

Royal Seducer
Michelle Celmer

Bossman Billionaire
Kathie DeNosky



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Michelle Celmer

**Royal Seducer / Bossman
Billionaire: Royal Seducer**

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Royal Seducer / Bossman Billionaire: Royal Seducer / M. Celmer —
«HarperCollins»,

Royal Seducer Michelle Celmer Royal must marry royal, which left Prince Christian few options...until a new princess was discovered. He would have wed whomever duty dictated, but Princess Melissa soon had Christian ready for a passionate royal wedding night. He just had to keep love out of the equation...Bossman Billionaire Kathie DeNosky Sexy as sin Luke Garnier wasn't looking for a wife. Just an heir... with no strings attached. Persuading his faithful assistant, Haley Rollins, to be his surrogate seemed ideal. But Haley's condition for having his baby was marriage!
IRRESISTIBLE Strong, rich, sexy men – almost too hot to handle!

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Royal Seducer
by Michelle Celmer
“You barely know me. I could be dangerous.”

Only to her heart.

She smiled up at him. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“You never know.” His hands slid up to her shoulders, caressing her through the delicate, slippery silk. “I might try to take advantage of you. There’s no one here to stop me.”

Even in the dim light she could see flames of desire flicker in his eyes. His gaze settled on her mouth, making her lips feel swollen and warm. Her own heart began to beat double-time and her skin felt tingly and alive.

She slid her arms around his neck, pulled him close. Being in Chris’s arms felt like returning home after a long arduous journey. For the first time since she was a child she felt as though she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

A rush of relief so intense washed over her that she felt like weeping. She’d never felt so vulnerable in her life, and frankly, it scared her to death.

Bossman Billionaire
by Kathie DeNosky
From the desk of Emerald Larson,
owner and CEO of Emerald, Inc

To: My personal assistant, Luther Freemont

Re: My grandson Lucien Garnier

Lucien is in the process of incorporating Laurel Enterprises into his own company, Garnier Construction. But it's recently been brought to my attention that he's entertaining the idea of having an heir of his own to inherit his holdings when the time comes for him to retire. I've been told by a very reliable source that he's asked his executive assistant, Haley Rollins, to help him with this project and she's agreed.

If my source is correct – and I have no reason to believe otherwise – Lucien is going to need a push in the right direction if this is to come to a satisfactory conclusion. I expect you to arrange whatever you deem necessary to accomplish that goal.

As always, I am relying on your complete discretion in this matter.

Emerald Larson

Available in July 2010
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Royal Seducer by Michelle Celmer

&

Bossman Billionaire by Kathie DeNosky

Billion-Dollar Baby Bargain by Tessa Radley

&

The Moretti Arrangement by Katherine Garbera

The Tycoon's Pregnant Mistress by Maya Banks

&

To Tame Her Tycoon Lover by Ann Major

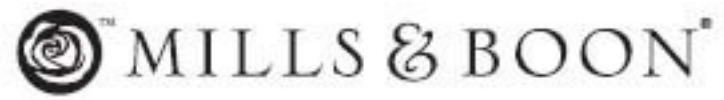
Royal Seducer

By

Michelle Celmer
Bossman Billionaire

By

Kathie DeNosky



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Royal Seducer

By

Michelle Celmer

Dear Reader,

Welcome to book five of my ROYAL SEDUCTIONS series: the story of Melissa Thornsby, the illegitimate princess of Morgan Isle, and Crown Prince Christian James Ernst Alexander of Thomas Isle.

As always, it took some time to work these two out, to see what made them tick. And believe me, they took me on one huge emotional ride. Melissa thinks she's so tough, it was heart wrenching the moment she realised she didn't have all the answers. And Chris is so blind to what is right in front of him, I wanted to whack him over the head and say, "Hello, what were you thinking?" Though it takes them both some serious soul-searching, I think you'll agree it's worth it when these two find their happily ever after.

Don't forget to watch in December for book six of my ROYAL SEDUCTIONS series and spend *Christmas with the Prince*.

Best,

Michelle

Bestselling author **Michelle Celmer** lives in southeastern Michigan with her husband, their three children, two dogs and two cats. When she's not writing or busy being a mum, you can find her in the garden or curled up with a romance novel. And, if you twist her arm really hard, you can usually persuade her into a day of power shopping.

Michelle loves to hear from readers. Visit her website at www.michellecelmer.com, or write to her at PO Box 300, Clawson, MI 48017, USA.

To Nancy

Chapter One

Melissa Thornsby never got nervous.

She'd been raised in the pretentious and oftentimes eccentric New Orleans high society, where it wasn't all that uncommon to check one's back and occasionally find a knife or two sticking out. But that was par for the course.

After Katrina, she'd started a foundation to rebuild the city, and when she met presidents, past and present, actors, musicians and other celebrities eager to "do the right thing," it was just another day at the office.

Even when she'd learned she was the illegitimate princess of the country of Morgan Isle and made the decision to move there permanently to be with a family that was, to put it mildly, suspicious of her motives, she barely broke a sweat. She took her late mother's advice and viewed it as an adventure.

So, visiting Thomas Isle, the former rival of her native country, and meeting the royal family, really wasn't a big deal.

Until she saw *him*.

He stood on the tarmac of the small private airstrip in the bright afternoon sunshine, flanked by two very frightening-looking bodyguards and a polished black Bentley at the ready. And he was, for lack of a better word, *beautiful*. Tall, fit and well put together in a tailored, charcoal-gray pinstriped suit.

Prince Christian James Ernst Alexander, next in line to the throne of Thomas Isle. Confirmed bachelor and shameless playboy. His photos didn't do him justice.

She descended the steps of the Learjet and the prince approached, flashing her a million-watt stunner of a smile. Her heart leapt up into her throat and a curious tickle of nerves coiled in her belly. Was it too much to hope that he was to be her guide for the duration of her two-week stay? Although in her experience that task was typically left up to the princess since the crown prince was usually busy with slightly more significant tasks, such as preparing to run the entire country.

