. Apologize to the lady. Make it sincere."

"Sorry ma'am."

Regan gave an abbreviated nod, her expression flat.

Ian released the kid. He stumbled slightly then jettied, leaving his buddies behind. The kid's friends raced to catch their leader.

Ian glanced over to be sure Regan was okay. Her gaze met his for a minute. Her dark eyes sparkled with fun and something that might've been invitation. Had he imagined it?

She gave his shoulder a pat. Nothing but a friendly little tap. If a guy'd done it he'd never think twice. But Regan wasn't a guy.

After giving her a boost into his rig, he retrieved his groceries, stowed them, started up the SUV, and then rolled out of the parking lot. His hopes for the rest of the evening glowing brighter.

In no time, they were back on the freeway heading for his beach house. Regan leaned back and closed her eyes within minutes of hitting the road. He didn't want to shatter the mood so he kept quiet, concentrating on his driving and hoping she wasn't brooding about the past.

She needed to trust him before she'd risk an emotional investment. That was a requirement. He wanted her to hurt the way he had. Only then could he move past her hold on him. This time he *would* win her love because he had a weapon he was not afraid of wielding--the physical attraction that arced like wildfire between them.

Chapter Six

Kingston, Jamaica May 15th 11:00 PM local time

Sam gripped the fitted bed sheet tight. The rest of bedding had long since been dispensed with. The usually airy room was sultry, thick with the scent of sweat and sex. Locking his muscles, he held back his climax by the thinnest of margins. Caroline worked herself against him, grinding her swollen clit against the base of his cock, locked in her own zone of mindless ecstasy. Her tits bounced enticingly and he gave up on his battle to resist fulfillment, letting his cum squirt deep inside her pussy.

Suddenly, recognition of what he'd done made his stomach roil uneasily.

He gripped her hips and held her in place. "Shit baby, I'm sorry. I forgot the rubber." He fought his queasiness, which strangely enough didn't reduce his pleasure. For a few seconds he forgot about the problem, groaning as a last spurt sent his swimmers heading for fertile city.

She didn't respond to his graceless apology and he wasn't sure that she'd even heard him. She pinched her nipples, and then worked her busy fingers in her slit, rubbing his spunk over her clit. She whimpered and bucked against his softening cock and her own hand.

Eventually she paused, and then opened her eyes far enough to make contact with him. "You've made a mess. Clean up time, big boy."

Not entirely sure why he complied, he crawled over and settled down to work his tongue through every fold, lingering over any portion that elicited an orgasm. Caroline came faster and more often than any woman he's ever known. Her sexual appetite was flattering and daunting, both at the same time. He often had the feeling that he was only slightly preferable to her hand, or vibrator, or some other dick.

"Harder," she demanded.

Rearing back, he positioned himself at her juicy entrance, and then thrust his now hard dick into her grasping slit with the kind of energy she expected. He'd given up on the idea of protection. It was too late to practice safe sex. God, she felt good. She never had a problem taking his whole length and the sensation of skin on skin was exquisitely erotic. He came again quickly, not bothered with insuring her satisfaction since her orgasms were as close as it got to a sure thing.

"You've got a great dick and you fuck like a love machine," she said sweetly as she rolled over and clutched her pillow. "By the way, you don't have to wear a rubber anymore--I'm preggers."

Shit, shit, shit! "Are you sure, baby?" he asked softly.

A delicate snore was her only response. He thought about the short time he'd known her and how he'd always used protection and wondered if there was really a baby. If there was--was it his?

There were disturbing gaps in his memory. Like the first time he'd brought her

home. There must have been something wrong with his wine. He'd felt dizzy, horny, and then humiliatingly nothing. Caroline told him he'd been a wild man, but he didn't recall any of the rest of that night.

Then he remembered other nights and how much she liked to play with his spunk and how he'd been fascinated, flattered, and aroused by the sight. He'd never made any effort to stop her. She was aggressive, demanding, and sexy as hell. He responded to her physically even when she irritated or disgusted him, maybe most of all at those times. And that was an uncomfortable thought.

He was certainly no choirboy--but Caroline didn't seem to have sexual boundaries. While they'd screwed six ways from Sunday for--how many days had it been? He stopped to count. Eleven days, no twelve--long enough. *Shit*. Shame for his selfish reaction, and then tenderness for the baby, who hadn't asked for any of this, and who shared his blood, washed over him. Marriage to her wasn't something he'd planned or even considered. But he wasn't going to abandon his child. The possibility that the baby wasn't his had already faded to the back of his mind.

After all, it wasn't as if she'd twisted his arm. He'd been horny and she'd been attractive and handy and willing. He'd set out to seduce her with no real thought of anything beyond getting well and truly fucked. Had he ever. And then some.

It seemed like hours before he finally closed his eyes, tired of staring at the dark.

The ringing persisted even after he'd turned off the alarm in his dream. Bleary-eyed, Sam squinted at the bedside clock radio. It read 4:00 AM. "What the fuck?" He muttered as he picked up the phone. "Moreno," he grumbled.

He nearly hung it up when nothing more than static and harsh breathing reverberated through the receiver. But something stayed his impulse to end the call, and then a flood of jumbled words assaulted him, punctuated by ragged gasps for air. He recognized his mother's voice and her panic but not a whole hell of a lot else.

Sam brushed the sleep out of his eyes, pushing himself upright on the side of the bed. "Slow down, Mom. Tell me again, what's wrong."

His mother gulped a breath, and then spoke more distinctly. "Are you sitting down, Sam?"

"Yeah Mom, I'm sitting." He kept his voice low, not wanting to wake Carolyn. She slept sprawled on her side, clutching one of the king-sized pillows in a death grip.

"Tony's dead." Patsy drew in a shuddering breath so raw and painful Sam felt the rasping in his own chest. For a moment, he couldn't divide his own shock and loss from his mother's grief.

"But how, he was doing great--" he let the question trail away. Thinking of all the things he should have told Tony, tears pooled, escaped, and then ran down his cheeks without him even noticing.

Patsy answered him slowly, her voice battling against her harsh breaths. "He was murdered. Shot, just once right behind his left ear. The police think it was a mugging, that--that it just escalated. His watch and wallet were taken."

"Where are you, Mom?" Sam cradled the phone with his shoulder as he pulled on pants and zipped them.

"The hotel in Tortolo, the police brought me here, from the morgue. I--I had to

identify him. Oh Sam, they hurt him."

Sam shoved his feet into boat mocs. "What hotel, Mom?"

"Sugar Mill, honey." Patsy's voice broke.

"Don't cry," he said, opening and closing his big hands into impotent fists.

"He was worried about me, always worrying, yesterday after all the excitement at the royal compound--" Patsy sniffled. "Tony didn't have dessert last night," she paused again, drawing another hard shuddering breath. "He wanted to lose twenty pounds."

"Try to get some sleep. I'll be there in a few hours," Sam said, working to keep his voice calm and soothing.

"I'm going to have a bath."

"That's a good idea. I love you, Mom." He hoped she'd heard him.

* * * *

Miami, Florida May 16th 2:00 PM local time

O'Brien glanced at the custom's officer with genuine sympathy. As slow as the line moved, making his feet hurt and him generally miserable, still he had to be in the germ infested, florescent-lit, detour to hell only for a short time compared to the poor bastard stuck working here for eight hours every day.

An awareness of the inherent irony of the situation tickled him, playing against his discomfort. How had he, a true patriot, wound up planning a major embarrassment for his government? A pointless question. However, he knew the answer. The depression, the drugs, and the paranoia--one mistake led to another.

After Mattie's senseless death, he'd lost his moral compass. When he turned to wreaking vengeance on a world that allowed his beautiful wife to die at the hand of a scumbag not fit to kiss her shoes--he'd succeeded. For too long and too well. His very success bred a careless irrational confidence.

He could see that now. Looking back, he'd wished that he had made different choices. A useless thought process. Neither his intelligence nor bitter experience saved him from making yet another mistake. Blinded by his obsessive need for revenge, he'd fallen into Mohammed's trap a second time.

The trip to Tortolo to check on Princess Halle brought him close to Tony, the temptation to meet out justice to his lying, thieving former manager had been too strong to resist. However, in hindsight, he should've written off Tony's betrayal.

What the fuck difference did the money make to him? Now that it was over, killing the fat little traitor brought him no satisfaction. He recovered nothing of the five million dollars Tony stole from him. The brief pleasure of exacting justice had not been worth the risk inherent in murdering the fat little fucker.

Now he wavered between the nagging thought he shouldn't have left Tony's wife alive and sick regret over the man's death. He was losing his edge.

The line inched forward. He nudged his bag ahead of him. Once he cleared customs, he'd book the next available flight to SeaTac. Most of the team was already in place. Each of the seven men was entering the country from a different route.

He'd memorized the profile for each of the team members, noting that three of the men were brothers. As impossible as it seemed Kareem, one of the brothers and his second in command, had already screwed up. Thereby endangering the entire operation.

Kareem had initiated a disastrously premature kidnapping attempt. From the garbled accounts O'Brien had pieced together, his second in command had misinterpreted a signal, believing the Princess was staying at the Plaza. While in reality, the Princess hadn't even left Paradise yet. The woman accepting the red-carpet treatment was a fake. Most likely, a cop, of some kind, made up and dressed to look like the Qsani princess.

They had failed to capture the pretend Princess Halle. In retrospect, a good thing. Kareem was unconscious, hospitalized, and in custody--not a good thing. O'Brien shrugged away tension settling in his shoulders. The situation could always get worse. The captured man's brothers were likely to resist the need to eliminate their fallen team member. Fanatics were so fucking volatile.

No one asked him how he felt about the operation. However, he was a professional and would keep his feelings out of the equation regardless of the circumstances. Pity, he couldn't count on the same level of commitment from the rest of his team.

His first problem was to re-establish contact with their inside source--a vital information link, which had unfortunately been Kareem's responsibility. Did anyone else even know how to communicate with the mole? O'Brien could only hope Kareem had entrusted one of his brothers with the details.

Considering that there was nothing productive for him to do from Miami, he put the whole mess out of his head. Instead, he thought about how best to identify, acquire, and secure the real Princess until she had served his purposes.

Obviously, the most expedient solution to insure he had the real princess was to eliminate the fake. Timing would be critical. There were other factors in play, which he couldn't assess as of yet. He set the possibility aside for later decision.

The royal visit scheduled for one week. Five days remained and they had no reliable intelligence on when the real princess would show.

If he failed to achieve his mission's objective then the least horrible outcome would be him still owing Mohammed three favors. Success was an absolute requirement.

According to the profiles he'd memorized, Bahar was the communications expert. Fortunately, his English was excellent since O'Brien's Arabic remained rudimentary. Theoretically, Bahar had deposited a pre-paid untraceable cell phone with text, camera, and Internet capability along with a revolver, silencer, and ammunition in an airport locker, waiting for his arrival. Each team member was to have received a similar welcoming package--customized to his specialty and preferences.

Relieved to find the materials as promised, O'Brien left the airport armed and already in communication with the rest of the team.

His first call was to Bahar. "Thank you for the welcome package."

"You are most welcome."

"Have you been in touch with our mutual friend?" O'Brien asked casually.

"Most regrettably, our friend is incommunicado and I do not have a reliable local number, perhaps someone else has an alternate number?" Bahar asked diffidently.

"Wonderful suggestion, I should have thought of it myself. I do have another number. I'll try it next."

O'Brien made it a point to be polite, to the point of gagging, with the team

members. One thing he'd learned from dealing with the *Sons of Allah* was the value they placed upon courtesy. Touchy bunch of pig-fucking terrorists.

He clicked through the preprogrammed address book to Habib, Kareem's brother, and then painstakingly entered a text message, requesting a call.

After pushing send, he shuffled his bag forward six inches as another customer exited the service desk at the rent-a-car kiosk. This was his second day of standing on one fucking line after another. However, this one meant traveling in a sanitized car as opposed to a filthy taxi or worse yet--some form of public transportation. God alone knew what kind of germs he'd already been exposed to on all the commercial flights he'd endured over the past few weeks.

With access to an inside source, finding out when the real princess was scheduled to arrive should be simple. However, with security tighter--thanks to the botched kidnapping attempt--he would be forced to execute the actual hostage taking on very short notice. If the fake princess hampered his plans in any way, she would die.

Chapter Seven

Ocean Shores, Washington May 16th 8:00 PM local time

After exiting off the highway onto the Ocean Shores access road, Ian pulled to a stop at a four-way intersection. He glanced over and found Regan watching him. He brushed a silky strand, which had escaped, back behind her ear. She didn't pull away. He leaned toward her, taking his time, giving her time to object. She moved closer to him--a tiny movement, but in the right direction.

The attraction, which had sizzled between them from day one flared to life. His lips barely brushed hers. A horn blast spoiled the moment. He jerked back, registering the headlights right behind them.

The kiss had been so brief it hardly counted. Yet, his lips tingled and his ears heated from the remembered sweetness. Something soft touched his arm. He reached out blindly and Regan's hand slipped into his.

"I'm glad you were there to today." She spoke softly, but her words slipped through his defenses, warming his heart.

"Me too, princess," he said gruffly.

She might make him crazy and uncertain and hopeful. But no matter what she did to him--this time he wasn't blowing it. Even if she was right and all they had between them was chemistry--then it was lab time.

When they arrived at the cottage, he busied himself with hauling in his luggage, and then the groceries. Watching as she looked over the beach house, trying to see it through her eyes. He tried to stay optimistic but the whole place was done in sedate and well-behaved colors. The living area had a boring brown sofa that would cramp more than his style if he had to sleep on it.

"Not bad." She tipped her head toward the master suite with its private bath. "You want to use the shower first?"

"Nah." He sat the grocery sacks on the breakfast bar, and then flipped the switch to start the hot tub. "I'm going to soak out there." He gestured toward the deck where the water bubbled invitingly.

"You have a swim suit?" she asked with what sounded a lot like wistfulness. *Because he had one or because she didn't?*

He lifted the battered leather suitcase, in his left hand in silent answer to her question. *Not that he'd insist on wearing it.*

"Always prepared," she murmured.

And ready and willing and able.

Regan moved toward the bedroom. "I'm grabbing a shower then."

Ian stood, stupidly holding his suitcase. Nothing was working the way he wanted it to. He was much too aware of his own hunger and unsure how hard to push her.

Regan called back from the bedroom. "You want to change first, help yourself."

"I'm cool. I'll wait till you're out of the shower."

"Why, what's up?" Regan came back into the living room. The blazer and her shoes were missing.

Ian couldn't get his mouth to form words. Every thought focused on absorbing the way she looked. Her dark hair hung flat down her back, forming a glossy curtain. The slip covered more of her than a bikini would have, but the color was close to bare and almost as sexy. Her look set fire to his imagination.

The sleek fabric clung to every curve and hollow, drawing attention to the dark smudges made by her areolas and making him painfully aware of her rigid nipples.

He tried to stop ogling her, unsuccessfully and in that instant his thoughts of revenge evaporated like ice in the heat of August.

"Come on. I won't bite too hard." Musical laughter floated behind her words as she disappeared into the bedroom.

He hadn't imagined that invitation.

"You're sure?" he croaked.

"Yeah, just don't go making a big deal about it. I need you to be clear about this. We're just friends with benefits. You're good about this--about us, right?" Her words drifted through the haze of lust clouding his thoughts.

In your dreams, princess.

"Right," he lied roughly. The word creaked out of a mouth gone dryer than one of his grandmother's tea.

She wandered back out, looking more tempting than ever. Dark eyes met his, asking him questions he knew he would agreed to. "Sorry about the lecture. It must be all that special victim sensitivity training coming out. You are good with just sex?"

"Yeah."

Oh yeah, whatever you want to call it--as long as it happens soon. Real soon. Like now. Please.

Moving closer, she snaked an arm around his neck, and then touched her lips to his. He opened for her. He surrendered to the kiss, afraid to move. He waited for disaster to strike. Waited for her to pull back. Waited for her to change her mind.

He was so thrilled when she didn't he damn near disgraced himself before the main event. When he didn't care, the game of seduction came so easily. But no matter what he told himself or what he'd agreed to--this was Regan. How could he not care?

She came up for air and he pulled back his head to take in her eyes, half-shut and endlessly dark. An unsolvable mystery. Her mouth was still wet and swollen from his kisses. He brushed the satin covering her back and moved on, stroking skin that was finer than the fabric, trembling as he followed the thin straps down to the lacy edge.

He molded his palm, which seemed way too coarse to touch such perfection, to one of her straining breasts. Her rigid nipple poked into his hand, demanding attention. Her body arched into him and a low needy sound tugged at his balls.

Lowering his head, he drew one insistent nipple into his mouth right through the slip and her lacy bra. When he'd suckled it thoroughly, he pulled back enough to stare at the wet material prodded by the proud peak. The dark nipple puckered, only thinly veiled by the now translucent satin. He bent his head to replicate his attentions on the other

side, keeping the first nipple tight by rolling the responsive nub between his fingers.

When he raised his head the second time, she reached for him, tracing the outline of his erection. He captured her hands and held them above her head. His state of arousal, riding the razor's edge between pain and pleasure. The last thing he needed was more stimulation.

She tilted her hips in an intimate invitation.

"Please," she breathed in a low hoarse voice.

Ian kissed her hard and deep. Kissed the sweetness and breath right out of her. Kissed her until she writhed against him with mindless burning need. Kissed her until he'd stripped her of all control, and his was a tattered scrap.

When her knees faltered, he wrapped strong arms around her, and then carried her to the bed. Not for a second did he interrupt the kiss--a magic connection, building passion, urgency and an intimacy that was more important than anything.

"Don't move," he growled in her ear, desperate and breathless with wanting her, grimly hanging on to the edge of sanity.

He walked stiff legged and awkward to the breakfast bar where he'd dropped off the grocery sack, which held the condoms, a lifetime ago. He dumped the whole bag, snagged the box of condoms, and then tossed them. They landed on the bed. A lucky shot, because he couldn't take his eyes off Regan.

She held the position he'd left her in.

Slender arms extended over her head. Her wrists stacked as if he still held them. The pose thrust her breasts forward, straining the wet satin of her slip taut over erect nipples. Her eyes hidden behind long dark lashes, her mouth an erotic invitation to plunder, her long legs slightly parted and her hips tilted in an irresistible appeal. He watched her, drinking in the reality, which was so much better than his dreams as he stripped off everything but his pants in record time.

He held himself tightly. Stopping a scant two inches from touching her, and then simply basked in desire. His, hers, theirs. The only sounds in the room were her shallow breaths and the thunder of the blood pounding through his body.

All of the fluid not essential to sustaining life raced south where his cock thrummed against his slacks.

Reining in a need so sharp that it made his teeth ache, he moved in slow motion. His body clamored for release. But he still had control and he was much more interested in savoring every inch of her than in personal gratification. He'd had lots of climaxes.

He'd never made love to Regan.

He put his heart and soul into her seduction. He was intent on giving her pleasure beyond any she'd ever known--certain that no one else could ever make love to Regan the way he would. Because this was his one chance to show her what they had in the only way she'd allowed.

Regan had made it clear this was only sex. He didn't believe her for one second and he intended to give her irrefutable proof of his argument without saying a word. He was making the most of this opportunity. He had to make her understand what they had was so much more. A rare and precious gift. He willed her to feel all of his passion and reverence.

He wouldn't repeat his mistakes from the past. He wouldn't demand commitment. He wouldn't tell her he loved her. Instead, he would demonstrate. Every kiss, every caress, every stroke--was infused with all his passion.

Regan might think she wanted nothing but sex, but she was wrong. She was getting more--much more. They were making sweet slow love until she had no choice but to recognize the truth of them. They belonged together.

Ian inched up her slip as he slid down her body, leaving a combustion trail of heated kisses until his face was buried between her legs. He tugged off a flimsy pink thong and got busy. Using lips, teeth, and tongue, he sought out known pleasure spots while tutoring her about new ones.

She cried out his name and ground against his eager mouth as he slowed, making her writhe and whimper. He steadfastly concentrated on his sole mission--Regan's complete satisfaction.

He stayed the course until she was entirely limp. Not a single strand of sensual tension remained in her body. Then he began again, giving her everything he had--coaxing another response from her.

This time he started from the tender flesh where her thigh joined her hip, nibbling his way to her long, slender foot. With every kiss, every nibble, he absorbed her reaction, memorizing a sacred map of her erogenous zones. Her middle toes, the arch of her foot, the tender skin below her inner ankle all evoked delicate shivers, which had nothing to do with cold. Stroking the long muscles in her back made her hum with delight. Teasing touches to the undersides of her perfect breasts, the inside of her elbows, and her sides right below her ribs--all made her arch and quiver.

He'd never explored a woman's body like this before. It was an exciting journey into uncharted feelings. Learning what pleased Regan aroused a new level of hunger in him completely different from anything he'd ever felt.

Then there was no more room for mapping, memorizing, or even wondering at the miracle of his woman's body. He was sheathed himself and was positioned at the entrance to her center. He sank into her slowly, giving her time to accommodate him, taking time, appreciating the exquisite sensation. He held his breath as she sighed and eased, letting him deeper. His whole body tensed into a giant steel spring that trembled as his control strained with each inch he nudged closer to paradise.

Regan had on nothing except Ian's hungry gaze and a molten fever that seeped from her blood through her very skin leaving her seared and aching for his touch. She had no notion such fiery pleasure existed. She burned from the inside out. Made incandescent by a passion that stole her breath, her self-consciousness, and wrenched loose strange, new feelings.

Ian touched her as if she was a priceless masterpiece and he was an avid collector. Making love with Ian was better than she'd dreamed sex could be. Not just a little better--in-a-whole-different category.

She'd always believed everyone had one special talent. Now, she'd discovered Ian's unique gift.

Her last thought burned away as he sank into her, changing everything. She'd imagined making love with him. But none of her dreams came close to the real thing.

He filled her, stretching her just short of pain as he continued to work his way inside her body, possessing her totally.

For a second, panic, from emotions that were too strong to bear, enveloped her. She met his gaze. His blue irises were nearly obscured by the midnight black of dilated pupils. His expression--that of a pure predator fierce with possessiveness--strangely reassured her.

This was Ian. He was safe. She trusted him. It would be all right. She shivered and softened, her body welcoming him slavishly.

The next climax hit her so hard, holding back even the smallest part of herself was impossible. She broke on the pleasure--flying into a million pieces. She was so moved by the beauty and the wonder that silent tears escaped.

Ian pulled back enough to hold her gaze and stilled.

She reached to caress his face, but he jerked his head back. His granite expression froze her heart. A knot of tangled feelings clogged her throat, making it impossible for her to utter a word. Ian pushed himself completely off her.

Regan tried to speak--to say something--to protest. Only a strangled sob escaped her lips. Ian didn't pause. He strode to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him with soft finality.

She pushed herself up, scrubbing away the tears with the heels of her palms. Hating that she was crying. Hating herself for crying. Hating him for making her cry.

Ian had made love to her with reverent tenderness. Then left without finding his own release. He couldn't have made his disappointment any clearer if he'd issued an all points bulletin. Somehow, he'd sensed her secret inadequacies--had intuitively known she was damaged beyond repair. Understandably, her flaws had repulsed him.

The magic had been one-sided.

With her heart aching, Regan tried to ignore the feeling she'd lost something infinitely precious.

Pulling on her ridiculously skimpy bra, she sniffled and stepped into the even skimpier lace thong, which no longer seemed irresistibly feminine and sexy. She skinned on the inadequate satin slip. She'd have swapped the whole sleazy getup for some old sweats in a second. Shrugging on the disgusting blazer, she had to resist an urge to button it up and to braid her hair. Defiantly, she left her hair hanging loose.

The conservative beige pumps didn't match the rest of her outfit, but they were all she had. With a choice between bare feet or the dull high heels--the ugly shoes won. They tugged at her skin as she crammed them on. The leather linings pulling uncomfortably without stockings.

She tucked away her feelings of hurt and loss. Hiding behind the princess persona she'd worked so hard to perfect, she glided into the kitchen. With an imaginary apple balanced flawlessly on her head, she arranged her mouth into a just-friends-forget-about-the-benefits-in-this-lifetime smile.

The saddest part was Ian would be relieved. What had she expected? She'd known all along that she wasn't right for him. Remembering the look on his face made her feel like some one had driven an icy knife into her heart.

Ian was a great guy. He'd tried so hard to make her feel like a real princess. Until

she'd totally failed as his lover.

The very least, she could do was give him a clean getaway.

Ian stared at the sucker in the bathroom mirror. He'd been beyond stupid this time. Typical dumb Ian thinking--try hard enough and they've got to love you. It hadn't worked with his parents. It hadn't worked with his grandmother. It sure as hell hadn't worked with Regan.

Good God, he'd hurt her. She was shaking and crying for God's sake. And what was his sophisticated tough guy response? Run away like a hurt little boy who had been scolded when he had hugged his grandmother too hard, or had messed his mother's makeup by giving her a grubby kiss.

How could've he been so wrong about her? About them? Their connection had been everything he'd ever dreamed of--until her saw her tears. They'd torn his heart and made him feel like the biggest animal who'd ever lived.

Damn it! He cared about her. The last thing he'd wanted was hurt her. He'd gnaw off his own arm rather than cause her pain. That's pretty much how it felt leaving her when he wanted nothing more than to plunge into her hot, wet, tight body again and again until ... That line of thinking was not helping tame the lust monster, which made him feel even lower.

Ian splashed cold water on his face. It helped, but not enough. He stripped off the condom and turned on the shower. Stepping into the icy blast didn't change anything, but it distracted him. If he stayed in long enough maybe his hard-on would go away.

Slowly, his erection softened, ebbing away along with his hopes that Regan would fade from his heart if they made love. His stupid heart turned to mush over Regan and apparently nothing, not even her tears, could dissolve the bond he'd forged with her.

The realization did not please him. He was not some sentimental jerk. He was a practical man with plans, hopes, and dreams of his own. All of them ruined by some weird genetic quirk, which fashioned him to love only one woman. What good was protecting, serving, and living this naively idealistic life when he would never have a family of his own to protect? He should have stuck to his original plan to seduce, and then dump her. Then maybe he would have had a chance to get over her.

As he dried off, his phone played its classical ring tone, picking it up displayed Clyde's cell number. Perfect.

Beethoven's ninth symphony announced an incoming call on Ian's cell, jerking Regan's thoughts back to her assignment and the real princess problem.

She started toward the bedroom, halting when she heard Ian's brusque tone.

"McKnight here."

A long pause followed. Regan waited impatiently.

"No freakin way. God damn it, Clyde. You listen--"

Another lengthy pause was interrupted by a string of imaginative profanity--proving even Ivy League guys have a rough side. If she weren't locked into princess mode she might have complimented him on the unique phrasing.

It was hard for street cop not to pick up a colorful vocabulary when so many of their interactions with citizens were characterized by the frank and uninhibited expressions of unhappy emotion. Still Ian's blast deserved respect.

He stomped into the room--barefoot, bare-chested, and clearly steamed. At the sight of him, her princess mode evaporated. Her thoughts reverted to pure lust. How could just looking at him make her feel this weak-kneed-achy hunger?

How could it not?

The man was pure temptation. His anger only added to his animal magnetism. Even with what had just happened, he made her want to snap and bite and grind her...

"Clyde's sending a chopper," Ian said through a locked jaw.

It took Regan a few seconds to drag her mind away from the lust track. Slowly she processed his words. Fortunately, he was much too angry to notice her denseness.

"How did he know where to send it?"

"Lucky guess," he said, and then muttered under his breath. "Lousy timing."

She stared at the play of entrancing muscles in his back as he stomped away. With luck, he had left to put more clothes on before she begged him for another chance, making a bigger fool of herself than she already had.

Ian was right about one thing, Clyde's timing. It was off. He should've called an hour ago.

What she needed was to put some distance between her and Ian. Time apart wouldn't fix the hole in her pride, or the one in her heart, but it would give her a chance to regain her composure. She prayed he took his time getting dressed as she poured herself a glass of water, and then just stood there, holding it. At last, she heard the welcome *whap, whap, whap* of chopper blades.

Regret warred with relief as she let herself out the back door. She crouched and ran toward the chopper, hovering inches above the driveway.

The passenger door opened. Clyde held out a hand. Regan took it, thankful for his strength. Glancing back, she met Ian's angry scowl. He stood with arms crossed, his feet still bare, glaring at her. She forced her gaze away from his angry face--still too aware of how she'd disappointed him.

Once they'd lifted off and the noise level dipped to a duller roar, Clyde yelled. "Sorry about the snafu at the hotel."

She wasn't used to Clyde being civil. All things considered, she would have preferred his normal surly attitude.

"No harm, no foul. Any luck with the guy we left in the elevator?"

Clyde shook his head.

She nodded her understanding and sympathy, and then slipped back into silent unhappiness, unable to keep miserable thoughts of Ian out of her head for more than a few seconds. She was grateful the chopper noise made conversation all but impossible.

* * * *

When they landed at Boeing Field, Regan was quickly surrounded by agents, intent on hustled her off to a waiting car. Clyde's broad back disappeared, as her new personal clique of secret service agents, as anonymous as gang members, herded her along. She felt more like a prisoner than a celebrity or a member of the team.

Did any of them even know she was a cop?

Regan longed for her familiar role as one of the good guys. She was stuffed into the back seat of a luxury sedan with tinted windows. Two of the cookie-cutter agents

sandwiched her in the backseat. Another sat up front with the driver. She sensed it wasn't the time to point out she was supposed to be bait.

"Do you know what happened to Rolf and Ulric, the royal guards?" she asked anyone willing to answer.

"I couldn't say ma'am," the agent on her right responded.

She bit back the retort on the edge of her tongue. *Damn, she missed Ian. At least he never cut her out of the loop.*

Her army began splitting off at the hotel elevators until only one agent remained. He held open the door to her suite.

Immediately, she was cocooned in luxury. The eggshell walls, thick carpet, antiques, overstuffed furniture, tasteful art, soft lighting, and a working fireplace were all designed to offer a feeling of ritzy sanctuary. It worked. The ambiance was comforting. So was Lundstrom's familiar cheery presence. She felt the tension ebbing and fought to keep a flood of emotions at bay.

Letting herself be tucked into a corner of the sofa with a light throw arranged over her legs, she smiled at Lundstrom, grateful that her tutor had not been hurt. The older woman was coddling her shamelessly and she was grateful for the kindness and the distraction. Then she began pummeling her with questions about her ordeal.

"Goodness gracious, Miss Regan, what a terrifying experience! I would have been frightened out of my senses. Were you able to identify any of the terrorists?"

"I must have seen them. But it's all still a blur." Regan shook her head in disgust at her failure to note the most basic details.

In her defense, she'd been playing princess at the time her guards were taken out. The Secret Service agents had looked authentic. Nothing had alarmed her until a man, who she didn't recognize, pulled her into an empty elevator. She'd replayed that scenario many times and it still didn't make sense. He'd pushed the button for the penthouse level, she was positive about that point. If she'd gone with him, then what? Lundstrom, possibly hotel staff, and secret service personnel would've met them at the suite.

"Who was in the penthouse with you?" Regan angled her gaze toward her friend.

"With me?" she echoed the question. "No one. Why do you ask?"

"No one? You're sure?" Regan didn't try to keep the surprise off her face.

"Absolutely. I was alone." Lundstrom's eyes took on a strained expression.

"Seems odd." Regan shrugged. "I thought at least one Secret Service Agent would've been assigned to the suite."

"Perhaps there was one outside, like now," the other woman suggested reasonably, before rising and crossing the room to the telephone. "I shall order you a nice cup of hot tea with a spot of peppermint liqueur."

Three short and two long raps on the suites door halted Lundstrom mid-dial.

"You want me to get it?" Regan asked politely, not interested in actually getting up or even moving.

"Good heavens, no!" she said, replacing the receiver, and then hurrying to answer the door.

Clyde ambled in, nodding to the older woman on his way by. "Too tired for debriefing?" he asked courteously.

Regan hesitated, caught off guard by Clyde's consideration. She scanned his face for signs he was being sarcastic and found none. She was tired and feeling sorry for herself, too. But neither condition counted for anything compared to the operation.

"Of course not," she answered, sucking it up and acting as if she weren't exhausted and heartsick.

"If you'll excuse us?" Clyde turned a hard gaze on Lundstrom. "Ma'am?"

"Certainly, please excuse me," Lundstrom answered then turned toward Regan with a significant look. "I will be in my room, well within earshot."

Apparently, Lundstrom considered Clyde a threat to her virtue. A too shrill laugh threatened to erupt from Regan's throat. She smothered it with a fake cough.

"You okay?" Clyde studied her way too shrewdly.

"Peachy," she assured him with a poor attempt at enthusiasm.

"Have you seen the news?"

"No, we were ... out of touch." Regan willed herself not to blush.

Would Ian talk to Clyde about her?

Of course not. She was being ridiculous. She'd been partnered with Ian. Even though he'd been monumentally disappointed in her, he wouldn't talk about it. He was a stand-up guy.

"During the attempted kidnapping at the Plaza, two secret service agents were murdered, along with both of the princess's personal guards. The threat is real and much more serious than anyone--than I--suspected. We've got a real mess and we have to play catch up. In main part due to my failure to assess the danger accurately. Whoever is behind the operation has the money, expertise, personnel, and inside information to get the job done." Clyde delivered the heartbreaking information and his hardnosed assessment without any visible emotion.

Regan swallowed hard, processing the grim fact four men died protecting her. "Did you get any of them?" she asked desperately.

Chapter Eight

Seattle, Washington May 17th 1:00 AM

Before answering Regan's question about apprehending any of the terrorist, Clyde's perpetual glower deepened. "No."

"What about the phony Assistant Manager--were you able to get anything out of him?" she asked with a thin strand of hope lifting her voice.

"What Assistant Manager?"

"The guy in the elevator at the Plaza. I borrowed his jacket. He had on a cheesy pin that said Assistant Manager," she explained--her voice sounding as tired and disappointed as she felt,

"Him," he grunted. "The thing is, he hasn't come around yet. Brain damage. Ian must've hit him a little too hard. Gave us quite a start when we found the discarded princess clothes in the elevator. We thought ... they'd succeeded in kidnapping you."

"Everything happened so fast. The guys who took out Rolf and Ulric looked like Secret Service Agents. Ian and I weren't sure who we could trust."

"He could've called me," Clyde said grumpily.

Regan retreated further in the corner of the sofa. "Maybe he tried," she said with a sincere effort at diplomacy.

Clyde ran a big hand over his shaved head. "Look, I'm sorry about all this." He waved vaguely, indicating what? She wasn't sure. "Romeo's never going to forgive me if anything happens to you."

He looked so glum, she actually felt sorry for him.

"Better me than Princess Halle, right?" she tried to lighten his mood.

"Not to Romeo."

"Why do you call him that?" she asked, not because she wanted to know, rather to change an uncomfortable subject. The ploy worked.

Clyde laughed. "It's exactly what he isn't. You know, like calling the fat guy Slim. Ian is the furthest thing from a lover boy there is, so I call him Romeo."

You are so wrong.

