

A man in a black tuxedo and a woman in a white strapless dress are standing close together, looking at each other. The man is adjusting the woman's dress. They are in a room with arched doorways and hanging lights in the background.

2 *in* 1
GREAT
VALUE

EXPECTING
ROYAL TWINS!

MELISSA McCLONE

TO DANCE
WITH A PRINCE

CARA COLTER

Cherish[™]

Melissa McClone

**Expecting Royal Twins! / To Dance
with a Prince: Expecting Royal
Twins! / To Dance with a Prince**

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Expecting Royal Twins! It's not every day that a gorgeous prince strides into your workshop and announces he's your husband! Mechanic Izzy's shocked and struggling with the idea of exchanging her oil-stained overalls for silken gowns! Until two small surprises change all the rules...To Dance with a PrinceStreetwise dancer Meredith's less than thrilled with teaching privileged Kiernan to dance. Yet, as Meredith uncovers the man behind the royal mask, she's in for a surprise. She's never believed in happy endings – let alone one with her own real-life prince!

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TO DANCE WITH A PRINCE CARA COLTER**



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**EXPECTING ROYAL TWINS!
MELISSA MCCLONE**

About the Author

With a degree in mechanical engineering from Stanford University, the last thing **MELISSA MCCLONE** ever thought she would be doing was writing romance novels. But analyzing engines for a major US airline just couldn't compete with her 'happily-ever-afters'. When she isn't writing, caring for her three young children or doing laundry, Melissa loves to curl up on the couch with a cup of tea, her cats and a good book. She enjoys watching home decorating shows to get ideas for her house—a 1939 cottage that is *slowly* being renovated. Melissa lives in Lake Oswego, Oregon, with her own real-life hero husband, two daughters, a son, two loveable but oh-so-spoiled indoor cats and a no-longer-stray outdoor kitty that decided to call the garage home. Melissa loves to hear from her readers. You can write to her at PO Box 63, Lake Oswego, OR 97034, USA, or contact her via her website: www.melissamcclone.com

Dear Reader,

Ever since my first 'royal' romance came out in 2000, I've wanted to write another one. But I struggled to find the right cast of characters and plot.

Enter His Royal Highness Crown Prince Nikola Kresimir of Vernonia. When Prince Niko popped into my imagination I knew I'd found my hero and a story would follow. It did!

Duty matters most to Prince Niko. He knows what his country needs to thrive in the future, but he doesn't have a clue what he needs to be happy. Forget about love. Niko plans to marry to provide Vernonia with a princess bride's dowry and an heir.

Isabel Poussard is an American car mechanic who dreams of working on a racing team's pit crew. Izzy hates the colour pink and doesn't own a dress. NO way does she want to be a princess. No matter what Prince Hottie thinks!

AS Niko and Izzy will learn, sometimes what we want isn't what we need to find our happily-ever-after. Enjoy!

Melissa

For Tom, Mackenna, Finn, Rose, Smalls, Rocket, Spirit, Chaos and Yoda. The best family a writer could have!

Special thanks to: Elizabeth Boyle, Drew Brayshaw, Roger Carstens, Amy Danicic, John Fenzel, Terri Reed, Robert Williams and Camas Shysical Therapy.

CHAPTER ONE

NIKOLA TOMISLAV KRESIMIR, Crown Prince of Vernonia, strode past his father's assistant and the two palace guards standing watch. As soon as he entered the king's office, Niko heard the door close behind him.

He grimaced.

Niko didn't have time for another impromptu assignment. His in-box was overflowing. The upcoming trade conference was turning into a logistical nightmare. Princess Julianna of Aliestle was patiently waiting to have lunch with him.

He was used to juggling competing demands, thrived on them actually, but the collar of his dress shirt seemed to have shrunk two inches since he'd left his own office three minutes ago. He tugged on his tie.

Not that it lessened his frustration level.

A summons from the king trumped everything else and often messed up Niko's schedule for the rest of the day, sometimes week. Not to mention the havoc royal protocol played with his priority of turning their provincial country into a modern nation. But he followed his father's orders out of respect and for the good of the country.

King Dmitar sat behind his large mahogany desk staring at a manila file folder in his hands. His once dark hair was now as white as the snowcapped peaks of the Balkans and Carpathians. His face, like Niko's own, was as rugged as those same mountain ranges. His wire-rimmed reading glasses rested low on his nose, making him look more like a professor than a soldier or a king who had spent the majority of his rule trying to unite his country against all odds.

Niko stood ten feet away, waiting.

A breeze blew through an open window, carrying the sweet fragrance of flowers from the royal gardens. A vast improvement over the acrid smell of gunpowder and sickening scent of blood that used to taint the air around here.

Five years had passed since the ratification of the peace treaty. Tensions between the two warring factions erupted occasionally, but peace prevailed. Niko intended to ensure it always would. A totally united Vernonia, however, seemed like a far off dream. A fairy tale, really.

Not wanting to waste more time, he cleared his throat.

His father looked up. Dark circles ringed his eyes.

"You sent for me, sir," Niko said.

The lines on his father's face seemed deeper, more pronounced, than they used to be. The conflict had aged him; so had grief. But still the corners of his mouth curved upward into a rare smile. "I have good news, my son."

The best news would be that Vernonia had been accepted into the European Union, but Niko knew they still had too many improvement projects to complete first. He stepped closer to the desk. "I've spent the morning wading through the demands of the trade delegations. Good news will be a welcome relief, Father."

"Your bride box has been located."

Not located. *Found.*

The unexpected news sunk in. Niko respected the past, but the fact something as important as his marriage was dependent on such on antiquated custom as presenting his wife a family heirloom on their wedding day irritated him. Traditions could only take his country so far. "You are certain it is mine?"

"As certain as we can be until we have the box in hand."

His bride box hadn't been seen in over twenty years. Not since the collapse of the Soviet Union brought turmoil to many Balkan countries. Vernonia had avoided the ethnic strife that ravaged many

of its neighbors, but terrorist acts had led to a deadly civil war that tore the country apart and nearly destroyed its economy. “Where is the box?”

“The United States.” His father adjusted his glasses and studied the folder. “Charlotte, North Carolina, to be exact.”

“A long way from home.”

“Yes.”

The location wasn’t really important. Niko would have the box back. Tradition—and his father—would be satisfied. Nothing would stand in the way of Niko’s marriage to Julianna. He could finally fulfill his duty as his parents and people wished him to do. The marriage would give him the means and opportunity to do what he wanted—needed—to do with Vernonia.

Plans formed in his mind, but he couldn’t get too far ahead of himself. Nothing could happen until he had possession of the box. “How was it discovered?”

“The internet.” His father shuffled through papers in the file. “Someone posted on an antiques forum looking for the key. After a few exchanges verifying the seriousness of our interest, we were sent a picture that confirmed our suspicions. The box is yours.”

“Incredible.” Niko considered the number of private investigators and treasure hunters hired to find the heirloom. He laughed at the irony. “Technology to the rescue of an Old World custom.”

“Technology may be useful at times, but our people desire tradition. You must remember that when you wear the crown.”

“Everything I’ve ever done has been for Vernonia.” Niko’s family had ruled for eight centuries. The country was in their blood and hearts. Duty always came first. “But we must modernize if we are to succeed in the twenty-first century.”

“Yet you have agreed to an arranged marriage.”

He shrugged, but the last thing he felt was indifference. His marriage would act as a bridge between the past and the future. He might not be the United Kingdom’s Prince William, but Niko had the attention of royal watchers. The publicity surrounding a royal wedding would be good for his country’s nascent tourist industry. He would use whatever he could to Vernonia’s advantage. “I may not be a stickler for tradition, Father, but I will always do what is best for the country.”

“As will I.” His father placed the folder on his desk. “You have the key.”

“Of course, sir.” Niko always had the key. He had been wearing the damn thing ever since the decree that he could never take it off twenty odd years ago. The only thing that had changed since then was the size of the chain. He pulled the thick silver one from beneath his shirt. A key that looked more like a cross and heart welded together dangled from his fingers. “Can I finally stop wearing the necklace now?”

“No.” The word resonated through the spacious office until the tapestries on the wall swallowed the sound. “You will need the key when you go to North Carolina tomorrow.”

“Send Jovan. I can’t travel to the United States right now. I’m needed here,” Niko countered. “My schedule is full. Princess Julianna is here.”

“The box is yours,” his father said. “You will be the one to bring it home. The travel arrangements have already been made. Your aide will be provided with an itinerary and the necessary information.”

Niko bit his tongue. Further resistance would be futile. The king’s word was final even if it made little sense under the current circumstances. “Fine, but you do realize I have never seen the box.”

“You have seen it. You were a child, so you don’t remember.”

What Niko remembered from his childhood and early adulthood was war, the one thing he wanted and hoped to forget. Keeping peace and modernizing Vernonia were his main goals now. Though the parliament wanted him to provide an heir. Might as well get on with that, now that nothing stood in his way of marrying. Speaking of which ...

“Do you wish for me to propose to Julianna before I leave for America or upon my return, Father?”

The king’s face reddened. “There shall be no official proposal.”

“What?” Niko remembered the open window and the people on the other side of the office door. He lowered his voice. “We’ve spent months negotiating with the Council of Elders in Aliestle. Even the Separatists are in favor of the marriage since King Alaric supported them during the conflict. The only obstacle to marriage has been the bride box. A delay will send the wrong—”

“No proposal.”

Frustration mounted. Niko had searched for a suitable bride for almost a year. He didn’t want to have to start over. “You agreed Julianna is an excellent choice for a wife and the future queen of Vernonia. That is why finding the bride box has been a priority.”

“Julianna is more than suitable to be queen, but ...” His father removed his glasses and rubbed his tired-looking eyes. “Are you in love with her?”

Love? Niko was surprised his traditional father had broached the subject. His parents’ marriage hadn’t been a love match. Niko had never expected one for himself after his older brother, Stefan, had been killed during the conflict.

“We get along well. She’s beautiful and intelligent. I will be content with her as my wife,” Niko stated honestly. He’d always known as crown prince he would marry for Vernonia’s good, not his own. “The publicity surrounding a royal wedding will increase our visibility to the tourist industry. Most importantly, an alliance with Aliestle will give Vernonia the capital it requires to complete rebuilding. That will help our efforts to join the European Union.”

“You’ve looked at all angles.”

Niko bowed his head. “As you taught me, Father.”

“And Julianna. Are her feelings engaged?”

“She ... cares for me,” Niko answered carefully. “As I do for her. She understands what is expected.”

“But is she in love with you?”

Uncomfortable, Niko shifted his weight between his feet. “You’ve never spoken about love before. Only duty and what a state marriage would entail.”

“You are old enough to know whether a woman has feelings for you or not. Answer my question.”

Niko considered his outing with Julianna yesterday afternoon. They’d left their security detail on the shore and sailed on the lake. He’d kissed her for the first time. The kiss had been ... pleasant, but Julianna seemed more interested in sailing than kissing him again. “I do not believe she is in love with me. In fact, I’m certain she isn’t.”

“Good.”

“I do not understand what is going on, sir. If something has changed with Vernonia’s relationship to Aliestle—”

“Nothing has changed there.” His father’s drawn out sigh would have made the parliament members’ knees tremble beneath their heavy robes. “But a slight ... complication in regards to you marrying Julianna has arisen.”

Niko’s muscles tensed. “What kind of complication?”

Inside Bay #2 at Rowdy’s One Stop Garage in Charlotte, North Carolina, a Brad Paisley song blared from a nearby boom box. Oil, gasoline and grease scented the air. Isabel Poussard bent over a Chevy 350 small block engine. The bolt she needed to remove wouldn’t budge, but she wasn’t giving up or asking for help. She wanted the guys to see her as an equal, not a woman who couldn’t make it on her own.

She adjusted the wrench. “Come on now. Turn for Izzy.”

A swatch of light brown hair fell across her eyes so she couldn’t see.

Darn ponytail. It never stayed put. If she had any extra money, she would get a short hairstyle so she wouldn't be bothered anymore. She didn't dare cut it herself. For years her uncle Frank had chopped her hair with whatever was handy, scissors or razor blades. She'd grown up looking more like a boy than a girl. Not that any dresses hung in her closet today.

Izzy tucked the stray strands behind her ear. She struggled to turn the wrench. Her palm sweated. The wrench slipped.

Frustrated, she blew out a puff of air. "No one is going to let you work over the wall in the pits during a race if you can't loosen a little bolt."

She imagined the start of the Daytona 500. The roar of the crowd. The heat from the pavement. The smell of burning rubber. The rev of engines.

Excitement surged through her.

Being on a professional pit crew had been Uncle Frank's dream for as long as Izzy remembered. An aneurysm had cut his life short. Now it was up to her to turn his dream into a reality. He'd spent his life caring for her and sharing his skill and love of cars. More than once he'd had the opportunity to be on a pit crew, but he hadn't wanted to leave her. This was the least she could do for him.

As soon as she saved enough money, she would enroll in pit crew school. She wanted to put her days at dirt tracks and stock car circuits behind her and take a shot at the big leagues. For Uncle Frank and herself. She had bigger goals than just being on the pit crew. She wanted to be the crew chief. Izzy would show those kids who laughed at her grease-stained hands they were wrong. She would do something with her life. Something big.

She adjusted her grip on the wrench and tried again. The bolt turned. "Yes!"

"Hey, Izzy," the garage owner's son and her closest friend, Boyd, shouted to her over the Lady Antebellum song now playing on the radio. "Some folks here to see you."

Word of mouth about her skills kept spreading. She could not only fix old engines, but the new hybrids, too. Her understanding of the computer and electronics side of things coupled with a gift for diagnostics drew in new clients daily. Her boss, Rowdy, was so happy he'd given Izzy a raise. If this kept up, she could enroll in school in a few months.

With a smile, she placed her wrench and the bolt on the top of her toolbox.

Izzy stepped outside. Fresh air filled her lungs. Sunshine warmed her face. She loved spring days better than the humid ones summer brought with it.

In front of her, a black limousine gleamed beneath the midday sun. The engine idled perfectly. Darkened windows hid the identity of the car's passengers, but uniformed police officers stood nearby.

Not simply "some folks" wanting to see her. Must be a VIP inside the limo if police escorts were needed.

Izzy couldn't imagine what they wanted with her since the car sounded like it was running fine.