Flanked by her own equally threatening entourage—the security detail her half brother, King Phillip, insisted she have accompany her—she stepped forward to meet him halfway.

When they were face to face, he nodded his head in greeting and said, in a voice as rich and as smooth as her favorite gourmet dark chocolate, "Welcome to Thomas Isle, Your Highness."

"Your Highness." She dipped into a curtsy, turning on the Southern-belle charm. "It's an honor to be here."

"The honor is all ours," he said with a lethal smile. Lethal because she could feel it, like a buzz of pure energy, from the roots of her hair to the balls of her feet.

He watched her intently with eyes a striking shade of green, and behind them she could see very clearly a hint of mischief and sly determination. She couldn't help wondering if he'd spent his previous life as a cat.

He noted her security detail and with one brow slightly raised, asked, "Expecting a revolution, Your Highness?"

Nodding to his own "muscle," she answered, "I was going to ask you the same thing."

If the question had been some sort of test, she could see that she'd passed. He grinned, playful and sexy, and the coil of nerves in her gut twisted into a hopeless knot. This really wasn't like her at all. Heaven knows, she was used to men flirting with her. Young and old, rich and poor, and all of them after the ludicrous trust her great-aunt and uncle had left her. But somehow, she didn't think the prince had money on his mind. He was one of the few men she'd met whose wealth exceeded her own. At least, she was assuming it did.

"The bodyguards were King Phillip's idea," she told him.

“Of course, you’re welcome to keep them with you,” he said, “but it’s certainly not necessary.”

Phillip had insisted she take the bodyguards with her, but he never said she had to *keep* them there. And call her optimistic, but entrusting her welfare to Prince Christian’s staff seemed to her a valuable gesture of good faith. In the vast, stormy history of their two countries, the peace they had adopted was for all practical purposes still in its infancy. And her duty, the way she saw it, was to build on that.

“You’ll see that they’re flown back safely?” she asked.

He nodded. “Of course, Your Highness.”

She cringed inwardly. She still hadn’t grown used to the royal title. “Please, call me Melissa.”

“Melissa,” he said, with that sexy British accent. “I like that.”

And she liked the way he said it.

“You can call me Chris. I imagine it best we drop the formalities, seeing as we will be spending a considerable amount of time together the next two weeks.”

Would they? Another jolt of nerves sizzled inside her stomach. “Are you to be my guide?” she asked.

“If you’re agreeable,” he said.

As though she would say *no* to two weeks with a gorgeous and charming prince. She smiled and said, “I look forward to it.”

He gestured to the waiting car. “Shall we go?”

She turned to her bodyguards, dismissing them with a simple, “Thank you, gentlemen.”

They exchanged an uneasy glance, but remained silent. They knew as well as she did that Phillip would not be happy she’d sent them home.

Oh, well. If there was one thing her new family had learned, it was that she had a mind of her own. As deeply as she longed to be accepted as one of them, to have a real family for the first time since losing her parents, there was only so much of herself she was willing to sacrifice. At thirty-three, in many respects she was too set in her ways to change.

The prince touched her elbow to lead her to the car, and despite the layers of silk and linen of her suit jacket, her skin simmered with warmth. When was the last time she’d felt such a sizzling connection to a man? Or perhaps the better question was, when was the last time she’d let herself? This was as much vacation as business, and it wouldn’t hurt to let her hair down and have some fun.

He helped her into the back, and she sank into the rich, butter-soft leather seat. He circled the car and climbed in the opposite side, filling the interior with a warm and delicious scent that left her feeling lightheaded. Were she home, she might have blamed it on the Southern heat, but the temperature here hadn’t even topped eighty degrees and there was no humidity to speak of. Warm for mid-June on Thomas Isle, but mild by her standards.

As soon as the doors were closed they were off in the direction of the castle, which couldn’t be more than a few minutes away, as they had flown past it just before landing. It appeared massive from the air—dare she say larger than the much more modern palace on Morgan Isle—and seemed to have acres of emerald-green lawns, ornately patterned gardens, and even a shrubbery maze.

A passionate lover of nature, she could hardly wait to explore it all. Her mother had been an avid gardener. Melissa’s childhood home on Morgan Isle was renowned for its award-winning gardens, and she’d carried on the tradition at her own estate in New Orleans. Though it had been hard to leave that and move back to Morgan Isle, the U.S. had never really been her home. Since losing her parents, she had never felt as though she truly belonged anywhere.

“My parents, the king and queen, are anxious to meet you,” Chris said.

“The feeling is mutual.” She turned to him and realized he was studying her, a curious look on his face. “What?”

“Your accent,” he said. “I can’t quite place it.”

“That’s because it’s a mishmash of different dialects. Little bits of every place I’ve lived pop out occasionally.”

“How many different places have you lived?”

“Let’s see…” she counted off on her fingers. “I lived on Morgan Isle until I was ten, then I relocated to New Orleans, then it was off to boarding school in France and summers in California, then college on the east coast, then back to New Orleans.”

“Sounds exciting,” he said.

One would think so, but really all she had ever wanted was to settle down, stay in one place. Of course, when she finally had, it just hadn’t felt…right. She’d thought that moving back to Morgan Isle would give her the sense of home and family she had been longing for, but she’d been disappointed to find that despite it being her true home, she still felt like an outsider. It left her wondering if she would ever fit in anywhere.

“How about you?” she asked the prince.

“My diplomatic travels have taken me all over the world, but I’ve never lived anywhere but here, with my family.”

She detected a vague note of exasperation in his tone. To her it sounded wonderful. After her parents died, she had been shuttled to the States to live with her great-aunt and uncle, who had little concept of family. Childless by choice, they saw their orphaned great-niece as more of an interloper than a part of the family. They wasted little time shipping her off to boarding school for her education and camp for the summers. Not that she blamed them. They’d done the best they could. Had they chosen not to take her in she would have become a ward of the state, and who knows where she would be today.