He might be right in the sense that Ian didn't talk about his intimate encounters. But he was a wonderful lover, knowing exactly where and how to touch her. Obviously, he was an experienced man. She was the one with no usable sexual expertise--just a quivering mass of nerve endings. Worse, in her ignorance, she'd done something to turn his on-switch off. The problem was that she didn't know what she'd done wrong. It wasn't an easy subject to work into casual conversation. She continued brooding while Clyde fooled around with his gadgets. She had no intention of asking for his advice on her love life.

Pulling a normal looking cell phone out of his pants pocket, he flipped it open and inspected the display before closing, and then re-pocketing the small device.

"Speaking of non-hounds, there he is, calling again." He hauled out the cell back out, this time, setting it on the coffee table. Where it vibrated like an angry bee. He shook his head, a resigned expression pulling his features downward as he answered the call. "What's up?" he said, holding the tiny phone away from his ear. "Not a problem. Sure thing. She's at the *Alexander*, top floor the Sultan Suite--now come on, I can't--" Clyde stared at the ominously quiet phone. "He's on his way."

Caught off guard, Regan gaped at Clyde, wondering if this day could get any worse. Then she remembered the men who'd died that morning and felt bad for thinking of her own silly problems. She'd have to see Ian again sooner or later--might as well get it over with now. He was a professional. She was a professional.

Besides, she had no choice.

"Fill me in on the official version of events. What's been released to the press?" she asked, needing a fresh distraction to shut off thoughts of Ian.

"We've kept a lid on it so far. The official version is Princess Halle has a touch of flu. Speculation is that she's pregnant. Tabloid version is either Elvis's love child or an alien's. Take your pick." Clyde shrugged massive shoulders.

Regan much preferred any kind of royal gossip to thinking of facing Ian again. Still, it had to be hard on the princess and her parents. "Welcome to the fishbowl, huh?"

An hour later, she covered a yawn.

Clyde stood. "Look, you're exhausted and I gotta get some sleep. Any problems, you yell, okay? I'm two doors down. We have this floor of the hotel locked off."

"Actually there is something--can you put a visit to Fairmount Park Elementary on the Princess's agenda for tomorrow?" She glanced at the mantle clock and corrected herself. "Or rather today."

"I'll see what I can do," he grumbled without any real menace.

"Thanks." Regan stood too. Who would've thought Clyde would be looking out for her? She didn't get his change of attitude, figuring she must look truly pitiful if even her worst enemy was being nice to her. No matter what his reason was for making it, she truly appreciated Clyde's kindness. Though she wouldn't be taking advantage of it. A few terrorists would be a welcome distraction, and she certainly didn't need protection from Ian. Except for her heart and that was already a lost cause. Anyway, he must've cooled off and changed his mind about coming over tonight.

One down--only four more days of playing princess to go.

* * * *

Ian had watched the chopper lift off, taking Regan back into danger and cursed himself for letting it happen. He'd been so wrapped up in his own hurt, anger, and disappointment he'd put his partner at risk. Except she wasn't his partner any more was she? But he knew Regan--she would not protect herself. There was no choice. He had to protect her.

There was plenty of time for analysis and regret on the long drive back into town. Regan had responded to him, he knew she had. When had he stopped paying attention? When had he hurt her? Damn it, he still felt like pond scum for making her cry.

He'd rather get arrested than cause her a moment's pain. Somehow he had to find a way to let her know whatever he'd done had been unintentional.

What mattered now was protecting her. Whether she wanted him to or not. And it was painfully clear the answer was going to be *not*.

But when she refused to consider her own safety, then it was his job. He needed to talk to Clyde. The big jerk was still set on using her as bait. Ian had to be part of any plan involving Regan. That was non-negotiable.

Since Clyde was staying at his house, it would be damn convenient to roust him out of bed and make him see reason.

Ian pulled into his garage with a frown. There was no rental car and no lights on. Except the security beams he'd tripped. Definitely no Clyde. His frown grew. Last time he'd talked to him, Clyde was in Regan's suite. Ian looked at his watch almost two AM. He whistled, cheered by the idea of Clyde guarding Regan. At least she wasn't surrounded by a bunch of iron-jawed Secret Service agents he had no leverage with.

Half an hour later he'd found Clyde. After he woke his friend, he'd proceeded to get a few things straight. First off, he was re-established as point man. Officially, he would act as the Princess Halle's escort while she was in Seattle. Privately, he'd have Regan's back. Temporarily placated, he settled himself on Clyde's couch for a nap.

* * * *

Regan heard the knock, cracking one eyelid to peer at her bedside clock, which wasn't there. Never at her best without coffee, for a few muzzy seconds, she couldn't figure out where she was. Then it all came back to her. The *Alexander*.

The knock on the door must be Lundstrom. Thank God, it was good to have people she could count on. She'd left her breakfast order, a pot of coffee and a blueberry yogurt, the night before, room service must have already come.

Um coffee--it had to be coffee. She had to get up and let them in. She'd probably slept in a little. With any luck at all, she should still have time for a couple of cups. The knocking started again. This time it sounded more determined.

Stumbling out of bed, she tugged on a silky dressing gown. Most of the princess wardrobe was either boring, or uncomfortable, or impractical, except for the intimate apparel. Regan was in complete accord with the Princess's taste in lingerie. The thin robe she wrapped around herself was a wonderful shade between pearl-white and baby-girl pink. The material floated over her meager curves, making the most of them. So glamorous, it even made bed-head seem sexy and tousled.

She kept her first response, "I'm coming," under her breath, remembering her role. "One minute please," she enunciated clearly in her refined Princess accent.

She flipped up the night lock, and then pulled open the suite's door.

"Good morning, princess."

She heard the deep familiar voice and any response she might have managed evaporated on her tongue, which had suddenly grown clumsy, thick, and dry. A disgustingly handsome and a way too-together Ian McKnight stood much closer than she could handle.

Acutely aware she was wearing nothing but a thin silk dressing gown, Regan girded herself to stay in character. The robe, which had seemed perfectly adequate to let in room service or Lundstrom, now seemed decadent and provocative in the extreme.

"What a pleasant surprise." Despite her intention to sound regal and frosty, her

voice came out all soft and breathy.

"You were expecting someone else." Ian didn't make it a question.

Judging from his scowl, he'd concluded the someone else was her lover. The hilarious idea pleased her almost as much as his reaction. Going just by his expression, he was jealous. Therefore, he cared. She should step away from him, defuse the situation--but he cared!

Regardless, what she needed was for him to keep right on thinking it.

If she could convince him that she was involved with another man then he'd think she was a slut and be totally disgusted with her. But it would be worth it, because her troubles with him would be over. He was way too upright to encroach on another man's territory. Normally, she'd balk at that kind of deception. Right now, it struck her as, if not a brilliant solution, at least the lesser of evils.

Busy thinking about how to make the situation work to her advantage, she made the serious mistake of ignoring the very large problem standing in the suite's hallway. She pulled the robe's sash a little tighter and headed toward the living room. Sensing Ian behind her, she turned to confront him.

Implacable steel arms trapped her between the hard wall of Ian's body and an equally solid antique armoire.

"Who is he?" Ian loomed over her.

She really needed coffee before she tried to deal with him. Why hadn't she thought ahead for even one question? She needed a name--a believable name.

No matter how menacing looked, he would never hurt her. She knew that as well as she knew her badge number. He'd die to protect her. Still, just his presence made it hard for her to think clearly. Her breath came too fast, her pulse raced, and her mouth grew drier. He rattled her senses, making it impossible for her to form any kind of rational plan. Let alone a clever answer to his question.

For too long she buried all sexual desire under a load of fear. To her delight and dismay, Ian strode right past all her defenses. He'd awakened the vixen within. Now, she had no clue how to deal with such unfamiliar and powerful feelings.

She licked her lips with a clumsy tongue. She tried to draw in a decent breath, only succeeding in bumping her achy breasts against his very solid, very male chest. Even that fleeting contact made her bite her lip to keep in a whimper of helpless hunger. Her breasts thrust themselves into him, her nipples instantly hardening into tender bullets of need, begging for his caress.

His head lowered until his classic Roman nose touched her plain one. Any hope she had of forming rational thought vanished. The seductive scent of him, clean man with a hint of green moss, filled every breath she took, reminding her he smelled even better closer.

Something warm and solid nudged under the arch of her foot. She glanced down and saw she was standing on top of his shoes. When had that happened? She opened her mouth to say something. This time a needy little moan escaped.

Before she had time to be embarrassed, she was busy dealing with a hot forceful tongue bent on invading her mouth. At first, she pressed back against his assault. When that felt too wonderful to be right, she angled her head and surrendered to the kiss.

Big mistake.

A strong arm wrapped around her, pulling her more completely against him. Wonderfully blunt fingers brushed the side of her breast. She melted against him, wanting more than his tongue. She tilted her hips in a blatant invitation.

Oh my dear God. Right there.

Ian pulled back, but it was too late. She'd run out of breath and sense. A faint voice in her head murmured about caution, assignment, and disappointment. Nothing important. Boring stuff that had nothing to do with her or the smoking gun wedged in his slacks. Judging from the hungry look in his eyes, he was all for skipping all further preliminaries, giving them a second chance to get it right. No longer thinking, she reached out and fisted a hand in his dress shirt, keeping him close while she nibbled her way up the side of his jaw.

"There's no other guy is there?" His voice held a new note of possessiveness.

She stepped back and damn near fell. Ian reached out, saving her. He watched her with the same kind of intense concentration she'd seen in the eyes of really big cats, who were stalking their prey.

Once she broke contact, the faint voice in her head, which had been murmuring about caution, duty, assignments, and past disappointment turned up the volume.

"What guy are we talking about, McKnight?" she asked with a passable imitation of coolness.

He crossed his arms in front of his wide expanse of chest, making all those impressive muscles ripple under his shirt. Regan made herself turn her gaze away.

"The one you were letting me think existed."

Oh, that one.

She crossed to the coffee table and picked up a glass of stale mineral water, left over from last night and took a sip. From there she walked over to the window to admire the view. Anything to buy time and get her breathing under control.

Acting as if there was nothing out of the ordinary about being alone with Ian while she was barely dressed, she pretended she hadn't been wrapped around him tighter than a righteous bust less than one minute ago.

Oh dear God, it was hopeless. She couldn't even convince herself she wasn't interested. She wasn't *that good* at pretending.

A warm hand clasped her shoulder. She jerked, sloshing what was left of the water. She grabbed a tissue, dabbing ineffectively at the spill with trembling hands.

"You kissed me." His voice held accusation.

She tossed the soggy tissue and leaned the back of her hips against a dainty cherry wood desk. "So?" She shrugged. "I've got a full day. My escort will be here soon and I've got about a million things to do."

Starting with breaking your heart. And maybe mine. She looked away from the raw hurt in his eyes. She needed to toughen up.

It was better for him to think she was a slut than for him to realize she cared. She would just disappoint him again. Then he'd feel obligated, and then their sad affair would turn into a miserable, childless marriage.

"I'm sorry," she swallowed and tried for less breathy. "The kiss shouldn't have

happened. You're a very attractive man, but it will never work between us." Regan drew in another calming breath. "And since we both know that, it'll be better if--"

"You haven't given us a chance," he cut her off. Icy sparks of anger from his eyes singeing her.

We had a chance and you were so disgusted you left in the middle.

But considering that he was here and undeniably interested--maybe there was more to his side of things. It would've helped if he'd just told her what the problem was instead of storming off. She already had enough issues without trying to read his mind. She was being silly. If it had been something simple or fixable then surely he would've told her.

Regan managed a credible laugh. "It was just a kiss, McKnight. A mistake. Get over it." She kept her voice even and her eyes locked on his, allowing no hint of the truth. There'd been far more than the kiss they'd just shared. Being with Ian was so magical--so beautiful that it made her weep.

Too bad he hadn't enjoyed the experience. Now for reasons beyond her understanding, he wanted to try again. He'd always been a stubborn guy. Her heart still hurt from their first time. She wasn't sure she could survive a second round of his disappointment. Even though part of her wanted to believe this time would be different. Maybe. If he told her what she'd done wrong

She wanted to ask him why he'd left when she was so vulnerable. But it wasn't a conversation, which she wanted to have when she was barely dressed and sleep deprived. Maybe, after this assignment was over, she'd have a chance to ask him. She would at least tell him how much his leaving hurt her. But right now, she needed to suck it up and do her job.

"Right, I get it." Ian glared at her, but he didn't move.

Despite his words, he wasn't backing off and he wasn't buying it. She noticed his jaw had unclenched. Something gave him new confidence. A hint of a smile flirted with his lips, which she shouldn't be staring at.

Maybe she wasn't masking her feelings as well as she thought.

"Time for you to go." She tried again, curving her mouth around a royal smile.

He just laughed.

Regan loved his laugh. She couldn't keep from smiling when she heard it. Like a catchy melody, it lightened her heart.

"I don't think so." Ian's mouth stretched into an irresistible grin, the one that made her want to kiss it off his face.

"Allow me to remind you of who I am. Your official escort, Special Liaison to the Mayor of Seattle, the honorable Lieutenant Ian McKnight, at your service, Princess." He bowed formally with a natural grace that made it all the harder to act immune.

Regan bit her tongue to keep from informing him that he should address her as *Your Royal Highness*. She was certain he already knew the correct protocol. It was one of the things she should hate about him. He came from a totally different world than she did. He probably did tea, or some equally foreign ritual, with royalty all the time.

His sexy grin didn't disguise his intention to plaster himself to her side. Could she get him to back off? Maybe with right kind of expletives.

Sometimes surrender *was* the smart option.

She was definitely safer with Ian by her side. At least as far as surviving this assignment went. She wasn't so sure about her heart. How many times could she take his brand of rejection?

She really didn't want to think about it. Reluctantly, she decided accepting his presence was the best of some pretty awful choices.

"Peachy. You can start by finding out what happened to my coffee and tell them to make it drinkable."

Ian took a step closer, erasing the distance between them and eroding her resistance. He reached out, tilting her chin. His gaze drifted down her face, locking on her lips. "I remember how you like your coffee. I remember everything."

Suddenly, she had to lick her lips. They were dry, bruised, and probably blistered from his last kiss. Her breath came in short little pants.

Wrapping his arms around her, he held her gently. Then he brushed his mouth across hers. She could've resisted if he'd grabbed or thrust, but his tenderness unraveled all the needs swirling in her belly.

Regan's very bones softened in the heat of his embrace. He gave a deep groan and she answered in kind. She was already so close. She deserved an orgasm. She needed it. So she'd had one yesterday. That hardly made up for a lifetime of deprivation. Her clenched thighs eased--the better to fit that marvelous hard length where she needed it. Her thin robe wasn't all that much of a barrier. She wanted this now.

They could get naked later--do it right, do it wrong, do it all night long.

Someone knocked on the suite's door, and then they separated. A slight parting of their lips. Far enough for her to see determination etched into every chiseled line of Ian's face, even his dimpled chin jutted. A new round of flutters started in her stomach and rapidly moved lower.

Her cheeks warmed. How had he made her forget their first session of disastrous lovemaking? Was this going to happen every time she touched him? What had he done to her? She met his eyes, trying to keep her cool, and failed. She dropped her lashes and stared at the tips of his shoes next to her bare feet. They were so male. Even his shoes looked sexy. She was in big trouble. Felony-level trouble. Grand-lust trouble.

Regan tried to move away.

Holding her easily, Ian leaned down, his lips brushing her ear. "Not so fast, princess." His warm breath sent electric charges skittering down her spine.

While her bones liquefied from his whispered warning, he unwound his arms. Instead of releasing her, he put his hands on either side of her waist and lifted her. He held her even with him for a heartbeat, his eyes locked with hers. "We aren't done."

The second knock barely registered.

Finally, he lowered her in a slow slide down his hard body.

Reality slammed home, let him deal with whoever was at the door. She bolted back for the bedroom on shaky legs. It took her five minutes to get herself together. Three and half of those were spent holding a cold washcloth to her face. She didn't know what outfit Lundstrom had planned for her to wear today, but what she really needed was body armor.

No, scratch that--what she needed was for Ian to be anywhere but here.

A soft rap on her bedroom door jolted her out of the bathroom.

Her fingers were on the lock before she asked the sensible question. "Who is it?"

"Lundstrom," her tutor answered, sounding taken aback to be asked.

Opening the door a crack, Regan peeked out to confirm her identity.

It was Lundstrom, bearing a breakfast tray and waiting for admittance. Regan widened the opening. She came in, sat the tray down, and then poured coffee.

"Did you see Lieutenant McKnight?" Regan asked casually, accepting a cup of delicious, but very hot coffee.

"Would he possibly be the large, angry looking man muttering and pacing around the suite, upsetting the agents? The one who is incredibly good-looking and built along the lines of the Greek God of fallen women?" she asked in her normal, cheery, and perfectly correct royal tutor voice.

Regan smiled at Lundstrom's wickedly accurate description as she spooned ice into the coffee, and then stirred. "That would be the one."

The man she missed every moment he was away from her side and dreaded seeing again. He was already driving her crazy and the day hadn't even started.

Half an hour later, Regan was dressed and groomed to Lundstrom's exacting standards. Along with her princess clothes, she'd found her defenses. Though they were slightly battered and dented, she had them back in place.

Her intention to maintain a safe distance from Ian evaporated to a faint memory at his first smoldering look.

"I liked you better in that robe you had on earlier," Ian whispered as he held her coat. His words heated her in completely unacceptable and nonpolitically correct ways, to say nothing of the protocol breeches.

A faint cough tickled Regan's ears. She peeked through her lashes to see Lundstrom had on her hat, coat and gloves--all outfitted for a day of touring. Lundstrom coughed pointedly, again, looking markedly uncomfortable.

"A tickle in my throat," the royal tutor explained mendaciously.

"Ready, Princess?" Ian's warm breath made an entirely different kind of tickle--one she felt to her toes.

Playing her royal part just got a whole lot harder.

Chapter Nine

Seattle, Washington May 17th 7:00 AM

The strategy meeting reminded Regan of roll call from her days in patrol. Same play--different cast. There was one female agent. Regan snagged the empty chair next to her, seating herself.

"Regan Longstreet, Princess Halle's stunt double," she introduced herself.

"Maya Garcia, minority token agent," the woman shot back, making Regan smile.

"I know the territory." Regan whispered, pointing to herself. "Half Native American. Nice to meet you, Maya."

Clyde stood. "People, can we get this show on the road?"

"May I see that?" she asked, lowering her voice and nodding toward the printed day's agenda on the table in front of the slender woman.

The sympathetic agent scooted her copy of the official schedule closer so Regan could read it too.

"Thanks." Regan scanned the itinerary. Marcia Bennington's school wasn't anywhere on the agenda, not a surprise. Either Clyde had forgotten about her request or he ignored it.

Job one, for Princess Regan was a manicure and pedicure in her suite, then a luncheon with the daughters of Svensberg, followed by yet another salon appointment, and then dinner with the mayor. With luck, she should be able to sleep through some of the beauty treatments.

"Does everyone know Victor Coluccio?" Clyde swept his gaze around the room. "Victor is handling the Secret Service end, which includes the day to day protection assignments. Remember, we need to keep a low profile. The name of the game is luring the bad guys into making an attempt. This afternoon's event looks promising."

Regan sensed Ian tensing even from across the room.

"There's an omission on the schedule," Regan announced in her best princess voice. "The Lincoln Park School visit."

Clyde frowned at her. "There is no school visit."

"There needs to be. Princess Halle promised to visit her pen pal." Regan exaggerated the level of the Princess's obligation with a clear conscience. Princess Halle certainly should have promised to visit Marcia.

"You're forgetting our mission. The idea is to lull the bad guys into believing it's safe to snatch you," Clyde dismissed her request.

If they wanted someone to play princess and passively accept their instructions, they should've pre-scheduled a lobotomy. Barring an intelligence reduction, she intended to have some input into the agenda.

"How do we even know they want to kidnap the Princess?" she asked coolly.

"We have highly developed intelligence sources," one of the Secret Service

Agents spoke up in defense of the status quo.

And I've got a highly developed survival instinct.

"What exactly did the notes say?" Regan persisted.

"Notes?" Victor Walters, the agent who thought he was in charge asked.

Maya stifled a snort, covering her gaffe with a fake cough.

"The threats that started off this whole operation," Regan clarified, keeping it polite. It certainly wasn't her problem, if these hotshots hadn't done their homework.

Victor whispered to the subordinate on his left before saying brusquely, "Sorry, we don't have copies available."

"Paraphrase then, the gist is fine," Regan continued to push.

Victor nodded stiffly, giving tacit permission.

One of the other agents spoke. "Both began with a quote from the Koran and included rationalization for using violent methods to achieve their ends, claiming divine approval. They condemned the Jaegers, the ruling family of Svensberg, as having been corrupted by Princess Halle's upcoming marriage into the royal family. They threatened retribution for crimes against humanity." The agent hesitated, cleaning his glasses. "It seems Princess Halle's father, the current ruler of Qsan, not only refused to grant asylum to political refugees from certain radical factions, but allowed the extradition of their leader, one Mohammed Abu."

"I missed the threat to Princess Halle. Where did that come from?" Regan inquired sharply, warmed by Ian's nod of approval.

"We--" the agent looked around for help and got none--"inferred it from the location of the notes and the references to dark-eyed virgins reclining on green cushions. Given that both notes were found pinned to the green pillow, which the princess had used for her naps.

"So you had nothing concrete, prior to the assault at the Plaza," Ian summarized the situation, making his support for Regan, public.

"Correct," Clyde admitted grudgingly, putting a merciful end to the doubletalk.

"Then you can't possibly object to the school visit. Since it wasn't part of the itinerary--there's no significant risk," Regan said reasonably.

"There's no time--"

"There's time this morning. Right now," she insisted

"You have a manicure--" Victor interrupted.

"Not essential," she dismissed the scheduling conflict with a wave of her already nicely buffed fingers.

"Come on, Clyde, she can do her nails later." Ian said, appealing to his friend with an irrepressible grin.

Regan willed herself not to blush with pleasure over of Ian's support.

* * * *

"Thank you again for allowing me to visit my friend Marcia." Regan shook the teacher's hand with the Princess's wimpy three-fingered grasp.

"Excuse me." A boy in the second row waved his raised arm.

"Yes Chad, you have a question?" The teacher recognized the curly-haired child, who was holding up his hand for recognition.

"I know you're the Princess, but who's he?" Chad pointed at Ian, who stood guard by the door.

"Prince Charming, stupid." A redheaded romantic informed the outspoken Chad.

Regan stepped forward, interrupting tactfully. "Class, may I present my escort? Lieutenant Ian McKnight of the Seattle Police Department. It is his job to look after princesses that visit your city."

From the looks on several of the girls' faces, Ian kept his Prince Charming status. She couldn't blame them.

"May I have a minute with Marcia?" Regan asked the teacher respectfully.

"Certainly." The teacher beckoned permission to Marcia to roll forward.

Regan waved goodbye to the rest of the class. Seeing the pride shining from Marcia's eyes, Regan really enjoyed the princess wave for the first time.

Once they'd wheeled her young friend from the classroom, Regan crouched to Marcia's eyelevel. "Would it be all right if one of my friends, who lives right here in Seattle, came see you once in awhile? She could keep me up to date on how you're doing." She smiled hopefully while waiting for the girl's answer.

"I guess, but I write you every week and tell you everything," Marcia said indifferently, trying to hide the doubts, pinching her small face.

Regan wished Princess Halle were close enough for a good shaking or at least a talking to that would leave her with better manners than to ignore a child's dreams.

"Sometimes the guards lose the Princess's mail," Ian mentioned casually.

Regan shot him a look of gratitude. "The Lieutenant is right, I don't always get your letters but I can depend on Regan to call me and tell me what is happening with you. Regan is a police officer just like Lieutenant McKnight."

"Is Regan a boy or a girl?"

"Regan is a girl," Ian answered quickly.

She decided his tone made the response a compliment.

"That would be okay then," the girl agreed, sounding way too adult.

Regan wasn't sure why it was so important for her to see Marcia again, but just knowing she would gave her a warm feeling. Though it didn't compare to the warmth she got from being this close to Ian.

To distract herself from dangerous thoughts, she began babbling as they left the school. "Thanks for your help back there, I spaced out for minute. I was so angry that the Princess ignored Marcia's letters--I couldn't think of a suitable excuse."

He slipped on sunglasses he didn't need, given the darkly tinted limousine windows. "How long has Marcia been writing to Princess Halle?"

"For almost six months, once a week. Can you imagine? She pours her heart out to a princess who doesn't even bother to read her letters."

"Yeah, I can imagine." Ian's voice was rough with old pain.

Regan shot him look from under her lashes, his jaw had clamped. She waited, not sure whether to push for more information or leave him alone.

"When I was little I used to write to my parents." His words rasped out as if they'd been locked away inside for decades. "Guess I shouldn't complain. At least mine wrote back, once in awhile. The ratio was something like fifty-to-one. I finally wised up

and started sending them a quarterly report. Like I was some kind of business deal."

Ian scanned the street.

"How old were you when you started writing the letters?" she asked softly.

"Seven."

"So young." Regan reached for his hand, taking it in hers. Instantly, her level of sensual awareness increased and she was forcefully reminded that holding hands with Ian might be even more dangerous than sex. Still, he was her friend and he needed comforting. She counted it a victory when he didn't pull away.

"I thought I must be the worst kid in the world because my parents didn't want me with them," he admitted with a rusty laugh.

"Your parents are still alive then?" she asked, tinge of envy coloring her words.

"As far as I know."

There'd been a small hesitation before he'd responded. What did he mean by as far as I know?

"I don't hear from them all that often. They're on another dig."

He'd just responded to a question she hadn't asked yet.

Now she was getting silly, he couldn't read her mind. He was being friendly, volunteering information about himself. Everyone liked to talk about himself. She was on the right track, deflecting the conversation away from hot topics.

"Are they archeologists?" she asked, even though she remembered they weren't, wanting to keep him talking.

He angled toward her. "Paleontologists."

"Ah right, the dinosaur hunters, I remember you telling me about them. You always made it sound like so much fun. I always thought what a great childhood you must've had."

The sunglasses came far enough down his nose for him to shoot her a look of disbelief over the top of the frames. He pushed them back in place. He had great eyes with eyelashes that should be a misdemeanor.

"Weren't you dinosaur crazy as a kid? I thought that was a stage all kids went through." Dear God, she sounded chirpy.

"Dinosaur envy more like," he muttered grumpily.

Regan laughed, squeezing his hand to let him know she meant no harm. "Sorry, it sounded funny. So you never got to play in the dirt at exotic excavation sites?"

"No, I lived with my Grandmother until I went away to prep school."

"Was that around here?"

"New York," he said.

"Poor little rich boy?"

Ian laughed--a short, sharp bark.

"Maybe they thought it would be too dangerous. The sites must be hazardous, right?" Regan gave his hand another squeeze.

"Yeah--maybe." His voice said he wasn't buying it.

She wanted to make it better. "I'll bet you were an adorable little boy. Your grandmother must've spoiled you rotten."

"My grandmother believes in spoiling only when it applies to her."

Regan raced on, needing to fill in the pauses. "We were just plain poor. I used to think that if we'd had money everything would've been okay. But money doesn't fix everything does it?"

"No. Money doesn't hold you after a bad dream. Money doesn't make you kind. And money sure as hell doesn't make you lovable."

Did Ian really believe he wasn't lovable? No, that would be truly crazy.

"Nice to hear about someone else's dysfunctional family." Regan smiled, still trying to lighten the mood.

"Zach's a great guy," Ian said, leaping to her brother's defense.

"He's the best, but he's already arrogant enough for two men so don't tell him I said so." Regan smiled.

Memories seeped in from hours spent with Ian during his first months on the force. He'd always managed to make the stories about his paleontologist parents and iron-willed Grandmother dryly funny. Now knowing him better, she wondered how much pain his wry humor had masked.

His parent abandoned him to his Grandmother's care. What good was an exclusive neighborhood, powerful friends, or political influence to a little boy left in the care of servants and one elderly, dour relative?

Regan tried to imagine how he'd felt, but she couldn't. She was getting a picture of a childhood that was far worse than hers.

"Not everyone is cut out to be a parent," she murmured.

"Zach will be a great father. You'd be a wonderful mother." His eyes found hers and locked.

His gaze did things to Regan's insides.

She was in so much trouble.

Unable to tear her eyes away from his, she surrendered to his pull, swaying toward him. Their attraction had been there since day one, simmering under the surface. Why did she fight the inevitable?

Her gaze dropped to his mouth.

He framed her face with one hand. "You're exactly the kind of woman I want for the mother of my babies."

Cruel, unfair, and so sexy he made her ache for him.

After the lovemaking they'd shared, everything changed. He'd stripped away her defenses. Now what was she supposed to do? Sleep with him? She'd just wind up disappointing him all over again, and then they'd both be hurt. What good would that do? Sleeping with Ian would be just plain wrong. But not being with him felt so horribly lonely and unfair.

Since when had she expected life to be fair?

Regan saw unfair every day she was on the job. That's where she needed to be--where she had a chance to make a difference. Not here, being torn apart by her feelings for Ian. There was no happy ending for them. She knew what she was supposed to do with her life. It was her dream to make possible happy endings for kids who deserved a second chance. She needed the work as much as any of the kids needed rescuing. The work wasn't just a job--it gave her life meaning.

If she'd been truly brave she would've told him about her past. She would've explained why she could never be the loving wife and mother to his children that he deserved. She should tell him the truth. She owed him honesty, and it would resolve the whole messy situation. But she was a coward. She didn't want to tell him about her sad history. She'd faced baseball bats, knives, and guns but she could not face Ian's pity.

For both of their sakes, she had to convince him there was no future for them. And since her sanity was on the line, she had to keep a safe distance from him while she did the convincing.

Right after this one kiss.

Ian brushed her lower lip with his thumb. "So soft and sweet you're like velvet tea cake."

He said insane things to her and she swallowed them like they were a priest's alibi. Her whole career depended on getting him to cool it. Being an officer meant everything to her, having a chance to head her own unit was a dream made almost real. An affair with the mayor's special assistant would be like giving a felony suspect a ten minute head start. Sleeping with Ian was definitely not in her best interest, nor in his.

He was the mayor's golden boy. She had to keep it together or both their lives would be ruined. But right at the moment, she didn't care about the rest of her life. She fixated on his mouth, wondering if his taste was as intoxicating as she remembered. Surely, her mind exaggerated his potency. There was only one way to find out.

Regan gave herself a virtual slap. Clinging to a tattered shred of her self-control, she pulled her gaze back up to Ian's eyes. "Tell me about your new job. Exactly what does the Special Liaison Officer do?"

His eyes were full of hot glints and his dimples teased her by winking in and out, as he grinned. "Besides protecting his favorite warrior princess?"

She loved the way that sounded.

"Yes, besides that." Her mouth quirked into an involuntary smile.

"Seriously, I do a lot of coordinating. Usually it's very routine--challenging in its own way. You can imagine all the egos involved with the different agencies."

"And you manage all of them," she murmured.

Ian chuckled. "I try. I like my boss. Bergman's a good guy, trying to make a difference. I admire him. He's raising his daughter by himself, not an easy task for anyone let alone a lawyer and a politician."

"How old is his daughter?" Regan had picked up on something in Ian's voice when he mentioned the daughter. She wasn't sure what it was about, but it set off her feminine radar.

"She's a kid, still in school. She has kind of a crush on me." He looked away. "She's sweet. I like her. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but--"

"She puts you in an awkward situation?"

So that's what her radar picked up on. Ian was such a sweet guy.

"Uh huh." He met her gaze, leaning closer.

The limo pulled up to the curb and glided to a stop.

Instantly, Ian was on duty. He pulled away from her, scanning the scene for danger. Terrorists were way less a threat to her safety than Ian.

Regan shivered. That had been way too close--her lips tingled as if they'd kissed. Saved by the daughters of Svensberg.

Stepping onto a runner of royal blue bordered by yellow and white, the colors of Svensberg's flag, she felt ridiculous in the pillbox hat Lundstrom insisted she wear. One glimpse at the women, beaming eagerly at her proved, once again, Lundstrom was correct.

She felt like she'd hit a time warp back to her grandmother's era. The women looked like old-fashion Easter morning churchgoers. Everyone dressed in pastels, complete with hats and gloves.

"Your Royal Highness, we're honored by your presence." Marie Sorenson, the current president of the Daughters of Svensberg, bent her knees in a curtsy.

The mantle of her well-practiced royalty, shielded Regan from unsettling thoughts about Ian as she relaxed into her role. "You're very kind to invite me." She extended her hand, tipping her head slightly to catch the other woman's thin voice.

"May I present ..."

For half an hour, Regan shook hands and greeted club members. A part of her stayed constantly aware of Ian. Never far from her side, and incredibly handsome in a gray suit and blue dress shirt, he still managed to blend into the background. His presence felt too right and warmed her in ways she didn't dare examine.

The luncheon was a sellout and everyone in attendance expected an introduction to the controversial princess. By the time, Regan had shaken hands with a few dozen daughters she understood the strategic value of Princess Halle's wimpy hand clasp.

"Mrs. Isabel Duncan is with us today as Miss Bergman's guest."

This one introduction stood out from the others--Ian's unfeeling grandmother. With the trained eye of an experienced cop, Regan took in all of Mrs. Duncan's relevant details. Between seventy and seventy-five, five feet eight inches, a slim build, one hundred-twenty-five pounds, silver hair, dark blue eyes, in good health with no obvious identifying marks.

As a woman, Regan noted the well-cared for hands, good teeth, excellent clothes, pricey shoes, and the telltale odor of wealth-- Lancôme face cream blended with Joy perfume. She didn't need to have the impressive diamond ring on Mrs. Duncan's left hand appraised to recognize old money.

Regan motioned for the curtsying grandmother to rise. "It's my pleasure to meet you." She dipped the older woman's hand.

Even if she hadn't known the name, the club president's simpering manner would have alerted her that Mrs. Duncan rated VIP treatment. For a moment Regan wondered how the older woman would've reacted if she were in her own clothes, a cop from the wrong side of the tracks.

Then she did what she was supposed to do--played princess. She curved her lips into a regal smile. "I'm an adopted daughter of Svensberg myself," she confided in a warm tone.

The older woman beamed. "You are the image of your mother, so lovely. I met her years ago in Gstaad, in another lifetime when I still skied."

"Mother always enjoys her time in Switzerland," Regan replied smoothly.

Mrs. Duncan's gushing pleased her. Which was silly, since the woman's approval belonged to the princess she was impersonating not her.

"Allow me to introduce you to Julia Bergman." Mrs. Duncan turned a fond gaze to the young woman next to her.

So did Regan.

Julia blushed prettily. Regan imagined that she did everything prettily.

Chapter Ten

Seattle, Washington May 17th 12:30 PM

Clyde's comment in Paradise about how Regan should leave Ian alone because he could be happy with Julia, echoed in her head with sudden, sickening comprehension.

Besides being in her early twenties, Regan judged Julia at five feet four inches tall and one thirty pounds. All of the extra weight was settled nicely in an impressive pair of breasts. A natural blonde, who'd employed expert help to become even blonder. Her baby fine hair swung in a sassy cut designed to minimize her apple cheeks. Her china blue eyes were guileless, rimmed with thick lashes improved by an artful touch of brown mascara on the tips. A button nose and soft chin made bland backdrops for a rosebud mouth. She was cuter than a litter of kittens.