She wiped her dirty hands on the thighs of her cotton coveralls. Not exactly clean, especially with grease caked under her fingernails, but cleaner.

One of the police officers gave her the once-over, as if sizing up her danger potential. A good thing she'd left the wrench in the garage.

A chauffeur walked around the car and opened the back door. A blond man exited. He wore a designer suit and nicely polished black dress shoes. With a classically handsome face and short clipped hair, he was easy on the eyes. But his good looks seemed a little bland, like a bowl of vanilla ice cream without any hot fudge, whipped cream and candy sprinkles. She preferred men who weren't quite so pretty, men with a little more ... character.

"Isabel Poussard?" the man asked.

She stiffened. The last time anyone used her real name had been during her high school graduation ceremony when she received her diploma. She'd always been Izzy, ever since she was a

little girl. Uncle Frank had taught her to be careful and cautious around strangers. He'd worried about her and been very protective. She knew he'd be that way now if he were here.

Izzy raised her chin and stared down her nose. The gesture had sent more than one guy running in the opposite direction. "Who wants to know?"

Warm brown eyes met hers. The guy wasn't intimidated at all. He looked almost amused for some strange reason. "I am Jovan Novak, aide to His Royal Highness Crown Prince Nikola Tomislav Kresimir."

Jovan's accent sounded European. Interesting since this was NASCAR country, not Formula 1 territory. "Never heard of him."

"He's from Vernonia."

"Vernonia." The name sounded vaguely familiar. Izzy rolled the word over in her mind. Suddenly she remembered. "That's one of those Balkan countries. Fairy-tale castles and snowcapped mountains. There was a civil war there."

"Yes."

"Hey, Izzy," Boyd shouted from behind her. "You need any help?"

She glanced back at the bear of a man who stood with a mallet in his hands and curiosity in his eyes. A grin tugged at her lips. She appreciated how Boyd treated her like a little sister, especially since she had no family. Of course that made things interesting the few times she had a date pick her up after work. "Not yet, Boyd, but I'll let you know if I do."

Jovan looked like he might be in shape, but she could probably take him without Boyd's help thanks to Uncle Frank. When she was younger, he used to barter his mechanic skills for her martial arts class tuition. Now she worked out every day to get in shape for the work necessary by a pit crew member during a race.

"Isabel. Izzy." Jovan's smile reached all the way to his eyes. He bowed. "It is such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your—"

"Is this about a car repair?" He acted so happy to meet her. That bothered Izzy. Most customers limited their interactions to questions about their cars. Some simply ignored her. The men who went out of their way to talk to her usually ended up propositioning her. "Or do you want something else? I'm in the middle of a job."

Not exactly the most friendly customer service, but something felt off. No customer would know her real name. And the guy smiled too much to be having car trouble.

"One moment please." Jovan ducked into the limousine.

Time ticked by. Seconds or minutes, Izzy couldn't tell since she wasn't wearing a watch. She used the clock hanging in the garage or her cell phone to keep track of time while she worked.

Izzy tapped her foot. She had to get the Chevy finished so she could work on the Dodge Grand Caravan. Somewhere a frazzled mom with four kids was waiting to get her minivan back. It was up to Izzy to get the job done.

Jovan stepped out of the limo finally.

About time, she thought.

Another man in a dark suit followed. Izzy took a closer look.

Smokin'.

The thought shot from her brain to the tips of her steel-toed boots and ricocheted back to the top of her head.

The guy was at least six feet tall with thick, shoulder-length brown hair and piercing blue-green eyes framed by dark lashes.

She straightened as if an extra inch could bring her closer to his height. Even then the top of her head would barely come to his chin.

But what a chin.

Izzy swallowed a sigh.

A strong nose, chiseled cheekbones, dark brows. Rugged features that made for an interesting—a handsome—combination in spite of a jagged scar on his right cheek.

Talk about character. He had it in spades.

Not that she was interested.

Spending her entire life surrounded by men, car mechanics, gave her an understanding of how the opposite sex thought and operated. The one standing in front of her wearing a nice suit and shiny shoes was trouble. Dangerous, too.

The limo, expensive clothing, personal aide and police escort meant he lived in a completely different world than her, a world where she was seen as nothing more than a servant or wallpaper or worse, a one-night stand. Having to deal with mysterious rich people intimidated her. She wanted nothing to do with him.

But she didn't mind looking. The man belonged on the cover of a glossy men's magazine. He moved with the grace and agility of an athlete. The fit of his suit made her wonder what was underneath the fancy fabric.

Everyone else around him seemed to fade into the background. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had this kind of reaction to a guy. No doubt the result of working too much overtime. Time to take a night off and have some fun. That would keep her from mooning over the next gorgeous guy who crossed her path.

"You are Isabel Poussard." His accent, a mix of British and something else, could melt a frozen stick of butter.

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

His assessing gaze traveled the length of her. Nothing in his eyes or on his face hinted if he liked what he saw.

Not that she cared. Not much anyway.

A hottie like him would never be interested in a grease monkey like her. Still he was a yummy piece of eye candy. One she could appreciate.

Izzy raised her chin again, but didn't stare down her nose the way she'd done with Jovan. She wasn't ready to send this one on his way just yet. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"I am Prince Nikola of Vernonia."

"A prince?"

"Yes."

She supposed a prince would have a police escort as well as an aide, but this was just the kind of prank Boyd would pull and kid Izzy about for the rest of her life. She glanced around looking for a camera. "Am I being punk'd?"

Jovan grinned.

Nikola pressed his lips together. "No."

Yeah, on second thought, she couldn't imagine the police participating in a joke. But she still had a hard time believing royalty would come to Rowdy's. This wasn't the worst part of town, but it wasn't the best, either. "Am I supposed to call you Your Highness or something?"

"Niko is fine," he said.

Better than fine, but he probably already knew that. Men as attractive as him usually did. "So Niko, why are you here?"

Jovan started to speak, but Niko held up his hand and silenced his aide.

Nice trick. Maybe he really was a prince. Or maybe he liked being the one to talk.

"You posted on the internet looking to find a key to a box," Niko said. "The box is mine."

She stared down her nose. "I don't think so, dude."

He winced.

"The box belonged to my mother," Izzy added. "I'm just looking for the key."

"I know you want the key, but the box in the picture never belonged to your mother."

Oh, boy. Rowdy and Boyd had told Izzy if she posted on the internet she would get some strange replies. But she'd received only one email from a person who described the box so perfectly she'd sent him a picture of it. "You're HRMKDK?"

"That's my father," Niko explained. "His Royal Majesty King DMITAR KRESIMIR."

Like a king would ever email a total stranger about a wooden box. Sure it was pretty, but it was old. Izzy had thought the only value was sentimental. Maybe she was wrong about its worth. "I did correspond with your, um, dad, but I already told you, the box belongs to me."

"The box is technically yours, but only because I gave it to you."

What a ridiculous statement. The box was Izzy's only connection to her mother who had died when Izzy was a baby. That was why she was desperate to find the missing key and open the bottom portion to see if anything was inside. With Uncle Frank gone, she had no family, no connection to her past. She wanted to know something ... anything.

Fighting her disappointment over not finding the key, Izzy squared her shoulders. "I've heard of Vernonia, but I've never been there. I'm certain we've never met. I've had the box for as long as I remember."

"You have had the box for twenty-three years," Niko said. "I gave it to you when you were a baby."

"A baby," she repeated, as if hearing it a second time would make more sense than the first time. It didn't. The guy wasn't that much older than her—that would mean he'd been just a kid. Ludicrous.

"Yes," Niko admitted ruefully. "I must sound crazy."

If he wasn't, then she was. "You do."

"I can assure you I'm not crazy," Niko stated matter-of-factly. He glanced at his aide standing next to him. "Isn't that true, Jovan?"

"Not crazy," Jovan agreed, though he continued to look amused by what was going on.

"I'm guessing you're paid to agree with him, Jovan," Izzy said, irritated.

"Yes, but I'm also a lawyer if that adds to my credibility."

"It doesn't." Maybe this was how good-looking, eccentric royals wasted their time and money. She wished they would go bother someone else. "I think you both must be certifiable."

The two men looked at her with puzzled expressions.

"Insane." Izzy glanced at the police officers. She couldn't imagine them wasting their time and tax dollars protecting some mental case claiming to be a prince. Surely they would have checked him out and asked to see his diplomatic papers or passport or something. "Let's pretend what you say is true—"

"It is true," Niko said.

She took a deep breath to control her growing temper. "Why would you give a baby the box? Is there some significance to the gesture?"

"It's customary."

It was her turn to be confused. "Huh?"

"Tradition," Niko clarified. "When a Vernonian prince gets married, he presents his wife with a bride box on their wedding day."

"That still doesn't explain why you would give the box to me."

"Because I am your husband."

CHAPTER TWO

“MY HUSBAND?” Isabel’s voice cracked. Her expression would have been comical if this were not such a serious matter.

“Yes.” Niko understood her shock. He even sympathized. Discovering he had a wife had sent his world spinning off its axis. But her feelings—his feelings—would only delay the annulment needed to remedy this “complication” so he could marry Julianna and help his country. “It is a lot to take in.”

“Take in?” Sharp, brown eyes bore into him. “Okay, Niko or whoever you are, cut the bull and tell me what’s really going on here.”

He stared at Isabel with the dirty, baggy coveralls, lopsided ponytail and grease on her hands and cheek. She might be halfway attractive with her oval face, high cheekbones and expressive eyes, if she weren’t dressed like a man and covered in motor oil.

“Come on, Niko.” She placed her hands on her hips. “Spill.”

He expected her lack of protocol and manners, but the strength in her voice surprised him, as did her take-no-prisoner tone. Most people kowtowed to him. Few ever challenged him. He was ... intrigued. “I am speaking the truth. I am your husband.”

She pursued her full, unglossed lips and gave him a long, hard look. He was used to such a frank appraisal, but unlike most women, Isabel did not seem impressed by what she saw. He didn’t know whether to be amused or annoyed by this woman who worked at a dilapidated garage fixing other people’s broken-down vehicles.

“I told you. I’ve never seen you before,” she said. “We can’t be married.”

“Indeed we can. You simply do not remember.”

Isabel’s gaze remained steady. “I think I’d remember getting married.”

“Not if you were only a few months old at the time.”

Her mouth formed a perfect O. “What?”

“I was only six years old when we married, and my memories are very vague.”

Almost nonexistent, but he needed to convince Isabel of what had occurred twenty-three years ago, not add to the doubts shining in her pretty hazel eyes.

“Children marrying?” Isabel’s nostrils flared. “There are laws against that kind of thing.”

“Yes, and today it is illegal in Vernonia, but not twenty-three years ago.”

“This is crazy.” Her voice jumped an octave. “I’m an American.”

“Your mother was American, but your father was Vernonian.”

“My father.” Isabel’s glanced toward Jovan as if seeking confirmation. At his nod, her hands balled into fists. “Now I know you’re lying. My father’s name isn’t listed on my birth certificate. I have no idea who he is.”

The hurt and anger in her voice suggested she was telling the truth. There was no reason for her to lie. She had too much to gain by accepting what Niko was telling her. His respect inched up. Opportunists or not, many women would have jumped at the chance to be his wife. “I have proof.”

“You mean the box,” she said.

“The bride box, yes, but also documentation and a photograph.”

Curiosity flashed in Isabel’s eyes. “What kind of documentation?”

Her interest loosened some of the tension in his shoulders. Maybe the paper would convince her of the truth. He motioned to Jovan, who removed a leather pouch from his inside suit pocket with a flourish and handed it over.

As Niko opened the flap, he noticed two tall men in coveralls watching them from the garage.

No doubt the limousine and police cars would attract attention. Niko wanted to avoid the media at all cost. The annulment needed to be handled quietly with no press coverage. Before departing for the United States, he had been upfront with Julianna about the situation, but others from Aliestle

might not be as understanding about the sudden appearance of “his wife” on the front page of tabloids. He didn’t want to risk losing her and what she would bring to Vernonina.

He glanced around. “I would prefer a more private place to discuss matters. Inside the limo perhaps?”

Isabel glared at him. “Do I look like the kind of woman who would get into a car with strangers?”

Niko assumed based on her reaction the answer wasn’t yes. “I may be a stranger, but I am your husband.”

“That remains to be seen.”

She wasn’t making this easy, but given her appearance he shouldn’t be surprised. “Perhaps the garage or if there is an office—”

“Here.”

He needed her cooperation. The last thing Niko wanted to do was upset her any more than he already had. He would allow her this much control.

“Fine. We shall remain here.” He removed two folded pieces of paper from the pouch. “I took the liberty of having the marriage certificate translated.”

She eyed him warily. “Marriage certificate, huh?”

He extended the papers toward her. “See for yourself.”

Instead of reaching for the documents as Niko expected, Isabel wiped her hands on the thighs of her oversize coveralls. The same way she had when she’d walked out of the garage.

Not totally without manners, he realized, but a far cry from the grace and style of a woman like Julianna. “These are copies so it doesn’t matter if they get dirty.”

Isabel took the documents and unfolded them. As she read, she flipped back and forth between the two pages.

Niko appreciated her thoroughness. Now all he needed was her compliance. Given how things were proceeding so far, that might take time. Especially since he hadn’t begun to explain the situation to her.

“The certificate actually looks legit,” she said.

“It is.”

“But it’s wrong.” She pointed her oil stained finger to the line with her mother’s name. “My mother was never married.”

He hesitated.

This “complication” went beyond Isabel Poussard being his child bride and standing in the way of him marrying Juliana and obtaining her significant dowry and trade support from Aliestle. Isabel might think she was a full-blooded American, but she wasn’t. She was also Vernonian, the last of the royal Sachestian bloodline. Her family came from Sachestia, a region in the northern part of the country. She was one of his subjects, one who knew nothing of her parents, her homeland or her past. Isabel deserved to know the truth, but a part of him felt awkward about what he had to do, say. He wished it were already over.

“Your mother, Evangeline Poussard, was an American college student. She was backpacking through Europe when she met Prince Aleksander Zvonimir.” Yesterday, Niko’s parents had explained what happened so he could explain it to Isabel today. “The two fell in love and eloped.”

She looked at Niko as if he’d grown horns. “My mother was married to a prince?”

“Yes.”