Melissa became aware that the car was climbing, and she knew that they were nearly there. Then the trees cleared and there sat the royal castle, like a scene from a child’s picture book, high on a cliff overlooking the ocean and hovering like a sentinel above a charming village below. Far less modern than Morgan Isle, she thought with a tug of pride, but magnificent nonetheless. She felt a little as though she had been thrown back into a past century.

From what she’d learned in her research, where Morgan Isle was modern and forward-thinking—a flourishing and expanding resort community—Thomas Isle was traditional and private. Most of their economy was based on export, primarily fishing and organic farming. Some considered it archaic, but she saw it as quaint and charming.

“It’s magnificent,” she told him, gazing up from the car window.

“Do you know the history between our two countries?”

“Only that they’ve been rivals for many years.”

“It’s a fascinating story. Were you aware that both islands used to be ruled by one family? A king and queen with two sons. Twins, born only minutes apart.”

“Their names wouldn’t have been Thomas and Morgan, would they?”

He smiled. “In fact, they were. When the king died, the princes became ensnared in a battle over who would be become the next ruler. They each felt they deserved the title. When an accord couldn’t be reached, one challenged the other to a duel.” He paused for dramatic effect. “To the death.

“The survivor would reign as king. But their mother couldn’t bear the thought of losing either one of them, and begged them not to fight. She suggested a compromise. They could split the kingdom by each taking one of the islands. They agreed, but their discord was so bitter, they never spoke again.”

“That’s so sad.”

“To spite the other, each chose his own name for his island. Their subjects, as a show of loyalty to their respective kings, were banned from visiting the island on which they didn’t reside, or even communicating with its people. Many families were broken and businesses ruined.”

“What about the queen? Which island did she choose?”

“She refused to choose between her sons and was banished from both islands.”

She pressed a hand to her heart. “Oh, my goodness, how awful!” How could they banish their own mother?

“It took hundreds of years to put our history behind us,” he said. “That’s why it’s so important that we maintain accord between our two countries. Joining our resources could benefit both our islands. Both of our societies. Both of our families.”

“King Phillip feels the same way,” she assured him. “That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. Matters such as these have the potential to be very...awkward.”

“I’m a go-with-the-flow princess,” she said, which was true, for the most part. “However, I take my new role very seriously. Anything for the good of the country.”

He flashed her another one of those sizzling smiles. “Then I’m sure we’ll get along quite well.”

The car pulled up the drive to the gates, where a mob of press waited with microphones poised and cameras at the ready.

The gates swung open and guards in formal uniform stepped forward to control the crowd. The car continued on past a stone wall that seemed to extend miles in each direction, and what she saw on the other side took her breath away. Everything looked green and vibrant, and the castle itself was a towering edifice of stone and mortar and ornate stained-glass windows, all meticulously maintained and preserved.

“Welcome to Sparrowfax Castle,” Chris said.

It was clear, as they rounded the drive and she saw the royal family and what appeared to be the entire staff lined up awaiting their arrival, that they were pulling out all of the royal stops. That annoying knot of nerves coiled even tighter in her belly.

This sure seemed like a lot of trouble to go to for a simple diplomatic visit. Yet she couldn’t let herself forget how important this was to her family and country, which would mean watching her behavior. Particularly biting her sharp Southern tongue that sometimes had a mind of its own.

As the car slowed to a halt, footmen in royal dress approached to open the doors. Melissa took the proffered hand thrust her way and rose from the back seat, feeling underdressed in her basic linen suit. The family was dressed and poised to receive royalty—which she had to remind herself, *she was*—and for the first time in her adult life she felt apprehensive about her suitability.

Chris’s parents, the king and queen, stepped forward to greet her. Though getting up in years, they appeared healthy and vibrant. Their other children, Chris’s brother and twin sisters, were as breathtakingly attractive as their sibling. What a privilege it would be, Melissa mused, to belong to such a beautiful family. It was a wonder that all of them had yet to marry.

Good looks, however, were only a fraction of a much larger picture. For all she knew they could be rude and unfriendly.

Chris appeared at her side, and though it was silly, his presence seemed to have a calming effect on her.

“All this for me?” she asked.

Her question seemed to perplex him. “Of course. You’re an honored guest. Your visit marks a new era for both of our kingdoms.”

Little ol’ me? She hadn’t realized her visit would be seen as quite that big of a deal. Her own family hadn’t put up close to this much fuss when she’d come home to her native land. In fact, there hadn’t been any fuss at all. Her return to Morgan Isle had been very hush-hush, to avoid a media frenzy.

But it wasn’t as though she was going to complain. What woman didn’t enjoy a little ego-stroking every now and then?

Chris offered his arm. “Are you ready to meet my family?”

She looped her arm through his, finding his solid warmth a decadent treat. And a comfort. He made her feel...safe.

She smiled up at him and nodded. Back in New Orleans she sat at the very top of the social food chain. But none of that carried much weight here, where she was known only as the illegitimate daughter of the late King Frederick.

And she suspected that for the rest of her life no one would let her forget it.

Chapter Two

Within five minutes of meeting her, Chris suspected that he and Princess Melissa would get along quite well.

Though he typically preferred blondes, Melissa's dark hair and eyes and her warm complexion were unexpectedly exotic and appealing. She was not only attractive and seemingly pleasant, but as had been suggested by King Phillip, she had a resilient personality and a sharp wit. Traits some might find undesirable, but a necessity for the type of arrangement they were considering.

He walked her over to his family to start the introductions. It had already been determined how everyone was to behave. It was imperative they make her feel welcome.

"Melissa, I would like to introduce you to my parents, the king and queen of Thomas Isle."

Melissa curtsied and said, "It's an honor, Your Majesties."

His mother took her hand and said warmly, "The honor is ours, Melissa. We're so happy that you could visit us."

"I hope we find it mutually beneficial," his father said, his tone serious.