Julia bobbed a dutiful curtsy while intoning politely. "Your Royal Highness."

Regan pressed her fingers, noticing Julia's gaze flickered right past her, locking in on Ian, who stood stoically behind Regan. The young woman dropped her eyes, dimpling and blushing adorably.

This was the mayor's daughter? The schoolgirl, who had kind of a crush on Ian? The one who needed a D cup? The one who was perfect for Ian?

Regan hated her.

Not only did Regan have six inches and ten pounds on her, she had twice the muscle mass, and she was at least a hundred times tougher. She could've used Julia to mop the floor without breaking a serious sweat. Not that she would ever resort to unprovoked violence. The cute blonde was exactly the kind of innocent civilian she'd spent her life protecting.

Her heart sank. When had she forgotten how impossible the gap was between her world and Ian's? When had she started to hope? It must have happened because now she felt the loss of a dream she'd never meant to allow.

"Grandmother, Julia," Ian acknowledged the women tersely.

Watching his grandmother's face, Regan saw pride and adoration. She recognized something Ian never had--his grandmother loved him. Maybe she didn't know how to show it. But that didn't make her love any less genuine.

To her amazement, she felt a kinship with the older woman she'd never expected to feel. For whatever reason, Mrs. Duncan had never learned how to show affection. Regan knew all too well an inability to express love had nothing to do with a person's depth of feeling.

But her empathy didn't extend to wanting to share the head table with Ian's grandmother and Julia. Nevertheless, she was seated with them. Ian remained standing, positioned several feet behind her chair. She knew he'd picked the position because it gave him a clear view of the room. It gave Julia, who sat directly across the table from

Regan, a clear view of Ian.

Mrs. Duncan smiled infectiously and winked at Regan. "I'm thrilled to be here today. I've dined out on my story of meeting your mother for decades. Now that I've met you, my social life is insured for the rest of my days."

Once again, Regan was surprised by the warm pleasure that Mrs. Duncan's words evoked. The older woman's delighted approval was for Princess Halle. She was just the princess's stunt double. Still the smiles and the gracious acceptance felt like she'd just won a special commendation.

As she listened to Mrs. Duncan rattling on about her grandson Ian--telling Regan all about the hopes and dreams she had for her brilliant boy. Regan saw through her haughty grand dame act. She loved him. The proud, lonely woman who adored Ian was as plain to Regan as her plate of slightly wilted greens. Mrs. Duncan might well be overbearing and no doubt guilty of trying to manage Ian's life. But her intentions were selfless. Regan recognized the loving motive behind her actions.

"Will the prince be joining you in Seattle?" Mrs. Duncan asked.

"Unfortunately, his duties prevented him joining me on this tour. He loves the Pacific Northwest. He is truly sorry to have missed this opportunity to spend time here," she replied smoothly, giving the well-rehearsed explanation for her solo appearance.

Mrs. Duncan's face reflected her disappointment. "That's too bad. I was hoping the example of wedded bliss would rub off on my grandson."

Regan stiffened. Ian shifted behind her. She signaled him to stay back with a palm out gesture even with her seat, invisible to anyone else.

"I beg your pardon?" she said coolly.

"Oh it was a far fetched plan, I know. That boy has always been stubborn to an unhealthy degree." His grandmother darted a sharp glance in Ian's direction. Turning back to Regan, she lowered her voice. "He's convinced he's a one woman man. Nothing wrong with loyalty, you understand. But the woman he's fixated on won't give him the time of day. He refuses to look at another woman. I'd hoped being around a happily married young couple might make him realize how much he's missing."

"I'm sorry," Regan murmured insincerely, wishing she could interrogate the chatty Mrs. Duncan for a couple of hours. "His Highness--"

Ian's grandmother patted her hand, surely a breach of protocol, though she was oddly touched by the gesture. "I understand. It must be hard for you to be apart from the Prince for a whole week."

Julia scooted her chair closer. "Oooh, you and the prince are so romantic. I loved the story of how you two met. Do you call him Your Royal Highness?"

Regan smiled, keeping it regal. She didn't actually know what Princess Halle called Prince Peder, snookems for all she knew. She went with her first thought. "No, we address each other by our Christian names."

Julia gave a bosom-heaving sigh, fluttering her lashes at Ian.

Regan restrained the urge to smash her adorable dimpled face into the table.

Then Julia spoke again. "Oooh, I just thought--will we see you tonight at the international goodwill dinner? I'm playing hostess for Daddy." She gave a cute, nervous giggle. "Normally Ian would be there ..."

Normally Ian would be there with her.

Regan felt the muscles in the back of her neck knotting. *Poor Ian, having to fend off the boss's bratty little daughter.* But she kept her voice serene. "Of course, your father honored me with an invitation. I am looking forward to it."

Julia's face lit up. "Then Ian *will* be there. And you too, naturally."

"I understand you attend a university?" Regan steered the conversation away from Ian, to avoid acting on her urge to throttle the guileless Julia.

The young woman nodded agreeably. "I'm a senior at Pacific Lutheran. After a year of actual classroom experience, I'll be qualified to teach physical education. I think sports are essential for girls--so important for their self-esteem."

"Just so," Regan agreed graciously, wondering what kind of sports Julia went in for. Treading water? Marathon sex?

Regan hated her more.

Where were the terrorists when you needed them?

Regan retreated into princess mode. She kept the well-practiced serene smile frozen in place as she conversed with the women who'd been honored with a seat at the royal table. Fortunately, her long hours of training stood her in good stead now, supplying her with the right gestures, the polite chatter, the tactful queries, and the graceful answers to their questions, all designed to charm her audience.

Princess Halle probably got very bored with questions about how she met the Prince. Regan found familiar questions a comfort, since she had stock answers ready. The social chitchat left her free to study Julia and his grandmother, the other women who loved Ian.

The thought startled her so much so that she nearly choked on a drink of water.

"Are you quite all right, Your Royal Highness?" Mrs. Duncan asked her voice full of kindly concern.

"Yes, thank you," she croaked, waving off Ian, and then sipped more carefully.

Did she love Ian?

She was close to Ian. They'd spent long hours working together in Patrol. It was so easy to fall back into that almost psychic connection. Even now, separated by six feet, she was aware of him. And he was equally attuned to her. He would know instantly if she had a problem. Unlike Julia, she didn't need to look at Ian to know he was okay.

Was that love?

Surely, their closeness was a natural by-product of working together in a high-risk environment. Mutual reliance between partners was essential for survival.

She was attracted to Ian. Her and every other woman in the room, except for his grandmother. Ian was a walking invitation to sin. The fact that he was such a straight arrow just added the irresistible challenge factor to his animal appeal.

Regan swallowed a sigh.

If she were honest, then she'd admit they had another kind of connection--chemistry, hormones, whatever. It was strong and mutual, but it wasn't enough to overcome their differences. Or cure her fertility problems. Secretly, she'd hoped if she ever found a man she really liked and trusted that she'd respond to him physically.

She had.

What she hadn't guessed was what a lousy lover she'd be. Maybe she'd been too responsive. There had to be a way to ask him so that he'd be up front with her. What if whatever had gone wrong was something she could fix? Ian was so skillful--he might be willing to teach her.

Bad idea.

He was too nice a guy and too good a friend. He'd take pity on her. But what if it were something he could just explain? The rest of the luncheon inched by like gridlocked traffic. Finally, Regan and Ian were back in the limo, alone.

The question she wanted to ask loomed in her head, crowding out everything else--even the need to breathe.

"You okay?" Ian eyed her. Concern wrinkling his brow and dislodging a wayward curl. He slicked it back, mussing his hair, which gave him a tousled sexy look. He was so male and so very appealing she couldn't imagine parents so absorbed in their work and themselves that they had no room in their hearts for him.

Regan drew in a ragged breath. "Tell me what I did wrong."

She watched his face carefully for a reaction. She'd know if he were kind or evasive. All she saw was puzzlement.

Ian frowned. "Did wrong?"

The knotted muscles in the back of her neck twisted themselves tighter, but she couldn't stop now. She had to know.

"When we ... slept together." She darted a quick glance from under her lashes, making sure he understood what she was asking.

"What you did wrong?" Ian's sculptured jaw sagged.

She turned away from his disbelieving gaze. She was no longer worried about him being overly kind or evasive. She wished she'd never asked, but she couldn't take back the words.

Forcing herself to turn back and face him, she explained. "Yes, when you left in the middle. What did I do that was so wrong?" Heat flamed her neck and cheeks, her head pounded, but she was going to get an answer to her question.

"You were crying," Ian spoke through a clenched jaw.

"You hate crying that much?" Regan tried to make sense of his answer. "It was so beautiful. I was moved. I cried."

A rusty grating noise came out of Ian. "I thought I'd hurt you."

"You did." She saw him wince and felt instant empathy--he was hurt too. "When you left," she added with a shaky smile.

I thought I'd done it wrong. I'd never done it like that. Never. Never done it at all--not when it was something I wanted.

"Do you know how much I want you?" he purred dangerously close to her ear.

"I have an idea." She felt warmed from the inside out. She hadn't upset him. They'd both overreacted to silly imagined hurts. Desire hummed to life, making her aware of the strength of her wanting. The feeling was disconcertingly powerful and definitely sexual. Sensations that were new and startling.

She knew that they couldn't have forever--but just maybe she could steal a little piece of paradise while the assignment lasted. Despite all her fears, she wanted to make

love with him--mate with him. Ian was simply irresistible.

When she and Ian got back to the suite, both Victor Coluccio and Clyde Jefferson waited for them. Their presence was a visible reminder of the seriousness of the situation. The two gloomy men pacing the sitting room worked as an effective lust antidote.

"No luck?" Clyde asked Ian.

"No one attempted to kill or kidnap Regan if that's what you're asking," Ian said, shedding all pretense of easy-going charm.

"Damn it! Of course, that's what we're asking. What's your problem, McKnight? The real princess will be here in a few days, if we haven't neutralized the terrorist threat what do you think happens then?" Victor didn't wait for an answer before continuing his rant. "Then we tie up a hell of a lot of resources in a no-win operation."

"Thing is, and you both already know this, there's no such thing as perfect protection," Clyde added his explanation.

"Speaking of imperfect protection, how's the guy I took out at the Plaza doing?"

"Docs say he's showing signs of consciousness," Clyde said.

Ian's forehead partially unfurrowed.

"What do you want us to do differently?" Regan quietly asked Victor.

"I'd like McKnight to take the night off," Victor snapped.

Ian resumed his glower, aiming it at the Secret Service Agent. "I don't think you're taking the risk seriously enough ..."

"I lost two good men this week. I'm taking it plenty serious," Victor volleyed, his voice bitter with regret.

"I'm not minimizing," Ian's rebuttal was interrupted.

"Victor's right, Ian. Back off a little. You've been super glued to Regan every minute," Clyde said reasonably.

Ian started to speak again but before he got a word out, Regan interrupted. "They have a point, Ian. You are intimidating and you've been right by my side all day."

Not that I haven't loved every minute.

"I am going to that dinner party," Ian frowned at her.

"Not as the Princess's escort," Clyde ordered, and then softened his stance. "Hang out with your girlfriend, Julie."

"Julia and she's not my--"

"Save it Romeo, nobody cares."

Regan held her expression in place. Clyde was wrong about nobody caring. She did. Way too much.

"There is a first-class security team in place, Ian. Like it or not, you're off duty for the next 24 four hours. Clyde slapped Ian's shoulder as he and Victor left. "Thanks for cooperating, man. You coming?"

"No, I want to talk to Regan."

"Go on, we'll talk later." She smiled at him. "I'm sure Lundstrom has me all signed up for painful beauty rituals."

"We're still good?" he asked softly.

She nodded and smiled more brightly.

Yeah, we're good. Good, I came to my senses before I ruined your life.

* * * *

Lundstrom presented her dress as if it were part of the crown jewels. Not too much of a stretch, considering the number of sequins involved. At least it wasn't pink. The dark brown gown didn't look like much draped over Lundstrom's arm. Once on, it was almost enough to make her forget about Ian and Julia. All those brown sparklies made the most of every curve.

Regan thought the dress made enough of a statement. But when Lundstrom fastened on a delicate necklace of gold and dark topaz she bowed to the other woman's taste. Best of all, she got to slip on a pair of sexy Manolo Blahnik sandals.

After Lundstrom finished with her makeup, Regan added eyeliner and lip gloss. Just this once, Princess Halle was going to look hot. She finished off with strategically placed drops of Fleur de Nuit, another princess extravagance she fully endorsed.

Tonight, she would get a glimpse of Ian's future. He was the mayor's golden boy with a brilliant career ahead of him. He was destined to be a politician and he was exactly the kind of man government needed--a man of principle.

Ian wasn't interested in casual sex. She'd managed to get him to compromise his ideals. What a proud moment for her. She met her own dark eyes in the mirror, saw glints of selfish pain and banished them. She wasn't going to spoil the short time they had together with regrets. Tonight would be hard, but she would concentrate on acting royal. She would get through it.

The assignment was over in four more days. Then she would have to let him go. She needed to find a way to do it so that he would never look back.

That evening, Hans, the driver held her door. It wasn't the same. There were no lingering touches and no hot glances. She swallowed the urge to sigh, telling herself this was better, smarter, and safer. The limo felt empty without Ian.

When she walked up the well-lit front steps to the mayor's front door, she felt exposed and vulnerable. She raised her chin and imagined the apple, half expecting to be grabbed from behind by terrorists. She shook off the fleeting feeling of danger. She'd let herself get dependent on Ian. Now she was letting her imagination run away with her. Even though she had no visible escort she knew that the house and grounds were both under surveillance. Entering the mansion was low risk. An attempt would be much more likely in transit.

The mayor and his daughter stood in the wide foyer, greeting their guests. Ian was nowhere in sight.

"Your Royal Highness, we're delighted you could join us." Mayor Bergman held her hand lightly and bowed his head with courtly grace, surprising Regan all over again with his suave performance. Princess Halle might take all the attention in stride, but she couldn't afford to relax.

Julia had her arm through her father's, letting go to curtsy awkwardly in her very tight, very red gown. "Your Royal Highness, so lovely to see you again."

"Thank you so much for inviting me." Regan smiled regally.

Julia should've stayed with pastels. The red was too strong for her blonde coloring--the dress overpowered her.

The red gown would've flattered Regan's complexion. Although, to be fair, she wouldn't have filled out the bodice the way Julia did. A wicked pleasure over besting Julia in the fashion competition, heated her like balm on her bruised ego. The fact that she deserved zero credit for her appearance was beside the point. She reveled in the subtly seductive effect of her understated outfit--sequins notwithstanding.

The knee-skimming skirt showed off her best feature--long legs. The sheer silk stockings and expensive sandals added extra star power.

"Your Royal Highness."

Still preening, Regan turned toward the intimately familiar voice and found herself face to face with Ian. He had on a classy evening suit and formal white shirt. Clothes so splendid, they made her think of royal tailors. And so sexy on his body, she pictured them coming off--slowly.

Ian bowed and took her hand, skimming her knuckles with his mouth. Her body rocketed to quivering, straining attention. Heat raced along her spine. She could only hope the soft lighting disguised his effect on her.

It took several seconds for Regan to realize that Isabel Duncan, Ian's grandmother, was waiting for her recognition. She tugged her hand away from Ian's clasp, hoping her lapse had gone unnoticed.

"Your Royal Highness." The older woman made a curtsy.

"Mrs. Duncan, it is so nice to see you again. Your grandson is an excellent escort. You must be very proud of him," Regan said regally, suppressing a sigh.

That was all it took. The proud grandmother was happy to take it from there. Regan darted a glance back at Ian, who'd stopped to talk to a man she didn't know. His gaze met hers and she was caught in the fire in eyes. Even with twenty feet between them, they shared a single thought.

Regan considered how much Ian had changed. Or, had he been this sure of himself all along? Maybe she was the one who'd changed, because she saw him as a much more take-charge kind of guy. He'd always been irresistibly gorgeous, but she used to be able to side step him. Somehow, she'd lost control. She'd never admit it--but she liked it. This new assured Ian was even sexier.

"Your Royal Highness?"

Regan dragged her thoughts back to a puzzled Mrs. Duncan and realized with a sinking sensation that the older woman must've been trying to get her attention for some time.

Going with the first thought that popped into her head, she excused her inattention. "I am sorry, the smallest headache ..." she let the words trail off.

"Oh my dear, come with me, we'll get you fixed up in no time."

Regan shot a helpless glance in Ian's direction as she allowed herself to be steered away. Getting cornered into a one on one situation with Mrs. Duncan was the last thing she wanted. She took a deep calming breath, consciously trying to ease the small muscles tensing in her neck.

She could handle Ian's grandmother. All she had to do was think regal.

Chapter Eleven

Kent, Washington May 17th 10:00 PM local time

O'Brien leaned against the bookcase that ran beneath the living room windows. The modest rental house verged on shabby, with a large yard in a working class neighborhood. However, the residence suited his purpose well. The neighborhood was largely comprised of recent immigrants, who minded their own business. Plus, with so many illegal aliens in the area, the Qsani men blended well.

Habib and Ahmad stayed in the suburbs with him, while Yasir, Bahar, and Dahab rented rooms from a downtown hotel accustomed to a cash-paying clientele.

Scanning the five men, facing him, he made a point of holding each man's eyes for a few seconds. Perspiration trickled down his spine. The sweat formed a pool of fear in the small of his back where the compact weapon nestled. However, he kept his voice carefully reasonable as he manipulated them, demanding their loyalty and obedience.

"You are the chosen *Sons of Allah*, and it saddens me to tell you of a new problem barring success for our mission. Our brother, Kareem is showing signs of consciousness. He is a man of honor, but his wounds have left him too weak to take his own life. We must save him from the pain of torture by the infidel devils. Who will risk his life to send Kareem to his eternal reward?"

After too many long seconds, Yasir stood. "My English is very excellent and I have medical training. I believe I am the logical choice." He angled his head toward Ahmad and Habib. "Unless one of you claims the right as Kareem's brother?"

The brothers sat as stiff and still as traffic cones. At last, Habib the elder of the two spoke. "No, we are all brothers here." His sweeping glance did not include O'Brien.

"Very well, Yasir has spoken. Let me know if you need any assistance." O'Brien offered gravely, reasserting dominance over the meeting.

Yasir grunted an assent.

"Let us have a moment of silence for Kareem's sacrifice." O'Brien waited several beats while they all maintained a respectful silence, honoring their wounded comrade's sacrifice.

Judging enough time had passed, he moved on to the heart of the meeting. "There are only four days left of the princess's official visit and our sources tell us there is no set time for the exchange. We must consider alternatives."

Dahab spoke slowly with his heavy Qsani accent. "What of kidnapping the fake princess? Would that not aid our cause?"

O'Brien nodded, pretending to consider the suggestion. "It would embarrass the infidels. However, it would not gain us leverage with either Qsani or Svensberg."

"What if we capture both Princesses?" Ahmad asked belligerently. "Kareem's death must be avenged. What if Princess Halle never comes to Seattle? Then my brother dies for nothing. Kill the infidel imposter princess--this will teach the devils we can not

be disrespected."

A low rumble of agreement swelled in the small room.

O'Brien spoke calmly, aware he was the sole voice of reason in seething pit of wounded honor. "This would not be wise, until we no longer have any use for her. If we kill her too soon, we insure Princess Halle's appearance will be cancelled. Also we would be forfeiting a valuable hostage."

Slowly, Habib nodded his agreement. "Sit down, Ahmad. Kareem will pay the ultimate price for the *Sons of Allah's* victory. We can do no less."

Not sure exactly what Habib's point was, O'Brien gathered he was supporting his agenda. Therefore, he nodded approvingly at the fanatic. "We need to assume that the current loose security will change once they make the exchange of the imposter for the real princess. Normally, our best opportunities for acquisition are during transits to or from an event."

"As of this point in time, the most likely exchange date is the Governor's ball, which will be held in the Fairmont's event room. To minimize exposure, the transfer will be set for after arrival at the hotel. Therefore, our most logical opening comes when the princess leaves the ball for the royal suite at the *Alexander*."

"What of transport--isn't that the most advantageous time to strike? Isn't that what you yourself said?" Yasir challenged O'Brien with unexpected belligerence.

Another trickle of clammy sweat rolled down his spine. O'Brien smiled sympathetically. "Movement can work to our advantage, but in this case, striking before they leave the hotel gives us several added advantages. The multiple exits give us valuable options and remember the Secret Service has been maintaining a considerable distance between the target and their security forces."

"There is something in what you say--" Yasir said broadcasting his intention to argue the subject.

O'Brien overrode the terrorist's counterpoint. "The biggest advantage is this, by taking her from the Fairmont, we protect our inside source."

Yasir nodded his agreement sullenly.

O'Brien took advantage of the temporary accord to explain his plan and their roles in it more fully. "In the interim, we maintain our shadowing. The more familiar we are with their routines and personnel the better. The more often we pass one of their check points, the less vigilant the next check." He paused, making eye-contact with each man, bending them to his will.

Ahmad said something in Arabic to Yasir. O'Brien worked to maintain his calm and confident façade, hating that every single man in the room understood the comment, except for him.

"It has been agreed that Habib will have the honor of dispatching Kareem," Yasir said, translating for O'Brien's benefit.

"How will he gain access to the hospital?" O'Brien asked mildly, wondering what else the men had been discussing--there had been far too many words for a simple change of assignment.

Dahab answered in his slow, gruff voice. "Habib will dress as a janitor, as in our country most of those willing to perform menial labor are not native to this country. No

one will notice anything unusual about a janitor with an accent or an unfamiliar face."

"Sounds as if you have a workable plan." O'Brien added his stamp of approval, though none of the men had sought his input. "Let's work on our target acquisition plan. Now that we are agreed the return from the Governor's ball is our best opportunity."

No one objected.

He continued with assumed confidence. "The first step is to separate the princess from her security guards. Even though we did it before, I still like the secret service impersonation. This time we will have a lot more information. We can assure the bodyguards that Coluccio wants a fresh team." O'Brien outlined his strategy to the men, carefully balancing courtesy and enthusiasm with firm authority. All too aware that any show fear on his part would be courting death.

Not that he cared about his own survival. However, he had a strong hunch there was something important he needed to do. Something that would ensure his place with Mattie in heaven.

Yasir cleared his throat portentously. "Wouldn't it be better to wait until we're at full strength?"

O'Brien hesitated for a second before asking for clarification. "Are you expecting someone else to join us?"

Yasir nodded solemnly. "Precisely so; Rafi and Musa should be here by tomorrow at the latest."

Nice of you pig fuckers to let me know.

"Excellent, then we'll fill them in tomorrow. Bahar you have their care packages ready?" O'Brien smiled pleasantly while he wondered what other surprises Mohammed had arranged for him.

* * * *

Discovery Bay, Jamaica May 16th 4:15 AM local time

"Just where the hell do you think you're going?" Caroline demanded.

Sam counted to ten, and then repeated the exercise a second time before answering. "My father's dead, I'm going to take care of my mother."

She scampered toward his closet. "I'm going with you."

"No!" he said too harshly.

Abruptly, her anger fled. Her lower lip trembled and her chin puckered. Once again Sam counted, needing patience to reassure her and finding it in short supply. "I'll be gone less than a week. "

"A week--" she squeaked.

"Less than," he corrected her firmly. "I need you to be brave and stay here, until I get back. I'll leave the car for you. Do some shopping, and take care of yourself. Remember you're sleeping and eating for two."

A shy smile, one that he'd never seen before, lit her features. "That's right, I am," she said softly, patting her rounded belly with affection.

Maybe things would work out between them better than he'd dared to hope. He called for cab and packed briskly while she trailed after him, alternating between wheedling, weeping, raging, sulking, and finally sleepy acceptance of his decision.

He pressed a chaste good-bye kiss to her hair, aware she almost certainly hadn't

felt the small reassurance. He studied her. She slept like a child--silky hair clinging to her damp skin. In sleep she looked angelic. It was impossible to imagine that innocent mouth swallowing his balls or rimming his asshole. The ripe curves were hidden by the sheet, only her round butt hinting that the angel in his bed had another, more lascivious, side.

A discreet beep announced his taxi. Sam took five hundred in cash and left it on the dresser, where Caroline would be sure to see it, before he left the villa.

On the way to the airport, he seesawed between trying to absorb the reality of Tony's death and struggling to make sense of his feelings for Carolyn. On the short chartered flight to Tortolo, he finally dozed for an energizing half hour. Once cleared through arrivals, he caught a cab and headed straight for the morgue. A tired-looking civil servant ushered him into a viewing room.

"You're sure you want to see the deceased?" the man asked with the rich musical accent common to the Caribbean. The warm voice seemed a mockery in this desolate receptacle of violent death.

"Yes," Sam said firmly, girding himself for the ordeal.

The attendant shrugged and unzipped the black plastic, which reminded Sam of an oversized trash bag.

The lines beside Sam's mouth tightened into two dark slashes in a face he knew was probably paler than usual because he felt chilled to his bones, in spite of a white-hot anger in his belly. His nostrils flared, as he drew a breath, the only outward sign of the seething caldron of emotion bubbling inside him as he viewed his father's battered corpse. His mother was right--Tony's death was certainly not the result of a simple mugging. Whoever had beaten, and then finally executed Tony, had been extremely angry. And it had been personal.

Tony didn't have many enemies. Only one name came to Sam's mind. O'Brien. The name rattled like a pinball banging its way through a machine, hitting light after light of confirmation. He was the only person who had serious cause to hate Tony. Hard on his conclusion came a new fear--was his mother in danger?

Sam had been a naïve fool, believing he could steal from O'Brien and enjoy tainted money without consequences. His father had paid the ultimate price.

Whatever it took, Sam swore would find O'Brien and he would extract revenge for his father's murder. Though, cold justice would not bring Tony back to life or heal his mother's broken heart.

When he left the morgue, a soft island breeze tried to sooth his anger and pain, but it didn't work. The azure sky, perfect beaches, and lush tropical greenery were a cruel façade of perfection, glossing over the danger and despair, which lurked everywhere. The laid-back island setting hadn't cushioned Tony's violent death.

Patsy waited for him in her suite. Dressed in tailored white slacks and simple silk shirt she looked almost normal. Her strawberry blonde bob was sleek and elegant, oversized sunglasses hid her eyes. Only the tight corners of her mouth hinted at her grief. She tried to smile. Her chin trembled. Then she hid her pain behind a linen hankie. "I want to take Tony home."

"To Jamaica?"

"Of course," she sniffled, dabbing fiercely at her nose.

"I'll take care of it, Mom."

"Thank you, Sam. Tony was so proud of you. We both--" she said, emotion choking her voice for a minute.

"It's okay, Mom," he tried to comfort her.

She didn't seem to hear him, beginning to speak again after a few moments.

"Such a lovely island, the Svensberg compound was gorgeous, even Tony was impressed with the grounds. And the princess, so beautiful, but so much violence toward her. Did I tell you about the attack on the princess?" Her voice trailed off once again. "It wasn't a mugging was it?"

There was no reason to sugarcoat his opinion. "No," Sam huffed. "No, I don't believe it was any kind of mugging."

"O'Brien?" she asked softly.

"Who else?" Sam bit off the words.

"I blame myself. I should have asked Tony to leave as soon as the blackmail started. He would've gone, if only I'd asked him," Patsy fretted.

Holy mother of God, Sam thought his heart would shatter at hearing Patsy blame herself. When he was the one who'd stolen the funds, it had seemed like a fool-proof plan. Even now, he was still rationalizing the worst mistake of his life. It was way past time for him to grow up and take responsibility for his actions.

"Don't go there, Mom. We all tried to make the best of bad situation. O'Brien was out of control, but he was still a lethal enemy. Hell, I knew him a hundred times better than you did and I underestimated him. But I won't make the mistake again."

"What are you talking about Sam?" Patsy asked, pushing up her sunglasses atop her head revealed a pain ravaged face. "Promise me you'll stay away from him."

"Don't ask me that, Mom," he said stubbornly.

"Sam, if I lose you too--" she said, her voice breaking.

"I won't get lost. I swear to you by all that's holy."

Chapter Twelve

Seattle, Washington May 17th 7:00 PM

The subtle paisley-patterned wallpaper in the small powder room blended basic WASP beige with threads of vanilla cream on a white background. The blonde cabinets, ivory marble and pristine white porcelain were tastefully complimented by natural linen hand towels and a white orchid arching gracefully on the countertop--all part of the more whiter than white decor. Regan felt as conspicuous as a lone chocolate-coated espresso bean dropped in a bowl of yogurt-covered raisins.

Worse, the tiny room held no opportunity for avoidance. Regan met Mrs. Duncan's piercing gaze in the vanity mirror when she reached for an immaculate towel.

"Do you remember our conversation about my grandson's obsession with one woman?" The older woman dove straight in for the kill while calmly washing her hands in the twin sink.

Discarding her used towel in a wicker basket, Regan sought frantically for an answer that would deflect Ian's grandmother from this whole line of thought. All she came up with was a pathetically weak response. "I beg your pardon?"

Mrs. Duncan ignored her poor attempt at royal haughtiness.

"By one of those bizarre coincidences--she looks remarkably like you. Exactly like you as a matter of fact." The older woman's sharp blue eyes held hers, effortlessly. "You're wondering how I know that."

She was wondering exactly that.

"Ian has a photograph of her in his wallet. I snooped," his grandmother confessed her sin with unconcerned candor and even a note pride.

Ian kept a photograph of her in his wallet?

Mrs. Duncan studied her openly. "What I wish to know is simply this--why do you think my grandson isn't good enough for you?"

Regan prayed for inspiration, stalling for time until it arrived. Using every trick in her arsenal to maintain a façade of royal serenity, she stepped closer to the vanity, opening the bathroom's medicine cabinet, and then removing a bottle of generic non-aspirin pain reliever. After shaking two capsules into her palm, she poured a glass of water, and then swallowed the pills. Finally, she ran out of delaying tactics and had to answer Ian's grandmother.

"Madam, you have either mistaken me, or the situation." Regan kept her accent and attitude pure princess.

"Come, come. Surely, you don't believe for one minute that I pose a security risk? I need to know what your intentions are toward my grandson." The sharp old woman drummed the pale marble counter insistently with long slender fingers.

Intentions?

"Hypothetically, if I were this person--" Regan spoke slowly, still struggling to

marshal an escape plan.

"Regan Aimee Longstreet," Mrs. Duncan supplied without a second's hesitation.

"How did you know?" Regan's chin dropped along with any further pretense.

"That you aren't Princess Halle?" Mrs. Duncan folded her arms under slight breasts in gesture Regan knew all too well. "Oh, don't worry, my dear. It was nothing you did wrong. Your performance is impressive and the resemblance is simply uncanny. I assure you, the give away was obvious only to me. It's the way Ian looks at you."

Regan stiffened.

The older woman grimaced. "Oh now, don't get your panties in a twist. I doubt anyone else would ever notice a thing. People see what they expect to see, don't they? But I know my grandson. Lord knows, I've been trying to get that look on his face for Julia, or any eligible woman for that matter, for a long enough time."

"She's not--" *Right for Ian.* Regan had spoken too quickly, and then had to bite off her much too revealing protest.

Ian's grandmother cut her off with an impatient wave of her hand. "She's not you, that's what she's not. Julia is a sweet girl, and someday when she grows up, she'll make someone a wonderful wife. However, she's not for Ian. Besides, even a stubborn, half-blind old lady could see he's truly in love with you."

Regan edged toward the door, evading Mrs. Duncan's too penetrating gaze.

"No, he's--a crush maybe. He'll get over it," she protested ineffectively.

"If you really believe that then either you aren't half as smart as I think you are, or you don't really know my grandson."

"Why? What did Ian say? Did he--" she asked too eagerly before clamping her lips together.

Thankfully, Mrs. Duncan interrupted her, "Ian told me nothing." She shook her head ruefully. "That boy was born a stuffed shirt. Though I have to admit, I never did anything to help him avoid the syndrome."

Regan smiled in spite of her best efforts not to.

"You love him." Mrs. Duncan let out a sigh of resigned acceptance. "But you won't marry him."

"I--"

Someone rattled the door handle.

"Just a minute!" Mrs. Duncan snapped.

The door banged opened. Ian scanned the tiny room. His gaze swept the area for several long seconds before his shoulders slumped in relief. Apparently having satisfied himself that there was no one except for his grandmother and Regan loitering in the Mayor's powder room.

"You two have been gone for twenty minutes. I thought--there could've been spiders," he finished lamely. His jaw tightened ominously.

Regan was shocked at how furious Ian was. Smoke practically fumed from his nostrils. She'd never seen him so close to totally losing it.

"Don't ever do anything like that again," he lectured his grandmother. "You took ten years off my life."

"Good, brings you that much closer to the age of reason." Mrs. Duncan showed

no sign of intimidation or repentance when she sailed past Ian, disappearing down the deserted hallway.

"Are you okay?" Ian asked, as he steered her gently into the passageway.

Regan could tell he was still mad. Partly because she'd gone along with Victor and Clyde's decision to forego his services as bodyguard. Still, he'd come to rescue her when she'd disappeared with his grandmother. He cared for her in ways that touched her deeply.

She caressed him with her gaze--unable to hide the feelings swamping her.

"You know I can take care of myself. I am not taking needless risks to hurt you. I have a job to do too. One that's important." Though they were alone in the hallway. Regan kept her voice pitched low--for his ears alone.

"We work better together," he grumbled.

"I'm supposed to be bait," she reminded him gently.

"Not dead bait," he growled back.

She laid her open hand against his chest. Intending to reassure him--instead letting his heartbeat settle her.

"Of course not. You can stay close tonight, while we're here at the dinner party, but I leave alone. Fair enough?" She looked through her lashes, watching his sculpted lips as she waited for his answer.

"Don't think you're going to distract me with feminine wiles. I'll catch on in fifty or sixty years and you'll get yours," he threatened.

She could tell he was fighting a smile.

Even his grousing was incredibly sexy. Excitement simmered in her veins, making it hard to catch her breath. Her temperature rose--maybe from all those little brown sequins holding in the body heat, or perhaps from something else entirely.

Ian's hand settled into the small of her back, guiding her back toward the party. His palm, burning his brand into her body as they moved closer to the others.

Mayor Bergman bustled toward her. "There you are Your Royal Highness, you must meet ..."

Ian dropped his hand from her back. She resisted the urge to rub away the chill that settled along her spine the moment she lost contact with him.

By the time she darted a look back, he was out of sight. But he was close--she felt him, almost as if they were still touching.

Another hour of serene smiles, and gracious recognition of those who wished to talk to a real princess, left her more on edge than before. Her nerves were further shredded by an acute awareness that this world of glib sophistication was Ian's natural habitat. An arena where she would always be outsider. She longed to put on a pair of old running shoes and fly around the track. Oh, for ten minutes of interviewing a suspect, or counseling a victim--a chance to do something she was good at--even something she was lousy at--anything from her real life.

"Everyone, time for dinner. Daddy?" Julia took her father's arm leading the way into dinner.

A dozen tables for six were set up in a large open room. A pianist played classical music in one corner. Everything gleamed and sparkled, including the female

guests who wore enough bling to rival the royal vaults.

The tables were dressed in Svensberg's colors, it took Regan a minute to make the connection, the décor was to honor her, or rather Princess Halle, who she was pretending to be. Small wonder that a real headache constantly threatened.