Isabel’s mouth quirked. She looked as if she was trying hard not to laugh. “So I suppose next you’re going to tell me someone who looks like Julie Andrews is not only my grandmother, but also the queen?”

Niko had no idea what Isabel was talking about. He knew who the actress was, but couldn’t connect to the reference. He looked at Jovan for an explanation.

“The Princess Diaries,” Jovan explained quietly. “A series of books and movies about an American who discovers she’s a princess.”

Niko had never heard of any such Princess Diaries, but at least he understood the context now.

“My mother is the queen,” he said to Isabel. “Though she would be thrilled to be a grandmother, I can assure you she looks and sounds nothing like Mary Poppins.”

Isabel didn’t crack a smile.

So much for his attempt to lighten the mood.

She shook her head. “I just don’t see how any of this can be true.”

“The truth is not always clear, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

As she studied the translated document, two lines formed above the bridge of Isabel’s nose. He found the trait surprisingly endearing. It made her seem less in control and more open to possibility.

“Let’s say my mother was married to this prince, and he’s my father,” Isabel said. “Why would she give birth to me in America?”

“She didn’t,” Niko said. “You were born in Vernonia.”

“My birth certificate says I was born in the United States. I have a copy.” Isabel pursed her lips. “One of the documents is fake. I’m guessing it’s yours.”

“Guess all you would like, but yours is the fake,” he said. “Given the political unrest in Vernonia when you were born, I wouldn’t be surprised if your parents had another birth certificate made omitting both Vernonia and Prince Aleksander’s name.”

“You sound as if you believe all this.” Disbelief dripped from each of her words. “That Prince Aleksander was my father.”

“Yes,” Niko said firmly. “I believe you are Princess Isabel Poussard Zvonimir Kresimir.”

She scrunched her nose. “Do I look like a princess?”

“You look like a car mechanic, but that doesn’t change the facts. You are a princess of Vernonia and my wife.”

Isabel stared at the marriage certificate. “Then how did I wind up here?”

“That’s what we’d all like to know,” Niko admitted. “My father’s staff have been trying to figure that out.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Where did they think I was?”

He didn’t answer.

“Where?” she pressed.

“Buried in your family’s cemetery.”

She gasped. “You thought I was dead?”

“Not me. I was too young to remember you, but all of Vernonia believed you were killed with your parents in a car bombing a month after our wedding.”

Isabel lowered the papers. “A car bombing?”

“By a splinter faction of Loyalists who were nothing more than terrorists.” The way her eyes clouded bothered him. “It was a ... troubled time, with two groups aligned to different royal bloodlines. That is in the past now.”

The two little lines above the bridge of her nose returned.

Good, Niko thought. Isabel was thinking about all that he’d told her. She would see she had to believe—

“Look. I get that you’re somebody. Otherwise you wouldn’t have the limo, lawyer aide guy, documents or a police escort. You know my mother’s name, but you have the wrong person. The Evangeline Poussard who was my mother never went to Europe. She never married. She never would have married off her baby. And she died due to complications with childbirth, not in a terrorist attack.”

“What about the box?” Niko asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe there are identical boxes. Yours and hers.” Isabel shoved the papers at him. “I don’t have time to deal with this. I have work to do.”

With her head held high as if she were the Queen of England and not a lowly mechanic, Isabel turned away from him and marched toward the garage.

Niko's fingers crumpled the edges of the papers. He tried to remember the last person besides his father who had dismissed him so readily. "Isabel."

She didn't glance back.

What an infuriating woman. He wanted to slip into the limousine and forget he'd ever heard the name Isabel Poussard, except he couldn't. They were tied together. Legally. He needed to undo what had been done without their consent. "Wait."

She quickened her step. Most women ran toward him not away, but he had a feeling Isabel was different from the women he knew.

"Please," he added.

She stopped, but didn't turn around.

He forced himself not to clench his jaw. "Before you go, please look at the photograph."

Isabel glanced over her shoulder. "What photograph?"

She made him feel more like a peasant than a prince. Likening a wife to a ball and chain suddenly made sense to him if said wife happened to be a strong-willed woman like Isabel Zvonimir.

He removed the picture from the pouch. "The wedding photo."

She didn't come closer. "Look, I'm on the clock right now. My boss is watching. I can't afford to have my pay docked so you can pull a prank."

"This isn't a prank." The old garage needed a new roof and paint job. Niko wondered if Isabel's financial circumstances were similar to those of her place of employment. "I'll give you one hundred dollars for five minutes of your time."

She straightened. "Seriously?"

Now he had her attention. With the pouch and picture tucked between his arm and side, he removed his wallet, pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and held it up. "Quite serious."

She hurried toward him with her gaze fixed on the bill.

"You really are crazy, but for that kind of money you can have seven minutes." Isabel snatched the money from him and shoved it in her coverall pocket. "Hand over the picture."

Niko gave her the photograph. He didn't need to look at it again. After examining the picture so many times during the flight to Charlotte he had memorized everything about the twelve people in it. "You are the baby in the white gown with the tiara. Your mother is holding you. Your father is standing on the right of you. Your paternal grandparents are the two next to him."

Isabel held the photo with both hands. Niko watched her face for some sign of recognition of her mother, but saw nothing.

"This looks more like a picture from a baptism than a wedding," Isabel said.

"Only because of the baby." Niko repeated what his mother had said to him. "This is a traditional royal wedding pose with the bride and groom in the center and their families on either side."

Isabel narrowed her gaze. "You're the little boy in the suit with the light blue sash across your chest?"

"Yes."

She glanced up at him. "I don't see much of a resemblance."

"That was twenty-three years ago."

Isabel traced his boyhood image. "You don't look very happy."

Niko wasn't very happy right now. He wanted to be rid of this complication, of her. "I imagine a six-year-old boy would not be too happy about getting married."

"Who is the other boy?" Isabel asked.

"My older brother."

"Why didn't they marry the baby off to him?" she asked.

Niko noticed Isabel said “the baby” not “me.” He took a calming breath to keep his patience under check. “Stefan was the crown prince and already betrothed.”

She looked up. “Was?”

“Stefan was killed during the conflict seven years ago.”

Her eyes grew serious. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Niko didn’t want or need her pity, only her cooperation. “All Vernonians suffered losses during the conflict. I intend to make sure that doesn’t happen again. I want to keep the peace and modernize the country.”

“Worthy goals.” Isabel refocused on the photo. “I’m sorry you came all this way for nothing. My uncle Frank had one picture of my mother that wasn’t destroyed when their parents’ house burned down. She looked nothing like this.”

Niko recalled the dossier containing information about Isabel. She didn’t have any living relatives. Her mother had been an only child and orphaned at nineteen following a train derailment that killed her parents. The Zvonimir side of Isabel’s family tree had been killed during the conflict. Nowhere on either side of her family tree had anyone named Frank appeared.

“Who is Uncle Frank?” Niko asked.

“Frank Miroslav,” Isabel said. “My mom’s older half brother. He raised me after she died.”

Miroslav. Niko recognized the surname, but had no idea how it related to Isabel and her American mother. He glanced at Jovan for clarification.

“The Miroslavs served the Zvonimirs for centuries,” Jovan explained. “There was a deep tie and strong loyalty between the two families even though the relationship was master-servant. Franko Miroslav was Prince Aleksander’s chauffeur, and I would go as far to say his best friend. It is rumored that Franko introduced the prince to Evangeline Poussard.”

Isabel’s mouth dropped open. She closed it.

“That would explain how you escaped out of Vernonia and ended up here,” Niko said. “If they used another driver and a doll for the baby after you left the country—”

“No.” Her lips tightened. “The woman in the photo is not my mother.”

“Are you certain the woman in the picture your uncle Frank showed you is your mother?” Niko watched the range of emotions crossing her face. The vulnerability in her eyes surprisingly pulled at his heart. “I apologize, Isabel. I know this is difficult for you.”

“What you’re saying is impossible. Who would let a Vernonian chauffeur into the U.S. with a baby? Where would they get forged American documents? It’s just not possible.” She looked at the photograph as if trying to discover a secret hidden in it. “Uncle Frank wasn’t a chauffeur. He wasn’t a servant. He was a car mechanic from a little town outside Chicago. The town where he grew up with my mother. His little sister. He was like a father to me. Why would he lie to me about this?”

Niko respected the way she stood up for the man who raised her. Loyalty to one’s family was important and would serve her well. “Perhaps Franko, your Uncle Frank, withheld certain truths for your own protection. You were his princess. A faction in Vernonia would have tried to kill you if they’d known you lived.”

A faction that had been loyal to Niko’s father even if the king hadn’t approved of the group’s methods and violence.

“It’s so unbelievable.”

Niko was not going to convince her with words, but perhaps he could show her. “There is a way to find out if what I say is true or not.”

Her gaze jerked up from the photo to meet his. “How?”

He pulled the chain from beneath his shirt. “We can see if my key fits the lock.”

Please don’t fit. Please don’t fit. Please don’t fit.

The mantra had been running through Izzy's mind for the last half hour, ever since driving home with Boyd and Jovan to retrieve the box. Now she sat in Rowdy's office with the wooden box on her lap waiting for the others to join her.

That still doesn't explain why you would give the box to me.

Because I am your husband.

Her husband. Izzy's vision blurred. She felt light-headed.

She clutched the wooden box with its mother-of-pearl inlaid design. She didn't want to drop it onto the hard tile floor. All these years, she'd carted it around, carefully, but not overly so. The value had been sentimental, not monetary.

Now...

Izzy Poussard, a princess and a crown prince's wife?

No way.

Okay, some women—maybe many women—would be excited to discover they were a long lost princess from some faraway foreign land and married to a handsome prince. But not Izzy. Oh, sure, she wanted a happily ever after, but her fairy tale didn't involve enchanted castles, sparkling jewelry and Prince Charming. Her dream revolved around wearing a fire suit in team colors, working over the wall on a pit stop, becoming a crew chief and standing in the winner's circle with champagne being squirted everywhere.

The door to Rowdy's office opened. Niko, Jovan and her boss entered.

"It'll be just a few more minutes, Izzy," Rowdy said. "Duncan Moore is on his way."

"Thanks." Izzy had asked Rowdy to call one of their customers who was a big-name attorney in Charlotte. She needed to talk to a lawyer before Niko and Jovan tried to take the box from her. To her surprise, Niko had offered to cover all her legal expenses. Izzy hadn't wanted to accept the prince's charity. She hadn't relied on anyone since Uncle Frank's death. But she didn't have extra money lying around to cover surprise legal fees. Duncan Moore wasn't only one of the best lawyers, he was also one of the most high-priced attorneys in town. Being prideful was one thing. Being stupid was another. "And thank you, Niko, for covering my legal expenses."

"You're welcome," he said. "I am not here to cause you grief or unwanted expenditures."

Izzy wanted to believe him. The corners of her lips lifted into a closed-mouth smile.

He smiled back.

Butterflies flapped in her stomach. Uh-oh. She'd better watch it. Being attracted to a man claiming to be her husband would only complicate things and might lead to her losing ownership of the box.

"Duncan's here," Rowdy announced.

Thank goodness, Izzy thought.

Duncan Moore, bald, in his late fifties and on his third marriage, strutted into the office. On any other man a polka-dot bow tie would have looked ridiculous with a suit, but it worked well on the successful attorney.

"Sorry for the delay, everyone. Izzy." Duncan looked at Niko and bowed. "Your Royal Highness."

Niko acknowledged Duncan with a nod. "This is my aide and lawyer, Jovan Novak."

Jovan shook Duncan's hand.

Unease crept down Izzy's spine. The seriousness of the situation ratcheted up a notch with two lawyers present.

"We may proceed now," Niko said.

The tension in the office quadrupled. Izzy's legs shook so much the box on her lap jiggled up and down. She placed the box on Rowdy's desk and opened the lid. She removed the velvet-covered tray so the keyhole showed. "I didn't realize the tray came out or there was a keyhole until after Uncle Frank died. He allowed me to look at the box, but never touch it."

“Did your uncle say the box belonged to your mother?” Duncan asked.

“No, but I assumed so.” Izzy hoped her words wouldn’t give more credence to the prince’s claims. “Uncle Frank just said it was important.”

Niko held the key he’d worn around his neck. “Let us see how important.”

His hand was as steady as a neurosurgeon’s. If it had been her, she would be trembling. Who was she kidding? She was trembling.

He inserted the key in the hole.

Izzy was tempted to close her eyes. She held her breath instead. She wanted to know what was inside the bottom portion of the box, but she didn’t want anything the prince had told her to be true.

He turned the key.

Click.

“The key fits,” Niko announced.

The air whooshed from Izzy’s lungs.

No, this can’t be happening. It can’t be true.

The bottom portion of the box slid out. A hidden drawer.

“Would ya look at that,” Rowdy said with a hint of awe to his deep voice.

Even though she had been waiting for this moment for a few years now, she was afraid to look. All her curiosity had vanished, replaced by trepidation. She didn’t care what was in the box. She only wanted things to go back to the way they’d been before Prince Niko arrived.

“It’s the same tiara,” Jovan said from across the office.

No. Isabel didn’t want to see so she squeezed her eyes shut. Her chest constricted. She shuddered.

Someone touched her shoulder and squeezed gently. Rowdy. Both he and Boyd could be big old teddy bears. She opened her eyes, but saw Niko with his hand on her instead of her boss.

“Isabel.” Concern filled Niko’s voice. “Would you rather wait?”

The tenderness of his gaze brought tears to her eyes. The situation, she rationalized, not him. Still she appreciated his gesture of comfort, drew strength from it, too. “No.”

Straightening, Izzy looked into the drawer past the small diamond tiara to find papers, photographs and jewelry. Her uncle Frank could have found the box or bought it at a garage sale or even stolen it in desperation. Maybe that was why she had no key.

No, she was just being silly now. None of those things would explain the prince knowing her mother’s name or his key fitting the lock. Isabel needed to accept what was in front of her, except.

Niko reached into the drawer.

“Wait, sir,” Duncan shouted.

The prince drew back his hand.

“May I please take a picture of the contents before they are disturbed?” Duncan asked with a camera in hand. “I would like to document everything. For both Izzy’s and your sake.”

“Certainly,” Niko said.

The flash of the camera reminded Izzy of lightning and intensified the emotions warring inside her. She hated storms. Uncle Frank had died during a lightning storm. She swallowed back a tide of grief.