"I'm certain we will," Melissa answered with a warm smile.

The king cast Chris a sideways glance, one that conveyed the message *don't screw this up*. Despite his past resistance when it came to the idea of settling down, even Chris couldn't deny that an alliance with the royals of Morgan Isle would be a smart move. Politically and financially.

"Meet my brother and sisters," Chris said, introducing them each in turn. "Prince Aaron Felix Gastel, and princesses Anne Charlotte Amalia and Louisa Josephine Elisabeth."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all," Melissa said. She shook each of their hands, and just as planned, they all greeted her warmly. Aaron was simply relieved that it was Chris in this position and not himself, though at thirty-one he should have been ready for the responsibility.

Louisa, the younger fraternal twin by five minutes, greeted Melissa with her usual bubbly enthusiasm. From the time that she was a small child, Louisa loved everyone, often to her own detriment. Her siblings had spent a good deal of time sheltering her from harm.

Anne was the older and more cautious twin. Too many times her trust had been betrayed by people she had mistakenly considered her friends. But even she put her best foot forward and welcomed Melissa warmly. She, like everyone else, knew how important it was that this visit go smoothly.

The introductions complete, Chris gestured to the maid who would tend to Melissa for the duration of her trip.

"Elise, would you please show our guest to her quarters?" Then he asked Melissa, "How much time do you need to settle in?"

"Not long," she said, a light of excitement flashing in the dark depths of her eyes. "I'm anxious to see the gardens. They looked decadent from the air."

"Then that's where we'll begin," he told her. "Will an hour suffice?"

She nodded. "I'll expect you in an hour."

Elise stepped forward, curtsied, and said, "This way, Your Highness."

When they disappeared inside the castle and out of earshot, and the staff was dismissed to resume their duties, everyone seemed to let out a collective breath of relief.

"I think that went quite well," his mother said.

And from his father, "Have you discussed it with her?"

Chris refrained from rolling his eyes and struggled to keep the exasperation from his voice. "Of course not, Father. We've only just met."

His mother shot her husband a sharp look. “Give it time, James.” Then she told Chris, “Take all the time you need, dear. A decision like this shouldn’t be rushed. But I do have to say, I think she’s lovely.”

“Although illegitimate,” the king reminded her.

“That’s hardly her fault,” she snapped back. “Besides, what family doesn’t have its share of scandal? And *secrets*.”

“Just some more than others,” Aaron quipped, receiving a stern look from the his mother.

“Well, I like her,” Louisa bubbled.

Anne shot her an exasperated look. “You like *everyone*.”

“Not *everyone*. But I really like Melissa, and I’m an excellent judge of character.”

Actually, Louisa was a rotten judge of character, but Chris hoped in this case she was right.

“We all have to remember to be on our best behavior,” their mother said firmly. “Make her feel welcome.” She took Chris’s hands in hers and gave them a squeeze. “I think this might be the one, dear.”

Though at first he had resisted, now Chris was inclined to agree.

He was quite sure already that Melissa would make a suitable wife.

“We need to talk,” Aaron said quietly to Chris as the rest of the family dispersed.

Chris nodded and followed his brother away from the castle, where they could speak in private. “Is there a problem?”

“There might be,” Aaron said, brow wrinkled with concern, which wasn’t at all like him. It took a lot to put a frown on his face.

“Something about Melissa?”

Aaron shook his head. “No, no, nothing like that. I had an urgent message from the foreman of the east fields, saying he needed to see me as soon as possible. So I drove down there this morning.”

The east fields, which made up close to a third of the royal family’s vast acreage, was used primarily to grow soy and housed the largest of their research and greenhouse facilities. “What did he want?”

“There’s some sort of disease causing a blight on the crops. A strain he doesn’t recognize.”

Due to the organic nature of their business, disease and insect infestations were at times a concern. “Is it treatable?”

“He’s tried several methods, but so far it appears resistant. He called in a botanist from the university who he believes will be able to help. But at the rate it’s spreading, we could lose half of the crop. Maybe more.”

Which would be unfortunate, but not a devastating loss. Unless it spread. “You say it’s confined to the east fields?”

“So far, yes.”

“And there have been no problems reported from local farmers?”

“None that I’ve heard.”

“Good. Lets try to keep it that way. The last thing we need right now is an epidemic. Or the fear of one.” Which could be just as damaging. The timing couldn’t be worse. “And we shouldn’t burden Father with this. Not until it’s absolutely necessary.”

“I’ll see that the situation is handled discreetly,” Aaron assured him. “Although if it begins to spread we’ll have no choice but to post a countrywide bulletin.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” This alliance with the royal family of Morgan Isle depended on a stable economy and strong leadership. Their father’s health issues were a closely guarded secret known only to the family and the king’s personal physician. And Chris intended to keep it that way. If he was to become king, sooner rather than later as the case might be, he needed a strong base on which to build.

“Try not to worry about it. Concentrate on your princess.” Aaron flashed Chris a sly grin. “Not that it will be much of a hardship. She’s very attractive.”

“And just think, once I’m married off, you’ll be next.”

Aaron snorted out a rueful laugh. “I wouldn’t hold your breath. Only the crown prince is required to marry and have an heir.”

“That won’t stop Mother from setting you up with every eligible female on the island.”

“She knows better.”

Chris laughed and said, “You keep telling yourself that. But mark my words, the instant I’m spoken for, you’ll be next.”

Aaron glared at him. “Don’t you have a princess to seduce?”

He did, and seduce her was exactly what he planned to do.

The interior of the castle was even more magnificent than the exterior.

As the maid led Melissa up to the room she would occupy for the duration of her visit, she took in with sheer wonder the high, ornately scribed ceilings and tall stained-glass windows, the authentic period furniture, magnificent tapestries and rich oriental rugs over gleaming polished wood and inlaid marble floors. On the walls hung amazing works of art, landscapes and portraits and even a few abstracts.