The mayor held Regan's chair, inching her closer to the table, before taking his own seat on her right.

"The room is lovely--so welcoming. You've made me feel at home," she complimented Julia, who was seated across from her.

The chair on her left pulled away from the table. Regan angled her head to greet the other dinner companion.

Ian smiled. "Hi Princess."

"You address her as Your Royal Highness," Julia stage whispered, her rosebud mouth screwed tight in disapproval.

Regan took a sip of water, trying to ignore the excited flutters deep in her belly, which arrived along with Ian.

A warm thigh rested against her left leg, sending more alarming and exciting signals racing through her shameless body.

Regan tried to concentrate on Julia, who peered at the place cards with the pretty frown, which threatened to become permanent.

Mrs. Duncan took the vacant chair on Mayor's right. Regan leaned forward to compliment her on her dress. But the older woman turned, deliberately abandoned her to her grandson's mercies, immediately beginning a spirited discussion with the mayor about the city's growth management plan. Her choice of conversation handily excluded any participation by Regan, in her role as Princess Halle.

Kyle McKnight soon filled the seat on Ian's left. Ian's proud grandmother introduced Kyle as her nephew. Regan thought the handsome soldier bore a strong resemblance to Ian, his older and even better-looking cousin. She listened as Mrs. Duncan explain that Kyle was home on medical leave. Kyle was recovering from injuries received while serving in the Middle East.

After the initial polite welcomes finished, Kyle angled his body toward Julia, effectively cutting off anyone else's attempt at joining their conversation.

Regan tried to catch the soldier's attention, but Ian acted as a barrier. When she finally managed to glimpse Kyle, he was completely immersed in a one-on-one chat with Julia. The mayor's daughter had quit frowning and was drinking in Lieutenant McKnight's sparkling wit with shining eyes. Their repartee seemed to be confined to deep-voiced sallies from Kyle and admiring 'oohs' supplied by Julia. Despite the limited range of expression, neither party seemed bored.

If Ian hadn't been making her crazy, she might've worked up a little sympathy for him over Julia's fickle behavior. But, since he was threatening her sanity, she had no capacity for tender concern for his feelings.

A large hand gripped Regan's left leg, too firmly and way too high to be an innocent gesture.

Dear God, it felt wonderful.

Her earlier promise that he could stay close during the dinner party came back to

mock her. She was torn between wishing he'd move a little further north and fear he might. She tugged at his arm, trying to dislodge him. To her chagrin, she felt more disappointment than relief when he promptly moved his hand. The sinking feeling of loss told her more than she wanted to know about the sorry state of her flawed character.

Then the very same hand settled on her knee. Slowly he slid up, every inch threatening her composure more.

This time he was under her dress.

The salads arrived. Regan prodded at her greens with a fork. Ian didn't bother to make even a pretense of eating.

"Rabbits pee on that stuff," he advised Regan, nearly making her choke.

Ian toyed with the lacy top of her stocking. A steady pulse beat between her legs. Everyone else at the table was involved in their own conversations. She chanced a whispered plea, "Stop it."

"Why? You like it." A teasing thumb stroked her folds through her moist panties, underscoring the truth of his comment.

Her eyes glazed.

He took pity on her and let his hand drift back to her thigh. His thumb made maddening circles along the top of her stocking. Making her core pulse with need and her nipples perk up, begging for his attention.

When dinner was over, except for coffee she didn't need, Ian lingered in his chair, chatting with his cousin. All through the meal, he'd kept up a steady erotic torture, making it impossible for Regan to do anything other than smile and respond politely to the few remarks addressed to her. When she wasn't helplessly flexing her thigh muscles, she thought about payback. So far, she'd been too distracted to form a good plan.

The dinner party took ages to wind down. After it was over and she was finally alone in her hotel bed, Regan lay tense and aching for more of Ian's attention. She was learning a hard lesson.

Desire had a definite downside.

* * * *

The next morning, Regan's bad mood was made worse by a lack of sleep. She woke with a throbbing headache. The pain, which hadn't been helped by finding an informal security meeting already underway in her suite, refused to yield to drugs. The four Tylenol had only dulled the jackhammer in her skull.

Victor, Clyde, Maya, and other agents, who she should know by now, milled around the suite. Some were reviewing grainy surveillance tapes and drinking coffee. Others were talking on their cell phones or to each other.

Regan poured herself a cup and nursed it quietly. Ian wasn't in the room. To her chagrin, she missed him. But she stubbornly refused to ask where he was.

After replenishing her caffeine level, she approached Maya, and then waited for a lull in her conversation with a co-worker. When they paused, Regan asked too brightly, "what's on today's agenda?"

"Just another fun-filled day for faux royalty," Maya said with teasing sympathy.

The schedule held a full day of christening boats, shaking hands, and then visiting a retirement center. After those events were history, she had beauty torture, a change of

clothes, topped off by an exciting dinner party hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Sorenson.

In her capacity as president of the Daughters of Svensberg's Seattle chapter, Mrs. Sorenson had done the honors at the luncheon the other day. Mr. Sorenson, whom she'd not yet had the pleasure of meeting, was, according to the security briefing that morning, an active Son of Svensberg.

Hans would drive her but aside from his sturdy presence--she was a solo act all day. The secret service would, of course, be nearby. A great comfort when the biggest hazard she had to face was limp lettuce, followed by overcooked peas, and terminal boredom. It was the sort of itinerary, which was dull enough to make even a princess long for an attempted kidnapping or two.

It was after eleven when Lundstrom departed for her own bedroom with one last firm admonition. "Princesses need their beauty sleep."

Regan didn't doubt the wisdom of her tutor's advice but she was too wound up to sleep. Pulling a scrunchy over her nicely brushed hair, she formed a ponytail as she sat cross-legged on the king sized bed, and then grabbed the remote, clicking through channels.

A local news program snagged her attention. A black-and-white artist's sketch of a suspect filled the screen while the newsreader's voice dripped with concern.

"What steps do the police recommend women take to protect themselves?" Joan Poole asked her co-anchor.

"Since none of the victims have been over fourteen, Joan, I think we need to be asking what we, as concerned parents, can do to protect our children," her co-anchor infused his voice with regretful concern, looking directly into the camera lens with an impressive grave sincerity.

Joan picked up his reprimand and ran with it. "Stay tuned, folks. Bob and I will be right back with tips from our personal protection experts on how to keep your children safe, right after a few words from our sponsors."

Regan's fist pounded the deluxe mattress in frustration.

Damn, she should be part of the children's protection team. It's what she did.

She'd accepted that marriage and kids weren't going to be part of her life. The only family she had was Zach and Ciara. He was a great brother, but she was lucky if she saw him once or twice a month. Ciara was like a sister and she had a few other close girlfriends, but being a cop was what made getting up everyday worthwhile. Nothing else came close.

She prowled around the room, frustrated by being stuck playing princess while real bad guys were out there targeting kids. Pacing was not relieving her tension. Dropping to the floor, she pumped off fifty push-ups. Then rolled over and crunched out seventy-five sit-ups. She broke a light sweat. It was nowhere close to the kind of workout she needed to relieve her tension.

Heaving a deep sigh, she flopped back on the bed. Reminding herself the terrorists were real bad guys too. But nothing had happened since that first botched attempt. She itched to be active. The role of passive bait was hard on her nerves.

Ian hadn't helped either. First, he tortured her at the mayor's dinner with illicit touches, and then he disappeared. It was as if he'd deliberately set out to drive her insane.

She took comfort by assuring herself the situation had to be hard on his frustration level too.

Maybe his problems were worse than hers were. After all, Clyde and Victor cut him out of loop. She still felt guilty for allowing him to be pushed out of the operation. She should've argued harder for him being included at least in the briefings. She owed him that much, and more.

In an effort to focus on something other than Ian for a minute or two, Regan clicked to the next news program. There might be more on the alleged rapist.

The newscaster's mellow voice chuckled warmly. "Here's a little footage from tonight's SASS, Street Angles of Seattle Supporters annual fund raiser."

Another event she should be part of SASS was definitely her territory.

As the film ran, the newscasters continued their commentary. "All the local celebrities were there. There're the Cabell sisters, Seattle's favorite celebrities--as dazzling as ever. I hope I look that good in my sixties. Oooh, look there's Julia Bergman, our very own mayor's daughter," the female anchor enthused.

"Nice to see how the other half lives. And who have we here?" her partner asked as the back of a familiar dark head moved closer to Julia.

"Bachelor number one. Too bad he wasn't on the auction block." Ann Morris, Rich's co-anchor purred.

A close-up of the same dark head, angled to admire Julia's breasts, ran on screen. The camera angle, emphasizing her impressive cleavage.

"Nice work if you can get it," Rich joked.

Regan felt sick, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the image on screen.

"Is that drool, Rich?" Ann teased in the background.

Rich chuckled pleasantly. "Who could blame him?"

Finally, they cut to commercial.

The image of Ian, ogling Julia's breasts, lingered on Regan's mind. She tried reminding herself that camera angles could be deceiving. He might have been looking down at his wristwatch. She tried telling herself he'd leaned closer just trying to hear what Julia had been saying. Who she was trying to kid? He was a guy. He'd been staring at her boobs.

If McKnight wanted Ms. Boobalicious, fine. But then what the hell was he doing molesting Regan at dinner parties?

Why was she letting anything he did upset her?

But she knew the answer. She'd started believing something was possible between them. Regan got up, pacing around the room. More than ever, she needed to get out of the hotel. She needed to burn off at least a little of her frustration.

If she had the right disguise then she could walk out of here as herself.

Regan pawed through the closet. The princess wardrobe didn't include anything inconspicuous or even vaguely athletic.

For a moment, she just stood impotently clenching and unclenching her fists. Then, she jumped into action. She wouldn't give up without an all out effort. Prowling through the suite, she silently inspected every cupboard and closet. At last, she scored a grubby frayed-around-the-edges trench coat. On the roomy side, but workable.

Ten minutes later, clad in the most basic black lace undies available, wrapped in the borrowed raincoat, wearing do-me-now black mules, she slipped into the lobby, and then used one of the public phones to call Kiki.

Lucky for her, Kiki was a child of the night. Regan slumped into a lobby chair, staying as inconspicuous as possible. It was after midnight, but the place wasn't deserted. A bell attendant pushed an empty luggage cart through to the bank of elevators. Muffled phones rang discreetly and were answered by invisible hotel staff in hushed tones. The restaurant, half a level down, was still open, adding the clink of plates, glasses, and utensils to the hum of conversation. A pub, beyond the closed perfumery, spilled music, more serving noises, and laughter.

Kiki strolled in, drawing the night manager's gaze from his computer screen and holding it. Always an imposing figure, at a full four inches taller than Regan, she believed in emphasizing the positive. Or as she put it--if you got it--flaunt it. In this case, adding to her six-foot frame by wearing four-inch heels.

She had on a trench coat too. But hers was immaculate and dashing, bearing only a passing resemblance to the battered garment wrapped around Regan. Kiki's coat floated from her shoulders, revealing a fiery red lining, a sexy mid-riff baring wrap sweater, and mini-skirt. Regan knew from past experience that those were the kind of clothes her friend wore just hanging out at home.

Sickening.

As if having the perfect body of Seattle's most sought after personal fitness trainer wasn't bad enough--Kiki had a face that could inspire poets. And she was a nice, warm-hearted, fun-to-be-with, true friend.

Totally disgusting, exactly the kind of woman she should hate.

Regan liked her anyway.

"I am not going to ask where you found that coat." Kiki hoisted a giant gear bag. "I came prepared."

"You're a lifesaver."

"Hmmp, we'll see how grateful you're feeling after I put your cute little butt through the wringer. Where've you been hiding anyway?"

"Long story."

"Save it then. We have a fashion emergency." Kiki propelled her toward the women's restroom. "Lord have mercy. That rag you're wearing has got to go. Love the shoes, though."

Kiki wanted to burn the coat. But Regan insisted on leaving the ratty garment hanging on a stall door. Pulling on running pants and crop top style sports bra felt great, especially after more than a week in insipid and formal princess clothes. She wriggled her feet into cushy ankle socks, and then paused, realizing the shoelaces she was tying were hers. "Where'd you get my shoes?"

"Your locker at the *Corinthian Club*. What did you think took me so long? I had to drive by work and pick up your stuff."

"How'd you know my combination?" Regan interrogated her suspiciously.

Kiki rolled her eyes. "Plueeze! Your birthday is not a high security code. You use it for everything."

Regan grinned, and then finished tying her shoes. "I owe you."

"Damn straight you do. For lots of things. Who keeps you in that fabulous shape?" she demanded.

"You do," Regan admitted, smiling like an idiot because it felt so good to spend even an hour or two in her real life.

"So when did you start hanging out with McKnight again?"

Regan swallowed a gasp of surprise at Kiki's accurate conclusion about the situation as she hooked her lucky baseball cap over her ponytail. "Thanks for bringing my hat."

"From your woe-is-me tone, I guessed you'll want all your lucky charms. So are you going to tell me what's going on or do I have to keep guessing?"

"Ian and I are working together again--special assignment, short term." She compressed her lips to keep from blurting out way too much information.

But not short enough.

"Uh huh." Kiki pulled open the restroom door. "Jefferson in on this case?"

"Uh huh," she mocked her friend.

Kiki smiled back with good humor. "Talk about your aggravating men--Clyde takes the cake. He never tells me a thing. I wouldn't give him directions to hell if he wasn't such a hottie."

"I think I'm too young to hear this," Regan drawled.

"Girl, your next pap is going to be positive for rust if you don't start using what God gave you." Kiki held the lobby door.

Regan started to protest but before she managed anything coherent. Kiki held out an open palm.

"Hold that thought."

Chapter Thirteen

Seattle, Washington May 18th 11:30 PM

The delay worked in Regan's favor. Without it, she might've told Kiki way more than she was comfortable sharing. But because her girlfriend's attention was diverted, all potential confessions about her pathetic sex life were held in abeyance.

Kiki's ride waited by the curb. The car looked fast even parked. A small beep welcomed them, announcing the unlock button worked. The sleek, powerful, very red, very sporty model suited her friend perfectly.

Once they were cruising toward the track Kiki demanded information. "Come on, spill it. Is McKnight as yummy as he looks?"

"Yummier," she admitted wistfully, no point in denying the obvious.

"You've got fifteen minutes to earn my gratitude before we hit the track. Better get to dishing," Kiki warned with mock sternness.

"There's nothing to tell," Regan mumbled, looking everywhere except at her too perceptive friend.

Kiki darted a knowing look in her direction. "You mean to tell me you chickened out again? Did you or did you not jump his bones?"

"Sort of ..." Regan admitted reluctantly.

"Now, I gotta hear all about it."

"It didn't work out."

"That bad, huh?" Kiki took a hand off the wheel, giving Regan a squeeze.

She shook her head, genuinely baffled. "I just don't get him. He wants me. But he's not acting on it."

Kiki turned her head away from the streaming traffic, meeting Regan's gaze--her chocolate eyes liquid with sympathy. Though they were alone, she lowered her voice.

"Has he got erectile issues?"

Regan gave a decidedly un-ladylike snort.

Turning her attention back to the traffic, Kiki asked, "well then?"

"He's not talking--at least not about the why not thing." Regan shrugged, staring, blindly at the passing scenery. "I think he's involved with someone else. He's a very loyal kind of guy."

"Right, I totally get that. He's hooked up with another woman, but he's playing with you. I can see his true blue side shining through." It was Kiki's turn to snort.

"Who're you trying to sell that to--me or you?"

"I'm not explaining it right."

"Hmmp. Guess not. Though how'd you explain a lying, cheating ... hold on--we're here."

Kiki got out, flipped the driver's seat forward then retrieved her running shoes from the shelf behind the passenger compartment.

Joining her friend, Regan began stretching.

Kiki shrugged out of her coat, skinned off her skirt and sweater, revealing black running shorts and a matching sports bra with reflective stripes. She sat sideways on the low-to-the-ground car's seat, removing her high-heeled boots, and then adding them to the tidy pile of folded clothes stacked in the car. The next ninety seconds were devoted to slipping on socks and tying her running shoes just so. Finally standing, she closed the car door and depressed the lock button on the fob. The key and fob disappeared into an inner pocket.

"Keep stretching," she ordered, not bothering to check on Regan's conformance as she followed her own advice.

"Yes ma'am."

"Five miles?"

"Dear god, yes I haven't worked out all week."

"Week off isn't going to hurt nothing," Kiki generously allowed.

Regan did a double take, Kiki letting her off easy? She must look really pathetic.

"So tell me about this new style of doing it--sort of. I might want to try it out," Kiki teased with a wicked chortle.

"I don't recommend it. Any tips on tempting a hard-headed man away from his misguided principles?" she asked lightly, hoping for a magic bullet answer.

"If you being naked doesn't do it then he needs medical intervention."

Regan barked a laugh. "Yeah, I can see how that works for you. I need something more."

Kiki shot a sharp glance in her direction. "A different guy comes to mind."

"Nope. I'm stuck on this one," she said without censoring her words.

Just how stuck was she?

"Have you tried telling him how you feel?"

"That's not as easy as it sounds," Regan said defensively.

Kiki tried again, obviously unperturbed by repeated failure. "What do you want to have happen between the two of you?"

Regan laughed. "I don't even know the answer to that one. I want him, but just wanting him scares me. But I definitely don't want anyone else to have him."

"Let me see if I've got it. You're not sure what you want from him, but you are sure you don't want to share."

"Sounds crazy," Regan said, laughing weakly.

Kiki shot her a speaking look. "You said it, not me."

"I know."

"The worthwhile stuff always takes work. Men too," Kiki observed with a cheerful acceptance of the facts.

"Dear God, why didn't you tell me this sooner?" she complained dramatically. They kept up a spirited conversation on the incomprehensible peculiarities of members of the opposite sex for the first few miles. After that, they both lapsed into thoughtful silence.

Kiki was right, and Regan knew it--she should talk to Ian. But she could think of millions ways for that to blow up in her face. The odds of him understanding and caring

about her inner turmoil were lousy--especially since she was too chicken to explain her sordid past to him.

A blinding spotlight swept the track, silhouetting them. The intimidating beam stayed locked on them as they sprinted back toward Kiki's car and the menacing presence of Ian's large black SUV.

As they approached, a big man emerged from the vehicle. She recognized Clyde from three hundred meters. So did Kiki, judging by her suddenly more rapid breathing.

"Busted," Regan murmured, both relieved and disappointed that it wasn't Ian.

Kiki grinned. "Uh huh."

"I smell an angry man ahead." Regan warned, wondering about her friend's sense of self-preservation. A glowering Clyde was a downright scary thought.

"There are much worse things than a round or two of righteous fighting with my baby boy."

Baby boy? Regan felt more clueless than ever.

Then a second figure stepped out of the car and Ian's more compact frame joined Clyde. Both men leaned against the SUV's side, arms and ankles crossed. Regan's heart rate accelerated past aerobic range. She and Kiki both slowed until they were barely jogging as they came closer to the waiting men.

Her spirits sank all over again at the sight of Ian's angry scowl. Then she remembered--she was mad at him. Who cared how he felt? She did, a traitorous inner voice whispered. Well, so what? She certainly shouldn't care about a man who preferred Julia's big boobs and uncomplicated company. Of course, she cared anyway. But she still had enough pride left to pretend otherwise.

Ian had changed from the evening clothes he'd worn on the newscast into sneakers, worn sweats and a tee shirt she wouldn't have used for dusting. He looked way too good for her peace of mind.

"Keys," Clyde's deep voice demanded.

"Sure baby," Kiki retrieved her car keys.

To Regan's amazement, Kiki dropped them in Clyde's outstretched hand. He tossed them to Ian.

"Appreciate it, man. I'd need to get greased up to fit in that damn sardine can," Clyde grumbled.

Kiki narrowed her eyes, but said nothing, allowing Clyde's slam of her beloved car to pass unchallenged.

In sullen silence, Ian walked over to the muscle car, unlocking, and then opening the door, waiting while Kiki retrieved her clothes.

So much for her girlfriend's moral support. If Regan hadn't seen it with her own eyes, she would have never believed that Kiki would turn all liquid sweetness for any man. Clyde must have hidden charms.

"Remember fighting leads to making up," Kiki whispered as she gave Regan a brief hug before sashaying to the SUV. Clyde held the passenger door open for her, shooting a menacing glower back toward Regan while gently boosting Kiki into the roomy vehicle.

Clyde turned the SUV around and then slowed on his way out of the parking lot.

Lowering the driver's window, he called to Ian. "Catch you later."

Ian held up an arm in a combination salute and acknowledgement of his friend's parting comment.

She continued to stare after the departing vehicle for a long moment before capitulating by sliding into the muscle car. As she buckled up she re-ran the chain of events resulting in her winding up alone with an angry Ian. When she darted a look at him, she noted his jaw had hardened into a block of solid granite. He didn't say a single word as he started up Kiki's sporty car and drove away from the track.

Regan knew this game--whoever spoke first lost.

The passenger compartment, which had seemed cozy when she was with Kiki shrank to a torture chamber for two with him glowering in the drivers seat, clearly in a bad mood. She wished she could go for another run. Anything to take her mind off the large male body sitting so close to her in the car.

She considered taking an attitude over his clothes, but that seemed pointless. Even the most disreputable rag-- and his current tee was definitely in the running for that dubious distinction--looked great on Ian. Holes, rips, and all. Locked jaws notwithstanding, he still cared about her. She got that message with every look she stole, and each deep breath his magnificent chest heaved. He would never have been this upset unless he cared.

The funny thing was, if she hadn't cared about him, she would've gone along with whatever he wanted. But if she hadn't cared, way more than she could afford to, then she wouldn't be in the mess she was in right now.

He was a good man. She tried to be a good woman. They both cared, and yet there would never be anything between them except pain.

Losing Ian, and she would lose him--based on the evening news--she'd already lost him--would rip her heart in two. When she crossed the line by getting involved with him--she'd already lost. There was no way to win. The only thing she could do to make things even worse would be to sleep with him again.

It would be way better to keep her romantic memories of Ian soft and fuzzy. She didn't need fresh full color images of his lovemaking to torture her wounded heart. Every time she felt his magnetic attraction--every time she felt her resolve weaken--every time she softened toward him--she imagined how she'd feel in a few years when she'd run into him out somewhere with his wife and future family.

Whether or not he married, Julia made little difference. He would wind up with someone just like her. Someone from his own social circle. Someone sweet, easy going, and kind. Someone who never challenged him. An adorable baby-doll with blue eyes, blonde hair, and big boobs. The boobs would be even bigger since she would be constantly pregnant--with his babies.

Blind, scarlet, jealousy knotted the small muscles in her shoulders and the back of her neck. The exact same muscles she'd managed to loosen with all her stretching and running. Sneaking out of the hotel to exercise was a good measure how desperate she'd been to work off a little tension. And that had all been before she'd gotten sealed into the too small vehicle with the smoldering volcano doing the driving. She wanted to run, but she was stuck.

Damn Ian, he was not going to turn her into a coward. Regan straightened her spine. Remembering the newscast footage of him panting over Julia's breasts, added a new fuel to her determination. She could handle his little game of romanticized lust. That's all there was between the two of them--no matter what he said.

To hell with him and his macho silent act.

She tugged her mouth into her most serene royal smile.

"Did you have a pleasant evening?" Her voice came out low and even--perfectly normal. That was so much better--she'd taken control. She was doing great. Everything was going well. In fact, ideal wasn't too much stretch. Friendly and reasonable that was her all over. She and Ian were just a couple of old buddies--friends who happened to be working together again, temporarily--very temporarily.

"Yeah, it was fan-fucking-tastic."

She kept her eyes glued to a spot on the doorpost past his left ear, so he wouldn't be able to read how pleased she was that he was unhappy too. Not that she was vindictive. No, absolutely not, but she was human. She didn't want him out having a wonderful time when she was miserable. Regan gave herself a mental shake, no backsliding. She was not going to be miserable.

She had a great job, wonderful friends, no sex life ... oh dear God, no backsliding,

Ian pulled up to a deserted park entrance. He stopped in a dimly lit corner under the spread of full trees. He turned off the car.

Regan was not going to feel sorry for Ian. She'd seen him ogling Julia's cleavage. He was a first class jerk. A man who acted like that did not deserve her pity. She hoped he married Julia and died of boredom.

"What'd you do?" she asked sweetly.

Did she really want to hear about his hot date? She'd already seen the video.

Yeah, might as well--she was a glutton for pain.

"Nothing special, work stuff, hung out with a few sanitation workers threatening to go on strike."

Just a minute, that wasn't right. What about the fancy SASS charity auction?

"You didn't go to the SASS party?"

"No. Why?"

"I thought I saw you on the news," she said nonchalantly, casually examining her flawless French manicure.

"Not me."

His gaze felt so intense that she wanted to squirm.

"I can tell you everything about my evening," he volunteered. "I shook hands and thought about you. I talked to some people and thought about you. I listened a lot and thought about you. I drank too much coffee to stay awake and thought about you. I came back to the hotel and thought about you some more. Then I took a shower and jacked-off while I thought about you."

Dear God. He did not just say that. Now she was blushing.

"That pretty much summed up my evening. Until I went to check on you and found out you'd disappeared." Ian paused to give her a lethal look intended to wound.

"Now, let's talk about what you've been up to, princess."

Regan bit off the defense that sprang to her lips. She took another calming breath instead. "I needed to blow off a little steam."

"What got you so steamed you had to sneak off without letting anyone know?" Ian's tone was so harsh Regan cringed inside.

He didn't give her a chance to answer before he went on. "You scared the shit out of me." That time his voice actually shook.

Regan took a long look at Ian. A dark shadow of beard dusted the lower half of his face. There were parenthesis around his mouth, faint vertical lines between his eyebrows and delicate violet tints under his dark blue eyes. Curly black hair showed through one of the midriff tears in his tee shirt. He didn't look too young. He looked like a tired cop after a hard night. And he'd never looked hotter. The combination of strength and vulnerability melted her heart.

She wanted to caress him. She wanted to reassure him. She wanted him. In a way that was selfish and carnal. Her longing had no interest in fairness and no concept of doing the right thing.

The realization hit her with stunning force, adding more heat to an already steamy situation. "I'm sorry." She forced herself to look away--to put ice in her voice.

"I thought the terrorists had snatched you again." Ian's jaw clamped shut.

"I am sorry," she said sincerely, letting more feelings coat the simple words than she'd intended. Though she still didn't understand how she had hurt him, she knew she had, and because of it, she really was truly sorry.

Ian met her gaze before he began speaking. "When I was little and my parents left, I'd cry and raise such a fuss that they took to sneaking off in the middle of the night when I was sleeping. I believed they hated me so much that they couldn't even stand to look at me for long enough to say good-bye."

Then he turned toward her, touching the side of her face with his hand. He held her gently, as if he needed the contact to assure himself she was real. "When I went to check on you and you were gone ... I went a little crazy. I overreacted."

Regan softened, picturing Ian as a little boy, left alone in the middle of the night.

"I was jealous," she admitted.

What was wrong with her? She'd had no intention of telling that to anyone, especially not Ian. But she owed him some truth in payment for the vulnerability he'd exposed to her.

"Of me? Really?"

Did he have to sound quite so pleased?

"What made you jealous?"

"There was a piece on the news, Julia Bergman and a guy--I thought it was you." She looked away from his gaze.

"Oh yeah? What were they doing?"

Regan thought about making something up, but didn't. "He was admiring her assets," she mumbled reluctantly.

Ian chuckled. The sound drew her away from her sulk and she met his gaze, fell into his eyes and the laughter.

"You were really jealous. Of me. I love it." Ian got out the words between

erupting chuckles.

"You're crazy," she said, shaking her head. Laughter bubbling inside her heart.

"I love that you don't want to share me." Ian leaned in and brushed her lips with his. Suddenly, he had her face in his hands, and then he was kissing her as if she were the essential missing element in his life.

His kiss made her ache for him with a sweet-hot hunger that was becoming familiar, but there was something else. Something beneath the hunger, calling to her on a different level entirely. Something that made her feel clean, safe, and sure.

What had they been talking about? Not about how good he smelled she was sure of that much. Green with envy--that was it. She couldn't believe she'd actually come right out and confessed she'd been in a jealous snit.

Ian picked up her hand and settled it against his thigh. His leg felt like a sun warmed log through the worn cotton of his sweats. She tried to tug her hand back, but he covered it with his.

She was trapped. And she liked it--way too much.

"Time to go." She smiled, acting as if she hadn't noticed her hand was pressed against him.

"We need to talk."

"We've talked lots. I don't need to talk. I'm good." She tugged her hand with even less effect than the first time she'd tried it. The longer he held her trapped the more her resistance eroded.

"I need to talk. We're working together." His voice grew serious, matching his expression, which was set in lines of chiseled stone determination.

"I've noticed." Chirpy wasn't cutting it. So she hauled out hostile and sarcastic. But her defensiveness didn't work with Ian.

His mouth quirked up on one side, but that was the only sign he'd heard her. "I don't want you pulling anymore of this disappearing act. No more of that lone ranger shit either." He stroked her hand, emphasizing his point.

"I'm more the Tonto type," she said dryly.

"I'm serious. I don't want you jumping out of your skin every time I brush your hand thinking I'm going to do something stupid."

Heat flared along her neck, leaving a trail of pink stained skin behind.

"I've earned your respect," Ian said reasonably.

The justice of his words banged against her fear. Her conscience squirmed. He'd never given her any reason to doubt his discretion, loyalty, or valor. She owed it to him to be the same kind of stand-up partner.

"You have it."

Ian nodded. "Good, there are a couple of other things I want you to know."

Regan turned in her seat giving him the same kind of absolutely rapt attention, which she usually reserved for questioning witnesses, interviewing suspects, and counseling victims.

"There is one real problem with us working together." He twisted to face her, still holding her hand between them. "I understand your concerns about me not being able to be objective if we're involved. I think we can handle it--but it's a moot point, princess."

We *are* involved and nothing you can do is going to change that." He brushed a kiss across her knuckles.

Her shiver was involuntary. She saw the tell tale glints of fire in his eyes and knew he'd caught it. Dear God, he read her too well.

It was after two AM before they got back to the hotel. Regan wished that she had a private room without tutors, guards, and secret service agents hovering constantly. She wished Ian had taken her back to his place. But he hadn't and she hadn't been sure enough of his response to ask. To be honest, she wasn't sure she could handle either yes or no. She hesitated and the opportunity slipped by.

Maybe it was for the best.

"I'll see you in a couple hours." Ian pulled her into his arms wrapping her tight. He buried his nose in her hair. She snuggled into his chest. He widened his stance and cupped her butt in his hands, bringing her tighter against the hard length of his erection in a move that made her ache for more. If he wanted to drive her wild, he succeeded. She wanted nothing more than to stop time.

Ian kissed the top of her head. "I've got to go, princess."

Chapter Fourteen

Seattle, Washington May 19th 7:30 AM

With only five hours sleep, Regan was desperate for coffee. If it hadn't been for the warning rumble of voices, she would've wandered out in her skimpy robe. Considering the sound level, there had to be more than one person out there. She wasn't interested in flashing any of the secret service personnel.

She tried to remember what was on today's agenda, but without caffeine, the task was beyond her. She picked out a slinky floral print, which was undoubtedly the wrong dress. But it had the advantage of fastening in front and being stretchy enough to allow her to move without collateral costume damage. After tucking her hair into a fast twist and sliding her feet into the mules, she was decent enough for coffee.

As she'd deduced, the conversation pit ebbed and flowed with mostly male bodies. A couple of pots of coffee, along with a selection of pastries had been delivered to the suite. Unfortunately, the coffee and pastries arrived with a mega-side of ticked-off agents and a fuming Clyde.

Not the nice Clyde who borrowed Ian's SUV and practically panted, in his own menacing fashion, when he saw Kiki. Nope. This was the old Clyde--sarcastic, intimidating, and impatient. He was back with a new, bad attitude.

Even Maya looked distinctly frosty, quickly turning away when Regan finally made eye contact.

Ian strolled in and the whole room brightened. His eyes found hers and she couldn't help feeling instantly happier. There were only two more days of playing princess left. A lot of things could happen in a couple days.

She'd started hoping that there was some way for them to be together--some kind of compromise. Ian wanted a permanent commitment, but he'd been willing to make love without one once. She wasn't ready for wedding bells and white dresses. She might never be, but she wanted him to be part of her life. The physical intimacy she'd feared before--she now craved. She cared about him in ways she didn't want to examine. If only they had more time together. Then, maybe ...

Regan started when Clyde slammed down the phone he'd been talking on a second before. "Damn, terrorist number one, the phony assistant manager, died."

The agent in charge, Victor stood so abruptly that he knocked over the chair he'd been using. "We're screwed. We'll have to cancel the exchange."

"I thought he was regaining consciousness--what the hell happened?" Ian asked.

"You hit him too hard." Victor whirled, turning flinty, accusing, eyes on Ian.

"You've pushed to be part of this operation and you've got no business here. Stick to your political games, pretty boy. Stay the hell away from my business."

Automatically, Regan looked to Clyde--expecting him to defend his friend, but he remained silent, avoiding her gaze. Unconsciously, she pulled away from the angry men.

Through all the chaos and violence they'd faced, she counted on Ian's support. He was quick on the uptake, reading situations, and her, with speed and accuracy. She didn't need to explain her actions to him. Because he moved in perfect counterpoint to her, with minimal communication. His physical presence was intimidating. But she valued his cool head, his ability to defuse tense situations, and his courage much more than his raw strength. Now, her heart sank at the idea of losing the partner she counted on for the second time.

Standing, she addressed Victor directly. "McKnight did what he had to do to protect me. I'm sorry you're not getting an opportunity to question your suspect, but I'm not sorry he hit the scumbag. McKnight is good cop. You're lucky to have him on your team and I'm lucky to have him as a partner."

"Nice speech, Regan. But no sale. He's a hot head. He's out," Victor threatened more calmly.

"Fine, then I'm out too. Find someone else to play princess." Her hands curled into fists at her sides.

"You'd better think it over. I don't handle ultimatums well," Victor said evenly.

From the edge of her vision, she noticed several other agents cautiously increasing the distance between her and them. She wasn't backing down. It wasn't a question of courage, but a matter of loyalty to Ian.

Her spine stiffened. "Neither do I."

"Thanks Regan, but it's not worth it, there's only a couple of days left. Let Coluccio play the game his way," Ian said coolly.

Regan kept her gaze locked on Victor. "It matters to me."

"Ian stays," Clyde announced in a flat tone that brooked no argument.

Victor's face closed down as he moved purposely for the exit, and then slammed out of the room.

"I could use another cup of coffee," she announced to anyone who was interested in listening.

"The pot seems to have a leak," Ian said matter-of-factly.

"I prefer Eriksson's coffee anyway," Regan remarked, picking up on his cue.

Ian headed for the door. "Let's do it. Join us, Clyde."

"Okay," Clyde agreed.

Questioning Ian with her eyes, he answered her with an infinitesimal shake of his head. A gesture she understood as meaning we're not talking about it right now. Her heart accelerated. He had a hold of something. This was the part she loved--the excitement, the turning point when the good guys started winning. Working together.