Duncan backed away. “Thank you, sir. Please proceed.”

Niko didn’t. Instead he looked at her. “At one time your parents had a key to the bride box. They placed these contents inside. Only you should remove them.”

Anger flared. She loved Uncle Frank, but he had kept her past a secret. Why? Why hadn’t he trusted her? She wanted to know why this had happened.

“Isabel—”

“I’ll do it.” She couldn’t decide what to do about this until she knew more. “But only because I need to have all the facts.”

Izzy felt four pairs of eyes staring at her. She was used to the attention. Not many people expected a female mechanic to fix their cars. This was different. Unsettling. But Uncle Frank had taught her to always hold her head high, no matter how uncertain she might feel inside. If only he were here now.

She scooted her chair closer to the desk. With a shaky hand, she raised the tiara from the box. “It’s so tiny.”

Niko nodded. “My parents had the tiara commissioned for you to wear at the wedding. The small diamonds represent all the towns and villages. The three larger diamonds symbolize you, me and Vernonia.”

“It’s hard to tell if it’s exactly the same one in the photo,” she said, knowing she was grasping at straws.

“It’s the same one,” Niko countered.

Izzy set the tiara on the desk. Next she removed foreign coins and dollar bills, a diamond pendant, an emerald bracelet and three stunning rings.

Those jewels would be worth a fortune if real. Maybe that was why Niko wanted the box back so badly. Money could make people do almost anything.

She picked up a photograph, a picture of a man and a woman.

“Those were your parents,” Niko said softly.

Her parents. Izzy wasn’t ready to believe it just yet. She stared at the handsome couple. They were smiling and holding hands. They looked happier than they did in the wedding photograph. “The woman is beautiful.”

“You look like her,” Rowdy said.

“I wish.” Izzy’s heart ached for some memory of the two people the prince claimed were her parents.

“You resemble your mother,” Niko said. “But you have your father’s eyes.”

Izzy felt a rush of excitement. No one had ever seen a resemblance between her and Uncle Frank. She removed more photographs. Baby pictures, family portraits, casual snapshots, of people she didn’t know taken in places she didn’t recognize.

Next came an official looking piece of paper with foreign writing. “I don’t know what it says.”

“Allow me,” Niko offered.

She handed it to him.

He glanced over the document. “It’s your birth certificate. Evangaline Poussard Zvonimir is listed as your mother. Aleksander Nicholas Zvonimir is listed as your father. Your place of birth is Sachestia, Vernonia. That is in the northern part of the country.”

Jovan placed the documents they’d shown her earlier on the desk. “In case you are concerned about the translation and wish to compare, ma’am.”

“My name is Izzy,” she corrected. “I would like to see a translation by an impartial person to confirm the document.”

“How can you still not believe?” Niko asked.

“I’m simply being cautious,” she admitted. “You’ve gone to a lot of trouble to find me. You could’ve just offered to buy the box and be done with it. And me.”

“You are my wife,” Niko said. “I cannot pretend you do not exist and be done with it or you.”

Izzy grimaced. “Too bad there isn’t some birthmark that would prove without a doubt that I’m royalty.”

“Perhaps there is one.” Wicked laughter lit Niko’s eyes. “I would be happy to search for one.”

Her cheeks warmed at the thought.

His faced reddened, too.

She hadn't been expecting that reaction from Niko, but his embarrassment made him seem less a dark, formal prince and more ... human. That made Izzy feel a little more comfortable with him even if her heart pounded like a piston engine each time she noticed him staring at her.

She removed several pieces of paper stapled together. Again, the words were written in a language she couldn't read. She handed the pages to Niko.

He flipped through them. "This is your father's will naming you the sole beneficiary of his estate."

"I will need a copy of the will, sir," Duncan said.

"Of course." Niko handed it to the lawyer then turned his attention on Izzy. "Everyone believed you died with your parents so your father's estate went to—"

"You," she said without an ounce of doubt.

"As your husband, your inheritance passed directly to me."

"What kind of estate are we talking about, Your Highness?" Duncan asked.

Niko glanced at Jovan. "What is the approximate net worth?"

"Approximately twenty-five million euros," Jovan said.

She didn't know much about foreign currency, but she knew a lot of money was at stake here. "You're willing to give that to me for some box?"

"The box and an annulment," Niko clarified.

Rowdy whistled. "It's like winning the lottery, Izzy."

Yes, it was. She took a deep breath. That meant it was probably too good to be true.

"Let's not get too excited," Duncan cautioned. "We have no idea how the legal system works in Vernonia. Each country has its own laws for estates and inheritance. Something like this could be tied up in the court system for years."

"I would never keep anything that rightly belongs to Isabel," Niko stated firmly. "Vernonia might be a small country, but we have a parliamentary government and a modern justice system. It will not take the High Court years to sort this matter out."

"Can't something like this be taken care of in the U.S?" Izzy asked.

"Your father's property is in Vernonia," Niko explained. "Besides, the High Court is private. There could be publicity if we used the court here in the United States."

She glanced at the lawyer. "Duncan?"

"I don't know anything about Vernonia's court system, but Prince Niko is correct about the publicity. America loves royalty. The press would have a field day if they found out you were an American princess."

Izzy frowned. "I'm not—"

"Come to Vernonia with me," Niko suggested. "We will appear in front of the High Court and have this matter resolved quickly."

Apprehension washed over her. She never went anywhere. "I don't have a passport."

"I can pull some strings," Niko said.

"Most definitely," Jovan agreed.

She bit her lip. "I don't know. Maybe I should take some time to think about it."

Silence filled the room. Outside in the garage bay an air compressor sounded. A horn honked. A car door slammed.

"There's a lot at stake, Izzy," Rowdy said. "Don't let that stubborn streak of yours get in the way."

Stubborn streak? She wasn't stubborn.

"Listen to Rowdy," Duncan advised. "Prince Niko believes you are Princess Isabel. He's willing to give you a multimillion dollar estate. What more do you need to think about?"

Her gaze bounced between Rowdy and Duncan. They made good points. Still she hesitated. Cautious. Nervous. Unsure.

“Something else is in the drawer, ma’am,” Jovan said.

She glanced down and saw a note-size envelope tucked away in one corner. The word Isabel was written on the front. The cursive writing looked feminine.

As she picked up the small envelope, her hand trembled. The flap had been tucked inside, not sealed. Carefully Izzy removed sheets of paper and unfolded the pages. She was happy to see words written in English.

“Our Beloved Daughter.” Tears pricked Izzy’s eyes as she read the words. No one had ever called her daughter. Not even Uncle Frank who she loved like a father. She continued reading.

You are only a baby yet you are already a bride. Forgive us for sending you to America, but your father saw no other way to keep you safe. The marriage between you and Prince Nikola was supposed to protect you and keep peace among Vernonians. But that plan appears to have backfired and now you are in even worse danger. My greatest wish is that you never read this letter. I plan to destroy it when we arrive in the U.S. If you are reading this note now, then things did not go as your father and I planned. And for that, little princess, I am more sorry than you will ever know.

Your father is torn between the two sides wanting control of Vernonia. The Separatists first wanted to split into their own country, Sachestia, with your grandfather as king. Now they want to wrest full control from King Dmitar and take over the entire country, but your father would rather remain loyal to the throne and Vernonia. Your marriage, however, has unexpectedly antagonized both factions and made it impossible for him to support either side now. We must leave Vernonia as soon as possible. Your safety is our utmost concern. Once this craziness ends, we will happily return.

We do not dare leave the country together so we are sending you first. We are entrusting you to the care and protection of Franko Miroslav. He is your father’s chauffeur, and our dearest and closest friend. He will do whatever is necessary to keep you from harm. We have arranged passage and paperwork so the two of you can escape to the U.S. We will follow the next day.

No one knows of our plan, including the king. He’s a good man, but the fewer people who know your whereabouts the better. Your departure and location will remain a secret until it is safe.

Your father is telling me it’s time for you to go. I must sign off now, Isabel.

We love you, our darling Izzy, and hope to be with you soon.

Love,

Mommy and Daddy

Izzy took several deep breaths as the words sunk in. She’d never felt anything toward the woman in the photo Uncle Frank had shown her, a woman who wasn’t really her mother. But this letter written in her mother’s own hand provided Izzy with a connection to the woman who gave birth to her. Something she’d longed for since she was little. Something she’d hoped to find by looking for the key.

“True.” She sat back in the chair. The girl more comfortable in Shop class than Home Ec was a real-life princess with both a mother and a father. Everything the prince had said ... “It’s all true.”

“I’m sorry,” Niko said.

Izzy believed him. No one wanted to discover they were married to a stranger.

Married.

Her stomach roiled.

Marriage was only part of this. Everything she thought she knew about herself was wrong. Izzy wrapped her arms around her stomach. She wasn’t who she thought she was. She had money. A title. A father.

Izzy recalled her parents’ smiling faces from the wedding photograph. A mother and a father who had loved her. A mother and a father who had been killed before she could get to know them.

Emotion clogged Izzy’s throat.

But it wasn’t too late to fulfill one of their wishes. Her parents had planned on returning to Vernonia. That must have meant Uncle Frank planned on going back, too.

Come to Vernonia with me. We will appear in front of the High Court and have this matter resolved quickly.

Maybe seeing the place where she came from would help her figure out who she was and what her future held. She could get the marriage annulled and receive her inheritance. Forget going to pit crew school. She could buy her own racing team.

Izzy rose. “When do you want to leave for Vernonia?”

CHAPTER THREE

When do you want to leave for Vernonia?

Sooner rather than later. Niko sat at the table in the recreational vehicle, also known as an RV, where Isabel lived. His concern over the press discovering the reason behind his unannounced trip to the U.S. continued to grow. But Isabel still had to shower, dress and pack. That would take time. They would be leaving later whether he liked it or not.

Isabel stood in front of the small refrigerator still wearing her bulky, stained coveralls. She rubbed her hands together as if nervous. “Would you like something to drink or eat?”

He appreciated her hospitality. Twenty-three years away from Vernonia hadn’t erased centuries of innate good breeding. “No, thank you.”

With a hesitant expression, she glanced toward the back of the RV. “It won’t take me more than a few minutes to get ready.”

A lump on the faded brown-and-orange plaid cushion behind his back made him shift positions. “The plane will not take off without us.”

As she closed a partition that separated the back portion of the motor home from the front section, Niko surveyed the interior with dismay. Warped wood veneer. Cracked cabinet and cupboard doors. Frayed carpeting. Cramped space. The RV had to be as old as Isabel.

What had Franko been thinking? Yes, the chauffeur needed to keep her safe, but why had he never contacted the king for assistance? Why had Franko allowed it to come to this?

Niko exhaled on a sigh.

Isabel was no damsel in distress. She’d impressed him with the way she’d dealt with her world being turned inside out. She hadn’t been blinded by his title or money. She wouldn’t accept his word as the truth without concrete evidence. Surprising, given she lived in near poverty in a shabby motor home with no family or resources. A princess of Vernonia deserved better than a life spent working long hours bent over a car engine and coming home to half a dozen barking, trembling Chihuahuas who lived next door.

She wouldn’t be his wife for much longer, but he wanted Isabel to have the kind of life her parents intended for her to have. She belonged in a castle.

The partition jiggled like it was stuck.

“Isabel?” Niko asked, wondering if she needed assistance.

“I’m almost finished,” she said from behind the thin wall.

He checked his watch. Five minutes. That had to be a world record. Then again, Isabel didn’t seem to be a woman who primped or even cared about her appearance.

The partition jerked open.

As she walked out of the back toward him, he did a doubletake. Her faded blue jeans fit like a second skin, clinging in all the right places, accentuating her feminine curves and long legs. The fabric of her T-shirt stretched across her chest. Her high, round breasts jiggled. Her shiny brown hair swung back and forth below her shoulders.

He met her gaze, captivated by her warm, brown eyes. An appealing mix of intelligence and caring shone in their depths.

This was his ... wife?

“I’m ready to go,” Isabel announced.

So was he. Niko was ready to follow wherever she wanted to go.

“I don’t own a lot of clothes.” Isabel motioned to the worn purple duffel bag she carried behind her. The bride box with all its original contents was in the limousine with Jovan. “What I have probably isn’t nice enough to wear to court.”

“I will make arrangements for you to go shopping once we arrive.” He would head off any of her financial concerns. “Do not worry about the cost.”

“You’re already paying for a lot.”

“I don’t mind.” Niko would enjoy seeing her in designer gowns with jewels adorning her graceful neck. He would enjoy removing those things from her, too. Too bad that would never happen. “You are my wife.”

“Only until the annulment,” she reminded.

“Yes, but until then it is my responsibility to take care of you.”

Isabel pushed her chin forward almost defiantly. “I can take care of myself.”

“I know that.” He still wouldn’t mind a turn. Most women wanted him to take care of them. It felt odd that Isabel didn’t. He bowed his head in apology. “A poor choice of words on my part. I promise to make it up to you.”

“No need.”

As she brushed past him, an appealing mix of vanilla and jasmine filled his nostrils. The smell was a significant improvement over the motor oil one earlier. “I want to.”

“That’s okay.” Her smile nearly knocked him off his seat. “I’ve already forgiven you.”

Niko didn’t want her forgiveness. He wanted ... her.

Damn. The attraction to Isabel was unexpected and unwelcome. His duties and responsibilities always took priority. Niko was practically engaged to Julianna. He shouldn’t be attracted to any woman.

Not even your wife? a voice mocked.

He balled his hands to gain control. His father had taught him to keep emotion reined in. Otherwise it became a weakness, one that others, particularly adversaries, would use to their advantage.

Niko focused his gaze on Isabel’s pretty face. Maybe it would be better to concentrate on her forehead. “Is there anything else you need to pack for the trip?”

“No. I won’t be in Vernonia that long.”

“You might like it there.”

She shrugged. “This has been my home since I was six.”

He couldn’t believe she’d lived like this for the past seventeen years. “That’s a long time.”

“When Uncle Frank bought the RV, he said we would never have to leave home again. We could always take it with us.” She removed a carton of milk from the refrigerator and poured it down the sink. “I wonder if he was thinking about Vernonia when he said that.”

“Possibly.” Niko glanced around her hovel. “There are many other places to live than here.”