In New Orleans she’d seen many magnificent residences—her own estate had been highlighted in its share of newspaper and magazine articles—and the palace on Morgan Isle was the pinnacle of luxury and style. Yet none could compare to the grandeur of Sparrowfax Castle. Though she had anticipated a dark, dank atmosphere—it was after all built of stone and mortar—it was surprisingly bright and airy, her own room included.

While her things were unpacked, she took some time to change and freshen her makeup, then investigate her chamber. It wasn’t a terribly large room, maybe only a third the size of her suite at the palace. But what it lacked in size, it made up for in luxury. The furnishings were rich and traditional, authentic to the period and meticulously preserved.

The bathroom was enormous and updated with all the modern amenities, including a whirlpool tub and three-headed shower. The stall, she noticed, was big enough for two. And she was sure that as good as Chris looked in his clothes, he probably looked better out of them.

Don’t get ahead of yourself, Mel.

She unpacked her laptop, booted it up, and typed in her password, scanning for a wireless signal. Her family expected daily updates on her visit and trusted encrypted e-mails over a cellular line that could easily be intercepted. Not that Mel expected they would be doing espionage, but she supposed one could never be too careful.

She established a link and opened her e-mail program, addressing a note to Phillip. She wrote: Arrived safely. Greeted warmly. Nothing to report yet.

A knock sounded at her door, so she hit Send and snapped her laptop shut. She crossed the room and opened the door.

Chris stood on the other side. He had changed out of his suit into dark slacks and a black silk dress shirt.

He looked delicious. Dark and sexy and a little mysterious.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said.

“Of course not.” She flashed him a warm smile, and noticed the way his eyes roamed slowly over her with no shame or hesitation, taking in the gauzy silk dress she had changed into. The deep, warm blue enhanced the gray of her eyes. She’d also let her hair down and brushed it out until it hung in rich, dark waves down her back.

She looked damned good, and it didn’t go unnoticed.

“You look lovely,” he said, heat flickering in the depths of his eyes like emerald flames. “How fortunate I am to have the privilege of spending the next two weeks with such a beautiful woman.”

His words made her feel weak in the knees, and she was tempted to say *You're not so shabby yourself*. But she should at least play a little hard to get. Instead she batted her lashes and turned on the Southern charm. "You flatter me, Your Highness."

He grinned like a sly, hungry wolf anticipating his next meal. And, oh, how she hoped he would sink those pearly whites into her.

"Is the room satisfactory?" he asked.

"Quite," she said. "What I've seen of the castle is breathtaking."

"Are you ready to see the gardens?"

More than he could imagine. "I'd love to."

He offered his arm for her to take, and she slid hers through it. Again she felt that exciting little rush of awareness. That tingle of attraction. And she could tell by the heat in his gaze that he felt it, too.

He led her downstairs, gesturing to points of interest along the way. Family heirlooms that dated back hundreds of years, gifted to the royal family from friends and relatives and neighboring kingdoms. Melissa had so little left of her own family. After her mother and the man she'd known as her father had been killed, her aunt and uncle had seen that all of their possessions had been auctioned off and the proceeds put in a trust. But Mel would have preferred their possessions, something to remember them by, more than all the money in the world.

She didn't even have the albums of photographs and scrapbooks her mother had meticulously kept. They had probably been tossed in the trash, deemed useless. The only reminder Melissa had of her parents was a single 4x6 snapshot of the three of them taken only weeks before their accident.

"It must be wonderful to be so connected to your family," she said. "To be so close."

He shrugged. "It all depends on how you look at it, I suppose."

"Well, it looks pretty good to me." She had hoped to rediscover that closeness, that sense of continuity with her half siblings, yet something was missing. Though they made an effort to include her, she still felt like an outsider. And maybe she always would.

She was the oldest, and illegitimate or not, technically, she had a rightful claim to the crown. But despite signing documents swearing that she would never challenge Phillip's position as ruler, she didn't think they were ready to trust her. Maybe someday.

Then again, maybe not.

Chris led her through an enormous great room and out a rear door onto a slate patio bordered by a meticulously tended perennial garden so alive with color its beauty made her gasp.

"It's amazing," she said. On the patio sat a variety of chairs, chaise longues and wrought-iron tables. She could just imagine herself out there in the morning, drinking coffee, or lounging in the afternoon, reading a book. She closed her eyes and breathed in the salty tang of ocean air, could hear the waves in the distance, lapping against the rocky bluff.

It felt like paradise.

"Do you spend much time out here?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "It's mostly used for entertaining. Although you might occasionally find Louisa out here practicing yoga."

If she lived in the castle, Melissa would be out here every day, weather permitting. Although that was easy to say. She hadn't spent nearly as much time as she would have liked in her gardens at her New Orleans estate. There always seemed to be more pressing business that needed tending.

"Can we walk to the bluff?" she asked.

"Of course." He offered his arm and they walked down a twisting sandstone path that wound its way through the gardens. His knowledge of the different varieties of flowers and shrubs impressed her, as did the steady strength of his arm, and his solid presence beside her.

She'd never been what one would consider a fading flower, she could hold her own in almost any given situation, but even she liked to be pampered every now and then.

"Can I ask you a personal question, Melissa?"

She didn't have to wait for the question to know what was on his mind. She could hear it in his tone, see the curiosity in his eyes.

She'd been getting that same look from many people lately.

"Let me guess. You're wondering if it was a shock to learn that I was an illegitimate royal?"

He grinned. "Something like that."

Her illegitimacy wasn't something Melissa tried to hide, or felt she should be ashamed of. After all, how could she be responsible for the actions of a mother she'd lost twenty-three years ago, and a father she had never even known? Nor was she shy about discussing it. Why attempt to hide something everyone already knew? It would only sit like the proverbial elephant in the room. She was who she was, and people either accepted her or they didn't. Loved her or hated her.

"I felt as though I'd been caught up in some surreal sequel to *The Princess Diaries*," she said.