"Your Royal Highness!" Lundstrom called. Her mouth pulled into disapproving pucker as she waited for a response.

A regal princess wave and a serene smile were Regan's only concessions to her royal tutor's disapproval as she escaped out of the suite behind Clyde and Ian.

* * * *

Even dressed in the old-lady pink print, her hair in a sloppy twist, and dwarfed between Clyde and Ian, Regan felt alive, excited, and almost normal. As she sipped her latte, she patted the small satchel purse holding her ID, her badge and her gun. It was the

one link to her real life. Being out, and not being the princess, was like coming up for a breath of fresh air.

She sipped again. Allowing herself to enjoy the caffeine buzz, the cop talk, and Ian's closeness.

"Can you get the suite swept?" Ian asked.

"Yeah, I'll make a call. We gotta get Victor in on this."

He nodded a curt agreement.

Clyde ambled outside, talking on his cell phone, punctuating his side of the conversation with energetic gestures.

"I'm being dense, but tell me why you are so sure that we have a leak," she said, admiring his lips and eager for his answer.

"I was blind--we all were," Ian muttered unhelpfully.

Clyde returned, taking his seat. "Victor will be along in a minute, the suite will be checked out sometime this afternoon. Sorry, but it was the best I could manage."

Seven minutes later, Victor strolled through the door, considerably more composed than the last time she'd seen him.

"I'd like to hear your thinking on the subject of an inside leak." Victor tilted his jaw toward Ian in a belligerent challenge.

"Sit down and I'll be happy to share," Ian said calmly.

Regan bit her tongue, keeping quiet.

After Victor parked his butt on the edge of his wooden chair, Ian turned toward Regan, speaking as if they were alone. "First clue was the attack at the Plaza, timing and location were too well-coordinated to be lucky guesses. Second clue, after the first attempted kidnapping there have been no other attempts to snatch Princess Halle." Ian waited a beat for his words to sink in before continuing. "It's as if the bad guys know there's a double in play. Third clue, the day after the scumbag terrorist shows signs of waking up, suddenly he dies. Amazing coincidence?"

"Good points. But not conclusive, and if there is a mole it's not one of mine. I can vouch for my people. They've all been vetted. Besides there's no one on the team I haven't personally known for at least three years."

"It almost has to be someone on your team. You've got the most manpower--sorry, Victor. But hey, I'm checking everyone else with any access to the operation." Clyde assured him. "Electronic surveillance is growing more sophisticated as we speak. I'm working on ruling that out too. For now, I want you all to treat the suite as a hot zone. In short, don't say anything you don't wanna hear on the evening news."

"Assuming for the moment that we are being observed, can we use the monitoring to our advantage?" she asked quietly, sitting a little straighter.

"Worth a shot," Clyde said in a tone that suggested he was actually considering it.

"Exactly what do you have in mind?" Ian asked suspiciously.

"I don't have a plan, just feeling my way. If the reason the terrorist haven't acted is because they know I'm a plant. Then we should proceed with the transfer tonight, except not really. Keeping Princess Halle in a safe location. Is that something you can arrange?" She looked from Clyde to Victor.

"Let's hear the rest of your idea before we commit to a strategic action plan,"

Clyde said stuffily.

"As I said before, strategy isn't my department," she prefaced her analysis with royal tact. But if everyone, other than the four of us, believes the exchange happened at tonight's ball then an attempt should be made within the next twenty-four hours."

"How do you figure?" Victor asked.

Regan explained slowly, thinking it through as she spoke. "Princess Halle is leaving for Svensberg tomorrow. The royal palace is a much more difficult infiltration site. Then this really is their last chance, and if we have a leak ..."

"She's got a point," Clyde said.

Victor methodically finished destroying a coffee stirrer for a few seconds more before responding. "I'll play along."

"One other thing, can one of you check with the hospital, find out if they have surveillance tapes? They might show who went into the terrorist's room," Ian said.

"I'll ask," Clyde volunteered.

Regan looked at each man in turn. "Are we're agreed then--the exchange goes ahead as planned?"

"I don't see a downside," Victor said brusquely, standing. "We done here?"

"Sure," Ian agreed curtly.

"So you're good to go as the princess's escort tonight?" she asked him.

Ian's eyes held hers. "Yeah, I can handle that."

"Business first, Romeo," Clyde rumbled, shoving the chair he'd been endangering further from the table.

Easy for him to say.

She wondered how regimented his approach would be if Kiki were the bait.

* * * *

By the time Regan made it back to the suite after her morning beauty appointments, chaos had arrived in force. Half a dozen agents milled around the room, some talking on cell phones, some talking to each other. The fax spewed paper, laptops whirled, pagers buzzed, phones beeped, chimed, rang, and played songs, announcing incoming calls and text messages.

Working her way through the crowd, she got close enough to catch Victor's attention. "What's going on?"

"As turns out your elevator man did not die from natural causes. The doc, who pronounced him dead, caught it. Unfortunately, said doc went right from examining elevator man into emergency surgery. He called the local cops first thing this morning. Here's where we got lucky. The call taker, who talked to the doctor, was sharp. She remembered hearing there was a watch on the suspect and got her supervisor involved. Her boss knew McKnight was the go-to guy for inter-agency situations."

"That was lucky," Regan agreed.

"Hold on, it gets better. The agents who followed up asked about a security camera. There was one. The tape hadn't been changed. We got it, ran it and I recognized one of the nightshift cleaning crew as Habib Rehman, a former *Al Qaeda* cell leader, currently believed to be associated with the *Sons of Allah*."

Exactly what Ian had suggested earlier. "Have you ...?"

"I need to take this." Victor held up a palm, angling away from Regan as he answered his cell phone. "Coluccio here."

Lundstrom coughed discreetly, pulling Regan's attention from the hopeless job of sorting anything useful out of the half dozen different conversations going on around her.

"What is it Lundstrom?" Regan found herself in Princess-mode without consciously thinking about it. *Definitely weird.*

"I am afraid I am unwell, Your--Miss Regan." She corrected herself.

A quick glance confirmed Lundstrom's assessment. She looked alarmingly pale and a light sheen of perspiration coated her forehead. Regan moved toward her tutor.

Lundstrom covered her mouth with a tissue, backing away from her. "Do not come too close, Miss Regan. I would never forgive myself if I made you ill also."

"I'll call the hotel doctor." Regan changed direction, heading for the closest available phone.

"No!" Lundstrom edged further away from Regan as she talked. "Please do not summon a physician. I will be fine. If I may rest for an hour or two?"

"You're sure?" Regan asked, torn between concern for her friend and the need to be part of the operation. She wasn't clear on the details, but it was obvious things were happening--she wanted in on the action.

"Yes of course. Rest assured that I will summon a doctor immediately, in the unlikely event that I do not feel better by this afternoon," Lundstrom assured her.

Ignoring her tutor's protests that she could manage on her own, Regan accompanied her to the bedroom, helping the normally cheery woman with her shoes. After adjusting the blinds to make the room darker, she made certain there was a fresh pitcher of ice water. Finally, she pulled a light throw over the ailing woman before tiptoeing out of the room.

The moment she re-entered the main room, she sensed something was different. Regan sought for the change as the room's energy buzzed around her. Her eyes locked on the back of Ian's head. His neck rotated, sensing her, seeking her. Relief, and the recognition of something more, flickered between them. Awareness of the new layer of intimacy added to the electric tension, which tingled through her whenever he was near. As he strode toward her, every cell in her body strained toward him, hoping for contact.

Today might be her last day of playing princess. How could she walk away from him?

"Victor made the janitor--did you hear? It's over--well all except for the aria and cigars." Ian grinned at her, his eyes communicating another, more intimate, message.

She couldn't tear her gaze away from his. The rush of excitement, the elemental thrill of the chase, and the pure sparkling pleasure of knowing the good guys had won one--was all there in his eyes--along with caring and a desire to match her own.

"SWAT has them contained--come on. We're backing." Ian's hand brushed hers setting off an interior quiver simply by giving her a black nylon windbreaker with SPD stenciled on it in large yellow block letters.

She pulled on the jacket, joining with him as part of the mass exodus from the suite. Then she remembered her tutor. "Hold on, Lundstrom's sick, I should--"

"You can call the hotel doctor, from the car. Ask him to check on her. Come on,

we need to be in on this." Ian said, steering her toward a partly filled elevator.

"You're right." She met his eyes again, but had to quickly look away because he was so gorgeous and a total distraction.

A containment perimeter was established by the time Ian and Regan arrived on the scene. It took them a while to wend through the security net.

With the simple act of putting on the windbreakers, Ian and she were instantly allied with all the SPD officers and with each other. It felt familiar, good, right, and very sad. Today would be the last day of the operation.

Three men were cuffed and in the process of being ushered into a secure van as Ian and Regan finally made it past all the security to the hotel's seedy lobby.

Clyde caught sight of them and waved them through.

"Looks like you got lucky," Ian commented.

"There were only three men involved?" Regan asked, surprised by the small number. She'd pictured a much larger, more sophisticated operation.

"No, the phony janitor is still loose. There's an APB out on him. He's not getting away," Clyde said with finality.

"Nice work Clyde." Ian clapped his friend's shoulder. "How'd you find them so quickly?"

"After Victor identified the janitor, we got a tip from the hotel clerk." Clyde jerked his head to indicate a man in a dull red turban and bright gold shirt talking to a pair of Secret Service Agents.

"We got a laptop and four cell phones. This could be turn out to be big." Clyde grinned with genuine enthusiasm.

The smile was a new experience for Regan. It definitely made him more approachable, she could almost see why Kiki thought he was hot stuff.

"So there wasn't an inside source after all," Regan murmured.

Clyde's gaze slid right past Regan to Ian. "Look's like you were wrong about that one. Sorry, Romeo. But hey, let's not complain. It worked out great. Except because of the tie in with the *Sons of Allah*, a team from National Security is taking custody of the suspects." Clyde shrugged off any disappointment. "The rest of our operation is strictly routine--mop up."

"Then the switch with the princess tonight is going to be the real deal?" Ian asked with a frown.

Victor joined them. "Absolutely. Two new royal guards are coming on board tonight. They'll accompany you to the exchange point, a private dressing room off the main ballroom. We'll isolate the real princess after the ball in a secure location, strictly as a precaution." He frowned at Regan, presumably to emphasize the seriousness of the situation. "It's vital that every detail of your appearance matches that of Princess Halle."

As if, she hadn't spent practically every waking minute perfecting her princess act for the past couple of weeks. She clamped down on her temper and resisted saying any of the things she was thinking. Verbal warfare with Victor was a no-win situation for her and it sure wouldn't help Ian's working relationship with the touchy agent.

Instead of arguing, she mentioned a relevant problem, "Lundstrom isn't feeling well. I called the hotel doctor and asked him to check her, but I don't think she's going be

up to hair styling by tonight. I'll do my best to reproduce the hair style, but--"

"Call Kiki. She knows about that stuff," Clyde said.

Regan was caught off guard by Clyde's casual suggestion. "You don't mind involving her in the operation?"

"Nah, Kiki's cool," he said after only the slightest hesitation.

"Okay then, I'll call her. Thanks." Regan had an odd urge to pat him. She caught hold of herself before she'd acted on it. He didn't look *that* approachable.

After listening to several retellings of every aspect of the operation's conclusion, from the tip-off all the way through to the takedown, Regan and Ian strolled back to his rig. In the space of an hour, they'd gone from anticipation to done. Suddenly, they had nowhere to go--nowhere they needed to be--until tonight.

"It's kind of anti-climatic, I feel almost let down," he voiced exactly what she'd been thinking.

"I know what you mean--all keyed up and no where to go." Regan agreed with an easy smile.

"Want to stop for coffee?"

"Sure, but make mine decaf--I'm still wired." A reckless happiness, simply because they were together, bubbled inside her veins, the emotion skating on the razor's edge of pain because there was so little time left for them.

"Finding all the terrorists in one fell swoop, it's almost too good to be true." Ian pulled into the Coffee Prophet's drive-through lane.

"It was a wonderful coup for Clyde and Victor." Regan tried to pump some enthusiasm into her voice, but she sounded flat even to her own ears.

Ian placed their order. "Looks like the operation is a wrap."

"You'll be getting rid of me sooner than you thought." She tried for light and breezy, but the lump in her throat threatened to ruin the effect.

They pulled into an open parking slot, sipping their coffees in silence that gradually eased into camaraderie as they played remember when and laughed over shared memories from their days in patrol. The police scanner provided a familiar background crackle for their conversation.

"We're a good team." Ian's voice seemed huskier.

Regan turned, meeting his gaze. "We always were."

"It doesn't have to end."

"Oh Ian." Her heart twisted.

"That doesn't sound like what I want to hear." His jaw hardened.

His anger stung. But she had no choice. A few more hours and this assignment would be over. Ian would go back to his real life and she's go back to hers. There was no compromise that would work for them. She wished that she could--but it was better not to even go there.

"If things were different ..." Regan left her thought unfinished, turning away from him to avoid his gaze. Finally, she dropped her eyes to her lap where she twisted and untwisted her now frayed napkin, which was all that remained from the coffee stop.

"What do you want to be different?" he asked, his voice thick.

So many things--my past, our families, our backgrounds ... but she didn't say any

of things she was thinking.

"You can't be sure how you'll feel tomorrow, the next day, or a year from now," she said reasonably.

"Yes I can. My heart is not going to change. If you think so then you don't know me at all. We did it your way for more than a year. How long do you need before you'll believe I love you? Five years, ten years? Until there's no possibility of us having a family? What will make it safe enough for you to love me? If I promise never to get shot? I've got a real safe job. What if I quit all together and stay home with the kids?"

Dear God, he knew her too well. Ian was shredding her heart with words. Why did he have to make this even harder?

"Don't do this. Please. I can't be what you want." She kept her eyes trained on her napkin.

"All I ever wanted you to be was mine," he said the bittersweet words with sadness and bleak finality.

A darted glance allowed her to follow Ian's hard jaw as he turned away from her. She quickly dropped her gaze back to her hands. She twisted the napkin tightly and unwound it again, focusing on the tortured paper as she fought to keep welling tears from spilling.

Please. Please stop. Please don't do this.

"You're a coward," he accused.

"That's not fair," Regan said it softly. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to be with him. She didn't know what she wanted. Except she was certain she did not want to fight with Ian.

"I'm done being fair."

"I'd never fit into your world," She said it flatly, like the fact it was, refusing to look at him. She didn't want him to see how much saying no to him cost her.

Ian caught her chin, angling her to face him.

"What the hell are you talking about? My world? We're practically neighbors."

"We come from different families--" Regan stole a fast look at him through her lashes, still unwilling to meet his eyes directly.

Ian cut her off, talking over her explanation. "Yeah, we're different, all right. You had family that loved you."

His hand dropped from her face.

Regan's chin threatened to quiver.

He folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not asking you to marry my family, only me."

"I can't. Please understand I ... I have to do what's best for both of us. I have to do the right thing." She couldn't look at him--couldn't bear to see the hurt and anger that she heard in his voice reflected in his eyes.

Oh Ian, why does it have to be all or nothing? Couldn't you have held me and kissed me just this one last night without conditions and ultimatums? Why couldn't you have let me love you for just a little while more?

She let her eyes drift shut and tried to tune out the words piercing her heart.

"If you really believe that, then there's nothing more for me to say. You're so

dead set on ruining your life that you don't care you're ruining mine too."

"Ian—"

"Fuck your rationalizations. I don't want to hear your, *I'm-doing-the-right-thing* speech. I thought you had guts. I wasn't looking for perfection. I was looking for a real partner I could count on, not someone who'd run the first time things got tough. I was looking for a woman who loved me."

His pain was an audible thing beneath the harsh words.

I do love you. That's why I'm letting you go. Because family is everything to you, and I can't give you one.

But there was nothing she was willing to say that would make him understand.

"I'm a simple guy, an old fashioned guy. I need the commitment, the vows, the license, the white picket fence ..." His voice thickened--choked with emotions.

A lump of unshed tears clogged Regan's throat too. She could not speak. If she tried to say anything, the dam of tears would break.

Ian said nothing more. Starting the car, he drove in stony silence, which he maintained all the way back to the hotel. He pulled up to the front entrance and stopped. Regan climbed down from the SUV. She turned back, intending to say something--she wasn't sure what.

Ian yanked the passenger door shut and smoked off.

A few minutes later, Regan let herself quietly into the silent and gloomy suite. Lundstrom's door was closed. Housekeeping had cleaned away all evidence of the morning's chaos. Cracking Lundstrom's door, she heard a light snoring and tiptoed back out, shutting the door softly.

She passed straight through her bedroom and started a bath, adjusting the water as hot as she could stand it then stripping out of her clothes. A trace of Ian's mossy aftershave lingered on the windbreaker. Hot tears spilled. They trickled down her cheeks, leaving wet tracks. Switching on the whirlpool feature, she eased into the steamy water, letting the heat absorb her tears and the bubbling water ease her tension.

The longer she thought about it, the more certain she became that she couldn't leave things the way they were. She couldn't let Ian think she didn't care. She had to make him understand that an affair was all she could handle.

She towed off impatiently, trying out different speeches in her head. There had to be a way to make him understand. Maybe words weren't the answer ...

Chapter Fifteen

Seattle, Washington May 19th 6:00 PM

Ian spun out into traffic, narrowly avoiding hitting an oncoming vehicle. The close call shook him, serving as an effective warning that he needed to deal with his temper and frustration. He circled the block, pulling into the hotel loading zone, and then surrendered his car keys to the parking attendant.

Once in his room, he shed the slacks and dress shirt swapping them for his favorite sweats and loose tee shirt. Fortunately, the gym was available to guests twenty-four hours a day--he headed straight for the weights. After a warm-up session, he pushed some serious iron, and then ran a fast five miles on the treadmill. Grabbing a sports drink on the way out, he paused to chug half the bottle before stepping into the elevator.

By the time he got back to his room, he was more in control. Stripping off his clothes on the way into the bathroom, he stepped directly into the shower. Then he let the hot water wash away the last of his anger.

Fact was, Regan got him going faster than anyone else ever had. He'd learned to mask his feelings of disappointment early on. His parents had still left him without saying goodbye. But by not breaking down and sobbing uncontrollably, even as a small child, he'd won back an important piece of himself. He might not be able to control his parents' behavior but he could, and did, control his reactions.

Then along came Regan and all his fabled control and principles went for nothing. He'd already crossed lines he'd sworn he'd never cross. But that was over with. If she cared about him then she could damn well make the next move and it had better be a good one.

'Hello' would work. Hell, her breathing was all he needed. Hopeless.

Ian ducked his head under the showerhead to rinse out the shampoo. He let the water beat down on his neck, but the image of pain in her eyes as he'd sped away from her wouldn't leave. He'd put the hurt in those beautiful eyes and that was the last thing he'd wanted to do.

He couldn't believe she could be so stubborn and so wrong. He wasn't buying her silly speech about them being from different worlds. She loved him, no matter what she said. What scared him was the possibility her love wasn't strong enough to get past her fears. Maybe it was wrong to push her. Maybe he should slow down--let her move at her own pace. Or maybe he should be tougher. Hell, if he knew.

Scariest of all, what if she was never ready for commitment? What then? Ian couldn't handle seeing Regan without any kind of boundaries. What if she wanted to see other guys? Was he supposed to be okay with that? What the hell was wrong with her anyway? All women wanted commitment--except Regan.

The only woman he wanted.

He turned off the water. Yanked a towel off the stack, rubbing it over his hair.

Damn woman. Even a reasonable man has limits, especially when he's horny. Maybe another round of lovemaking would make her come to her senses. But what if it didn't? He wanted to make love with her forever. A quick fuck wouldn't solve anything.

Tucking the towel around his hips, Ian strode over to the bedside phone. He started to pick up the receiver then set it back down. This was the kind of conversation, which went much better in person. As a matter of fact, the more in person the better.

Immediately, he began rehearsing what he wanted to say. This time he would be better prepared--more in control. This time he would not lose his temper. This time he would not accept any answer other than yes.

A few minutes later, Regan boldly knocked on the door to Ian's room. She didn't allow herself to hesitate for even a second, for fear her courage would flee. She wasn't even sure what to hope for. If Ian was still out burning off his frustration then she'd never find enough nerve to come back. If he was here then she might be jumping into a fresh pit of disaster.

He answered the door before her second thoughts won. Wearing nothing but a royal blue towel tucked around narrow hips and still damp from the shower, he looked so delicious she was so ready to tumble him into bed right this second. Or if the bed was too far away--the floor would do just fine--she was flexible.

Regan cupped his head and drew it down to her level. When he got close enough, she nipped his bottom lip. He opened his mouth to protest. Taking full advantage of the breach in his defenses, she deepened the kiss. She had him--the evidence of his arousal pressing against her lower belly. She won the first round.

She might have to bite her lip and turn away a hundred times in the future, but right this moment, he was hers. The painful future didn't exist. There was just an endless now where she kissed Ian and was safe in his arms. She imprinted the feel of him on her pores. Every nerve ending sprang to life, tingling from his touch.

Memory burned on every sensory channel. The way he smelled: warm and clean with a hint of moss. The taste of him: dark and rich with an extra kick of spice. The feel of him--solid as a bronze sculpture, but rougher, hotter, and much more supple.

The assignment ended tonight. As far as she could see, they had to end, too.

One big hand cupped her butt, keeping her close. The other was stroking her from neck to tailbone. He'd taken control of the kiss about half a second after she'd tried to swallow his tongue.

Regan tasted something more under his addictive flavor, a yearning to match her own. His hunger gave her a rush of pure feminine power. She ran her fingers through his still wet hair, the texture surprisingly smooth and tantalizing to her touch. She snuggled closer, burrowing right into his magnificent chest.

After long delightful minutes, Ian broke the kiss. Caressed her with his eyes. "God, I'm the luckiest man alive. What made you change your mind, princess?"

That wonderful hand kept stroking her back.

"Maybe we should go inside," she suggested weakly.

Or maybe I should just shoot myself now.

She tried to hold on to the champagne bubbles of arousal and happiness, but they began popping under the piercing cold of Ian's gaze.

He stepped back into the living area still holding her eyes. "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

Way too quick. Just this once why couldn't he have been a little dense?

She shook her head no, knowing it was the wrong answer.

His made-for-sin face rumbled into a scowl. "What's this then--a pity fuck?"

Regan put her fingers to his mouth. She shook her head again and met his gaze.

"No," she said it so softly she wasn't sure he'd heard her.

"What then?" A small vein pulsed in his neck.

A reward for good behavior. My consolation prize. Temporary insanity brought on by lust. Good bye. Maybe all of the above.

He looked as disappointed as a kid who'd missed out on his chance to see Santa.

"Thanks, anyway." His voice creaked and he cleared his throat.

"Would a little happiness be such a bad thing?" She heard herself say the words and still couldn't believe she was pleading with him to make love with her.

He crossed his arms in front of his chest, not even a tiny bit self-conscious, as he stood in the hotel doorway only one smallish blue towel away from full frontal nudity.

"You really want to do something for me?"

He sounded doubtful about the honorability of her intentions. That was rude. Down right insulting. If she'd been any less miserable, she would've been offended.

Regan took a turn clearing her throat. Working her way around the hard to accept implication that sleeping with her wasn't worth setting aside his damn principles. "Yes," she said cautiously.

"Go out with me," he said it as if he'd just dared her to see a high stakes bet.

"Go out with you? Like a date?" she asked, nursing her wounded pride.

"Exactly like a date."

Stupid man. What did he think the point of dating was? Dear God, he was twenty-seven years old. Any right thinking man his age would be looking to score. Not Ian. Nope. He had principles.

Too bad for her.

Oh hell. Why not? She'd been willing--make that anxious, desperate even--to sleep with him. A date wasn't going to change anything between them, but if that's what he wanted. Sure.

She told herself it'd be better this way. As soon as her swollen breasts and the empty aching between her legs eased off a little, she'd be glad he turned her down. She was nearly sure that's exactly how she'd feel about it--in about a hundred years.

"Sure. Let me know when and where." She smiled. It might have been a little shaky, but she definitely smiled. Whirling, she marched away hoping he didn't notice her wobbling knees.

Out of a whole planet teeming with men she had to fall for the one guy who insisted on commitment first.

His voice stopped her. "The Governor's Ball, tonight."

She rotated to face him. "Excuse me?"

"You said--'let me know where and when.' Where, the Governor's Ball at the Fairmont. When, tonight."

Regan scanned his face for a clue that he was joking. "But ... we're ... I'm already going there as the princess."

"I know. I'll be there to escort you." Ian winked.

"But we won't be ... the exchange is set within minutes of our arrival"

Ian stepped closer, folding her in his arms. "Wait and see. It'll be perfect."

Perfect would've been them in Ian's nice big hotel bed. But he'd said no. She worked to understand him while controlling all of the feelings churning inside her.

"Sure, if that's what you want," she said as graciously as possible.

Ian's gaze locked on hers pulling the same electric awareness of him as he always did--though it was the last thing she needed to be feeling.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I want." His eyes continued to hold hers, flickering with barely contained heat.

In spite of everything, a flame of hope grew in her heart.

Once back in her own suite, she unpacked the ball gown, which had just arrived from Paradise. Cautiously folding back the rosy tissue paper, Regan eyed the fairy tale gown inside full of misgivings. The dress was sheer delight, but it only reminded her of the challenge ahead.

She clung to the hope that Ian would change his mind and agree to an affair. An intimate relationship was a huge scary step. She wasn't ready for more.

When he'd asked for a date--she'd been torn. What woman doesn't want to be loved and romanced? But she cared about Ian too much to mislead him when her intentions were less than honorable and so far from what he wanted.

Tricking him would be wrong, but there was certainly nothing immoral about trying to change his mind.

Regan paced away from the dress, and then came back. She let her hand drift down and caress the soft material. She gazed at the fairy-dusted chiffon of palest possible blush. The dress captured long forgotten dreams buried deep inside--dreams where Prince Charming and happily ever after lived.

Shelving the long ago innocent girl's dream of romantic love, she gently hung the exquisite gown. Wearing the clothes didn't commit her to any course of action, except for playing her last act as the princess.

Underneath the gown, she found lingerie as beautiful as the dress itself, and a pair of to-die-for evening sandals waited to transform her. Everything was exquisite--rare and perfect enough to make her feel like a real princess. But she was the fake--the stunt double--only here as a decoy to draw out the terrorists. And she'd best remember it or her grownup heart would be shattered just as easily as her childish dreams.

Then a nasty thought slipped into her head. If she was in danger of believing the fairy tale--then what about Ian? Was he seeing the real Regan? Or had he fallen for the illusion? She pushed the doubts away, imaging being in Ian's arms, her eyes drifted shut, waiting for the first strains of the waltz. Even Cinderella got one night at the ball. She set the dress gently back on its nest of tissue paper, trying to shut out her mushy thoughts.

This was the real world and she had a job to do. She moved rapidly through the hotel rooms, stopping to tap softly on Lundstrom's bedroom door. A muffled summons permitted her entry into her tutor's suite.

Lundstrom was awake, sitting up in bed with a magazine open on her lap. A quilted pale blue bed jacket suited her perfectly. Though her hair was still bubble perfect, Regan thought she was still paler than usual. The tutor removed her half-glasses, setting them, and the magazine she'd been reading, aside.

"How are you feeling?" Regan asked with concern and more than a little guilt over how little she'd thought about her sick friend.

"Terrible. I have let you down grievously." Lundstrom plucked at the bed covers.

"Don't worry about that. We've got everything covered," she assured her tutor.

The older woman continued to worry the blankets. "Who will do your hair and your make up?"

"Kiki, a friend of mine, is filling in. Of course, she's not you. But she has a great eye and a way with hair. I'm still counting on you to check me over before I leave."

"Oh please, do not bother with me. I am confident your friend will do a wonderful job." Lundstrom sniffed, clearly sulking.

Regan hid her smile over the other woman's obvious jealousy, agreeing lightly. "Sure, if that's what you want. Is there anything I can get for you?"

Lundstrom coughed delicately, covering her mouth with a tissue. "No thank you. I am quite comfortable. The doctor gave me something to help calm the cough. I plan to make an early night of it. Though, you must promise to tell me every detail tomorrow."

For a minute, Regan considered not mentioning the exchange. By morning, Lundstrom might well be back with her beloved princess. However, considering that she could still be contagious and therefore unwelcome in the princess's quarters--she didn't want to get the woman's hopes up for nothing. A glance at Lundstrom's too-white face convinced her that the potential cheering factor of good news outweighed any possible future disappointment her friend might suffer.

"Princess Halle is going to finish the tour."

"Oh my goodness! When, how--?" Lundstrom asked, her eyes glittering with excitement.

"At the Fairmont, before the party--"

A knock on the suite's door interrupted their conversation. "I've got to run. I'm sure the Princess will fill you in on all the details tomorrow," she excused herself, hurrying to open the door for Kiki.

"Tell this jerk I'm only letting him live because he's a government servant and therefore works for me," Kiki demanded.

The secret service agent who had a firm but respectful grip on one deceptively slight elbow looked monumentally unhappy.

A quick visual inventory showed him to be physically intact. Regan assumed all his injuries were the result of verbal assaults.

"She's a friend of mine, really. I cleared her with Coluccio and Jefferson," Regan assured the worried agent.

He looked extremely doubtful, but released Kiki's arm.

"Hmph!" Kiki pushed her elegant nose in the air and sailed by him, slamming the door behind her.

"What's his name?" Kiki jerked her head toward the door.

"Sorry, I don't know."

"I guess I can't report him to Clyde then," Kiki sulked.

"Actually, all the special agents report to Victor Coluccio."

Kiki narrowed her eyes. "Oh yeah? Who yanks Vic's chain?"

"I'm not sure. Clyde, I guess. At least, for this operation."

Kiki flapped long fingers in dismissal. "Doesn't matter, boy was just doing his job. But I ask you. Do I look like a terrorist?"

"Terrifying, yes. Terrorist, no."

Kiki let loose with a gale of irrepressible, uninhibited laughter. The sound was contagious--no one could listen to it without at least smiling.

"Clyde said it was all over, but the shouting ..."

"I guess so." Regan looked away.

"Hey, getting the bad guys was the whole point, right?"

"You're right. It's just ..."

"McKnight," Kiki finished her sentence. "You have to promise me something, honey. If we're going dish--no tears. Got it? I'm not having my efforts to transform you into a goddess ruined by some not-worth-the-trouble man."

"Then you'll have to tell me about you and Clyde. I promise I won't cry no matter how pathetic you make him."

Kiki laughed again, a rich bubbling expression of joy.

Her friend's life had not been all lattes and sports cars. Kiki had worked hard for everything she had, yet she always embraced the positive. Regan promised herself she'd try to be more like Kiki. She'd get better at welcoming happiness and leave counting her sorrows for another day.

"Clyde's a fun guy. The thing with him is simple yin and yang--nothing complicated. I love how he's completely un-intimidated by me."

Regan lifted an eyebrow.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not blind. I know I got lucky in the gene pool. But this is just window dressing." Kiki dismissed her beauty with a sweep of her hand. "Clyde isn't awe struck, or scared off, or ..." she shrugged "Maybe because of his size--he gets how I look isn't me. Although, the outer package is the only thing most people react to."

Regan hugged her friend. "You're a million wonderful things besides beautiful."

"Thanks." She let loose with another chortle. "You've got the same problem--you just handle it different."

"Me?"

"Plueeeze! Don't go there--you've got a mirror."

"That's the princess gloss. I'm just me." Regan dismissed the idea that she lived anywhere near the same neighborhood as her friend's exotic beauty.

"Right." Kiki's skepticism settled as heavily as body armor.

Regan's friend had been gone for maybe three minutes, when she held her breath and balanced the tiara on her head. She nudged the circlet of fake diamonds slightly toward the back. Miraculously, it settled as if it truly belonged exactly there.

Some of the princess clothes, make that most of the princess clothes, made her want to cringe. But this evening's outfit was perfect. She stroked the delicate fabric with no more substance than an addict's excuses and sighed.

It might be silly, but tonight she felt like a real princess and the tiara was a fitting accessory. Kiki did a wonderful job, the upsweep, copied from a photo, which the princess's dresser had faxed over, was better than any of the styles that Lundstrom had created. With her expert make-up, elegant hairstyle and the exquisite gown she really did look wonderful. Tonight the beautiful princess illusion was too perfect.

Fooling herself was a real risk--one she definitely couldn't afford.

Ian's knock accelerated her heart rate. Regan forced herself into princess mode, gliding regally toward the door.

"Good evening--" Ian said, his deep voice trailing off as his eyes made a slow journey from her sexy sandals to her tiara and back down--lingering in all the best places. His heated gaze affected her exactly as if he'd actually touched her intimately, making it impossible to draw a decent breath.

She was up for a few indecent ones.

But she stayed in character, giving him a dazzling smile of sheer pleasure. The one the real Princess reserved for Prince Peder. From under her lowered lashes, she devoured Ian in his evening clothes. The stark lines of the formal suit and snowy shirt looked as natural on him as his ancient holey tee shirts and worn jeans. The fact was that he made whatever he wore, look good. And he looked even better naked.

Raising her gaze to his, she read frank male approval, setting off a round of intimate feminine flutters. How on earth would she be able to get through the evening as the princess and Ian's date? Then she remembered. She wouldn't need to. This was it for them. She would be changing places with the real princess before the party actually got started.

Ian held out his arm and Regan let her hand settle on the sleeve of his evening suit. If he hadn't already stolen her heart, she would've lost it right then. He was all rugged masculinity--polished to a sophisticated gloss.

She resolved to try to keep tonight sweet and tender--to leave both of them him with wonderful romantic memories, even as she sensed how impossible that ambition would be to achieve.

He'd given her a corsage of orchids fashioned into a bracelet. The flowers carried a musky vanilla fragrance, adding another layer of pleasure to her dream date. When he captured her chin and met her eyes, she felt suddenly shy. Her lashes lowered, masking the helpless sensual surrender he evoked. She waited for his kiss.

"No shoptalk tonight, okay?" He traced her lips with his thumb setting off another chain reaction of erotic sensations.

It took several heartbeats for her to manage an answer. "It's your date. You're calling the shots." She darted a fast glance at him. "I'm sorry, there was no work-related pun intended."

"Thanks for going along with my date idea. Next time--" he said, leaning closer. "Will there be another time?" His breath teased her ear.

"I don't know," she lied. There would never be another time. She wasn't that

much of a fool for pain. She understood him fine. He had a fixation on home and family. Given his history, she even understood why. But she couldn't go there and she wasn't about to put her heart back on the line by asking him to sleep with her again.

Dear God, his rejection had hurt more than--more than she'd thought she could be hurt. But, if she could be sure he'd changed his mind ...

"Tell me something. Are you against premarital sex in general--or should I take this personally?"

"Before you, I was all for it," he admitted with too much candor for her comfort.

She believed him. Still, it sounded pretty harsh--as if she'd turned him off sex. She leaned back so she could narrow her eyes at him in mock temper. Flowers, no matter how beautiful only bought a guy just so much immunity.

Then he gave her the best possible explanation. "Since I met you I haven't been interested in any other woman."

She wished that he'd stopped while she was acting insulted and angry. His honest tenderness melted her defenses--melted her heart--melted her.

"But I figured you'd never buy the bull if you were getting the stud service for free." His face stayed flat--his tone was detox dry.