“I know.” Isabel rinsed the carton in the small sink. “This motor home is nothing more than an old metal shed compared to a lot of other places, but I’ve been happy here. A little lonely since Uncle Frank died, but it’s hard to leave the good memories behind.”

“You will make new memories.”

“I need to come to peace with the old ones first.” She stared off into the distance. “So many things about Uncle Frank are making more sense now. The lack of photographs. Wanting me to study martial arts. Keeping such a low profile. Being so protective. Even if he wasn’t related to me by blood he’s still family. The only I ever knew.”

Niko nodded. “We shall honor Franko for the sacrifices he made by keeping you safe.”

“Thank you.” Gratitude shone her eyes. “Vernonia must have meant a lot to him or he would have never given up so much for me. I always thought he was satisfied living like this, and I’d be the one to leave someday. Now I know he didn’t plan on living here forever, either. He would have returned ... home.”

Isabel’s words eased some of Niko’s concerns about her future. “Your father’s estate will enable you to live wherever and however you want.”

She sighed. “The thought of so many choices is intimidating.”

“Think of only one choice at a time. It won’t seem so ... overwhelming.”

“Good advice,” she said. “Thanks.”

Helping her pleased him. “Is there anything else you need?”

Isabel glanced around. “Boyd is going to check on the RV while I’m away so everything should be okay.”

Niko remembered the tall man who had driven her and Jovan to retrieve the box. The same man had come out to check on her and watched her from the garage. A woman as attractive as Isabel was sure to have men after her. One who worked with her would have an advantage. “Is Boyd your boyfriend?”

“Boyd?” She scrunched her nose. “He’s like a brother. Some people think we’re a couple, but we’re just friends.”

The news brought an unfamiliar sense of relief. But Boyd wasn’t the only man in Charlotte. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No boyfriend.”

“But you date.”

“Not nearly as much as I probably should. I work too much overtime to have a serious relationship. And the boys at the garage can be a little overprotective when guys do drop by.”

The news pleased Niko more than it should have.

“What about you?” she asked.

“No boyfriend.”

She grinned. “Any girlfriends?”

He used to have girlfriends. He’d dated models to princesses. Julianna wasn’t his girlfriend *per se*, yet she was the woman he planned to marry. Better to keep things simple than give Isabel too complicated an explanation. “Yes, I have a girlfriend.”

“What’s her name?”

“Julianna. We are planning to marry.”

“Congratulations, Niko.” Isabel locked a window latch. “I hope the two of you are very happy together.”

Her enthusiasm surprised him. “You do?”

“Of course I do,” she admitted. “Why wouldn’t I? I may be your wife, but that was a choice neither of us made or would choose today.”

Niko winced. Her words stung. He might not choose her, but he didn’t see why she wouldn’t choose him. He was a prince and quite eligible according to the tabloids and magazines. “Who would you choose to marry?”

“No one.”

“You do not wish to marry?”

“I have a few things I want to do first.”

“Tell me about these things.”

“I’m planning to enroll in pit crew school, work on a pit crew and eventually be a crew chief.”

Those were unusual goals for a woman. Unthinkable for a female in Vernonia let alone a princess. “You like racing.”

“I love racing. Open-wheel, stock car, go-kart, it doesn’t matter as long as there’s a checkered flag at the end.”

The passion in her voice matched the light in her eyes and reminded him of Julianna when she sailed. Perhaps the two women had more in common than Niko had thought. “Your inheritance will allow you to do almost anything you want in racing.”

“Yeah, I guess focusing on going to pit crew school now is like a Lotto winner who plans to keep their job.” Isabel swung the strap of a blue backpack over her shoulder. She opened the door. “Ready to roll, Highness.”

Then again, maybe she didn’t have that much in common with Princess Julianna after all.

Across the tarmac at the Charlotte Douglas International Airport, jet engines roared.

This was unreal. Izzy stood on the landing at the top of the portable aircraft staircase with a gorgeous prince who happened to be her husband. She still couldn’t believe what was happening.

Each beat of her heart slammed against her ribs. She’d never once dreamed of traveling to a far off destination except to attend a race. But here she was about to board a private plane and fly off to another continent.

An airplane sped down the runway.

She shivered. Soon that would be her plane.

Some might call this an exciting adventure, but not Izzy. Her misgivings were increasing by the minute.

Another aircraft taxied by. The silver, red and blue colorscheme seemed almost festive compared to Vernonia’s solid white airplane with only an aircraft numbers, letters and a small coat of arms for markings.

A royal coat of arms.

A chill ran down her spine.

She could never have imagined this happening to anyone let alone her. A grease monkey who cared more about the Winston Cup standings than the lines of succession for European thrones was now a princess?

Below her at the bottom of the stairs, a local security detail stood watch. A custom agent checked paperwork with the security liaison officer who wore a uniform and seemed to be part of the flight crew.

The shock of discovery still had her reeling. Denial battled acceptance. In spite of the physical evidence, Izzy still found the truth hard to accept. Would she ever feel like Princess Isabel Poussard Zvonimir Kresimir? She doubted it.

Facing the open doorway, Izzy sensed rather than felt Niko standing behind her. She clutched the strap of her backpack.

“It’s time to board,” he whispered from behind her. His warm breath fanned her neck.

Awareness shot through Izzy. Her uneasiness quadrupled.

Hold it together.

She straightened, not wanting to appear weak. “I know.”

Yet the open doorway loomed in front of her like a mysterious black hole. Her heart pounded so fast, Izzy thought her chest might explode.

All she had to do was step across the threshold and board the plane. Too bad her feet felt as if they’d been permanently attached to the staircase. But they knew what Izzy kept trying to forget.

This wasn’t only about never having flown before. She had absolutely no idea what waited for her on the other side. Of the doorway or when she arrived in Vernonia.

She’d never had to face the unknown alone. Uncle Frank had always been there to pave the way. Even after his death, she’d continued working at Rowdy’s, living in the RV and following the plan they’d dreamed up together. But now she found herself on a new, uncertain path with all her plans swept away.

Worse, there was no turning back.

Her life was irrevocably changed whether she boarded the plane or stayed in Charlotte. The realization made her lightheaded.

The prince moved closer, crowding her from behind. He emanated strength and warmth. Her pulse skittered.

Uh-oh. Izzy needed to put a little distance between them. Not that she had much room to go anywhere. She shifted to the side until her backpack and hip hit the staircase railing. “Give me a minute.”

Niko gently placed his hand on the curve of her back.

Izzy stiffened. The slight touch made her more apprehensive.

“You will have plenty of time once we board,” he said.

She was losing control of this situation, of her life. “Things are happening too fast. I need everything to slow down.”

“Everything will slow down when we are in the air. We have a long flight ahead of us.”

A long flight that would carry her away from everything familiar. Nerves smacked into her like a rogue wave. Her stomach churned.

“Isabel,” Niko said.

Another plane took off. The roar louder than any engine she’d ever heard at the racetrack. Goose bumps prickled her skin.

“I told you I needed a minute.” The words came out harsher than she intended.

“It’s been an eventful day,” Niko said.

“You think?” She swallowed around the crown-jewel-size lump in her throat. “I doubt anyone else has ever had a day like today. I wish it were all a dream. But it’s not. And now I’m stuck.”

“Stuck?”

“Having to go to Vernonia to annul the marriage and get my inheritance,” she admitted. “Unfortunately I have no idea what’s going to happen once we arrive. I may have been born there, but it might as well be Mars.”

Niko’s assessing gaze made her feel like one of Cinderella’s ugly stepsisters. “Vernonia is different from what you are used to. Some would call the country old-fashioned. Others antiquated. Especially when it comes to gender roles.”

Izzy half laughed with a mix of desperation and fear. “If you’re trying to make me feel better, it’s not working.”

“I will not lie to you, Isabel,” he said. “Your life has changed. But you will not have to deal with any of this on your own.”

A sense of inadequacy swept through her. Izzy was used to handling everything on her own, but she was completely out of her comfort zone here and practically shaking in her held-together-with-super-glue tennis shoes.

“It will be my pleasure to help you,” he offered.

Niko made a dashing knight in shining armor, but Izzy didn’t like being cast in the role of damsel in distress. She didn’t want or need his help. “Thanks, but I can do this on my own.”

Please let me be able to do this on my own.

With a deep breath, Izzy stood and stepped through the doorway of the plane.

“Welcome aboard, Your Royal Highness,” a male flight attendant with a crew cut and navy blue uniform greeted. “We have a seven course dinner for you as well as movies for your entertainment.”

It took Izzy a minute to realize the man was addressing her. “Thank you,” she muttered, wondering how he knew who she was.

The flight attendant smiled at her. “Would you like me to escort you to your seat, ma’am?”

“Thank you, Luka, but I will show Princess Isabel the way,” Niko said before Izzy could answer.

Luka bowed. “Enjoy your flight, ma’am, sir.”

“I thought you wanted to keep my identity a secret to avoid publicity,” she whispered to Niko as she moved away from Luka.

“Only until after we appear before the High Court,” he explained quietly.

As his male scent surrounded her, heat rushed through her veins. She hoped the High Court would be their first stop after they landed.

“Do not worry,” he continued. “The crew is part of the Vernonian Air Force. They can be trusted with the information. As can the palace staff.”

That seemed like a lot of people in on the secret, but he was the prince. “If you say so.”

“I do.”

Izzy made her way down the aisle, holding her backpack in front of her. The interior, a mix of warm beiges, browns and blues, created a welcoming environment. Couches and tables filled the first section of the cabin.

“This is the lounge area,” Niko explained. “Feel free to come up here if you want to stretch your legs.”

“I doubt I’ll unfasten my seat belt during the flight.”

The corners of his mouth lifted. “That may get uncomfortable if you have to use the facilities.”

Her cheeks warmed. She hadn’t considered that.

The second section of the cabin contained rows of seats. The wide leather seats looked comfortable and luxurious, not narrow and cramped and squished together as her high school classmates had described after their graduation trip to the Caribbean. Izzy hadn’t been able to afford the trip, so had stayed home and worked at Rowdy’s garage.

Times sure had changed. Mechanic Izzy Poussard was now Princess Isabel, the wife of the crown prince of Vernonia. She nearly laughed at the absurdity of it.

“This is where we sit for takeoff and landing, or, if you choose,” Niko said, “the entire flight.”

Izzy passed the row where Jovan sat. A few other seats were taken by people she hadn’t seen before. She continued to the last row of empty seats before a divider.

Before she could sit, a female flight attendant rushed from the rear of the plane. The young woman wore a navy jacket and skirt. Her blond hair was neatly braided into a bun. “Good evening. Allow me to hold your backpack for you, Your Royal Highness.”

Before Izzy could say a word, the backpack strap was lifted out of her hand. Every one of her muscles tensed, bunching into tight balls. She wasn’t used to being catered to. It was disconcerting because she didn’t feel like royalty.

She sat in the window seat and buckled her seat belt.

The flight attendant handed the backpack to Izzy. “Would you care for something to drink or eat, ma’am?”

“No, thanks.” Izzy didn’t want to upset her stomach any more than it already was. Her nerves were getting the best of her. Over the flight, over Vernonia, over Niko. Maybe if she distracted herself.

She pressed a button that turned on the overhead light. She twisted a knob that regulated the airflow nozzle.

Niko sat next to her. “Are you certain you do not want anything?”

Izzy wanted this to be over with. “No, thanks, Your Highness.”

“Call me Niko.”

“I’m not sure I should get in the habit of calling you by your first name. As soon as our marriage is annulled I doubt you’d want to be on such familiar terms with a commoner.”

“You are not a commoner,” he said. “You are a princess by birth. Royal Sachestian blood flows through your veins.”

“That may be true, but I was raised American. Royalty is something other countries have.”

“Americans have unofficial royalty. The Kennedys, the Rockefellers, the Hiltons.”

“I suppose, but a princess isn’t something I aspired to be beyond the age of four or five. Wearing a tiara has never been a dream of mine.”

“You may feel like an American, but you are a Vernonian.” He spoke as if her being a Vernonian was the most important thing she could be. No one had ever spoken to her that way. Not even Uncle Frank. “You will be amazed by the history of your family.”

Intrigued, she leaned toward him. “I have a family history?”

“Your lineage goes back centuries. Your father’s family played an integral role in the formation of our country, when Sachestia in the north merged with the south to form what we now call Vernonia.” He fastened his seat belt. “If you have questions about anything, please ask.”

“I—” The lights in the cabin flickered. She clutched the seat armrests until her knuckles turned white. “What’s that?”

“The APU, auxiliary power unit, coming on,” he explained. “It powers the lights and air system while we are in flight.”

“Oh, yeah. I should have remembered that.”

The plane moved backward.

Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy.

“Do not worry.” Niko covered her hand with his large one. His skin was warm, but not soft. Scars and calluses covered his hand and fingers. “The plane is being moved so the pilot can taxi to the runway.”

Forget about the plane. His touch disturbed her more than it comforted. She tried to slip her hand from beneath his, but couldn’t. “I’m sorry if I’ve acted like a wimp, but I’m okay now.”

“You’ve handled everything remarkably well, Isabel. You should be proud of yourself.”

He wouldn’t let Izzy remove her hand from his, but his words made her sit taller. She wanted to be brave for him, but mostly herself. That was what Uncle Frank would have wanted her to be.

The engines roared to life. She sucked in a breath.

Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about.

The words became a mantra.

The plane taxied to the runway. Out the window, she saw the airport lights shining in the darkness. Pretty, but she would rather be at home watching a television show than sitting on a luxurious private jet holding hands with a handsome prince.

Too late to back out now.

Izzy pressed her feet against the floor of the plane.

“We will be in the air shortly,” Niko said.

All she could do was nod.

The jet lurched to a stop. The engines whined, the sound growing louder. She was too nervous to appreciate the speed of the rotor. The cabin shook like the crowd at Daytona when cars went three wide. Izzy held her breath.

Suddenly the jet speeded down the runway.

She glanced out the window at the world passing by her.

“Remember to breathe,” he said.

She did.

Nikola squeezed her hand.

This time his touch reassured her. She met his eyes. Her gaze dropped to his mouth. She thought about kissing him until she couldn’t think straight, but that seemed a little extreme. Maybe burying her face against his chest until this was over would be better. She closed her eyes instead.

“Look at me, Isabel.”