His eyes crinkled with confusion. "*Princess Diaries*?"

"Suffice it to say, I was flabbergasted. I had no idea that I wasn't my father's daughter."

"Did it upset you that your parents never told you the truth?"

"On some level. But honestly, I have little room to complain. If my father knew I wasn't his, he never let it show. I had an extremely happy childhood. And my real father...well, I honestly think he did me a favor by staying out of my life. Although after my parents died it would have been nice if he'd claimed me. But I understand why he didn't."

"Life after your parents passed away wasn't so happy?"

The directness of his question surprised her a bit. Most people tiptoed around the subject of her parents' deaths. It seemed almost as though he was testing her. Seeing how tough she was.

"To quote Nietzsche," she said "That which does not kill me makes me stronger."

Chris smiled. "I believe he also said, 'No price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself'."

And she did own herself. Despite everything that had happened, she was in control of her own life. Her own destiny. And she intended to keep it that way.

The path ended and the gardens opened up to a rocky bluff that seemed to stretch for miles in either direction. Over its edge was nothing but cloudless sky and calm blue ocean, and farther in the distance, the coast of Morgan Isle. Fishing boats dotted the expanse that lay between the two islands, and closer to the Morgan Isle shore she could just make out the luxury craft common to the tourist trade.

She toed closer to the edge and peeked over the side, to the jagged rocks below. It was a *long* way down. At least three or four stories, with no discernible beach that she could make out in either direction. She looked back at Chris. "Is there a path down?"

He shook his head. "Not for miles. It's a straight drop down to the water. Tactically speaking, it was the perfect place for my ancestors to build the castle. Invading forces would have been forced to dock their ships miles down the coast."

She leaned farther over, trying to see the sharp incline of the cliff wall.

"Be careful," he said, concern in his voice.

"I'm always careful." At least, *almost* always.

"Not afraid of heights, I guess."

She shrugged and backed away from the edge. "Not afraid of anything, really."

He regarded her curiously. "Everyone is afraid of *something*."

She thought about it for a moment, then said, "Centipedes."

He grinned. "Centipedes?"

"All those legs." She shuddered. "They give me a serious case of the creeps."

"Well, then, you have nothing to fear here," he said, offering his arm and leading her back toward the castle. "We don't see many centipedes."

There was one other thing she feared. Feared it more than a stampede of creepy centipedes.

She was afraid she might fall for Prince Christian. Then get her heart broken as she had so many times before.

Chapter Three

Chris and Melissa strolled slowly back to the castle, she a soft and comfortable presence beside him. They chatted about the weather and the flowers and the different crops they grew on the island. She had an insatiable curiosity about practically everything, and always looked genuinely interested in his answers and explanations. But when he led her past the shrubbery maze, her eyes all but shimmered with excitement. She stopped him just outside the entrance. “It’s taller than it looks from the air.”

“Three meters, give or take,” Chris said. “It takes an entire crew a full day to manicure.”

“I’m sure it’s worth it.”

“This maze has been standing here, unchanged, for hundreds of years.”

Her eyes filled with mischief. “Could we go inside?”

“You’d like me to lead you through?”

“Oh, no, I’ll figure it out myself.”

Chris looked at his watch. “Unfortunately, there’s no time. We’re to meet with my parents for drinks before supper.”

“How long does it usually take?”

“Drinks or supper?”

She laughed. “No, the maze.”

“If you know your way, not long. Ten minutes, maybe. For the novice, though, it’s easy to get turned around. I’ve seen people wander through there for hours.”

She shot him a cocky smile. “I’ll bet I could figure it out in no time.”

“It’s more confusing than you might think.”

“I have a very good sense of direction. And I like a challenge.”

He didn’t doubt that she did. She certainly had spunk. He liked that about her. In his opinion, it took a strong and independent woman to withstand a marriage of convenience. Melissa seemed to have what it would take. He hoped she felt the same way.

“Just in case, I think it should wait.”

She looked disappointed, but she didn’t push the issue. Duty was duty, and she seemed to embrace the concept. One more trait in her favor.

“Tomorrow, then?” she asked.

“Of course.”

She gazed up at him through a curtain of thick, dark lashes, a wicked smile teasing the corners of her lips. “You promise?”

“I’m a man of my word,” he said.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the saying ‘Chivalry is dead.’”

“Not on Morgan Isle it isn’t.” He gazed down at her, into the smoky depths of her eyes, and swore he could see a shadow of apprehension. Maybe even sorrow. Then it was gone.

Either he’d imagined it, or she wasn’t as tough as she wanted people to believe.

“Now,” he said, “are you ready to have drinks with my parents?”

“I guess so.” She took a long, deep breath, and blew it out. Then asked, “Anything I should know before-hand? It’s important that I make a good impression.”

“Just be yourself and I know they’ll find you as enchanting and interesting as I do.”

He could see from her smile that she appreciated his answer.

“I like you, Your Highness.”

He returned the smile. “I would have to say, that’s a very good thing.”

“Why is that?”

“Because, Princess, I like you, too.”

As Melissa had suspected, “drinks with the king and queen” was code for a thorough grilling by not only Chris’s parents, but his brother and sisters as well. They seemed to want to know all about her and her half siblings, and the country of Morgan Isle. And they weren’t shy about asking. She tried to answer their questions as honestly as possible without giving away too much, or in some cases, too little. She had been with her new family such a short time that in some cases she simply didn’t know the answers.

Dinner was a five-course feast of seafood caught off their own shores, organic vegetables from the royal family’s personal garden and bread baked fresh from wheat grown in their own fields. They followed it up with a dessert that was so mouthwateringly delicious Melissa was tempted to ask for seconds.

Though she had never been one to choose organic or natural products, it really did make a difference. She would go so far as to say it was one of the tastiest, freshest meals she’d ever eaten.