She wanted to be insulted, but that's exactly what she had half-hoped, that an affair with Ian would get him out of her system. And that the tender, strange feeling making her reckless and giddy wasn't really, truly love.

She kept her voice light and teasing. "Maybe you're like dope. One taste and I'd be hooked."

Tracing his dimple with the pad of her middle finger, Regan let a soft smile flirt with her lips. It was dangerous playing this game with him, especially when she wasn't at all sure of the rules. But Ian was worth the risk. There was nothing boyish about his wicked sexy grin. He was about as subtle as the Super bowl's scoreboard.

Regan didn't want to think about the impossible. Not tonight. He was getting exactly what he'd asked for. Strangely enough, right this second, it was what she hoped for too. She wanted to dance, hold hands, and enjoy a simple goodnight kiss. One magic night filled with romantic memories.

She kept forgetting that she was exchanging places with the princess within minutes of their arrival. Their magic evening was destined to stay a wistful dream.

During the short drive to the Fairmont Ballroom, she should've been practicing her official greeting speech in case anything went wrong and she had to address the crowd. But all she could think of was Ian. He was sitting so close that he flooded her senses. He sat very correctly, not touching her anywhere. Her awareness of him grew until her body wept for his caress. He was close enough for her to feel his heat. She longed for him to be wrapped around her, soothing all her achy-needy places.

The plan to keep tonight g-rated got tossed during the first few minutes of the drive. Ian had no one but himself to blame. He'd said he wanted her and he'd made her want him. Now she prayed for a few minutes of privacy, counting on Ian's uncanny ability to pick up her signals.

After he'd handed her out of the limousine, Regan had whispered to her guard, saying exactly what she'd rehearsed to facilitate the exchange with the real Princess.

"A moment before the introductions," she'd murmured.

Bjorn grunted an affirmative and led the way to a private dressing room set aside for her use. The room was more spacious than she'd expected. The spacious room was furnished with feminine rosebud patterned drapes, which framed pure white sheers, billowing from the windows like a bridal veil. The combination of wedding fabrics--moiré silk, frothy tulle, and luxurious satin--covered the furniture confirmed her guess that the space usually served as a bride's changing room.

Charmed by the romantic décor, she barely had time to be nervous before the door opened. Ian joined her and the room shrank to an intimate space perfect for holding just the two of them.

"Where's the princess?" she asked breathlessly, leaning forward to nibble on his sexy chin as desire consumed her.

"Cancelled," he said against her lips.

"And where are Bjorn and Erik?" she asked, slipping off her panties. She was not at all interested in his answer.

She stroked him through his slacks. Backing up, he bumped against the paneled door. She stayed right with him.

"Erik is checking the ballroom. I told Bjorn to take a break. I said I'd look after you." His words came out fast and rough.

"Good." Regan nibbled his smile.

"Slow down princess, this isn't exactly the time or--"

Not what she wanted to hear. In fact, she didn't want to hear anything. Regan unzipped his slacks finding him hot, heavy, and oh so hard.

"Good God, woman you--"

She didn't give him time to finish his protest. She gripped his chin and assaulted his mouth with sexual intent.

He'd been asking for it. He'd started her fire with a hundred hot looks, dozens of intimate touches, and she was in no mood for more preliminaries.

She wanted him inside her. Now.

A quick adjustment and her voluminous skirt was bunched up, leaving nothing but an empty throbbing need between her aching pussy and his hard cock.

Hooking a leg around his hip, she tugged his butt closer. A small push and his silky head nudged her where she was slick and swollen for him. He thrust in with a groan. Her feminine muscles contracted in helpless spasms milking him as she exploded in a sweet agony of desperate grinding.

She was pulsing on him, around him and finally with him. Waves of release crashed through her arched body, flooding her with heady, bubbling, intoxicating, and ultimately blissful satisfaction.

Chapter Sixteen

Kent, Washington May 19th 6:30 PM local time

O'Brien waited with well-feigned patience for Ahmad and Yasir to take their seats, joining the new recruits Rafi and Masa, before speaking. "We have confirmation the exchange is on for tonight. Two new royal bodyguards have arrived from Svensberg. They will accompany the princess when she leaves the Governor's ball."

Ahmad interrupted belligerently. "What of Habib and Bahar--are we to abandon them to rot in the infidel's prisons?"

"Our mission parameters are clear cut; there will be no rescue," O'Brien spoke flatly, tensed for mutiny.

"At least, Yasir should tell us what happened with Kareem, Ahmad muttered."

Irritated by the man's lack of manners, O'Brien bowed politely to Yasir. "If you would be so kind as to enlighten us, I'm sure it will give comfort to Kareem's brother to hear of his bravery."

Yasir bowed brusquely. "The janitor uniform and cleaning cart worked as well as a cloak of invisibility. I administered an overdose of the morphine by bypassing the pumps metering system. Kareem died as a true Son of Allah, praise for the holy mission and a smile of gratitude on his face as he entered Paradise."

Cautiously, O'Brien took a breath. Yasir had described the perfect ending for their comrade. The faces of the men listening showed nothing but approval for Yasir's version of Kareem's execution. O'Brien wondered idly how far from reality the account was, at the same time, accepting that he would never know the truth.

"Thank you for sharing our comrade's final journey with us," O'Brien said respectfully. "The Governor's ball begins at 8:00 PM with the princess due to arrive thirty minutes after that. She will be entering through a special side entrance while at the same time the imposter will arrive in the Svensberg embassy limo at the front entrance. The two women will trade places in a dressing room set aside for their use. The imposter will leave by taxi and the real princess will give a speech thanking the city and state for their hospitality. She will dance with the governor and the mayor and leave around 11:00 PM. Any questions so far?"

"How reliable is this information?" Rafi asked.

O'Brien shrugged. "It's straight from the Secret Service security briefing this afternoon. However, nothing is ever set in stone. Since you're working the party as a waiter, you are our eyes and ears at ground zero. It is your responsibility to alert the team to any changes in the agenda."

There you go you arrogant little fucker, enjoy the reminder about your part in this operation and thanks for interrupting.

He nodded toward Ahmad, Masa and Yasir. "If you don't mind, I want to run through your conversation with the Svensberg guards. Your command of English is

excellent. However, we must erase all trace of a Qsani accent for these few sentences."

Once O'Brien was satisfied with the terrorist's delivery of the simple message, he brought up the most critical subject. "In the event that tonight's kidnapping fails we need a backup plan. Any thoughts, gentlemen?"

"We will not fail," Ahmad said flatly.

* * * *

Discover Bay, Jamaica May 19th 9:00 PM local time

When Sam got home from Tortolo, he wasn't sure if Caroline would even be there. But he hoped. Unfortunately, he didn't know his fiancé well enough to make an informed guess as to her probable response to any situation, let alone one as emotionally laden as this one.

Quietly, he locked the door behind him and trudged upstairs to the master bedroom. Caroline was asleep in the identical position he'd left her, three days ago. Superstitiously, he dropped a kiss on the top of her head. This time the result was different; she woke stretching sensuously.

"You're home," she mumbled sleepily.

"Go back to sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

She rolled over, burrowing deeper into the soft mattress. "Kay."

Sam stripped out of his clothes, heading directly for the shower. While he rinsed the shampoo from his hair the bathroom door opened. His cock rose in anticipation.

The shower doors stayed shut. Retching noises took the starch out of his hopes.

Running water, gargling, and spitting sounds told him at least she wasn't prostrate with nausea. Then the shower doors opened.

She stepped in closing the door carefully behind her. There was a new languor to all her movements. And as unlikely as it seemed, he would've sworn her breasts were already enlarged. She slipped past him, availing herself of the hot spray from the showerhead. Looking over her shoulder gave him a great view of wet tits with turgid nipples. She backed up until his hard dick was nestled between the cheeks of her butt.

"Do me in the ass," she ordered, bending over further to facilitate his access.

Cautiously, he pressed the head of his cock again her sphincter--excited by the tightness and the taboo of anal penetration, but not wanting to hurt her and put an end to all future ass-fucking. Oh God, he was such a bastard. He'd been home ten minutes and already he was getting ready to--

Oh holy mother of God! He'd pushed gently but she'd already lubed up for him and she sucked him right in. Trying to go slow, he really was, but it felt incredible as he jammed his cock further inside her tight back passage.

She wriggled, ramming her butt impatiently into his crotch. "I'm not made of glass--move that prick, boy. Mama wants to come."

To hell with gently, the woman wanted satisfaction. Sam reached around her, finding his way through her swollen vulva to the edge of her cunt and thrust two fingers inside while keeping his thumb on her hot button. Then he proceeded to set a fast pace, matching the strokes of his cock to those of his hand. Her own hands were busy, pinching and rolling her nipples.

The first orgasm hit her in seconds. He didn't bother slowing. Instead, he picked

up his tempo ramming her ass and pussy harder and faster.

"We're getting married," he panted very close to his own climax.

"Sure, as long as you keep fucking me right," she agreed graciously.

Sam didn't bother answering her. He was too preoccupied, in filling her rectum with his cum.

He cleaned both of them thoroughly. For once, Caroline seemed content. After he'd patted her gently dry, he carried her back to bed. She dozed off almost immediately with an ease he envied but was unable to duplicate.

When he did finally fall asleep, he only achieved a light somnambulant state. The first time Caroline got up to pee he woke. She came back to bed a few minutes later, pressing her butt into his groin. His dick hardened as if he hadn't had sex in weeks. She was so slippery he entered her cunt from behind with almost no resistance. He loved the way she took his full length and welcomed his hard grinding strokes with encouraging whimpers and more joy juice.

"I was serious about getting married," he said as she bucked against him.

"And I was serious about getting well-fucked," she said, shocking him. Although he'd heard her say it the first time. The odd part was that her crudest phrases excited him. The ruder and more demanding she was--the harder he came.

Invariably, she made him lick up all of her juices and his. He disliked it, and craved the abasement. Almost as if he'd been waiting his whole life, without ever realizing it, for someone to care about him enough to demand discipline. The sad part was that Caroline didn't seem to really care.

If he held the power, he'd cherish his submissive. The thought was strongly seductive. He used to be such a nice regular guy.

Chapter Seventeen

Seattle, Washington May 19th 8:50 PM

Ian pulled away from her, tucking himself back into his slacks and gingerly zipping up the rumpled cloth. "We need to talk," he said stiffly.

His grim tone doused Regan's euphoria faster than a stun gun. Worse, it triggered a flash flood of shame. The bride's dressing room, with its ultra-feminine décor suddenly seemed to be judging her just as harshly as Ian. Why hadn't she noticed how cold those mirrors were earlier?

"Later," she promised with a fake smile.

In some other lifetime.

A glance at his frown made her add, "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" His brow lowered another notch and his words dripped with angry disbelief.

"We have to talk," he repeated his demand, making it sound even more like a warning before he stormed out of the tiny room.

Regan dropped her gaze, unwilling to face her own reflection. She definitely wasn't looking forward to that conversation. No happy discussions ever started out with the man announcing, *we have to talk*. Especially not when he growled it like an ultimatum.

Burying her pain and wounded pride, she sought for the safety of princess mode. After slipping back into her lacy panties, she wet a guest towel with cold water. Wringing the ridiculous pink linen nearly dry, she held the cool cloth to the back of her neck in an effort to regain her composure.

What had she just done? Had he even been willing? He'd responded to her, but still, did that make it count as consensual sex?

She forced herself to meet her own accusing eyes. She'd lost control and assaulted a man. A man who'd made clear he wasn't interested in a casual sexual relationship. The fact it had been Ian, whom she cared about deeply, made it all that much worse. She had no idea where to begin to repair the wrong she'd done.

Unfortunately, she didn't have the luxury of tears, temper, or even avoiding Ian for a few hours. The real princess had exercised her royal privilege, leaving Regan on duty with a ball to attend and a speech to deliver.

For the next three hours, she relied on her princess training to carry her. She'd taken her place in the receiving line, had exchanged compliments, had made small talk, and had shaken hundreds of hands. Afterwards, she'd performed on cue giving her speech without hearing a single word of it. Then she'd met, mingled, and made more chitchat with the dignitaries, community leaders, and service personnel. She'd danced with the Governor while Ian waltzed with the state's first lady.

Finally, shortly before midnight, she'd said her farewells and was escorted from

the ball. Her headache pounded, alternating between sickeningly painful and excruciating. The royal guards, Erik and Bjorn arranged themselves on either side of her, the secret service agents weren't visible, but no doubt they were observing her departure from some nearby viewing point.

The feeling of eyes on her back would have made her feel paranoid on a good night. Despite four mornings of security briefings, there were still agents she didn't recognize. Like the men who'd suddenly stepped both in front and behind her. The sudden appearance of the strange agents made her nervous.

"I thought you were keeping a low profile," Eric, the guard on her left, commented to the agent pacing him.

"We're relieving you," the newcomer supplied smoothly.

Now that she looked at him more closely, there was something about the agent that bothered her. Not for the first time, she wished she spoke Svenska fluently so that she could communicate with her guards without alarming anyone else. Her first instinct was to question the new agents. Her second thought--to keep quiet, giving the suspects a chance to either reassure or else incriminate themselves by their actions--was the smarter option. After all, the whole object of this exercise was to catch the terrorists.

Testing her theory wouldn't hurt anything. But how? Mentally she flicked through her limited Svenska vocabulary, seeking a sentence consistent with the Princess's speech pattern, and finally settling on a pettish complaint. "Where's my purse?"

The guard in front cocked his head, because he hadn't understood her--or because he had? She was carrying the stupid purse. He should catch on unless she had totally mangled the pronunciation of the question.

Before she had a chance to get more frustrated, the special agent behind her pulled Erik aside. She heard grunts and thuds as the two men struggled.

Bjorn, the other royal guard, reacted quickly, stuffing Regan into a niche in the long hallway. He stepped in front of her while pulling an automatic pistol from a shoulder holster.

The phony agents fled. Bjorn fired, but the terrorists disappeared around a bend in the narrow passageway. Bjorn spoke rapidly, into his lapel mike, alerting the secret service to the attempt and requesting assistance for Erik as he chased after the terrorist.

Hopefully, the attackers ran straight into the arms of the real Secret Service agents. She hurried to Erik, who had slumped against the wall, a spot of blood bloomed on his white shirt. Using her palms to apply pressure, she slowed the alarming flow from the guard's chest, praying his wounds were treatable.

A flow of Svenska issued from Erik, from his tone a protest. She shushed him, ignoring his words to concentrate on controlling the bleeding.

If only she'd been sharper or better at speaking Svenska or faster to notice the threat. Another innocent man's life was seeping through her fingers while she could do nothing accept maintain pressure and whisper reassurance.

The wail of sirens grew louder--promising help was on the way. Then she was pulled from the wounded guard and roughly hurried toward the limo, where an ashen faced Hans waited, holding the passenger door.

She cooperated, not having any real choice. Stumbling into the car and safety,

she was sick with a painful awareness that once again good men had been injured because of her. The realization flooded her with guilt and reawakened the nightmare of her past.

Ian stopped to talk to Bjorn, and then spoke to Erik, who was receiving an expert field dressing.

Erik grimaced as the medic worked, brushing aside Ian's concern. "This is nothing, a minor wound. Did Bjorn catch the other one?"

"I'm not sure," Ian answered the guard over his shoulder, already hurrying to catch the limo.

"The one who attacked me has a broken nose," Erik called after him.

When Ian approached the car, the driver was already closing the passenger door. He quickly re-opened it after meeting Ian's eyes. Whatever he'd seen in his expression served to motivate him into action. The man held the door open with such a rigidly correct posture that Ian halfway expected a salute.

His long fuse had burned dangerously close to nothing.

Regan's head rested against the seat. Her eyes closed. He knew, simply by the way she held herself, she had a bad headache. He also knew she'd be beating herself up for the wound her guard had suffered. Her pain defused his anger faster than anything else could have.

He stared at Regan, beyond frustrated by her behavior and yet wanting to comfort her--needing to protect her. Her slender neck was exposed. The vulnerable line of her throat tugged at his heart with its poignant beauty. For days, he'd been showing her she could rely on him. He'd adored, honored, and cherished her. When her eyes invited him to follow her into the dressing room, he'd hoped.

When she unzipped him, flipped up her skirt, and then pressed herself to his throbbing cock, what the hell had she expected to happen?

He was only human. He'd answered her with everything he had.

What had been her response? *I'm sorry.*

She'd used him like a scratching pole and it felt so damn fine he wanted to beg her to do it over and over.

He'd been willing too. At least one traitorous part of his anatomy was all for meaningless animal sex. Remembering the specifics of exactly how it had felt made him as hard as if he'd never had relief. But this time his arousal only added fuel his anger.

Temper burned the back of his neck. Ian honestly didn't know if he was more upset with Regan or himself. He clamped his jaw to keep from saying things he'd regret.

His cell phone rang, and he answered it without bothering to check caller ID, happy to talk to anyone other than her.

"Hey Romeo we got the bastards. Those Svensberg guys did okay. One of the scumbags has a broken nose." Clyde chuckled.

"Thank God!" Ian breathed a little easier.

After he finished the call he refocused on Regan. "That was Clyde. They apprehended the last two terrorists."

"Good," she said, refusing to look at him.

She still blamed herself, if he knew Regan, and he did. Sitting opposite her, in

order to keep himself from wringing her fragile neck, he continued to study her. She looked smaller, younger, and more fragile with her eyes closed. A flicker of long thick lashes presaged her eyes opening to cautious slits.

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and pitched his voice intimately. "We are going to talk."

He wanted to know why she'd said she was sorry. He wanted to tell her how amazing she was, and how much he cared about her. He wanted to yell at her for making him crazy. He wanted to kiss her until she couldn't think, and then ...

"I already said I was sorry. What else do you want to talk about?" she asked softly. "Isn't it enough punishment that two more men nearly died protecting me?" Her dark eyes remained half-veiled as she studied the hands twisting in her lap

He didn't yell, but his temper flared all over again at her blaming herself for the terrorist's actions. "One thing has nothing to do with the other."

The words that came out of his mouth next weren't at all what he'd planned to say. "We just had unprotected sex, princess. I'd say that warrants some discussion. Do I need to be worried?"

Regan's eyes flew open. She jerked herself upright. Ian saw a flash of pain cross her face, but he was too hurt and too angry to relent.

"You don't have anything to worry about. I was tested years ago," she said quietly, and then looked away, refusing to meet his eyes.

So there was something he needed to be worried about. His gut twisted and he fought to control his feelings, clinging to his anger. *Not so fast, princess. Damn her-- he needed to know what she was hiding.*

"What about more recently--say, since your last sexual contact?"

The whole conversation was moving downhill fast. But he couldn't back out of it. He wasn't letting her slide away from him with evasions. The very least he deserved from Regan was honesty. He wouldn't settle for less. *Not when he wanted much more.*

"It's been awhile." Her voice was so soft and low it was hard to hear her.

"Not good enough."

She shrugged in a so-sue-me gesture. Then she turned, pinning him with her eyes. "How about you McKnight? Do I need to worry?"

"No, I always use protection."

"You didn't tonight." She zeroed in on the hole in his logic.

And that was my fault? "What about birth control?" *No quarter, princess.*

"There hasn't been any ... there hasn't been any need." Her neck stretched an extra regal inch, daring him to keep pushing. He wanted very badly to shake her, or kiss her, or ...

He was in so deep they'd have to send a submarine to rescue him. He'd never trusted those swab jockeys. He might as well give in now. He was a goner. Before he had a chance to surrender, she spoke again.

"I admit ... I acted impulsively. I did say I was sorry. Could we just forget about it?" She flashed him a brave smile, which he might have fallen for if it hadn't been for the quivering chin.

Not a chance in hell, princess.

Then her request sank in, grabbing him by the balls and twisting.

The hard-on he'd thought was going to be permanent ebbed away. He'd actually thought she'd been so attracted to him she'd been unable to control herself. He'd hoped she was as crazy in love as he was.

Reality check: she wanted to forget about the most fantastic sex of his life.

Silence weighted the air between them for the remainder of the ride back to the hotel. He'd shut up, but if she thought their conversation was over she was mistaken.

Steering her with a hand in the small of her back he said nothing in the elevator. She looked anywhere but at him. But he'd felt her shiver when he touched her. She couldn't sell him the ice princess act now. He knew better.

"I'll handle it from here." Ian nodded to the secret service agent reading a magazine in the suite.

Ian had dismissed her guard with an ease Regan wanted to be irritated by, but wasn't. Ignoring him, she headed straight for her room. She still had a headache and she was tired of playing princess. If Ian was determined to badger her, at least she could change clothes first so she could get beat up as herself.

Since Lundstrom was sick. She wouldn't be there waiting up for her, but she was still in the apartment and besides, Secret Service agents were only a scream away. Things couldn't get out of hand. She sat down her evening bag and stopped. Exhaustion halted her. She waited for a surge of energy to take off the fairy tale dress and tuck away the tiara.

The bedroom door swung open. Regan didn't look up. Lundstrom must've crawled out of her sick bed to greet her Princess. She was in for a disappointment. Welcome to the club sister. It was a toss up which one of them was in worse shape. Regan simply waited.

When the other woman didn't speak, Regan sighed. "Don't bother lecturing me, Lundstrom. I don't need it. I did something beyond dumb and I don't know how I can ever fix it.

"You might start by telling me the truth," Ian said sternly.

Regan whirled, the sudden movement making her headache pound harder and added dizziness to her list of miseries. "What are you doing here?"

He ignored her question, asking his own instead. "What's wrong? One of your headaches?"

"No--maybe a small one," she contradicted herself.

Regan peeked at Ian from under her lashes, not ready to face him. He looked angry, tired, worried, slightly scruffy, and completely irresistible. How was she supposed to ... but she knew. All she had to do was tell him the truth and then she wouldn't have to worry about resisting him.

So why was she hesitating?

Regan practiced the yoga breathing exercises, which Kiki had taught her for calming. She ran over her options. Her choices were simple and ugly. She had to either give an Oscar worthy performance or trot out the truth.

She sank onto the vanity's chair and leaned back against the padded seat keeping her breathing even, willing herself to relax. This was the Princess's highly visible suite.

Nothing was going to happen.

Despite her efforts at self-reassurance, her pulse leapt and skittered like she was in a foot pursuit.

Ian stared at Regan, unable to look away. Faint shadows made the skin around her eyes look slightly bruised. A tiny line appeared delicate between winged brows--a sure sign that she was stressed.

"You want some Tylenol?" he asked.

"No, it'll be okay."

Ian wasn't so sure. They'd had a rough couple of days. The relentless tension of not knowing when an attempt would be made took a toll. Not knowing who to trust made it worse. Yesterday's assault would've shaken anyone. Tonight's was tougher. But Regan handled messy, violent, and depressing all the time. Whatever was eating her right now wasn't about the terrorists.

"You were my first real lover." She said it so softly he'd barely heard her. Regan stood with her head bowed. The wrap she'd been holding drifted to the floor.

Ian picked it up and draped it across a chair. His head swimming with questions he was afraid to ask. He'd never seen her like this--so open--vulnerable.

Her elegant neck bent with sorrow. His response was automatic. He stepped closer to protect her from whatever demons haunted her. Surrounding her with his body, not touching. Only sheltering.

A single tear dropped from her lashes. He pulled a clean handkerchief from his front pants pocket and tucked it into her limp fingers. She closed around it, giving his hand a squeeze. His heart swelled with tenderness.

"You asked me about my last sexual encounter" Her voice was thick, and her words slow as though they'd been unburied from some deep cavern.

She lifted her lashes. She didn't meet his eyes, but stared straight ahead. Another tear rolled down her cheek. The reluctant silent tears tugged at his heart.

He waited for her to continue--holding himself at attention. Suddenly, unsure that he was ready to meet Regan's demons.

"It was fifteen years ago ... my stepfather. He said it was my turn to take care of him since my mother had died. That was the way he put it ... like she'd inconvenienced him. I didn't even understand what he meant."

She couldn't have been more than fourteen, just a kid. Ian wanted to howl with rage for what she'd suffered. He wanted to kill the bastard who'd done that to his warrior princess. But Regan didn't need more anger. She needed his strength and understanding.

On some level, he'd known from the start there was something driving her. So many things made more sense now. He could only imagine the cost of using her pain to help others. He dreaded hearing more, but she needed to tell him. He had to listen, no matter how much it hurt.

"He told me I was a tease. He said I'd made him too horny, that what I was getting was exactly what I had coming."

"He was wrong," Ian spoke the words firmly, hoping she would believe him.

"You're right. But knowing that doesn't erase the shame or the guilt. It must've been partly my fault. Everything bad happened after my mother died."

Zack was taken into custody. I was questioned for hours, and then placed in a foster home. That was my fault, too."

Ian tried to interrupt but she pulled away angrily, crying openly, not bothering to wipe away the tears.

"I was such a basket case I didn't make them understand what had happened, that Zack had only been defending me. Everything was such a mess ... when I found out Zack was on trial for murder, facing the death sentence, I had to testify--there was no choice. Of course, everything came out. Thank God, Zach was acquitted and the death ruled a justifiable homicide." She raced on, the words stumbling out. "Even after the acquittal, people treated us as if we were the monsters."

"Did you have anyone you could talk to, who you could trust?" he asked.

Anger warred with empathy for her ordeal, threatening to overwhelm him. He hung on, keeping the helpless rage at bay. The last thing Regan needed was his fury. She relied on his strength.

"Zach sent me to a therapist. It helped, but it didn't erase the bad stuff."

"You were the victim, you don't own his guilt."

Regan leaned back, letting him fold her in his arms, speaking so softly he leaned closer to catch the words. "I never thought I'd feel desire. I thought that was one more price I'd paid for surviving."

The idea of this passionate woman living without love sliced his heart. "You never even fantasized about making love?"

"I thought about it. I wondered how it would feel if the man were kind. But even in my fantasies things never went ... they were incomplete. Whenever I got close to a man, I'd freeze up. I tried. More than once," she admitted softly.

The idea of another man touching Regan made a red haze fog the edges of his vision. "None of them knew about your history." He made it a statement.

"It's not easy to talk about."

"I'm glad you told me," he said--not sure whether or not he was lying.

Regan struggled against his arms and he let her go, even though he ached to hold her safe.

"It's not just my history" She dipped down, unfastening her shoes with flexible grace. "Believe me I'm very grateful for everything you've done for me. But everyone who ever loved me is dead. It's fairly short, sad, list--starting with my father, my one living grandmother, and then my mother. Except for Zach, and he came so close it still gives me chills. I'd be crazy to think about marriage. I decided after my mother died, and everything bad that had happened, that I wasn't going to marry. Ever." she added, just in case she hadn't made it clear enough.

She held her breath. Nothing. He didn't say anything.

She forced herself to meet his eyes already hating the pity she knew she'd see. But she was wrong. Ian didn't look at her with pity. His deep blue eyes flashed with angry sparks--his sensual lips compressed into a hard line.

"That's it?" His voice held equal parts of incredulity and anger.

"Yeah, that's it." She scrubbed away the tears tracks, meeting those hot blue eyes with anger of her own. Dusting this insensitive jerk was getting easier by the moment.

"Let me get this straight, you're afraid the people you love might die?"

Regan nodded cautiously, a trace of her headache still lingered, frowning at him. The way he talked made it sound as if she was being neurotic and irrational and that's not how it was at all.

He'd leaned forward until his beautiful face, tight with determination, was less than an inch away from hers. "What about Zach? He didn't die. Maybe I'll be like Zach and be able to withstand the curse of your love."

"It's too big a risk." Regan averted her eyes from his, unable to look at his honest feelings.

"What about you? Are you going to live forever? You could die first, after all you are four years older than me. Does that mean I shouldn't love you?"

She blinked. *Did he really love her?*

He wasn't done.

"The way I see it, you've written off a huge part of your life on the chance bad things might happen."

Privately, Regan admitted there was some justice to his remark even as she armored herself against his angry arguments. She wrapped her arms around her waist, scooting her chair away from him.

"It's my life," she said, aware she sounded like a sulky teenager. *That was the best she could come up with?*

An old memory from the therapy her brother had insisted on resurfaced. "Don't let him rob you of your sexuality. Fight back, and embrace your feelings. He stole your innocence and hurt you in terrible ways, don't give him more than he already took."

Had she done that? Had she given her stepfather her courage, her passion, her ability to love? But he had taken the most precious thing of all--her ability to conceive children and she hadn't found the courage to tell Ian that part.

"When you're ready to grow up and start living your life instead of hiding from it give me a call." He stomped off, demonstrating his superior maturity by slamming the door hard enough that the vanity mirror shivered.

Her headache throbbed with fresh viciousness.

A moment later, Ian reopened the door. He wasn't done. As a matter of fact, he hoped he was never done with Regan. "I am not too young for you."

Regan arched one eyebrow at him. "I didn't say you were."

Ian ignored her response. "You're a couple of years older, big deal."

"I'm five years older," she said quietly, her thoughts obviously elsewhere.

"Four and a couple of months. If the age difference were reversed you'd never give it a second thought. Admit it."

Damn, this wasn't how he wanted to sound--growling defensively at her.

Crossing the room, he reached out to her, forcing himself to be gentle when he wanted to throttle her. Stroking the back of her neck, he pleaded. "Give us a chance."

Regan leaned back and closed her eyes. He massaged her shoulders. She felt so slight under his fingers. She didn't seem nearly strong enough to bring him to his knees, but he was damn close to begging.

"You've got to go," she murmured, not moving, not meeting his eyes.

He cupped the back of her head holding her loose, but steady. Anticipation sang through his blood, accelerating his pulse as he lowered his head.

Over a kiss.

God, she made him feel like a teenager, except for the hunger. That was man-sized. He was through being noble. He would settle for what she gave, taking more if he could get away with it.

"Stand up. I'll help you with the dress."

Regan rose, turning her back toward him obediently.

He concentrated on unhooking the fragile material and then unzipping without catching either the flimsy gown or her delicate skin. As the zipper lowered, more of her backbone emerged. The long delicate muscles of her back barely visible under luminous skin smoother than any fabric.

His lips followed the zipper trail, pressing kisses on the newly bared back. When the dress was completely undone, Regan shimmied and stepped out of the gown. She would always be a princess to him, whether or not she bothered to dress for the part.

She stood before him like every fantasy he'd ever had about her come to life. Her stockings, bra, and panties were shimmering white lace concoctions not in the same neighborhood as innocence, yet so touchingly feminine. She still had on the uber sexy silver sandals with the straps suggestively undone, and the tiara. There was something about making love to his princess that made him feel like he could kill dragons before breakfast.

Regan reached up and removed the tiara, setting it on the dresser. Then she began removing hairpins. It was the most erotic thing he had ever watched. Her eyes stayed locked with his until she removed the last pin. She sat it with the others. Her lashes drifted down.

Ian shrugged out of his jacket tossing it over a chair. He gathered Regan's gown and draped it there too, liking the way their things looked tangled together.

He took his time shedding the rest of his clothes. Regan watching him. He met her eyes and loved the desire he saw reflected. His? Hers? Theirs.

He could build from that. She wanted him. She trusted him. Perhaps more than she realized. All he needed was a chance.

He stepped closer brushing her with his need. Letting the softness of her erase everything except for them. He traced circles up her back. When he came to her bra he unfastened it and tossed it toward the rest of their clothes. He continued his massage down her spine working the fine muscles into butter--sizzling melted butter.

She relaxed in his arms. He slipped off her panties and decided the stockings and heels could stay. Backing up until he bumped a chair--he sat, taking her with him. He arranged her on his lap, and then continued his erotic massage. Working in smaller and smaller circles, he rubbed ever closer to her hot spots.

Ian knew exactly when Regan went from relaxed to aroused. Her nipples puckered into hard ripe berries, begging for his mouth. He resisted testing her folds, knowing that if he found her wet it would erode his control. He was already so hard he hurt. But he didn't have what he wanted, yet.

He wanted her beyond willing, past aroused. He wanted her desperate. He

wanted her as hungry for him as he was for her.

"Please," she begged.

He was a reasonable guy. No point torturing the woman. He fastened his mouth over one straining nipple while teasing the other with his thumb.

"Harder."

That throaty, hungry voice urged him. His cock bobbed eagerly against her wet satin folds, wanting to help with the harder part.

She wriggled her hips making contact with his joystick.

Ian lost the battle. He surged into her hot, tight, wet core.

She pulsed around him, feminine muscles massaging his already primed cock, making him harder than he'd ever been. His balls tightened and she moaned--nearly making him explode. But he had no intention of imploding solo. He stroked the ultra-sensitive underside of her breasts. At the same time, using his teeth tenderly on a demanding nipple. She whimpered softly and worked herself against the ridge of his pubic bone.

She cried out, begging him for release, "Ian, oh please ... Ian." His name a sweet obscenity on her lips. Her eyes were dark pools of desire pleading for release more eloquently than words.

Love, the kind he'd dreamed of, softened her expression. At that moment, he wasn't the supplicant and this wasn't just fantastic sex. They were equals making love.

Her back arched, all her muscles clenched tight. Denying her, denying himself was impossible. He soared with her--helpless to resist the soul gripping need for fulfillment. He broke in a release beyond pleasure, beyond pain, beyond ecstasy into unexplored territory.

Regan's muscles refused to function. They'd gone on strike. Even her bones had dissolved in the heat of lovemaking. She lay slumped against Ian in puddle of happiness--nothing but satiated nerves and spent flesh.

Gradually she became aware of details and they were all good. Like the way his legs felt under hers--warm with tickling hairs that teased her smoothness. The hollows and planes of his muscles and bones surrounding her. The rough hands stroking her back. Learning her. Soothing her. Pleasing her. The hairy chest teasing her nipples with each breath he took. The focus of his desire thickening inside her stretching tender muscles. Pleasure points she'd thought were done for at least a day tingled to awareness then quickened with arousal--greedy for more ecstasy.

She met Ian's gaze, helpless to resist the pull of him. She bit her tongue to keep from telling him she loved him, a pointless act of self-torture. Love was in his gaze, in his touch, and she knew from his expression he could see it in her. She surrendered to the moment--to a brief sanctuary from reality.

Loving him was the right thing to do--for now.

Later that night, Regan woke with Ian's body spooned around hers. He felt perfect and natural as if they'd been sleeping together for years. The flame of hope, which first flickered to life when he'd asked for a date instead of the sex she'd offered--grew steadily stronger in her heart.

Crazy as she'd been to keep caring about him, she hadn't been able to stop. He'd

given her more than reassurance, even after she'd forcefully seduced him. She blushed, remembering their lovemaking.

She'd teased him about being addictive. It turned out to be true. He was so sexy that he should be a controlled substance.

Irresistible as he was, could she trust him with her heart? Just maybe it was safe to love Ian.

She turned--hooking a leg over his hip--teasing his eager cock.

"Do you mind?" She kept her expression serious.

Ian let out an exaggerated sigh. "I'm at your disposal, princess."

"Oh I like the sound of that," Regan laughed, pressing her needy, slippery folds around him. He cooperated, pushing back. Once joined, she didn't rush for the finish line. She was content with just being close to him. Nuzzling and kissing--letting the tension build slowly, she reveled in the brand new luxury of confidence.