She forced her eyes open. Her gaze locked with his intense green eyes.

“You are safe,” he said. “As long as you are with me, you will always be safe.”

The confidence and strength he exuded made her almost believe his words. But she knew *safe* didn’t really exist. If it did her parents would be alive. Uncle Frank, too.

The vibrations increased until she thought the plane might break apart. The forward momentum pushed her back against her seat. Niko laced his fingers with hers.

The plane lifted off the ground.

The lights below grew smaller and smaller until they disappeared altogether. The plane climbed at a steep angle, as if it were a fighter jet not a passenger plane.

The aircraft jolted. She sucked in another breath.

“A patch of turbulence,” Niko said. “Normal.”

None of this was normal. Not the takeoff, not the prince sitting next to her. And certainly not this life-altering adventure she was embarking on.

After what seemed like forever, the plane leveled.

“We’ve reached cruising altitude.” Niko kept his hand on hers. “Not too bad.”

It wasn’t a question.

“No,” she admitted. “But we still have to land.”

The corners of his mouth lifted. “Landing will be easier.”

“Really?” she asked.

He nodded. “You’ll be tired due to the time change. You may even be asleep when the wheels touch ground.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be sleeping after everything that’s gone on. My mind’s a big jumble right now.”

“You should try to sleep,” he encouraged her. “Tomorrow will be a big day.”

“Are we going straight to the court?” she asked.

“The High Court is not in session on Saturday. We will go to the castle.”

“Castle?”

“My parents want to meet you.”

“I’ve never met a king or a queen.”

“You have, but you don’t remember.”

“What’s your father like?” Izzy asked.

“He’s very ... kingly.”

“That’s intimidating,” she admitted. “I’m glad I don’t remember meeting him or I might be more nervous than I already am.”

“He only wants to reassure himself you are alive and well.” Niko squeezed her hand. “You have nothing to worry about.”

This time Izzy knew the prince was wrong. Dead wrong.

She had lots to worry about, starting with the tingles shooting up her arm as he touched her. But even worse was the realization that she didn’t want him to let go of her hand.

Not now.

Not when they landed in Vernonia.

Not ... ever.

CHAPTER FOUR

AS THE plane cruised at thirty-three thousand feet, the interior cabin lights dimmed. The engines droned, but unlike the white noise device Niko usually traveled with, the sound did not soothe him. He couldn't sleep. Too many things weighed on his mind. But a busy day did lie ahead. He should at least try to rest.

Niko pressed the button on the armrest. The leather seat reclined into a comfortable position. He closed his eyes but couldn't stop the continuous stream of information flowing through his brain. Thoughts about Vernonia, Julianna, his father and most especially the woman sitting in the seat next to him.

Isabel.

Opening his eyes, he turned toward her.

She sat with her seat reclined and her head resting against a pillow. She'd fallen asleep after struggling against her heavy, drooping eyelids and drawn-out yawns for almost an hour.

Isabel's unwillingness to give in to her tiredness without a fight made him wonder if she turned everything she did into a battle. Her actions today suggested as much. But the political peace that came with her lineage could be good for the country.

Yes, Isabel seemed like a fighter. No doubt the Vernonian in her. Niko smiled at the thought that she would likely disagree with him. No matter, he would want her on his side. If he had a side. Thankfully those days were over. No one would be forced to choose who to support or who to fight again.

Once he and Julianna said the words "I do," Niko would have the financial resources and international support to bring his country into the modern age and, in time, the European Union.

Nothing could stand in his way now.

Not an antiquated custom. Not a childhood bride.

Niko's gaze focused on Isabel once again.

He'd been married to her for the past twenty-three years, almost all of her entire life and over three-quarters of his. If not for the missing bride box, he would have never known she existed. Things would have been less complicated for him that way. But once she received her inheritance her circumstance would improve dramatically. A better life was waiting for Isabel. The life her parents would have wanted for her. That made what he was going through more acceptable.

He worried what responsibilities would be thrust on Isabel's shoulders once she arrived in Vernonia. People would judge her. She would need training to be a princess. Stylish clothes and makeup lessons would improve her appearance. A manicure would help with her dirty, chipped nails though not much could rid her hands of the calluses, cuts and scars. Perhaps she could start a new fashion trend by wearing gloves.

In spite of Isabel's faults and disregard for etiquette and style, she was a refreshing change from the other royals he'd encountered over the years. She was not caught up in the tangled web of tradition. Even Julianna, as perfect as she was, came from a kingdom more out-of-date than Vernonia.

He admired Isabel for working on cars. He remembered what being a soldier was like. Living day-to-day, sometimes hour-to-hour. It was the closest thing to an ordinary existence he'd had. Even after she put her mechanic days behind her, she could relate to the people at their level.

Isabel might not know how to be a princess yet, but at least she was a contemporary woman, something rarely found in his country. He could use that to his advantage as he moved forward with his plans. Though right now she looked more like a schoolgirl than a woman with the cashmere blanket tucked around her shoulders.

The cover rose and fell with each of her breaths. Her hair fanned across the pillow, the brown strands contrasting with the white fabric. The slender column of her neck contradicted the stiff

backbone she'd shown earlier. The curve of her cheek and fullness of her lips weren't diminished by the lack of makeup and lip-gloss on her face. She possessed a natural beauty.

Although Niko appreciated her spirit and self-reliance, he couldn't deny the appeal of this softer side. The defiant set of her chin and tight jaw had relaxed. The result of sleep, but she looked so peaceful and serene. He wondered if she ever looked this way awake. He doubted it.

With her lips slightly parted, she almost appeared to be smiling. The result of a pleasant dream? A dream about him?

No. Her dreams were none of his business. Isabel might be his wife, but he should think of her like a sister. Anything else would be ... inappropriate given his intention to marry Julianna.

Isabel shifted in her seat. The way she stretched reminded him of one of the feral cats who lived in the stable. As she settled into a new position, the top half of her blanket fell from her shoulders and pooled on her lap.

He could see the rise and fall of her chest better now. The V-neck collar gave a tantalizing view of creamy skin and lace. The fabric of her shirt stretched across her breasts. The cool cabin temperature beaded her nipples.

Niko covered her with the blanket and tucked the edge around her shoulders.

"Sir," Jovan said, standing in the aisle.

Niko jerked his hands away from Isabel, feeling as if the palace's renowned pastry chef had caught him sneaking a *tulumbe* from a batch soaking in syrup overnight.

"It is late." Jovan handed him a blanket. "There is nothing more to be done until we arrive in Vernonia. Please rest, sir."

Niko knew sleep was futile, but he placed the blanket on his lap. Jovan was only trying to do his job. "The shopping arrangements..."

"Have been taken care of, sir. Princess Julianna has offered her assistance and expertise."

The future wife helping the soon-to-be former one? The thought of the two women, so very different, made Niko's temples throb. "That will be ... interesting."

"Princess Julianna's sense of duty is matched only by your own," Jovan said. "She simply wants to help you, sir."

Niko only hoped Isabel accepted the help. That independent streak of hers might get in the way. "Julianna will make a fine queen."

Jovan nodded. "She will also be an excellent role model for Princess Isabel to emulate, sir."

"Yes." Niko glanced at Isabel to see if she was still asleep. He lowered his voice. "She will need all the help she can get."

Jovan smiled at the sleeping woman. "Princess Isabel is not what I expected, but she has ... spirit. She puts on no airs. Plays no games."

"She is different and has a certain down-to-earth charm," Niko agreed. "In time she could become a role model herself."

Jovan's brows furrowed. "I do not think she intends to stay long enough for that to happen, sir."

"Once Isabel sees all Vernonia has to offer, she will want to stay. We can have her things shipped over."

"You sound certain, sir."

"I am," Niko stated. "You saw the hovel she calls home. Her life in the United States leaves much to be desired."

"She doesn't seem to mind that life, sir," Jovan said. "And with her inheritance ..."

"Perhaps she does not know any better."

Niko's gaze returned to Isabel's face. Her full lips still appeared to be smiling. He wouldn't mind a taste of them. A kiss.

No. He couldn't allow himself to go there, even if he was ... tempted.

He focused his attention on his aide. "Staying in Vernonia is best for Isabel."

Just as Julianna was best for Vernonia, thus best for him.

“I wonder what Princess Isabel will have to say about that, sir,” Jovan said.

“She may not have an Ivy League education, but she is intelligent. It won’t take her long to realize where her future lies.”

“If she disagrees, I suppose we can finally make use of the tower, sir,” Jovan joked.

Niko laughed. “You’ve been spending too much time around my father.”

“Isabel.”

A man was calling Izzy’s name, but she didn’t open her eyes. Her alarm clock hadn’t buzzed yet. That meant this must still be part of her dream, an odd mix of fairy tale and nightmare with a brooding, handsome prince holding her captive in a tower.

“Isabel,” the man said again.

She liked the way the three syllables rolled off his tongue. I-sa-bel. She snuggled against the pillow, wanting more sleep and more of him.

The bed lurched, as if she were riding on a flying carpet that had come to a sudden stop.

“Welcome to Vernonia,” the male voice continued.

Where? And then she realized.

Izzy wasn’t in bed dreaming. She forced her heavy eyelids open. Bright sunlight streamed through the window. She blinked. The plane had not only landed, but also parked. A small turboprop taxied by.

Every single one of her muscles tensed. Yesterday had been real. The box. Her parents. The prince.

She clutched the armrests.

“Good morning, Isabel,” Niko said from the seat next to her.

Izzy saw nothing good about this morning. She was tired, surrounded by strangers and far away from home. She turned toward Niko to tell him as much, but her mouth went dry at the sight of him.

Hello, Prince Hottie. Heat pulsed through her veins.

The stubble on Niko’s face made him look sexier, dangerous. Especially with his scar. A real bad boy. His clothes remained unwrinkled, as if he’d just stepped away from a photo shoot, not spent the night flying across an ocean and a continent.

“You didn’t eat much dinner last night,” he said. “Are you hungry?”

She wouldn’t mind a bite of him.

Strike that. A serving of prince sunny side up wasn’t on the menu this morning. Or any morning. Izzy reminded herself. This wasn’t just some guy. He was her husband. At least for another couple of days until the High Court was back in session.

Izzy toyed with the edge of the blanket covering her lap. “No, thanks. I’m not hungry.”

“I will have a meal delivered to your room in case you are hungry later.”

Room service? She wiggled her toes with anticipation. She’d never stayed at a nice hotel that offered room service. Maybe this trip would have some bright spots. “Thanks, but please don’t go to any trouble. I can order my own food.”

“It is no trouble,” he said.

But it was for her. “I prefer to do things myself.”

“Luka already came by with the warm towels,” Niko continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “If you would like one—”

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

Tired, but good. Izzy yawned, hoping she wasn’t breaking some princess protocol. She needed more sleep. A shower wouldn’t hurt. Once she arrived at the hotel ...

“Ready to see your homeland?” Niko asked.

Vernonia might be her place of birth, but she would never call it her homeland. “I suppose I can’t stay on the plane all day.”

“You could.”

“Really?”

“You’re a princess,” he said, as if she knew all the rules about being royalty. “But you might get bored.”

“I don’t do well being bored.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

She stood and placed the shoulder strap of her backpack over her shoulder.

“The crew will carry your backpack,” Niko said.

“I don’t mind.”

“The crew does. They consider it an honor to serve you.”

“I’m, uh, not really comfortable with that. My wallet and ID are in it.”

“It looks strange for a princess to be hauling around a backpack.”

“It’s my purse,” she countered. “Besides I don’t care what other people think of me.”

A muscle flicked at his jaw. “You’ve made that quite obvious.”

Niko pressed his lips together. The same way he’d done in Charlotte. He wasn’t happy with her. He’d probably better get used to it for as long as she was in town.

“Just so you know,” she said. “It bugs me when people try to tell me what I can or can’t do.”

She walked down the aisle before he could say anything else to annoy her.

The other passengers, who had been introduced by job titles, not names during the flight, had already deplaned. The flight crew, including the pilots, stood in a line at the front of the plane. Izzy thanked them and exited.

At the top of the portable staircase, she took a deep breath. The crisp air refreshed her.

The airport wasn’t as large as the one in Charlotte and seemed to be built on a plateau. Everything from the control tower to the runways looked brand-new. Beyond the runways the flat landscape gave way to foothills and rocky mountains beyond that.

Niko joined her on the landing. He motioned to a black limousine at the bottom of the stairs. “Our chariot awaits.”

Attached to the front of the car were two small blue and white flags with yellow emblems in the center. They fluttered in the cool breeze. Uniformed guards with large guns stood nearby. A man in a black suit unloaded the luggage from a cart. He carefully placed her battered duffel bag into the trunk as if it contained fragile Fabergé eggs, not thrift store bargain buys.

Feelings of inadequacy swept through her. Izzy was completely out of her league here. She clutched the metal handrail like a lifeline.

Niko extended his arm. “I’m only offering because you must be tired.”

His gesture of chivalry brought tears to her eyes. Uncle Frank used to do the same thing before escorting her across the street or down a parking lot staircase. Izzy wiped her eyes with her hand.

Boy, she must really be jet-lagged to get so sentimental. But Niko was right. Her legs were stiff from the flight. Her shoes fit tighter, making her wonder if her feet had swollen. She couldn’t pretend she wasn’t feeling more tired by the minute.

Falling down the stairs was a distinct possibility in her current condition and would not be a good start to her visit to Vernonia. Forget making a faux pas. The stage was set for an epic fail. She couldn’t let that happen.

Better safe than sorry. Izzy wrapped her arm around Niko’s. “Thanks.”

Together, they descended the stairs. He went slowly, shortening his long stride. For her sake, Izzy realized. Her thoughts about him being a knight in shining armor weren’t too far off. Still she wasn’t comfortable needing his assistance. She’d been standing on her own two feet for the last five years, ever since Uncle Frank died. Leaning on someone else felt odd and unnatural, even if it was only for the length of the portable staircase.

“You are not merely tired.” His gaze remained focused straight ahead, never straying her way. A slight breeze ruffled the ends of his hair. Even the scar on his face suited him. He wasn’t a perfect prince, but he wasn’t that bad. “You are exhausted.”

“Yeah.” She struggled not to yawn. “Though I’m not sure why since I slept most of the flight.”