It was nine-thirty by the time dinner was over and she thoroughly expected another round of drinks, and very possibly more questions. Instead, Chris’s parents excused themselves to their quarters. The king did look exhausted, but she supposed that was only natural when she considered that he spent his days running an entire country. And though he didn’t exactly have one foot in the grave, he was no kid, either. In his late sixties would be her guess, but she wasn’t rude enough to ask.

She also didn’t miss the way his children seemed to coddle him. The fleeting and furtive looks of concern they would direct his way when they thought no one was looking. She couldn’t escape the feeling that there was something going on with his royal highness. Something they didn’t want her to know.

Everyone said their good-nights, his brother and sisters included—although she doubted they all actually went to bed this early—and Chris walked her to her room.

“Everyone retires early here,” she said when they stopped outside her door.

He leaned against the doorjamb. “Our primary business is farming. Early to bed, early to rise.”

“In New Orleans, if I was in bed by one it was an early night. It’s a totally different culture.”

“To be honest,” he said, “I’ve always been something of a night owl myself.”

“Would you like to come in for a while?” she asked, gesturing inside her room. “We could have a drink and...talk.”

He looked past her into the bedroom. A single lamp burned beside the bed and the maid had turned down the covers. There was no denying that it looked awfully inviting. “I’d like to, but I shouldn’t.”

“Tired of me already?” she teased.

“Quite the opposite.” He took a step closer, his eyes simmering with desire. “If I allow myself to come into your room tonight, you know as well as I that we’ll be doing much more than just talking. Is that what you want?”

Though a part of her wanted to say *yes*—the curious, reckless, and let’s face it, *lonely* part—she knew it wouldn’t be right. She’d met him only a few hours ago. Shouldn’t she at least get to know him a little before she let her hormones call the shots? Before she gave in to the inevitable? Because she knew without a doubt that sometime before she flew home to Morgan Isle, she would sleep with Chris.

But not tonight.

“No, I guess not.” She took a step back from him, from the heady pull of attraction that would instead have her wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer for a long, deep kiss.

He looked disappointed, but not at all surprised. “I thought we would take a tour of the island tomorrow. See the village and the fields we control.”

She smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Shall we have breakfast first? Say, eight o’clock. If that’s not too early.”

She doubted she’d be able to sleep late, if she slept at all. She smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Good night, Melissa. Sleep well.”

“Good night, Chris.”

He took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips, brushing a soft kiss against it, and for an instant she thought he might take her in his arms and kiss her anyway, then he let go of her hand and backed away. He flashed her one last dark, sizzling smile, then disappeared down the hallway.

She closed the door and leaned against it.

Wow.

Her heart pounded and she felt drunk on the sensation of his lips against her skin. If she did sleep, she had no doubt whatsoever that she would dream of him.

She changed into her favorite silk nightgown—which also happened to be her sexiest, since one never knew—and because she wasn’t the least bit sleepy, booted up her laptop to check her e-mail.

There was one from Phillip. It said simply:

Have you spoken with the king and queen?

No *How was your trip, or Are you having fun?* He didn’t even ask why she’d sent the bodyguards home.

She couldn’t help but feel he was relieved that she was gone. Which could very well be her imagination. Phillip was not what anyone could call warm and fuzzy. He was, she imagined, very much like their father. With the exception of his sleeping habits.

As in, Phillip was faithful to his wife, while their father, it seemed, hadn’t been able to keep it in his pants.

She hit Reply and typed up a quick e-mail, giving Phillip a brief rundown on her visit so far. Leaving out the part about almost shacking up with Prince Christian. Phillip wanted her to become well acquainted with the royal family of Thomas Isle, particularly their future leader, but she didn’t think he meant *that* well.

She’d never been one to sleep around, though that was not to say she was a prude in any respect, but maybe there was more of her father in her than she cared to admit.

She sent the e-mail and, with nothing better to do, opened her favorite card game, but after fifteen minutes or so was bored to tears. She tried curling up in bed and reading the book she’d brought along with her, but she couldn’t concentrate.

She called down to the kitchen for a cup of herbal tea, but not even that would quiet her nerves. Back home in New Orleans, a stroll in the garden under the moon and the stars was usually the most effective cure for a sleepless night. She doubted anyone would mind if she took a quick walk. Besides, how would they even know? Unlike her, they were all soundly sleeping.

She slipped on her robe and opened her door, peering out into the hall. In the palace on Morgan Isle, it seemed there was always some sort of activity going on, day or night, whether it was midnight bottle feedings or diaper changes, or the guards’ nightly rounds of the premises. In contrast, the castle was quiet and dark.

Melissa stepped into the hall and quietly made her way down the stairs and through the castle to the patio door. She slipped outside onto the patio, the slate smooth against her bare feet. The air was cool and damp, and the full moon cast a silver, ghostly glow across the land. In the distance she could hear the *whoosh* of the ocean against the bluff, but otherwise the night was eerily still.

To the east, just beyond the garden, stood the shrubbery maze, looking ominous in the dark. Yet it seemed to beckon her. If it was a challenge during the day, think of the thrill it would be to guess her way through with only the moon to light her way.

She glanced back at the castle, dark and still, and figured, *why the heck not?* This was supposed to be a vacation. And what was the worst that could happen? She would get lost and wander around in there all night.

She stepped off the patio onto the cool, damp grass and cut across the lawn to the entrance of the maze, her heart thumping a little faster with excitement.

Here goes nothin’.

She stepped forward and the maze swallowed her into its depths like a hungry animal. Inside it was dark and serene, and the towering greenery seemed to muffle all sound beyond its walls.

She waited for her eyes to adjust, until she could see the first turn ahead of her. She stepped forward, deeper inside, the grass cool and slippery under her feet. She turned the first corner to find herself at the end of a long, ominous-looking passageway. Memorizing her steps in case she needed to back her way out later, she walked slowly forward. Halfway through she encountered another passageway that hooked off to the right. Should she maintain her present course, or turn down a path that would take her deeper inside?

The adventurer in her said go deeper.