Chapter Eighteen

Seattle, Washington May 20th 8:00 AM

The next morning, lost in Ian's arms, it took Regan a few a few minutes to register the significance of the polite cough outside her bedroom door

"Your Royal Highness, it is I, Lundstrom. Are you awake?"

"She must be feeling better," Regan whispered.

"Yeah, she sounds healthier but her timing is in critical condition," he said, tickling her ear with his breath.

A delighted chortle escaped from Regan's throat.

"Your Royal Highness? Are you well?" Lundstrom's voice went up an octave in obvious alarm and the door handle rattled desperately.

"Just a minute," Regan called as she started untangling herself from an extremely unhelpful Ian. The door handle stilled.

"Miss Regan?" Lundstrom's voice strained to a frantic croak.

"Yes--give me a couple of minutes." Regan excused herself, slipping deeper into the world of erotic magic that was lovemaking with Ian. It took much longer than a few minutes to extract herself. She'd been so right about Ian's addictive properties. Unfortunately, confirmation had come too late. She was already hooked.

By the time they had showered and dressed, there was just time for breakfast before heading to the airport for the official farewell, and her final, appearance as the controversial Princess Halle.

"Good Morning, Lundstrom. What do you think? Will the hair pass muster?" Secretly, Regan was pleased with how well she'd recreated one of the simpler styles.

Barely glancing at her, the tutor intoned. "Very nice, Miss Regan."

Immediately, the older woman returned to staring at her lap. Her lack of interest wasn't a good sign. Regan worried about Lundstrom's listless response, nibbling her lower lip while she studied the older woman for signs that her recent illness was recurring. She looked okay. Maybe she was still a little paler than usual, but not alarming so. Her hat was anchored to her chignon, ivory kid gloves neatly lay over the purse waiting on the end table beside her, and her pale yellow coat was smooth over an unassuming beige sheath. Knees modestly together, the tutor's sturdy legs were correctly angled to one side.

Despite Lundstrom's normal high standards of grooming, something was off. The tutor sat very upright and still, which was usual. But the hands in her lap--locked in fierce clamp, shouted tension.

"Would you like a cup of coffee? Or tea? I'm sure Ian would share," Regan asked, trying again to coax a response from her friend.

Ian looked up from the copy of Baron's he was perusing. "Of course," he said agreeably before returning to his reading and toast.

"No, thank you," Lundstrom said primly.

After licking the last drop of raspberry yogurt, Regan poured herself a second cup of coffee. She was still bothered by the other woman's distressed behavior, but at a loss as to how to help.

"What happened to the Princess?" the tutor blurted out.

That was what was eating her--concern for her mistress. Regan didn't know the details herself. When Ian had told her the princess wasn't coming, she'd lost interest in the subject. Images of them in the dressing room assailed her, setting off happy flutters deep in her womb. Ignoring them, she touched his arm.

He looked up--meeting her gaze, and then grinned his slow sexy smile. Regan couldn't help smiling back even as she shook her head at him.

"What happened to the Princess last night?" She repeated Lundstrom's question.

Ian folded the paper, and then set it aside. "Didn't feel up to it ... I gathered. Maybe she had a touch of Lundstrom's bug. No, I remember now, it was something about the dress not fitting her properly."

Lundstrom made a muffled sound of agitation.

"Are you sure that you're sure you're well enough to go to the airport this morning?" Regan asked worriedly.

"Yes, certainly," Lundstrom said, affronted.

"I'm not sure how long it will take, but we'll be coming back here. You're more than welcome to stay here in the suite and rest," Regan assured her quietly.

"Very thoughtful of you, to be sure. However, my duty is to be with the Princess," she sniffed.

"Of course," Regan agreed, unhappy not to be able to ease Lundstrom's worries, especially since the other woman had been so generous and patient in teaching her the ways of royalty.

Ian looked at his watch pointedly. "Showtime princess. Your final performance."

"Let's do it." Regan scooped up her coat, hat, purse and gloves. She anchored the hat in place and reached back to slip her arm into the coat Ian held for her.

"Will you miss being royal?" he asked in an intimate undertone.

"The tiara was the best bling ever. I'll miss *it*." She teased, infusing her whispered words with mock regret.

"You'll always be my princess, bling or no bling." He pressed a tender kiss on her ear.

Joy bubbled inside Regan, a million light years from where she'd expected to be this morning. She and Ian had only had a few hours together. They'd started with a great foundation of mutual respect, caring, and a red-hot attraction. They'd come so far so fast. She still wasn't ready to promise forever. But he was being patient and she was more willing to risk her heart with every passing minute. Even the impossible was becoming a real possibility.

It was hard not to smile.

Ian handed her into the back of the limousine. Regan made a mental note to shake Hans' hand and thank him for all his hard work driving her everywhere, during her brief reign as princess.

Lundstrom took her seat across from Regan, and then Ian settled himself on Regan's right.

It was hard not to touch him.

Even with Ian's nearness fogging her senses, she noticed Lundstrom fidgeting. The closer they traveled toward Boeing Field the more upset the other woman became. The normally cheery tutor's forehead had creased into an unhappy frown. She'd twisted her gloves into a knot. Finally, she unfastened her safety belt, standing.

"Lundstrom!" Regan reached out to steady the woman who'd befriended her. But her arm was knocked away by a sickening jolt as the limo's wheels left the pavement. A second bone-jarring thump knocked the tutor sideways as they bounced off the shoulder. A gap in the guardrail widened with a skin-crawling screech of metal scraping metal. Then the barrier gave way. The big car teetered halfway off an embankment for long seconds. Slowly tipping over the side with a stomach-lurching flip.

Ian wrapped himself around Regan tucking her against his body. Her stomach flipped as the limo went airborne.

For an extended minute, nothing but blue sky was visible through the windows then the ground was where the sky should be and the car ricocheted off land with a sickening thud. The limousine finally bounced to a halt at the bottom of the embankment. Ian freed a passenger door, pushing Regan out of the wreck.

He raked over her with worried eyes. "You okay?"

"Yes, Lundstrom--" Regan said, patting her hair and absentmindedly noting her hat and gloves were missing in action. She clutched her princess handbag tightly to keep her hands from shaking, staring at Ian to assure herself he was all right.

"Hang on. I'll get her." Ian said.

The car rested at a precarious tilt. The smell of gasoline was strong. Steam escaped from the hood and sparks from the hot exhaust smoldered in the dry grass of the gully. For a moment, fear for Ian's safety froze her in place. Then she hurried toward the driver's compartment, irritated with herself for lurching on shaky legs that hadn't yet recovered from the crash.

The driver's door hung open. For a moment, she thought Hans might have been thrown from the car on impact. Movement above her on the highway shoulder pulled her gaze. If Hans had been thrown from the car, and then he'd bounced well. He ran down the side of the freeway.

Ian re-emerged from the wreck carrying Lundstrom.

"I hated to move her but--" He jerked his head toward the small trail of fire heading toward the gas tank.

They jogged south, picking their way over the rough terrain, which slowed their progress. Behind them, the car exploded. Hot sparks and debris rained on them. Regan darted a quick look at Ian, relieved to see his face was set in lines of grim determination. He pushed on, carrying the unconscious tutor.

"Cell phone?" she asked.

Ian stopped. "Left pocket," he said, his breathing labored. "Call Clyde, he's number five."

She briefly wondered about numbers one through four, during the few seconds it

took for Clyde to answer, and then felt ashamed for being petty and jealous when Lundstrom was injured.

"Hey Romeo, what's shaking?"

"It's Regan, there's been an accident ..." she recited the details of their situation and location as concisely as possible.

"On the way." Came back Clyde's gruff, reassuring reply.

After laying Lundstrom down gently, Ian leaned against the embankment. He had to be at least as bruised and breathless as she was.

"Not an accident?" Regan puffed.

"No way," he grunted. "There was no one near us."

She shook her head, trying to make sense of the driver's betrayal. "Hans was the inside guy then. Damn, I liked him."

"He booked right?"

"Right," Regan admitted.

"Doesn't bode well for his innocence. Sorry, princess."

Her heart sank, after all the work that had gone into this operation, she'd screwed up the final act. "Dear God, I forgot all about Princess Halle."

"Clyde will handle it."

"He's a good guy," she admitted. His friend was beginning to grow on her.

"The best."

Suddenly, the reality of the crash hit her. "You could've been killed," she squeaked. Her voice was high and brittle. She sank to the ground as her knees wobbled and then gave out completely.

"Regan!" Ian's voice echoed from a long ways away.

New strength flooded Ian. He caught Regan mid-crumple. She was surprisingly light in his arms. He barely noticed scaling the embankment that had looked too steep to tackle without mountain climbing equipment. He knelt beside her on the freeway's grassy shoulder only partly reassured by her steady pulse.

They'd had one night together. This couldn't be the end. She'd been softening toward him. He knew it. Damn it, she cared about him. He'd seen it in her eyes--felt it in her touch when they'd made love. She'd started to open up to him. All he needed was time for her to believe it was safe to love him. Her long lashes fluttered and her beautiful eyes met his.

"Thank God!" His tense shoulders slumped with relief.

Slowly he noticed their surroundings. Traffic moved by at a dizzying rate. The wail of approaching sirens added to the vehicle roar.

He fought to keep his sudden anger from making him tremble. He crossed his arms and slowed his words emphasizing the seriousness of her transgression. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

His worried demand reminded Regan why she'd fainted. Angry with herself for doing such a silly girl kind of thing seeped through her body. She'd been scared. Scared and helpless--that's what love did to you. Love made you vulnerable and then the people you loved died.

Regan couldn't live paralyzed by love and fear of loss. How could she help at-

risk teens if she were terrified? She couldn't. She needed to be strong and confident. That meant not leaning on anyone else, not even Ian.

Love was for other people. People who were stronger than she was. People who could deal with being vulnerable and risk losing their loved ones. The only one tiny flaw in her thinking--she already loved Ian.

How could she not?

Not only was he the sexiest man on the face of the earth--he was so honorable, kind, and normal. Normal wasn't an option for her. How had she forgotten that? She had no illusions she could handle normal. The chain reaction of devastation had begun with her father's death and worsened with each loss. Her beloved grandmother, and then her mother's death. After that her stepfather's abuse ripped away her innocence and in all probability her ability to bear children. She'd decided against marriage, not wanting to be that vulnerable again.

She loved children. As a child advocate, as a cop, and as a volunteer for the Street Angels she fought for them--protected them. And she was good at it. That had always been enough. Now there was Ian and her loss was a thousand times greater.

Nothing had really changed. Sure, sex with Ian was incredible. She cared about him--way too much. It was because she cared that she had to stay away from him. They'd only been together for a short time. Already, he'd nearly died. Intellectually, she knew that she hadn't endangered him, but her understanding did nothing to fix the welling terror of losing him forever.

Sirens drew Regan back to the immediate situation. Fire was first on the scene. Both cops and medic units, arriving within seconds of the first responders.

One of the medics tried to fasten a blood pressure cuff around Ian's upper arm.

"Forget that. Check her--" Ian gestured toward Regan. "Check Princess Halle, she lost consciousness for a few minutes. And Ms. Lundstrom, she's at the bottom of the embankment. She's seriously injured. I hated to move her, but" his gaze angled toward the burning car.

"Yes sir, we'll get to everyone. You need to get checked out, too." The medic pressed firmly on Ian's shoulder. He sat with an irritated grunt, but only after he was satisfied that Regan was being treated and a team of firemen and other rescue personnel had disappeared into the ravine to tend to Lundstrom.

Regan let the medic attending her check her vitals without fussing. Sure that she had no serious injuries. A few bruises, at worst, a possible mild case of shock. She'd seen enough accident victims to be an expert. Much more worrying was Lundstrom's condition and the chauffeur's escape.

The secret service agent in charge, Victor arrived shortly after the emergency response team. She relaxed slightly when she saw him talking to Ian. Then Lundstrom was transferred to a gurney, further allaying her fears. The medic attending her tutor jogged along side, holding the IV fluid bag already attached to her friend's arm. Within minutes, the ambulance containing three medics, and Lundstrom, departed.

Clyde joined Ian and Victor's discussion.

"Are you done?" she asked the medic, who'd been examining her as he folded away his equipment.

"Yes ma'am, but it would be real smart for you to get yourself checked out at the hospital," the tech advised her earnestly.

"Thank you," she excused herself, joining the boys club.

"We don't get to question him at all?" Clyde's expression was stunned.

"Not my call," Victor said with a shrug. His scowl making plain that he was no more pleased than Clyde about being cut out of the loop.

"Question who?" she asked.

"Hans or whatever his real name is," Ian said, scrutinizing her. "You're certain that you're okay?"

"Fine," she said impatiently. "Who is questioning Hans?"

"National Security," Clyde grumbled.

"So what now?" Ian asked.

"We're scrubbing even the brief version of Princess Halle's visit. She'll have to see her cousin another time. I re-routed her for tonight. Regan can make her farewell appearance at Boeing Field tomorrow morning. I'm still operating with a skeleton team so let's keep a low profile till then."

"You got it," Ian agreed with uncharacteristic speed.

"Think fast, Romeo." Clyde tossed Ian a set of keys. "I'll catch a ride with Victor."

"You want us to drop you at the hotel?" Victor asked Regan politely.

Regan felt her cheeks heating, embarrassed by her own weakness. Hadn't she just promised herself she'd stay away from Ian?

"No, I'll go with Ian." She turned to meet his gaze. She'd expected it to be full of wicked intentions. But he looked at her with so much heart stopping love in his eyes that her breath caught.

On the ride back to the hotel she stayed quiet. Something teased the edge of her mind, a scrap of information tugging at her from the edge of memory, just out of reach. Whenever she tried to bring it to the surface, it slipped away. She tried distraction to give the elusive thought a chance to pop into her head. But whenever she let down her defenses, Ian flooded her thoughts, making it impossible to focus on anything except him.

A single agent met them at the hotel. He rode up to the suite with them. Checking out the rooms before excusing himself.

After the agent left, Ian spoke. "What's wrong? Are you hurting somewhere?"

"No, I'm fine, really." Regan rubbed her arms. "I just can't shake the feeling I've missed something."

"Like me?" Ian snuggled her back against his body.

He fit her so perfectly. His erection pressed into her butt reminding her of how good it had felt to be in his arms--to be with him in the most complete way possible.

Why did he have to be so stubborn? And if he had to be half-mule then he could at least have the decency to fight fair. He brushed down her side touching the outer edge of her breast and making her melt into a pool of desire.

Definitely not fair.

Ian stepped back with a look of pure regret. "I promised to call Clyde when we got here. I need to find out what's happening. You're really okay?"

"I'm good. Go, make your call. Please ask if he's heard anything more about

Lundstrom's condition."

"Will do."

Regan studied the small pile of faxes left behind by the security team. The nagging thought she'd missed something vital lingered. She prowled around the suite, finding nothing that triggered the maddeningly elusive memory. When she paced by the sitting room Ian was using she heard him talking on his phone.

"Try to be serious for one minute. This is my life we're talking about."

Regan thought about tiptoeing back out--for a whole second. Not happening. She angled her head to hear better.

"Yeah great but I want more. It's that simple and that complicated. Her lips say no, but her body says yes. She's making me crazy."

Welcome to the club.

"At least I'm trying. You've never told Kiki how you feel."

Whoa, filing that tidbit for sharing later.

Ian had to be still talking to Clyde. She'd never be able to look that man in the eye again. She shrugged--no great loss.

"You're right. I do know her better." Ian's jaw got tighter as he listened to whatever Clyde had to say, she knew because of way the next words were forced through clenched teeth. "Regan is not like that. She'd never ... she loves me whether she says it or not."

Ian knew? What should she do now? She'd have to play it cool--brazen it out.

"Forget about it," Ian paused. "Yeah, maybe. How's Lundstrom doing?"

Another, longer pause followed. "No internal injuries then? But the concussion--I understand--yeah, it's still too soon to tell. Thanks again for everything." More listening. "You take care of yourself bud."

Regan backed up, shed her purse, and then crossed to the bar. She poured herself a glass of Zinfandel. She took her time sipping the cold fruity wine before sauntering into her bathroom. She was still a mess from the car wreck that hadn't been an accident. A hot shower would help with all the small aches and pains. Turning on the shower first, she brought in a change of clothes. Whatever happened between her and Ian she could deal with it better dressed.

After the steamy shower, she slathered on the rich vanilla sugar lotion the hotel provided, and brushed her hair until it lay smooth and shining before pinning it up. The effect was much simpler than Kiki's creation, but it looked okay. She slipped into clean undies, stockings, and then a wrap dress. Skipping the fancy pots of make-up because she'd turned into such an emotional wreck that she would just wind up crying, ruining any attempt at glamour. She did anoint her pulse points with *Fleur de Nuit*.

A last critical assessment of the bathroom mirror's truth confirmed she was as ready as she'd ever be to face him.

She was wrong.

Ian took her breath away. Pure male temptation spread across the bed she'd foolishly wasted on sleeping. Her half-formed plan to stay cool evaporated in the heat of his gaze. She fanned herself ineffectively, pulling the thin print dress away from her breasts.

"This is the sauna, right?" The question slipped from her lips uncensored.

"It is and clothing isn't an option." His sexy drawl turned up the steam level.

Dear God! That man made her hot. He knew it too, which should've been a turn-off. But nothing short of another ice age would turn off the inferno he'd stoked deep inside her belly.

His arms were propped behind his head, his ankles crossed and nothing covered any of the sights in between. Regan took in every inch bared for her viewing pleasure. She felt a rare blush rising from her breasts, which pushed the room's temperature level another notch higher.

It took a while for her to make it back to his eyes. When her gaze locked with his, she fell without a net. His blue eyes flashed with sparks of desire, igniting a new and even more dangerous answering flame in her.

"The clothes have to go," he growled, making it an order. One she was all-too-eager to obey.

Regan's fingers trembled while untying the side of the slinky dress. Minutes ticked by as she fumbled with its fastenings. Finally, the dress slipped from her arms. She stepped out of her shoes, relishing the dense pile under her feet. Pulling the slip over her head left her vulnerable torso bare.

Ian's breath hitched, turning her attention back to him. Caught by his sheer male animal perfection, she stopped with one sheer stocking rolled just below her knee. He motioned impatiently for her to continue.

For a few seconds, she wondered if he was so affected that he couldn't speak. She slowed her movements, prolonging the tease, and testing her pleasing theory.

"Keep going." His voice scraped like a tailpipe dragging.

That strangled voice gave her a confidence infusion. Suddenly, she was a temptress. She rested her foot on the seat of an armchair before complying with his request--very slowly. She stole glances at him from under her lashes, enjoying his reactions every bit as much as he was enjoying her show.

Sliding one satin strap down her arm, and then the other she strained against them, pretending frustration. Stretching, and wriggling, provocatively she freed one arm, dipping the edge of the shelf bra tantalizingly low. Repeating the same sinuous movements, she released the other arm.

With sultry deliberation, she rotated to give him the rear view. Undoing her hair and tossing the hairpins on the chair seat as she went. She shook her head, tossing her hair back, and then leisurely finger combing the long strands. With her back still toward him, she unhooked the black lace and pink satin bra and let it drop. Hearing a satisfying rasp in his breathing, she kept the pressure cooking.

Tenderly, she slid two fingers inside the bikini's waistband easing the small garment away from her body. She slipped it down, folding her legs as she lowered the panties all the way to the ground, and then rising, she stepped out of them. Bending, she retrieved the delicate satin panties and flung them in the same direction as the bra.

Revolving once more, this time to face Ian, she forced her hands to stay down, deliberately baring her body for his assessment. The expensive lingerie was no help now. No princess trappings. Just her, with the long muscles visible in her runner's legs.

Every part was exposed--bony feet with their fragile high arches, thighs too skinny to meet, and hipbones that poked out.

At least one of them should enjoy the art on display. She held her breath, raking her eyes over his beautiful body. Starting from his big sexy feet, her gaze traveled up strong hairy legs, and narrow hips, to a dark triangle of springy black curls beneath a voluptuous and very hard cock. An enticing display of corrugated abs and sculpted pecs moved up and down as his breaths came faster and more shallow. Broad shoulders and a strong neck led her to his dimpled chin and a slightly strained but still sexy grin.

"You're killing me. You know that, right?" he croaked.

Suddenly, her thighs and bony hips were just right. "That was my intent." She flashed him her best smile.

"But I do want you to die happy," she added innocently.

She straddled his hips.

With his hands gently guiding her, she enveloped him inch by slow inch. After long moments of patience, he thrust up burying his cock completely inside her, the sudden fullness holding her on the edge of pain. She rocked experimentally and found she could control both the pace and the depth. A rush of excitement accompanied the discovery, aiding her body's acceptance of his. No longer separate--they had merged into a single magical being. Together like two halves of an ancient puzzle, their fit so perfect that all her doubts burned away. The feelings were so powerful that her vision blurred behind a veil of tears.

Chapter Nineteen

Seattle, Washington May 20th 2:00 PM

Ian kissed Regan's tears away. "Happy tears, right?" he asked with worried eyes and a voice softened by concern.

"You feel so good," she murmured. "I wish this could last forever."

The moment the words left her lips, she knew she'd made a mistake. Forever was Ian's dream. She already knew life didn't come with guarantees.

"You could marry me and then it would," he said teasingly. But the light tone didn't disguise his serious intention.

She couldn't lie to him. Not about that. Not when it meant so much to him. Ian was looking for the perfect family. She had no doubt he'd make a wonderful husband and father--for the right woman. But she wasn't his perfect princess. No matter how much she wished she were.

"We could be friends with benefits." She teased back, but her voice caught. A glance at his face made her try harder. "Really good friends, with great benefits." She offered, with what she hoped looked like a sexy confident smile.

He grimaced.

"Friends who don't see anyone else," she added with the last incentive she could honestly include. He pulled further away. Physically, he moved only a few millimeters, but emotionally he grew more distant with each beat of her heart. Her smile trembled and disappeared. She looked away to avoid seeing his disappointment.

"You know what they call friends with benefits who are exclusive and committed to each other?"

Regan felt the muscles knotting in the back of her neck, keeping her hands from massaging the tension with an act of sheer will. "Lovers?"

"Married," he said in a tone that told her his jaw was clamped in a stubborn line.

"A piece of paper doesn't change anything," she said defensively.

"Then why are we fighting about it? Marry me and we can fight about more important things, like how many kids we're going to have."

Regan angled away from him and he knew he'd lost. His chest felt like he'd taken a shotgun blast. "What is it? Kids? Is that the problem?"

Regan shook her head. She'd shut him out. Damn it. He could see it in every rigid line of her body. She wouldn't even look at him. He should shut up now. Give her time, pray for a change of heart. Hers or his.

Hell no! He couldn't let it go. His life was on the line, too.

Without Regan, what kind of future would he have? Even his parents had each other. Ian had been casual about sex. But never with Regan. He'd known from the first time he'd seen her that she was the one woman in the world who fit him perfectly. From day one, they'd formed a bond--communicating on a whole different level. She'd refused

to acknowledge the attraction between them. Then he'd blown it by proposing too soon. He'd sworn that if he ever got a second chance, he would find a way to bind her to him before asking for commitment. He thought he'd done that.

It wasn't enough.

She didn't love him. At least, not enough to make a commitment. She wanted to have an affair, see how things went.

Damn stubborn woman. Couldn't she see he needed more?

He had to give Regan credit. She'd never lied to him, not once. Never promised him love, and then walked away, the way his parents had. No, not Regan--she wouldn't promise him anything at all.

It was time to back off and let her go. But he couldn't quit. "Talk to me, damn it. Explain it to me and don't try telling me you don't care about me."

Regan eyes flickered across his face. "Of course, I care about you. That just makes it worse. It's better to stop now than to get more involved, and then figure out that great chemistry isn't enough."

"That's all you think we have? Chemistry?"

"Great chemistry." Her chin came up.

"We have more than chemistry."

"It wouldn't last." She lowered her lashes.

"If you won't try then you're automatically right aren't you?" Regret and anger warred for top billing, as he fought the pull of futility. Nothing he could do or say would make her love him.

"You would regret marrying me and you would wind up hating me," she said in a flat dull tone that left no room for dispute.

"Mind telling me exactly why you think I'd regret it?" His temper hissed to the front of the pack of feelings threatening to tear him apart.

"The rape--resulted in an ectopic pregnancy. And it gets worse. The pregnancy went undiagnosed until my ovary ruptured, then an infection set in, the surgeon saved my life, but my fertility was nearly obliterated."

"Nearly doesn't mean impossible, right?" he asked carefully.

"Virtually impossible were the words the surgeon used."

"We'll get a specialist, medicine has come a long way."

"No, we won't," she said quietly.

"Why not?" he asked, already knowing he wasn't going to like the answer.

Regan's eyes flashed with angry glints as they met his. "Because you've fallen for the princess act. News flash, McKnight--I'm not your princess. I'm a girl from the projects, who destroyed her whole family. Zach and I are the only ones who made it out alive." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And we very nearly didn't."

"You're wrong." Ian sat up and swung his legs out of the bed. He yanked on his slacks and did them up. "You're so wrong, I don't even know where to start. I fell in love with you the day I saw you. My feelings have nothing to do with your royal act. But I guess that's all this was to you, part of an act."

He grabbed his shirt, ramming his fist down a sleeve. "What does that make me? The special princess stud?" Ian left the shirt flapping as he jerked on socks, then

crammed his feet into shoes. Grabbing his tie and jacket, he headed for the door. "Call me if you ever grow up." He flung the challenge at her over his shoulder, too angry to see straight.

"Don't bother calling me because you're never going to grow up," she yelled back.

Ian halted at Regan's volley of words.

But she didn't stop. She was on a roll. Her pain and rage spewed out in a hot torrent. "You live in some fairy tale world where everything works out the way you want it to. Well good for you, I hope you're very happy with your political career and your perfect life. You're all set aren't you? The mayor's golden boy. You and Ms. Boobalicious are perfect for each other."

"Maybe we are." Ian lobbed back. He wanted to hurt her. His jaw clenched and the tops of his ears burned. He strode out of the room banging the door shut.

Dear God, what had she done? She didn't mean any of it, but she couldn't retract the angry words. Hot tears spilled down her burning cheeks.

Ian crashed back into the room.

Regan whirled, turning her back toward him, blinking furiously and waving her hands ineffectively in front of her face in a ludicrous effort to dry her tears.

"I forgot. It's time for your farewell appearance. Let's get it done, and then you never have to see me again."

"Great," she choked out.

Hurrying away from him, she barricaded herself in the bathroom, running the cold water. Three minutes later, having done all she could to repair her tear-ravaged face, she re-emerged, finding Ian.

They rode to the lobby in silence acrid enough to set off a smoke alarm.

The limo surprised her. She raised an eyebrow, meeting Ian's hard gaze coolly in a silent question.

"Thought it'd look more authentic," he grunted, shoving his hands into his pockets and trying to act as if he routinely sprang for limos.

Regan nodded, touched. Not that she'd let him see how much his gesture had moved her. In fact, she was mad at herself for being so soft.

He held the door for her. "What about your luggage? Don't you have things of your own?"

"I'll get my stuff later," she said coolly, keeping her gaze focused anywhere but on him.

Ian quit talking. But she knew he was there. He sat on the other side of the big bench seat. She knew without looking, he'd be in an elegant loose-limbed sprawl. She knew how he smelled, how he tasted, how he felt, and how much she loved the stubborn mule-brained fool of man.

Why couldn't he give her more time? Why did he have to have everything his way right now? Regan knew under that hulking exterior sprawled next to her was a wounded little boy, who'd been abandoned and pushed away far too often. But she couldn't be his perfect woman--his ideal wife and mother. She wished she could. If anyone deserved perfection, he did.

Ian had coordinated Regan's last appearance as the princess. Escorting her to the

airport was his last official duty relating to this operation. Thank God, this damn princess snafu was almost over. He stole a quick look at his watch. Another twenty minutes tops and he'd be out of here. He rubbed his chest where it ached. Damn the woman for making him love her, and damn her twice for pushing him away.

What the hell was wrong with her? Did she really believe that load of crap she'd tried to feed him about the princess act? What did she think? That he was a tiara freak? He wanted to wring her neck half of the time. The other half of the time he wanted to kiss that powder-soft skin until it was as darkly red as her ...

He mentally shook himself. What the hell was wrong with him? Couldn't he take no for answer? He'd been hearing 'no, not now, don't touch, not so rough, be gentle, Ian' since he was old enough to remember. He should have gotten the hang of rejection by now.

He stood rigidly at attention while Regan gave a stellar performance as Princess Halle. She ascended the ramp stairs like true royalty, stopping at the top to turn and wave one last time to the press assembled to see her off. If he hadn't known who she really was he would never have guessed he was watching an impersonation.

When she stepped inside the aircraft, the crowd began to disperse. Then Clyde called and reported the janitor had been picked up. The last of the terrorists had been turned over to National Security. The men were all dissident Qsani, part of a radical sect--the *Sons of Allah*. Hans, the limo driver had been their inside source. It all seemed a bit too neat and tidy. Ian's cop instincts said no way. He usually listened to his gut. His first partner had taught him that. But apparently that was just one more thing she was wrong about.

After finishing his phone conversation with Clyde, he issued instructions for the return to the hotel. He had to pick up his rig and the pieces of his life. His real lonely life. Maybe he had been a tad stubborn. Regan cared for him. She'd been through a lot. With time--maybe--or was he still trying to kid himself? Hoping for love didn't make it happen.

* * * *

Once inside the Gulf Stream, Regan expected to see Princess Halle.

Instead, Simpson greeted her with a curt, "Miss."

"Where's Princess Halle?"

"Follow me, please."

Regan trailed after the royal dresser to a private stateroom where Princess Halle, a vision in bubble-gum-pink silk, held court from a royal sleigh bed.

"Come sit. You must tell me everything. I'm absolutely devastated. The crash, poor Lundstrom, what an ordeal. Come now, do not keep me in suspense for one single minute more."

Happy to oblige Your Royal Highness. If I can get a word in edgewise.

"Simpson, doesn't she look tired? You must fix her one of your special pick-me-up facials." Princess Halle smiled serenely at Regan. "Now, tell me everything, from the beginning, if you please."

Regan dutifully reported. Her style was probably a bit dry by princess standards, honed as it was on incident reports, but she included all the relevant highlights.

When she'd finished the Princess spoke. "How very bizarre. It sounded almost as if Lundstrom had a premonition of the crash."

"She'd been ill," Regan offered.

"Just so." Princess Halle lapsed back into silence.

"If that's everything--"

"One last favor--visit Lundstrom for me. It would cheer the old thing if she thinks I came to see her. I can not, of course. But you can. You will perform this one last service for me, yes?" Princess Halle smiled imploringly.

It wasn't the smile, after all Regan saw that every time she brushed her teeth. It was the thrill that she knew Lundstrom would get--if she managed to carry it off. Her tutor would be tougher to fool than anyone else. There was no downside, if Lundstrom caught on then Regan would simply pass it off as final test of her tutoring skills.

She'd never let Lundstrom know the Princess asked her to substitute for a visit she could've just as easily arranged to make herself. Even if Princess Halle had sent flowers, or just made a phone call, Lundstrom would've understood. The woman would've been touched that the Princess thought of her.

As she left the plane, disguised by her dark glasses and plain vanilla raincoat covering the trademark pink princess suit, Regan dialed Kiki's cell phone on the off chance she was available for a therapy workout. The call went straight to voice mail. She rang off without leaving a message, and then phoned for a taxi.

During the ride back to the hotel she took a moment to call Lundstrom, speaking as the Princess, to assure her that she would be stopping by to see how she was doing. Setting the stage helped. As Lundstrom had pointed out--most people saw what they expected to see.

When Regan returned to the hotel, she scanned the suite's living area afraid to hope. But there was no Ian glowering at her--demanding one more chance.

The bell attendant cleared his throat.

She retrieved a tip for him. A definite step down from royal guards who handled all gratuities, but it was time for her to get used to real life again.

"I'll ring when I'm ready."

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked up at the ma'am. Even out of uniform, she was getting ma'am-ed. Your Royal Highness sounded so much nicer.

She swallowed a sigh, catching sight of herself in the entryway mirror. Too bad she didn't have Lundstrom to work her magic with brushes and make-up. If she was going to fool anyone without the sunglasses then she'd better get started.

The dark circles under her eyes made her look almost ill and her jutting collarbone looked like it would pierce her skin any second.

Getting back to the work, which she loved, regular meals, some solid sleep, and some serious exercise would help. Kiki kicking her butt into shape was as close as she'd ever come to having a staff. Royal dressers weren't part of her reality.

A smile pulled at the edges of her lips, thinking of Lundstrom and how much she had in common with Kiki--both women pushed her to be more than she ever believed she could be. Though her tutor was still convalescing, her condition was stable and her spirit

unflagging. Regan knew she would make a full recovery.

Parking the small handbag, she looked around. She frowned and walked over to an end table where she picked up a hand-addressed envelope propped next to a vase of tropical blooms. Sure that neither the flowers nor the envelope had been there when she'd left that morning. She turned it over, finding the Svensberg royal crest was pressed into a deep red wax seal. Inside she found a pair airline tickets and a note.

She unfolded the heavy notepaper.

Dear Twin of a different mother,

There's no way to repay you for what you've done. Peder and I wanted you to have some token of our deepest gratitude. We thought you might enjoy a trip back to Paradise. The compound is deserted during the coming month, except for a small staff of course. So do come and stay as long as you like. Who knows, perhaps you will find a prince of your own to share the trip. Our fondest hope is that you agree to accept this as a token of our sincere gratitude and will forgive us the presumption.

Halle!

There'd be no trip to Paradise or anywhere else for her and Ian. This morning he'd been about as warm as a holding cell. He was unwilling to even consider a compromise. To be fair, she was just as stuck in her own position. She couldn't promise him forever. Terror choked her whenever she even thought about marriage. No matter what he said, he was in denial. There was no way he'd be happy without kids of his own and he had fallen for the princess act.

True, he'd been attracted to her once upon a time, but he'd managed to control himself and stay away from her for over a year. Suddenly, she was the one again? If he truly loved her then he'd have at least tried to compromise. Instead of going all lantern-jawed caveman on her.

Tears threatened, blurring her vision. She blinked rapidly to dry her eyes. Hastily she stuffed the Princess's note into her purse and hurried into the bedroom to pack. She moved rapidly, concentrating on her task and shutting out everything else.

It took less than five minutes for her to organize her personal items. She called the concierge, requesting shipping containers for the princess clothes. While she waited for them to be delivered, she located Lundstrom's luggage, and then packed up her tutor's personal things. When the boxes arrived, she asked the bell attendant to help with the rest of the packing.

Working together, they removed the last traces of the princess operation from the suite. The young attendant lined up the tape gun ready to seal the last box.

"Hold it." Regan grabbed the marker he'd used for addressing the packages and scribbled over the Svensberg address, writing hers on the container holding the royal lingerie collection. What kind of princess wore used lingerie? For sure, not Princess Halle. Not in this lifetime. Besides, Regan adored the extravagant undies. So what if no one else ever saw them? They were beautiful and gave her pleasure. That was reason enough.

On a whim, she scooped up the vase of exotic blooms on her way out of the suite, taking them with her. Knowing the flowers would remind Lundstrom of Paradise.

The concierge assured her he'd arrange delivery for the containers and called

another taxi to take her to the hospital. Regan thanked him for all his kindnesses during her stay.