“Jet lag. It’s the middle of the night in Charlotte,” he explained. “You need time to adjust. You can rest soon. Though not too long or your body clock will be thrown off even more.”

“A short nap is all I need.”

“A short nap you shall have.”

His grin made her breath catch in her throat. Izzy wouldn’t mind if he tucked her in and kissed her good-night.

Her foot missed a step. As if in slow motion, she fell backward. Her right hand clutched the railing. Her left hand gripped Niko’s arm. Somehow he caught her before her bottom hit the staircase.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

His strong arms righted her so she was standing upright. “Yes,” she said grateful. “Thanks to you.”

“Only a few more steps.”

Thank goodness. Her entire body trembled. Not because of the near fall, but because of Niko. Looks aside, his compelling presence drew her in like a tow truck’s winch. She needed to get away from him.

As soon as Izzy reached the tarmac, she slid her arm from his. The chauffeur opened the back door. She climbed inside. Leaning back against the leather seat, she stretched out her legs, relieved to be away from Niko.

He slid into the limousine and sat next to her even though the rest of the seats were empty. Darn the man. Didn’t he understand the concept of personal space?

His thigh pressed against hers. Not on purpose, she thought. Still her temperature rose.

The prince might be a hottie, but he was off-limits. He was her husband, but he planned on marrying someone else. His heart wasn’t on the open market. She couldn’t allow herself to be attracted to him.

Izzy scooted away. She needed something to defuse her growing awareness to him. “Where’s Jovan?”

“In the front with the driver.” Niko pressed a button and lowered the dark glass separating the back of the limousine from the front. “Jovan is making sure everything will be ready for you to shop today.”

“I don’t have to go shopping today.”

“I know you are tired. I wish you could have more time to adjust, but my parents expect you to attend dinner tonight.”

“Tonight?” Her voice cracked. “That’s, um, nice of them, but dinner isn’t really necessary. I mean, in a few days, we won’t even be married.”

“Our parents were friends. They orchestrated our wedding,” Niko explained. “You are and always will be a princess of Vernonia and should consider us family.”

Family.

Izzy felt a pang in her heart.

The word family brought up all kinds of strange emotions. Ones she’d tried to ignore while growing up. She’d never had any family except Uncle Frank. “That’s a generous offer, but I feel more like a serf than a royal.”

“A royal serf,” Niko said. “An oxymoron.”

“How about a royal waif?” she suggested.

Laughter danced in his warm eyes. “Serf, waif or princess, you’ll find acceptance here, Isabel.”

The only people who had ever accepted her were back at Rowdy's garage, but she appreciated Niko trying to make her feel better. She stifled a yawn.

"After you rest, you will shop. Someone will help you select and organize the various outfits you'll need."

"Um, thanks." Izzy didn't know whether to be offended or grateful he was providing her help. She didn't care about what was in style or not, but she wasn't colorblind. "I don't need a lot."

"Most women like having several different outfits."

"I'm not like most women."

His gaze raked over her. "No, you are not."

She didn't think he intended that to be a compliment, but she wasn't offended. His words reaffirmed what she already knew. Izzy Poussard wasn't princess material. She didn't belong in Vernonia. She needed to take care of business, learn about her family and return home to Charlotte.

As the limo left the airport, Niko pointed out the window toward a town up ahead. "We're entering the capital city."

Izzy was surprised to see a city smaller and more compact than Charlotte with narrower roads. But the commotion on the streets suggested a busy, bustling town.

A crane lifted steel girders while men in yellow hard hats guided them onto the fourth floor of a construction site. Next door, scaffolding covered the front of a new office building and men painted. Across the street, a woman in a multicolored skirt, boots and long sweater pushed a baby stroller. Two teenagers kicked a soccer ball back and forth as they hurried past the woman and child. A man in a business suit glanced at the limousine before hurrying into a newer five-story building made of steel and glass.

"What do you think?" Niko asked.

"It's very modern for a country that allowed children to marry."

"I told you, that is against the law now."

"Yes, you did." She didn't see any garbage or graffiti anywhere. That was quite an achievement. "Everything is so new and clean. Even the streets."

"This part of town was demolished by bombing," he explained. "Rebuilding takes time and money. Projects are being spread out to best utilize our resources."

The limousine drove into another part of town. This section consisted of smaller stone and brick rectangular buildings each painted a different color. Some were new, but many were older. Several had window boxes, but no flowers. "Is this a residential area?"

"Yes."

Izzy noticed one similarity among the colorful homes. Holes on almost every structure. Bullet pocks? she wondered.

A memorial sign hung on a pole. Flowers and pictures were attached. She shuddered.

"I can't imagine what living through a war must be like. Just watching the television coverage of 9/11 was difficult. Granted I was a teenager, but this ..." A weight pressed down on her chest. "I hope this never happens again."

"I intend to make sure it doesn't," Niko stated firmly. "War is never pleasant, but fighting amongst your own is particularly brutal. Friend against friend. Brother against brother. Both the Loyalists and the Separatists accepted the treaty unanimously. Our postconflict elections have gone well. We are fortunate to have not faced some of the problems that have plagued other Balkan countries. I am determined to see that peace is upheld and good triumphs for all Vernonians. No matter what side they supported in the conflict."

Her respect for him rose. "Good luck."

"Thank you."

The limousine left the town behind and traveled up a steep hill. Tall trees lined both sides of the road and cast shadows on the pavement. As the car crested a bump, she saw a castle in the distance.

Her heart beat triple time.

A fairy-tale castle, so perfect it appeared to have been painted on a canvas of blue. Turrets jutted into the sky. Leaded glass windows sparkled. Silver roof tiles gleamed beneath the morning sun. She'd never seen anything so beautiful in her life.

"Wow."

"We are fortunate the castle remained in such good shape given the battles fought here," Niko said. "The wall took several mortar hits, but that was the worst of the damage."

"Thank goodness." Jovan turned around from the front seat. "The royal family stayed in residence during the conflict."

"When we weren't fighting," Niko said.

Izzy was surprised a royal would be out on the front line. "You fought in the war?"

"Yes." The one word spoke volumes. "Stefan and I fought with the loyalists to preserve the boundaries and traditions of all people."

Izzy could imagine Niko as a warrior, fierce and hard, defending his people to the death. That took courage and strength. She pointed to the jagged scar on his cheek. "Did you get that fighting?"

"Yes, we are all marked in some way by the conflict," he said. "Some scars are physical. Others are not."

Did Niko have other scars? Hidden ones? Izzy wanted to know, but didn't know him well enough to ask. She wanted to see if there was more to this seemingly in-control prince than met the eye. Curiosity about the man her parents had married her off to, she rationalized.

As the limousine approached the castle, the immense structure loomed in front of her. Was that a moat?

She peered out the window. Yes, it was. A river flowed underneath a bridge flanked by armed guards. One waved the limousine across.

Two minutes later, the car stopped in front of tall, wooden doors. A uniformed man stepped outside. His white dress shirt, creased pants and sharp jacket made Izzy feel totally under-dressed in her faded jeans, T-shirt and ratty sneakers. No wonder the prince was so keen on her shopping.

"Your bag will be delivered to your room, ma'am," Jovan said before exiting the limousine.

"Wait a minute." Izzy's gaze locked with Niko's. "I thought I was staying at a hotel."

"You are legally my wife," Niko said. "You will stay here at the castle until the annulment has been granted."

"I want to stay at a hotel."

"No."

Darn the man. He hadn't listened to her before. If he had, he wouldn't be telling her what to do. "But—"

"The castle is the most suitable place for you to stay."

Izzy could rattle off a hundred reasons why she shouldn't stay here with him, the queen and the king. She settled on one. "I'd be more comfortable in a hotel."

"You will be more comfortable here," Niko countered. "Your every whim will be catered to by the castle's staff."

"I don't have any whims that need catering."

He set his jaw. "No hotel."

Her eyelids felt heavy. She needed to sit down. "I really—"

"This isn't up for negotiation."

Her tiredness was putting her at a disadvantage. She couldn't think fast enough. "Please."

"You will sleep better here than anywhere. Trust me."

Izzy didn't trust him. She couldn't.

"It's also better for you to stay at the castle for security reasons."

Okay, that she could accept.

“Fine. I’ll concede on that point.” She stared down her nose. “But just so you know, as soon as we get the annulment, I’m outta here.”

I’m outta here.

Niko had one parting thought before he handed Isabel off to a maid.

Good riddance.

He kept the thought to himself, balling his hands into fists instead. He would not lower himself to *her* level.

The woman was ill-mannered and brash. She had no idea how she was supposed to act. A month locked in the tower with only etiquette and protocol books might actually help her learn to be a princess. The room in the tower would be better for her than the rusty aluminum can she called home. Though she would probably miss the grease from the garage.

The sharp click from his heels against the wood floor as he strode through the hall echoed his irritation.

“Niko.”

He stopped and flexed his fingers. He did not want his annoyance at his “wife” to affect his soon-to-be new wife.

Julianna stood in the doorway of the library. Her designer skirt and short-fitted jacket complemented her figure the same way her deftly applied makeup accentuated her features. Her long, blond hair gleamed under the lights. “Welcome home.”

One word came to mind as he stared at her—perfection. He couldn’t have found a better princess to be Vernonia’s queen. Her beauty was matched by her intelligence. She spoke four languages fluently—German, French, Italian and English. She was an Olympic-caliber sailor and an excellent spokesperson. She had the necessary family connections and wealth, but her sense of duty set her above many of the other unmarried royals he’d met over the past few years. She knew what her country expected of her, and she fulfilled her duty without question. One hundred and eighty degrees different from Isabel.

“It’s good to see you, Julianna.”

“And you.” She sounded genuinely pleased to him. That would bode well for their future together, if only he could stop thinking about ... his current wife. “I hope your trip went well,” Julianna added.

The hallway was empty, but that didn’t mean people weren’t listening. He didn’t want to take any chance of someone overhearing him.

“Let’s talk in the library where we will not be disturbed.” Niko led her past floor-to-ceiling bookcases to a small meeting room in the back. He closed the door.

Julianna ran her fingers along the polished walnut desk. “I had no idea this room was even here.”

Memories of pestering his older brother, Stefan, while he attempted to study surfaced. Niko pushed them and the pang of grief aside. “Thank you for offering to help Isabel with her shopping.”

Julianna smiled softly. “It’s the least I can do for you.”

Niko had always put Vernonia first. He dated, but had never had a true partner to confide in or ask for help. Perhaps that would change soon. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, but it’s not a hardship. I love to shop.”

He wasn’t about to criticize his current wife to his future spouse, but he didn’t want Julianna blindsided, either. “You may find Isabel a reluctant shopper.”

“I’m sure I can convince her a shopping spree is in order.”

“It could be a challenge,” Niko admitted. “Isabel does not want to be a princess.”

Julianna smiled knowingly. “Every woman wants to be a princess, even if they would never dare admit it aloud.”

“Not Isabel.” His blood pressure rose thinking about her. “I’ve never met a woman who tried so hard not to be female.”

Julianna furrowed her finely arched brows. “Isabel wants to be a man?”

“No, but she is a car mechanic. She works hard not to look like a woman. No makeup. Baggy coveralls. Very casual clothing. No dresses or high heels.”

“You sound exasperated.”

“She is exasperating.”

“First impressions can be deceiving,” Julianna counseled, making Niko wonder if this was how she spoke to her younger brothers. “Isabel must be in shock.”

“The news has shocked her, but I don’t believe my impression of her is far off.” Niko thought about her parting words to him. “Isabel is young. She speaks without thinking. She has no sense of what it is to be royalty.”

“She sounds refreshing.”

“I thought so yesterday, but today we keep ... clashing,” he admitted. “She slept so peacefully last night, but when she awoke this morning she was more beast than beauty.”

Julianna’s mouth quirked. “Isabel is a beauty?”

“Not exactly,” he backtracked. “Some men might find her attractive.”

“Do you?”

“She’s my wife. I don’t think of her in that way.”

Amusement gleamed in Julianna’s eyes. “I see.”

“There’s nothing to see,” he countered. “Fortunately Isabel agrees an annulment is the only option. She was excited to hear about our getting married.”

Julianna sighed. No doubt relieved the upcoming royal engagement and nuptials faced no more obstacles. “We can add her to the wedding party. A royal wedding can never have too many attendants.”

“That is thoughtful of you.” Her thoughtfulness was another reason why Julianna was perfect for his country. “I doubt Isabel will want to remain in Vernonia that long.”

“You must convince her to stay,” Julianna insisted.

“You haven’t met her.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Julianna countered. “Isabel has a duty to fulfill here in Vernonia.”

“I understand what you are saying, but Isabel is very—” he searched for a somewhat complimentary adjective “—independent. I don’t think she is the type to fulfill her duty.”

“She needs training,” Julianna said. “I can help her.”

“You don’t know what you’re offering to take on.”

“Come now, you make her sound like an ogre.”

“Not an ogre,” he admitted. “Ornery.”

“I have four younger brothers. I can handle ornery.”

“See how shopping goes, then you can decide if you want to continue helping her or not.”

“I can’t wait to see what you think of her with a brand-new wardrobe complete with coordinating accessories, shoes and makeup.”

Niko’s shoulders tensed. No way would Isabel agree to a total makeover. “Just get her into a dress by dinnertime, and I’ll be much obliged.”

“Obliged enough for another sail tomorrow?” Julianna challenged.

The jaunt to America had wreaked havoc with his schedule. Niko had little to no free time right now. He appreciated Julianna’s help because that meant he didn’t have to deal with Isabel himself. The woman didn’t need only a fashion makeover, she needed a complete personality transplant. Niko doubted even the capable Aliestle princess could do much with Isabel by dinnertime. But if Julianna was willing to try.

“If you can make her presentable to my parents, I’ll gladly find the time to go sailing with you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER FIVE

IZZY didn't want to like it here. She wasn't going to fit in no matter what she did. The less attached she got to anyone or anything during her short visit the better. But right this minute she wouldn't want to be anywhere else but Vernonia.

Nothing could beat floating on this cloud.

Okay, she was lying on a four-poster queen-size bed, but the mattress was truly fit for a king. Or a princess. No lumps, bumps or peas to be found. The feather pillow conformed to the shape of her head and supported it exactly right. The luxurious sheets cocooned her. She sighed in delight.

Best nap ever.

She never knew a bed could be so comfortable or sheets could feel so soft.