The taxi honked, and then the concierge held the front door.

Regan shook his hand. He bowed over it. She swallowed a sigh. She would miss the bowing and the tiara. Who would've guessed? Parts of being a princess really did grow on a girl.

The moment she settled into the taxi, the loss of Ian overwhelmed her. She blinked hard, scrubbing away a rogue tear. After everything, she deserved a good cry and chocolate. Really good chocolate. But chocolate wasn't going to cut it this time.

How could he dump her when they were so good together? Didn't he realize what a big step an affair was for her? Why did he have to push? Okay, dump was a little harsh. Maybe what they'd shared wasn't as special for him as it was for her. The thought stung. She knew how much marriage meant to Ian. She'd made the critical error of thinking she meant more.

If she'd been smarter, she would've stayed clear of him. He'd made it plain from the start he needed the promises, the ring, the whole forever and ever thing. When he'd agreed to her first friends-with-benefits proposition, she'd hoped he'd changed his mind. She'd counted on his willingness to compromise.

Big mistake.

Now he was imprinted on every cell of her body. She'd fallen in love with a man who demanded a lifetime commitment she wasn't sure she'd ever be ready to make.

She'd refused his proposal. What else could she do? She couldn't risk living with his regrets. He'd asked her for all the wrong reasons. He'd been taken in by her princess act, believing she'd fit into his world.

What would happen to their relationship when she wasn't playing princess? She couldn't pretend to be someone she wasn't for a lifetime. Ian was attracted to her, sure. He'd just confused lust and love. To be fair, he cared about her, but not enough to bridge the gap between them. He would get over her. But she would never get over him.

Wrenching her thoughts away from Ian, she concentrated on the Teen Advocacy Unit and how much good she could do. She thought about Marcia and seeing her again and managed a genuine smile. She thought about Kiki and Clyde but that just led back to more thoughts of Ian. What if she was wrong? What if he really loved her?

"This is it, yes?" The taxi driver asked dubiously.

She leaned forward scanning the hospital's patient loading zone.

"Yes, this is it." She dug money out and paid the fare adding a twenty percent tip.

Ian would wince if he could see her wasting money on cab fare, yet he'd rented a limousine just to add a touch of authenticity to her princess act. He'd done it, even though he was furious with her at the time. A small smile curved the corners of her mouth. Maybe, just maybe, he really did love her.

From that thin strand of hope, a happier mood wrapped around her like a SWAT jumpsuit as she rode the elevator up to Lundstrom's floor. For once the princess pink outfit suited her. Was she ready to promise till death do us part? She really was completely hopeless when it came to Ian. Her gaze fell on her fake engagement ring. She and Ian came from different backgrounds, but if she could overlook his faults ... too

bad he didn't have any. Except for his excessive thriftiness, his stubborn streak, and that insatiable sexual appetite. The urge to smile came back stronger than ever. Could she and Ian make love last? There was only one way to find out ... and he was definitely worth fighting for, even if it scared the hell out of her.

Regan sat her luggage down outside the door to Lundstrom's room. It would be fine for the few minutes she'd be visiting with her former tutor. Slipping into her princess role, she planned to keep the visit short. It would've been much nicer to visit Lundstrom as herself and give her a hug. She promised herself that she would do exactly that tomorrow--on her way to work.

She let out a deep calming breath as she morphed into princess mode. Princess Halle wasn't a patient woman. Besides, there was no sense pressing her luck by performing her royal act for a moment longer than necessary.

"My dear Lundstrom," she greeted her friend as she entered the private room.

"Your Royal Highness! You really did come ... I did not expect ... oh my, such an honor. What lovely flowers--so thoughtful." Lundstrom coughed politely, shifting her gaze away.

Regan placed the vase of exotic blooms and her purse on the windowsill. She turned to face her audience of one, keeping her most serene smile in place.

She was surprised to see her mistress. So far, so good. Lundstrom really couldn't tell her from Princess Halle. A glow of satisfaction for a job well done warmed Regan, but she didn't dare dwell on her triumph. She stayed firmly in the princess mode.

"I am between engagements and wanted to assure myself that you were not seriously impaired. Simpson tires from time to time. Really it has been most inconvenient to have you gone for so long."

"I am sorry, Your Royal Highness," Lundstrom said, any further words were lost as she nearly choked with a sudden violent coughing fit.

Regan gave a small sigh before taking the other woman's hand. She squeezed, using the Princess's, now almost natural, three-fingered gesture instead of her own firm handshake.

Lundstrom bowed her head.

"Thank you Your Royal Highness. I have let you down." Lundstrom's voice shook with the force of her emotions.

Regan had expected her tutor to get a little weepy when she saw her beloved princess, but her distress seemed over the top. Regan gave her the princess's second best smile. "It is a bit difficult making do. It was really too bad of you to be injured," she teased with regal stuffiness. "I suppose it could not be avoided. Do allow the doctors and nurses take care of you. You will be back on duty in no time. Then all will be perfection again--as it should be."

A strangled sob escaped from the other woman.

As uncomfortable with the other woman's distraught reaction as the real princess would have been, she took a half step back. "The palace would not be the same without you. Do hurry and get well."

A doctor bustled in, relieving Regan from the need to make more uncomfortable princess small talk.

Chapter Twenty

Seattle, Washington May 20th 6:00 PM

Once inside the room, the doctor halted. Locked into princess-mode, Regan moved toward him, holding out her hand.

"An unexpected honor Your Royal Highness." He bowed over her hand.

His accent sounded familiar.

"You are Qsani?" she said, politely, smiling regally while she worried about the ugly scene that would follow when he reverted to Arabic. Inevitably, exposing her as an imposter when it became obvious she didn't understand more than a handful of words. Lundstrom would catch on and be devastated.

Regan's earlier plan to pass off her deception as kind of graduation present, now seemed naïve and pathetic. She grappled for words to explain the deception without implicating the real princess.

To her profound relief he continued to speak in English. "You have a good ear, Princess." He eyed her with surprise and maybe a tinge of respect.

Tugging back her hand, she resisted the urge to break character and correct his breach of protocol or even crazier, tell him most cops have good observation skills.

Instead, she spoke with royal remove, knowing how much it pleased her tutor. "Do take good care of our Lundstrom. We miss her."

She retrieved her handbag, and then minced her way toward the door.

"Good day." She turned before leaving the sterile hospital room, giving Lundstrom a regal smile and her best royal wave.

The needle plunged into her neck so fast she had no chance to react.

She swayed, fighting to stay conscious. She felt like she was bound by five point restraints as her field of vision narrowed and darkened.

Time slowed while the doctor ignored her, speaking to Lundstrom.

"So good of you to call and tell us that the Princess was coming to see you. By the way, your little sister died weeks ago. So, you see, you betrayed your precious princess for nothing."

Lundstrom sobs grew softer as if her regrets went beyond tears.

The missing link, which had tugged at her consciousness all day, slipped into Regan's mind. Her tutor was the mole. Of course--she'd seen her erratic behavior when Lundstrom believed the exchange was happening at the ball. She was also the one who'd ordered a kidnapping attempt on the way to the airport. That's why she'd been so upset when she realized the exchange hadn't happened. It all made sense now.

Why hadn't she seen the obvious sooner? Because she'd been so wrapped up in Ian, and pretending to be the princess, she'd been blind to the signs of betrayal.

The phony doctor added a silencer to an ugly little automatic pistol. Which he'd concealed under his long white coat. He raised the gun casually, as if he were merely

demonstrating the weapon.

Then he depressed the trigger.

Soft plops sounded as the gun spit death. Lundstrom's body jerked as each bullet slammed into her forehead. An incongruously tidy row of holes appeared across the top of her face.

The sulfur smell of spent gunpowder filled Regan's nose. Then the lethal weapon aimed at her.

She tried to whirl away. But her frozen limbs refused to obey her instructions. Her movements so sluggish, they were barely perceptible. She imagined the bullet slamming through the fragile bony plate of her skull.

Whatever drug he'd given her hadn't stilled her thoughts, but had robbed her of the ability to act. The floor tilted crazily, she fought to stay conscious through a wave of nausea. Finally, in the war between her determination and the drug, science won and her knees gave way.

First the assistant manager at the Plaza, now a Soundview doctor. Was no one who they were supposed to be? There should be something she could do. Sadly, she was in no shape to drop the guy and now, even her concentration had eroded. This time Ian wouldn't race in to rescue her. With this last discouraging thought, she ceded the battle. The gaping black void yawned, and then swallowed her whole.

* * * *

Within minutes of leaving Regan at the airport, Ian had second thoughts. She'd deliberately baited him, using anger to distract him while she recklessly put herself in harms way.

By the time Ian was able to get back to Boeing Field, the Svensberg jet had left. A ramp agent remembered a dark-haired woman with big sunglasses, wearing a raincoat, who'd caught a cab. A tall drink of cool water was the way he'd described her.

Ian didn't bother explaining that tall drink of firewater would be a lot more accurate. That bit information fell into the no one else needed to know category.

He was a step behind her at every stop. She'd left the hotel in another taxi. She wasn't home. Her cell rang through to voice mail. Zach hadn't heard from her. Ian caught Kiki between classes at the Corinthian Fitness Center.

"Hello, Ian McKnight here. I'm looking for Regan."

"Hey Ian, I missed a call from her, but she didn't leave me a message."

"Can you tell what time the call came in?"

"Sure, hang on a minute." A series of beeps accompanied her search. "Eleven oh eight this morning."

"Thanks."

"What's going on?" she asked sharply.

"I wish I knew."

"Good luck," she said much more softly. He wondered uneasily how much she knew about him and Regan, but knowing his princess, not much. However, women could be eerily perceptive.

Then he did what he should've done to start with. He called Clyde and sounded the alarm. Another hour crawled by, as the team was reassembled, and then began

retracing Regan's route.

Ian stormed the temporary command center in a hospital conference room. He saw Regan's overnight bag, agape in the center of a table. Her clothes tumbled half in and half out. A pair of pink satin panties, peeking from the undone zipper, made him want to punch the hell out of something or someone.

Clyde waved from his seat. Ian strode toward him, willing to ignore the insult of Regan's intimate things being on display in exchange for information. As he got closer, he saw Clyde was on the phone. His end of the conversation consisted mainly of grunts. After what seemed like hours, but his watch insisted had been only six minutes, Clyde ended the call.

"Where's Regan?"

"Sit down, man.

"Tell me what the hell is going on. I'll rest later."

"We lost her."

Ian's heart sank. His knees felt like rubber. He sagged against the table. Clyde stood, steadying him with one massive arm. He leaned into his friend's strength.

"You promised me," he accused his friend angrily.

Clyde turned his face away as if he couldn't stand the raw pain Ian knew was bleeding from his eyes. But what good was it to act tough when his heart had been ripped apart? It never got him anywhere as a kid. He doubted it would help now. But old habits are hard to kill--he choked back the lump of tears, speaking roughly. "What the hell happened?"

"I pulled back on her security coverage." Clyde raised an arm, holding his palm out in the universal hold-it-right-there-mister gesture. "We both thought the assignment was a wrap. You left her at the airport."

Ian's heart sank still lower, pounding out the reality of his guilt. "I know. I thought ... ah hell, it doesn't matter."

"Are you gonna keep moping or help find her?" his friend asked brusquely.

Ian raised his head, gaping at Clyde. "I thought you said you'd lost her."

"I did. That's why we're looking for her," he explained with the exaggerated patience of a man dealing with the comprehension challenged.

"She's alive?" Hope soared, lifting Ian's heart.

"I don't know man," he admitted sadly.

His friend explained about the tracking unit the Secret Service had imbedded in Regan's copy of the Princess's engagement ring. The miniature sending unit had a range of only a couple of hundred feet. Unless the booster unit in her purse was operating then the signal would have a five mile radius.

It would still be like looking for a dropped Jackson on Aurora Avenue.

The medical examiner put Lundstrom's time of death between ten and noon. Ian was able to narrow it down further. Since he left Regan at Boeing Field at ten thirty and she'd called Kiki at eight after eleven then the earliest she could have arrived at the hospital was eleven thirty.

He checked his watch--four thirty. His gut twisted. Five hours in captivity was an eternity. If he allowed himself to think about what could've happened--might be

happening--he'd be sick.

"How many guys do you have sweeping for the signal?" he asked stoically.

"Every unit we have is out there and has been since one fifteen when we realized Regan had been taken hostage."

"Have you heard from the terrorists? Have there been any--"

"Uh uh," Clyde shook his head, adding extra emphasis. "Kind of worries me. If they found the booster unit in her purse or anything to make them suspicious" He didn't need to finish the thought.

Ian understood with sickening clarity how little value the *Sons of Allah* would place on Regan's life if they found out she wasn't Princess Halle. If they knew she was only a beautiful vulnerable woman. He forced away the crippling thoughts, holding the red mist of helpless rage at bay by concentrating on hope.

Clyde's phone rang. Ian listened with half an ear to a meaningless series of grunts and mutterings.

"Thanks man. I'm on the way." Clyde snapped the phone closed and slipped it back into his trouser pocket.

"Raul, Mike, come on. We got a signal." Clyde spoke as he moved in long ground-eating strides toward the door.

"I'm coming." Ian announced as he caught up with Clyde.

They piled into a nondescript van, which turned out to be a mobile arsenal-and-tactical communication center. The tech, who was manning the communication unit, bobbed his head to acknowledge their presence. But he kept talking as they entered, holding up a warning finger for silence.

"Yes, I understand you, sir. I will certainly do everything in my power to grant your requests. I urge you to be patient. Please allow me to repeat your conditions back to you so that I can be confident that I am conveying your message accurately."

Leaning closer to catch every nuance of the conversation, Ian didn't realize he was holding his breath until the tech hung up.

"Tell me we got a fix," the tech demanded.

Another agent listened to the voice on his headset with a frown. "Gentlemen, we have coordinates."

"Feed them to Len," Clyde grumbled, buckling himself in.

"Did you talk to Regan?" Ian asked.

"Ian, Archie." Clyde rotated his neck to introduce the tech. "Archie, Ian has been point man acting as Officer Longstreet's escort."

"Nice to meet--"

"Did you talk to her?" Ian demanded, moving toward Archie.

"Ian's taking this personally. He and Officer Longstreet used to be partners," Clyde explained patiently.

Archie nodded cautiously. "Sorry pal. I didn't talk to the hostage. I asked. They said she was resting."

Ian nodded grimly. Resting from what? His early euphoria over finding Regan evaporated. He clung tenaciously to one hope--that she was alive. Why the hell had he been so stubborn? He should've gone along with an affair. He wasn't that lonely little

boy waiting for parents who had more important things to do than be with their son. Regan loved him. She didn't have to say vows for him to believe it. Praying that he'd get a chance to tell her--to make her believe that whatever she wanted was enough for him, he willed the sluggish oversized van to go faster.

* * * *

When Regan regained consciousness, she was hot, thirsty, and cuffed. She also had the mother of all throbbing headaches. The taste in her mouth and her muzzy head reminded her that she'd been drugged. Cautiously, she took a personal inventory, finding a few new aches and pains. But nothing alarming. This meant her captors still believed she was the princess. She had time. But how much?

The room was so dark she couldn't see anything. She waited for her eyes to adjust, but the absolute blackness didn't dissipate into shadows. She heard faint noises and tried to determine direction. Getting up without the use of her hands was awkward, but she managed it on the second try, bumping into a low ceiling. It might have been a cage, or maybe a storage area. She stumbled against an exposed stud and revised her guess. An attic.

Attics had spiders. She'd never liked spiders. A silky cobweb tumbled free brushing her cheek. Panic threatened to swamp her. Visions of hairy, big, poisonous spiders moving toward her loomed, stealing her courage.

She squeezed her eyes tight and then reopened them. Nothing. The blackness was total. Terror welled, her pulse pounding in her ears, her breath coming in pants as she fought to control the fear. She was alive. Ian would look for her. Then she remembered yelling at him. Telling him she hoped he and Julia would be happy together. Her heart fell to her boring princess shoes. She was going to die wearing old lady pumps and insipid princess pink toenail polish.

Ian would never know she loved him. She did, and what's more if he was dumb enough to keep proposing to a street cop from the wrong side of town she was going to accept and do her best to make sure he never regretted the decision.

So what if she didn't have the right address, the right connections or the right money to be Ian's wife? She loved him more than any snobby little socialite ever could. Why hadn't she been able to see that was all that counted?

She couldn't let it end like this. There had to be something she could do.

Regan's pulse had returned to more normal levels and she heard the noises again. They were louder this time, men's voices, arguing. She crept toward the sound, putting her ear to the floor when she bumped a wall.

"Shut up and let me think. They'll give us whatever we want in exchange for the Princess." The first man spoke so softly it was hard for Regan to make out his words.

"Ask for Habib first." The second voice was louder, higher and spoke faster. His thick accent made him even harder to understand.

"Fuck that. He was stupid enough to get caught--he deserves to rot in prison." This time terrorist number one spoke with enough force she understood him fine. She shrank back instinctively. The voice had no accent.

Both men were speaking in English. Why? Unless one of the *Sons of Allah* didn't speak Arabic.

"Habib goes free or the princess dies. I'll kill her myself." Number two's voice climbed a full octave, in desperation.

Regan caught the gist of terrorist number two's threat and shivered. A hairpin slid down her neck, clinking softly on the rough floor. She knelt carefully feeling for the stray pin. Then she wised up and shook her head hard enough to dislodge several. One dropped directly off her knee she rotated slowly--feeling behind her cautiously. Her fingers made contact with one of the metal pins.

Time alternately raced and crept as she doggedly kept at the lock with the now mangled hairpin. Perspiration rolled down between her shoulder blades, her arms ached, and her fingers were numb by the time the lock gave.

A few precious seconds were devoted to rubbing muscles too close to cramping. The next thing she did was check to see if she still had her gun. Her fingers made contact with the holster snugly in the small of her back.

Thank god. Relief washed through her, making her a little dizzy. Long strands of hair had come loose. She could imagine how little she looked like Princess Halle now. That was fine. She had no interest in convincing the clowns downstairs of her royal authenticity or anything else.

All she wanted to do was get out of spider central and throw herself into Ian's arms and ask him to marry her. He'd been asking for trouble from the start and she was just the girl to give it to him. If things had been any less grim, she would've laughed at the irony. Her fears about marriage were ridiculous compared to a lifetime without Ian. She prayed they would have another chance for happiness.

She still wanted to help the kids that needed fresh starts, but there was one young woman, who was overdue for her second chance--Regan.

Inching toward the wall that she'd bumped earlier with her arm extended, heavy footsteps thudded on stairs. The steps grew louder.

She lowered her lashes to prevent being blinded by light. After removing her backup piece from the holster, she kept her arms behind her, like she was still cuffed. Having done everything she could, she waited for the right opportunity.

"You are awake." The phony doctor's thick Qsani accent announced the obvious.

Through the narrowest slit of her eyes the man was nothing more than a dark outline in the doorway, a small weapon dangling from one hand.

"Please, Peder will pay whatever you want, just let me go," she pleaded.

"I have no doubt. The prince will ransom such a prize. How could you, a true Princess of Qsan give yourself to an infidel?"

Now there was a trick question if she'd ever heard one.

The man stepped closer, confirming his identity as the phony doctor. He drew back his gun arm. The better to backhand her.

Wrong princess, scumbag.

Regan moved in counterpart to his action, dodging the vicious blow and letting his own momentum unbalance him. Spinning around, she came to a hard stop with an elbow jab to his solar plexus. As she connected with his stomach, she stepped into it, putting her whole body behind the blow. When he clutched his mid-section, she followed up by crunching down on his instep with a wicked princess heel, then snapping her baby

gun snug against the underside of his sagging chin.

"Drop the weapon," she ordered.

His automatic pistol clattered to the floor.

She caught one of his wrists in the cuffs she'd struggled to unlock. He tried to twist away. She dug the barrel of her weapon harder into the soft flesh under his jaw while she snapped the other cuff in place. Stepping back, she stooped, collecting his discarded gun and shoved it into her waistband, keeping one eye on her hostage the whole time.

Regan gave the ugly little gun a small pat. Too bad, she didn't have any duct tape. He would've looked good with silver gag.

"Start walking doc," she said, nudging him with her gun as an added incentive.

Armed and dangerous was so much better than just dangerous.

"How many others are there?" she asked, already knowing there had to be at least two other men because she'd heard three distinct male voices.

"Too many for a woman to handle," he sneered.

We'll see about that, doc.

She could've knocked him down and taught him a couple of things about women, but that would've negated his value as a shield. Even a pretend princess needed to be practical when dealing with a bunch of fanatic terrorists.

A swift kick in the butt propelled the phony doctor into the kitchen.

"Drop your weapons! Hands where I can see them," she barked, wondering where the third terrorist had gone and hoping he wasn't behind her.

"She can't shoot both of us," a tall man with a scraggly beard declared.

"Maybe you're right. But I can shoot you for sure. Possibly your friend as well. I'm quick and an excellent shot. Put your hands up now!"

Scraggly beard shifted his gaze between her and his friend. She took careful aim at his crotch. His hands came up and his weapon hit the floor.

The boots of the SWAT team member entered via the kitchen window. Almost immediately, she heard cops crashing through the front windows.

"Great timing, guys. I haven't given them their Miranda warnings. There's at least one more man. He can't have gone far," she said, relief buoying her voice.

The SWAT team quickly secured the site and the suspects. Backup was exactly what she'd needed. The only man she would've been happier to see wasn't currently speaking to her.

"Hang on ma'am, Agent Jefferson and his team will want to debrief you," the assault team leader cautioned her.

Regan nodded numbly, feeling very much like a ma'am. She sat down on the backstairs. Then something made her look up.

Ian strode toward her. She started to get up--her knees wobbled, so she sank back down. No sense in falling at the man's feet and hurting herself. She needed a minute. Using the time to study Ian's handsome face, she noticed his sexy grin was missing in action. Every line of his chiseled features screamed pissed-off male. Nothing about him was cool or disdainful. He was all hot and bothered.

Dear God, she was glad to see him. Glad to be alive.

He scooped her up with surprising gentleness. Given that she could practically hear his teeth grinding and even the muscles, which weren't strained by her weight, rippled with tension.

"You scared the hell out of me," he growled.

"Nothing new about that, you don't even like it when I drive," she murmured, giving him a small love bite.

"I must be crazy." The muscles in his jaw eased fractionally.

"I'll drive slower," she offered with an uncertain smile.

"God, I'm so grateful, I thought, all that matters is you're alive. We'll have an affair forever or as long as you want it to last. We don't even have to live together--"

"Will you marry me?" she said into his neck, emphasizing her good intentions with hungry kisses.

"You're still taking the teen advocacy job right?" he asked, negotiating.

"Is that a condition, McKnight?" She hated the breathy, needy voice, which stole so much of her leverage.

"No," Ian admitted, letting out a heart-felt sigh.

"Good, 'cause I hate conditions, so make as few of them as you can stand okay?" Regan raised her head to meet his gaze. She wasn't holding back anything this time, because she wanted it all. "I love you Ian McKnight, totally and completely. No conditions. No reservations."

The corner of Ian's lips quirked, pulling Regan's gaze to his sexy mouth. Slowly his lips parted until his smile widened into an irresistible grin. Regan raised her gaze back to deep blue eyes full of wicked glints.

"So are we getting married or what?" Regan tried to tease and failed. Her heart lodged in her throat as she waited for Ian's answer.

"Hell yes, we're getting married." Ian lowered his head to brush his lips across hers. "Before you change your mind."

Slowly he lowered his head.

Regan closed her eyes. His lips brushed hers in an exquisite, torturous prelude to a real kiss. Then his tongue demanded entrance and she welcomed him home on a soft sigh of satisfaction, melting into his arms and the most dangerous rescue of all.

Chapter Twenty-One

Nice, France May 24th 8:00 AM local time

O'Brien relaxed in his seat in front of his favorite neighborhood café in Nice. The early morning was, as of yet, unspoiled by tourists. The day was overcast but not actually raining. There was every sign a perfect spring day was unfolding. He sipped his café au lait, savoring the rich coffee and the last of his pastry. The smooth tubular arms of his metal chair supported him with surprising comfort. The Mediterranean Sea remained calm under a layer of misty fog. The raincoat he'd splurged on in London had proved a good choice. He was glad for its extra warmth.

The whole unpleasant princess fiasco was already fading from his memory. At least he'd performed as asked and therefore owed Mohammed one less favor, which was the one bright side to the otherwise disastrous operation.

Technically, he still owed the devious bastard two favors. Upon reflection, he'd decided avenging Tony's betrayal had been worth it. Thinking about the way the fat little fucker had screamed gave him a dose of needed comfort.

"Good morning," Mohammed greeted him with warmth, startling O'Brien from his reflections. The old bastard's Qsani accent was barely detectable. A trickle of icy fear oozed down O'Brien's spinal column. He straightened, his stomach muscles tensing in response to an obvious, though still unidentified, threat.

"Good morning," he said cautiously, spotting Mohammed's bodyguards stationed at both ends of the café. There was a day when he would have leapt the small railing separating the restaurant's customers from the street, and then escaped. However, his speed was no longer reliable enough to ensure a safe getaway. He waited for Mohammed to inform him why he was there, relying on his wits and Mattie's guardianship to keep him safe.

Mohammed spoke softly, regretfully. "You understand the catastrophe in Seattle can hardly be considered as adequate compensation, which you had so generously promised me." He shook his head with heavy regret. "No, not even for one of the many paltry favors I have granted you."

Swallowing a groan, O'Brien responded evasively, yet politely. "Seattle was a most regrettable situation, but not of my making."

"A leader is responsible for the performance of his men as well as for his own actions," Mohammed said mildly. His meaning was searingly clear.

O'Brien acquiesced with a nod of agreement.

His tormentor reached inside the jacket of his impeccable wool suit, withdrawing an airfare holder. "You depart Nice this afternoon for New York. Rent a hotel room and check your email each evening at five PM. You will receive instructions sometime this next week. Be ready."

Mohammed rose smoothly and signaled to his men. O'Brien eyed his cold coffee

with disdain. The remainder of his pastry had grown soggy and unappetizing. Abruptly he signaled for his bill, settling it with a twenty-euro note without bothering to read the total.

Three favors left. With a sickening flash of insight, he knew they would never be repaid to Mohammed's satisfaction. He would never be free.

* * * *

Kingston, Jamaica May 30th 9:00 PM local time

A week after the small quiet funeral and another two weeks after an even more subdued wedding to the surprisingly docile Caroline, Sam had to face the hard fact that he needed to help to locate O'Brien, let alone extract retribution. Using O'Brien's ill-gotten gains to hunt him down, struck Sam as at least a start on poetic justice. Unfortunately, even though he offered a hefty retainer, his search for assistance had not been going well.

"Forget about it," Todd Chadwick said, standing in the universal signal that their meeting was finished.

"That's not an option," Sam shot back, rising too. Chadwick was the third private investigator he'd seen. The one he'd consulted last had suggested Chadwick might be crazy enough to take on a lost cause. Apparently, his colleague was mistaken about the PI's criteria for accepting clients.

The office was definitely low-rent. Sam was worried the ceiling fan was going to wobble right off whatever half-assed screw kept it suspended from the aged yellowed ceiling. The furniture was scarred wood, still a few months away from attaining antique status, mixed with government surplus metal pieces.

Unlike his shabby surroundings, Chadwick was impressive. He wore the loose print shirt and khakis that served as an island business casual uniform. But underneath the laid-back clothes was a hard body and quick mind.

Before the investigator had refused Sam's case, he had assessed and dismissed him as non-serious. Frustrating for him. Throwing a tantrum about it would only strengthen the detective's conviction that he was dealing with an emotional kid. Looking even younger than his twenty-six years was an advantage he was sure he would appreciate someday. Right now, he wished his appearance matched his determination.

Finding O'Brien was going to be a do-it-yourself job. Sam should've figured that out a little faster. What's more, he needed to get realistic about how he was going to handle him when he did find his enemy. Considering that his quarry had taken down Tony, he was not the same coked-up disaster he'd been in Seattle.

When Sam promised his mother he wouldn't *get lost* he'd been serious. He was all she had left and he had every intention of honoring his words to her. He was smart, young, and fit, but that didn't make him a serious challenge to his enemy, let alone the lethal avenger he needed to become. Time to acquire some new skills.

"You know anything about martial arts?" he asked from the doorway.

Chadwick eyed him warily, but finally answered. "I teach Tai Kwan Do over at the youth center on sixth."

"You have an age limit on students?"

The detective thawed, marginally. "No, I try to match up students for practice

based on their skill level--not age or size. You thinking of taking a class?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Then what, learn to shoot, and Detection 101?"

"Maybe," Sam said cautiously.

"Do you have any idea what you're getting into?" Chadwick asked with a weary sigh, but he didn't give Sam a chance to answer. "Come on, tonight's class is on me. We'll see how you feel about being a tough guy after Jimbo kicks your ass. If you're still gung ho, we'll talk after class."

"Fair enough; who's Jimbo?"

Chadwick ignored the question. "You can follow me, the red pickup is mine."

"Sure," Sam said. There was something likable about the detective, even if he had refused to help.

A few minutes later, Sam parked next to the beat up piece of junk pickup that ran amazingly well and strolled after the detective, who disappeared inside the small municipal building.

The students were all teens or preteens dressed in baggy tee shirts, cutoff tops and long oversized shorts. Sneakers lined one wall. Sam paused to remove his shoes before stepping onto the mats covering most of the floor.

When Chadwick returned he was dressed in a simple white cotton uniform belted in basic black. The students immediately lined up and bowed. Sam joined them, a beat behind the rest of the class. He was surprised and impressed by the respect the motley young men showed their instructor.

The class began with the detective demonstrating a position and the students imitating the teacher's actions. The lesson started easy, rapidly progressing to harder challenges. Sam panted, keeping up with the amazing wiry pretzel-boys able to pump off one-handed and fingertip pushups with ease.

Then they paired-off. Chadwick introduced him to Jimbo. Who was possibly thirteen years old and no more than one hundred ten pounds at the outside. Sam planned to go easy on the kid.

It didn't take long for him to recognize that worrying about being rough with Jimbo was a waste of his time and energy. His practice partner tossed him to the mat repeatedly. Without breaking a sweat. He wasn't mean about it.

In fact, Jimbo took the time to show him how to defend himself and applauded Sam's weak efforts with gruff praise. "All right, mon."

It was humbling, coming from a kid, but he wasn't letting pride stop him. Sam was there to learn. Everybody had to start sometime.

Once class was the over, after bowing, the kids had vanished. Leaving behind crumpled mats, the faint odor of old sneakers, their teacher, and Sam.

Every muscle in his body already whimpered from the unaccustomed abuse they had endured. Gloomily, he knew he'd feel much worse in the morning. He swallowed the urge to grunt as he straightened and his back cracked. Jimbo, the demon he'd been paired with for the Tai Kwan Do session, seemed like a nice kid. But someone should've tied at least one of his arms behind his back in order to make things a little more sporting.

"You survived your first lesson," the laidback detective, now revealed in his alter

ego as an evil sensei, said with a chuckle.

Hiding the stabbing pain in his back, Sam replied with an uneven grin. "Yeah, battered and bruised, but still standing. That Jimbo is an animal."

Chadwick's eye twinkled with suppressed laughter. "They're all pretty good and you're ... not."

"Ouch! Thanks for the confirmation of the message my poor aching body already sent. I'll learn. When's the next class?"

"Tomorrow night, same time, same place."

Sam swallowed another humiliating groan. "I'll be here."

"Wanna to give me a hand with these mats?"

"Sure," he lied while manfully pretending the muscle spasms weren't happening. Actually, much as he wanted to lie down and suffer quietly, to keep moving was the smarter option.

"Then I'll change and let you buy me a beer while you tell me why it's so friggin' urgent for you to find this weird dangerous dude."

Half an hour later, he and Chadwick sat at a corner table, sipping matching bottles of wicked dark lager, an old favorite for Chadwick, a new taste experience for him. Not one he liked all that well, however. He was really more of a wine kind of guy. But he was trying keeping an open mind--the bitter brew might grow on him.

"So tell me what's going on with you and this O'Brien," Chadwick said.

"It's a long story." Sam took another experimental swallow of the lager, and then added. "O'Brien killed my father. He's smart, ruthless, and a threat to my family."

"Let me ask the obvious question. Why not go to the authorities?"

"He's an ex-cop, who has a lot more clout with the authorities than I do. As example, my father's death was ruled a mugging by person or persons unknown. Trust me, it was nothing like a mugging. It was a torture session, followed by execution."

"You gonna tell me how you wound up on the wrong end of a vendetta with an ex-cop? Or do I have to guess?"

Sam took a longer swallow of the bitter drink. "You're better off not knowing."

Chapter Twenty-two

Seattle, Washington June 3rd 11:00 AM

Regan stared at the princess in the mirror, and then tried a tentative smile. Dear God, it really was her. She looked ... amazing. The pretty bride's changing room was lovely and romantic, but the reflection in the mirror was an illusion, which Kiki conscientiously worked to perfect. Suddenly everything seemed surreal and false. What if Ian came to his senses and realized he'd made a mistake?

A delighted laugh spilled from Kiki's lips, distracting her from her rising panic. "Pretty damn fine, if I do say so myself." She sat down the hairspray and paused to buff her own gleaming red nails. "Course, considering that you're marrying pretty boy, Ian, you need to be at the top of your form."

All Regan heard was marrying and Ian in the same sentence and panic was back full force, blanching her face. Cold seeped through her pores into her bones, finally settling in her hands and feet. She laughed too shrilly at Kiki's comment, eyes wide with unreasoning terror. She'd sworn that she'd never marry--why would she? There was absolutely no point to a childless marriage.

The white dress was a bad-taste joke. She wasn't pure. She was hideously irretrievably broken. Her breaths came faster, but she couldn't get enough oxygen. Kiki guided her onto an aptly placed fainting couch.

"Stay right there, don't you even think of running out of here until I get back," her friend admonished her.

Regan nodded, closing her eyes in relief. Kiki was going to help her get out of here--everything would be okay. Except she would hurt Ian. Oh dear God, she didn't want to hurt him--she loved him with all her heart. Which is why it would be a mistake to marry him. She couldn't do that to him. He needed a woman who could give him the family he longed for.

What was taking Kiki so long? The ceremony was due to start soon. She needed to disappear now. There was no way she could bear to humiliate Ian by walking away from him during the ceremony. It had to be now. Right now.

The door opened and she bolted up, gathering the excess material of her train. She glanced at Kiki, but something had gone wrong because instead of friend there was Ian and he didn't look happy.

"You weren't thinking of breaking your promise to marry me were you?" But he didn't give her time to respond. "Because a McKnight's word is his bond. He never goes back on a promise, no matter what."

"I'm not a McKnight," she said shakily.

He glanced at his watch. "We're fixing that in about five minutes." Then he pulled her hard against him. "You are going to make an honest man of me or else."

"Or else what?" she asked, her lips curving the teeniest fraction in spite of her

lingering fears. Ian's presence calmed the worst of the terror and reminded her what really mattered--loving this man as long as she had breath in her body.

"Or else things will get really dangerous," he promised.

"They might anyway," she murmured against the irresistible lips pressed to hers.

The End