Izzy kept her eyes closed, wanting to linger on the cloud a little longer. But not too long. She didn't want to throw her body clock any more as Niko had mentioned earlier.

Niko.

He hadn't looked happy when he'd handed her off to a maid named Mare. Izzy hadn't been as polite as she could have been. Being tired had contributed, but she didn't like being bossed around. She wasn't one of Niko's subjects. He seemed to forget she was an American. He couldn't tell her what to do.

The image of his ruggedly handsome face formed in her mind. Those to-die-for blue-green eyes. That dark mane of hair. His killer...

What was she doing thinking about him? Izzy opened her eyes.

Darkness filled the room. That was weird. Some natural light had been filtering in through the large windows when she lay down.

Oh, no. Panic spurted through her. Had she slept too long?

Bolting upright, she glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. Only two and a half hours had passed.

Relief washed over her. But why was the room so dark?

She glanced around, allowing her eyes to adjust. Her gaze rested on the closed yellow damask drapes. They'd been open before she fell asleep.

Izzy squirmed with uneasiness. She had lived alone for the last five years and wasn't used to anyone being around when she slept. A good thing she wouldn't be here long.

She tossed back the covers and slid from the bed. Her bare feet sunk into a thick, colorful rug covering the hardwood floors.

Talk about living large. The grandeur of the interior exceeded the castle's fairy-tale exterior. She felt as if she were staying in a museum with antique furniture, famous paintings and exquisite tapestries. Everything looked so expensive she didn't want to touch anything she could break.

Inside the expansive bathroom, Izzy found her toiletry kit sitting on the gold-veined marble countertop. Someone must have removed it from her duffel bag. Having people do everything for you was really weird.

A thick, plush white robe hung on a gold hook. She ran her fingertips over the soft fabric. The robe was nicer than any of the clothing she had brought with her. A good thing she was going shopping.

Izzy brushed her teeth in the gold sink. Everything was gold, from the faucets to the gold seals on the pretty soap wrappers. Even the fluffy white towels had gold embroidery on the bottom portion. Uncle Frank would have gotten a kick out of this big gold bathroom.

She felt a familiar tug at her heart.

Then again, he hadn't been a simple car mechanic. He would have been used to castles and bathrooms like this. Living in a motor home had been the opposite extreme. Had he been hiding her?

Or maybe Uncle Frank had wanted to give her as normal a life as possible, not one with gold sinks. Izzy believed he'd kept the past a secret and raised her the way he did for a reason.

Aleksander and Evangaline Zvonimir might have been her birth parents, but Frank Miroslav had been Izzy's father. He had wiped her tears when she hurt herself, boosted her self-confidence when the kids at school teased her for being different, and taught her everything she knew and loved about cars. He'd saved her life by leaving his own family to raise her in another country. She was only beginning to comprehend what he'd given up for her. It was too late to say thank-you, but Izzy wanted to make it up to him somehow. Maybe she could find his relatives and tell them how wonderful he'd been to her.

Emotion clogged her throat. She shook it off. The way she'd learned to do these last five years.

A shower would make her feel better. She turned on the water. As she undressed, steam filled the bathroom. She stepped into the large shower.

Hot water pulsed down on her as if she were standing in a heated waterfall. She nearly sighed at the decadence of the oversize showerhead.

Okay, Izzy grinned, comfy beds and amazing showers were definitely perks to being a princess. She could even forgive the invasion of privacy while she slept. A shower like this could make her forgive and forget most everything.

Normally she finished showering in a couple of minutes due to the size of the RV's tiny water heater. This time, Izzy stayed in until her fingertips shriveled like raisins.

Best shower ever.

She turned off the water, dried off with a towel, slipped into the luxurious robe and combed her hair.

Out in the bedroom, she padded to her duffel bag. It wasn't where she'd left it.

Izzy looked around. Her backpack sat on the table, but her duffel bag was nowhere to be seen. That was odd. The purple would be hard to miss against the yellow and gold decor.

Maybe whoever placed her toiletry bag in the bathroom had put the duffel bag away. Izzy checked inside the gilded armoire. Empty hangers hung on the rack. She slid out the two drawers. No bag or clothing. She checked under the bed. Nothing there, either.

This wasn't good. She wanted to get dressed.

Izzy had the clothes she'd worn on the flight, but she didn't relish the thought of putting them on again. They were dirty, and she was clean.

Her cell phone was no use. Anyone she could call was half a world away and asleep. They couldn't tell her where to find her duffel bag.

She thought for a moment. Only one explanation made sense. Someone must have taken her bag. To wash the clothes, iron them, who knew why?

A castle this size had to have a large staff. She would flag someone down and ask how to contact Mare.

Izzy poked her head out of her room. The wide hallway was empty. Waiting for someone to appear, she shoved her hands into the deep pockets of the robe. No one came.

"Is anyone out there?" she half whispered.

No reply.

Come on. Izzy grew impatient. This was a castle for goodness' sake. Maids and butlers should be running around. She would have to find someone herself.

She tightened the belt of her robe

Stepping into the hallway, Izzy left the door to her room open. She wanted to remember which room was hers.

The farther she moved away from her room, the more antsy Izzy became. Walking around with wet hair, barefoot and wearing nothing but a robe was not exactly princesslike. A castle probably had rules. Ones she would know. Maybe she should go back.

She was about to turn around when a white-haired man exited a room. The older gentleman was tall, wore a nice suit and walked with a slight limp. On closer look, she noticed he had a prosthetic leg.

No matter what side you were on, we are all marked in some way by the conflict. Some scars are visible. Others are not.

Niko hadn't been kidding. Izzy couldn't believe an old man had to fight in the war. Maybe he'd been a soldier at the beginning. Unless he'd just been a casualty. Thinking about what these people had endured made her heart ache.

He headed in a different direction.

She ran up to him. "Excuse me."

The man stopped. His eyes widened when he saw her.

"Do you work here?" she asked.

He blinked. "I do."

"Finally."

He studied her with probing green eyes. "Who might you be?"

"I'm Izzy. I arrived this morning from the United States."

"Welcome, Izzy." His smile deepened the lines on his face. "I'm Dee."

"Nice to meet you, Dee." In spite of all the wrinkles, he was still attractive. He must have been really handsome when he was younger. She couldn't help but think of Niko. "I'm in a bind. My bag with my clothing has disappeared. I searched the room, but can't find it."

"Oh, dear, that is quite a predicament."

She nodded. "I don't imagine trickster ghosts haunt this place?"

"No, though we do have our share of skeletons in the closet."

"That's what I figured." She felt more comfortable with the staff than royalty. One more reason she wasn't cut out to be a princess. "I'm sure you have work to do, but would you please tell me how I might locate Mare? She was assigned to help me, and I'm wondering if she knows where my bag might be."

"Part of my job is making sure everything runs the way it is supposed to around here."

"Oh, you're the castle manager."

"Something like that." He sounded amused. "I don't know where Mare is, but I know where we can find your clothes."

"Great."

Dee extended his arm. "Allow me to escort you."

She took his arm. "Thanks."

He walked with a steady stride. His leg didn't slow him down. "What do you think of Vernonia so far, Izzy?"

"I didn't see much during the drive from the airport, but this castle—" she looked up at a fresco painted on the ceiling "—it's straight out of a fairy tale."

"I hope the accommodations are to your liking."

"They are lovely. Thank you," she said. "I wanted to stay at a hotel, but Prince Niko wanted me to stay here. He said I would be more comfortable."

"I hope you are comfortable."

"I've only been here a few hours, but I've already had a nice nap and a wonderful shower."

"An excellent start," Dee said.

Izzy nodded. She wondered if Niko would agree. Earlier he couldn't wait to get away from her. No doubt he wanted her visit to be a short one. At least they agreed on something.

"I believe what you seek is inside here." Dee stopped in front of a pair of wide double doors and opened one of them. "These ballroom doors are heavier than they look."

She peered inside and gasped. This wasn't a ballroom. This was a clothing store.

Mannequins, decked out in elaborate outfits with matching accessories, fought for space on the parquet floor between racks of clothing and shoes. Stylishly dressed women bustled about in short skirts and high heels, carrying purses, lingerie and shoes. A mix of perfumes lingered in the air.

The room looked to be a pumped up, steroid-version of *What Not to Wear*. This was so not the kind of shopping Izzy had in mind. She struggled to breathe.

Some women might tingle with excitement at the thought of being let loose among all these clothes and shoes, but the sight filled Izzy with dread. Fashion didn't interest her in the slightest. She was into comfort, not style. Worse, these women had gone to all this trouble for her. Niko and Jovan, too.

Near a three-paneled mirror, she noticed a man who looked out of place among all the feminine finery.

Not just a man. Niko.

He'd showered, shaved and changed suits. He looked like he had at the garage—hot. She wasn't the only one who thought so. A few of the other women kept stealing glances.

Niko didn't seem to notice. He was engaged in a conversation with a gorgeous blonde supermodel. Feeling more out of place than before, Izzy crossed her arms over her stomach.

Dee cleared his throat.

Conversations stopped. Women froze in place. Heads bowed. Eyes lowered.

"What's happening?" she whispered and moved closer to Dee.

"Do not worry." He smiled down at her. "Everything is fine, Izzy."

Niko stared intently at her, making her question the fine part. "What are you—"

"Izzy's bag with her clothing disappeared from her room," Dee said, rather bravely Izzy thought considering the fierce expression on Niko's face. "I offered her my assistance."

"The women needed her sizes so they borrowed her bag, Father."

Realization hit Izzy between the eyes. She inhaled sharply. "Dee as in Dmitar."

"Yes, my dear," Dee said.

"Oh, no." Her cheeks burned. She pulled the robe tighter as if she could somehow disappear into its folds. "You're the king, the one who emailed me about the box, and I'm an idiot."

"Father—"

King Dmitar held up his hand the way Niko had done with Jovan.

Niko remained silent. Izzy had forgotten about that trick, but made a note to remember it for later.

"You're not an idiot, Izzy," King Dmitar said kindly. "You are delightful. I see the best of your parents in you."

Emotion tightened her throat. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"As for my son ..." King Dmitar turned his attention to Niko. "Izzy does not know our ways. She should not be left on her own and forced to figure out where her clothing disappeared to."

Niko bowed his head. "Yes, sir."

King Dmitar turned his attention back to her. "And a suggestion, Izzy."

"Yes, Dee." She cringed at her lapse. "I mean, Your Majesty."

"Queen Beatrice does not like the color pink. You may wish to keep that in mind while shopping."

"Thanks for the tip, sir." Izzy smiled, trying to make the best of the situation. "I'm not much into pink myself."

"Excellent." The king eyed the racks of dresses. "The queen does like the color purple. As do I."

"I'll remember that, sir. Thank you."

He focused on each person in the room until his gaze came to rest on the stunning blonde who had been talking with Niko. The king pressed his lips together for a moment. "I see you are in good hands. I will leave you to your shopping."

With that, the king departed.

As soon as the doors closed, the women went back to carrying accessories to the mannequins. The blonde, who had been speaking with Niko, supervised them.

Izzy blew out a puff of air. "I can't believe that was your father."

Niko stood next to her with an irritated look in his eyes. "Who did you think he was?"

"The castle manager."

The irritation vanished. Niko laughed. "I suppose that is one of his job responsibilities."

"You're not helping."

Niko raised a brow. "I didn't think you needed anyone's help."

Izzy made a face at him.

"You may have trouble finding an outfit to go with that expression," he teased.

"I'm sure I can find an outfit to match every expression as well as one to wear each hour of the day. I thought I was going shopping at a store or a mall." She motioned to all the clothing. "It's a bit ... much, don't you think?"

"Not for a princess," Niko said. "There will be dinners, outings, appearances at the High Court."

"I won't be here that long."

"Long enough."

Izzy tried to take it all in. Tried and failed. "I think I'm beginning to understand what Cinderella might have gone through."

"Except in your case the shoe already fits."

"But we want to get it off as soon as possible."

"That is the plan."

He sounded excited. Izzy set her chin. "You know, dude, I want the annulment just as badly as you do."

Before he could reply, the supermodel hurried over, walking on high heels as if she were wearing tennis shoes. She probably taught Pilates, cooked like a gourmet chef and rescued orphans from third-world countries in her spare time. The woman smiled, showing off two rows of perfectly spaced white teeth. The boys at the garage would be comatose in her presence. "You must be Princess Isabel."

"Isabel," Niko said. "This is Her Royal Highness Princess Julianna Von Schneckel of Aliestle."

Julianna. Niko's girlfriend and future wife. She was also a princess. No wonder he couldn't wait to annul the marriage and marry a woman who exuded so much confidence and beauty even a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model would be intimidated.

Izzy was out of her element in every possible way. She forced her foot to stop tapping.

Julianna extended her arm. Everything about the princess was perfect right down to her manicured and polished fingernails. "It's wonderful to meet you, Isabel."

She shook her hand. Julianna's grip was firm and her hands rougher than Izzy expected them to be. "And you."

Niko watched them with interest. No doubt comparing his current wife to his future one.

A chilling thought inched its way down Izzy's spine. She hoped he wasn't planning to stay while she tried on clothing. This was going to be difficult enough without him here watching or, worse, providing commentary.

"Thanks for arranging all this, Niko." Izzy tried to sound as cheerful as she could. "But I'm sure you have better things to do with your time so don't feel you have to stick around. As your father said, I'm in good hands."

"You're in excellent hands," Niko said. "But I have a few minutes before my meeting."

Bummer, Izzy thought.

"You keep Isabel company, Niko," Julianna said. "I want to get everyone in their places."

People had places? Izzy took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"It won't be that bad," Niko said, as soon as Julianna was out of earshot.

“Want to trade places?” Izzy asked.

“My legs weren’t meant for dresses.”

“Mine, either. I mean, I haven’t worn a dress since ...” Uncle Frank’s funeral, she realized. “It’s been a long time.”

“You’ll look fine.”

She shrugged. “New clothing isn’t going to turn me into a princess.”

“Whether you wear a pair of coveralls or a dress by Chanel, you are already a princess,” he said. “But new clothing might help you feel more comfortable here.”

She stared at the large crystal chandeliers hanging from the ballroom ceiling. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“You only just arrived.”

“I’m not like her.”

“Her?”

“Your girlfriend. Princess Julianna.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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