She turned and followed the passage, but after a few yards she reached a T in the path. Should she go right, or left? Logic dictated that turning right would put her on course for a dead end, so she went left instead.

Behind her she swore she heard a rustling, but when she turned to look, there was nothing there. Probably just a bat, or some small animal. She shrugged and continued on through a few more twists and turns until she reached another T. This time she chose right. She heard another noise, a distinct rustling of branches, but this time it seemed to be coming from in front of her. She strained to see in the dim light, and could swear she saw a dark figure cross the path somewhere in front of her.

Her imagination? A trick of the light?

Curious, she forged ahead, turning the same direction as the figure had, and found herself at a dead end. There wasn't anyone or anything there.

That was odd. She felt around, looking for some sort of secret passage. There was nothing but solid branches, far too thick and brittle to slip through. Then she heard the rustling again, this time from directly behind her.

She spun around, but there was no one there. Yet she had the distinct feeling she wasn't alone. "Hello?" she called. "Is someone there?"

There was another rustle, then the dark figure passed the T junction just ahead of her. It was too dark to tell who it was, or even if it was a man or a woman.

She darted after the ghostly figure, determined to catch up. But it seemed as though no matter how swiftly she moved, he or she was always rounding the next corner, out of sight before she could get very close. Whoever it was, they obviously knew the maze well. They had lured Melissa deep inside, and she'd been concentrating so hard on following him or her, she hadn't been memorizing her steps. Now she had no idea how to get out.

She suspected that had been the intention all along. Whoever it was, he was taunting her. Trying to throw her off track, and it had worked. She was hopelessly turned around. And of course, her ghostly figure had chosen that moment to disappear without a trace.

"Swell," she mumbled to herself. She wandered around for another twenty minutes or so trying to get her bearings, hearing an occasional rustle in the leaves, sometimes in front of her, sometimes behind. If this was some sort of test, she was failing miserably. She strained to hear the ocean, to get a bearing on her direction, but it was useless, and since the idea of wandering around in there all night held little to no appeal, she threw in the towel.

"You win," she called. "I surrender."

"I told you it was confusing," a voice said softly into her ear.

She spun around and crashed into the wall of one very long, solid and—oh, Lord—blissfully bare chest.

Chris's chest.

Chapter Four

Melissa was so surprised she nearly toppled over backward. Chris grabbed her arms to steady her, the heat of his hands searing her through the thin silk of her robe. He wore a playful, slightly cocky grin that she felt all the way through to the center of her bones.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked.

“I was just about to ask you the same thing.”

“I couldn’t sleep. I decided to go for a walk.”

“In the middle of the night?” His eyes raked over her and the gentle pressure on her arms increased. “In your night clothes?”

“I didn’t expect to run into anyone.” She didn’t bother to point out that in baggy PJ bottoms and no shirt he wasn’t exactly overdressed either. And it was taking all of her concentration not to stare at his smooth, muscular, *magnificent* chest. “I just assumed everyone had gone to sleep.”

“I’m sure everyone else has.”

“Except you.”

“I was working. I saw you from my bedroom window. When you went into the maze, I worried you might get lost.”

She doubted that. “Actually, I was doing just fine until someone got me all confused and turned around.”

His teeth flashed white in the dark as he smiled. “Most people aren’t brave enough to venture in here at night.”

She shrugged. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Giant, man-eating centipedes?” he suggested, then a sly smile curled his lips. “And there’s always me.”

“You?”

“You barely know me. I could be dangerous.”

Only to her heart.

She smiled up at him. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“You never know.” His hands slid up to her shoulders, caressing her through the delicate, slippery silk. “I might try to take advantage of you. There’s no one here to stop me.”

“What if I didn’t want you to stop?” She reached up and pressed her palms against the solid warmth of his chest, felt his heart thumping under warm skin and sinew. “Who knows? I might even take advantage of *you*.”

Even in the dim light she could see flames of desire flicker in his eyes. His gaze settled on her mouth, making her lips feel swollen and warm. Her heart began to beat double time and her skin felt tingly and alive. She knew instinctively that he would be an accomplished lover. Probably because she’d known so many who weren’t.

You’re moving too fast, her subconscious warned her. She barely knew Chris, yet already she was sure that before she returned to Morgan Isle, she would be getting to know him a lot better. Maybe it was destiny. Or fate.

“Since the minute you stepped off that plane, I’ve thought of little else but kissing you, Melissa,” he said, so close she could feel the whisper of his breath on her cheek. And, oh, how she loved that accent. When he spoke her name it gave her warm shivers.

A proper Southern belle would tease awhile, play hard to get. But she never had been one to play by the rules.

She smiled up at him and said, “So what’s stopping you?”

He caressed the side of her face with one large, warm hand while the other slipped through her hair to delicately cradle the back of her head, as though she were a precious object he worried he might damage.

He lowered his head, leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. So sweet and gentle she went weak in the knees. But she wanted *more*. Every instinct she possessed was screaming that this was right. She wanted all of him, right that second.

She slid her arms around his neck, pulled him closer, deepening the kiss. Being in Chris's arms, feeling his warm hands on her skin, his lips, soft yet firm, on her own, felt like returning home after a long, arduous journey. For the first time since she was a child she felt as though she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

A rush of relief so intense that she felt like weeping washed over her. She'd never felt so vulnerable in her life, and frankly, it scared her to death.

She flattened her palms against his chest and gently pushed, severing their connection. And he knew why instinctively.

"We're going too fast," he said.

She nodded. So much for her brave claims that she might take advantage of him. That she wasn't afraid of anything. Right now she was terrified.

"Maybe I should walk you back up to your room," he said.

"You probably should," she agreed. Another time, another night, maybe she wouldn't tell him no.

"Give me your hand," he said.

She held it out, and he laced his fingers through hers. He led her through the maze and had them out in a few short minutes. They walked together in silence through the castle to her bedroom door.

She opened it, and turned to look at him. "I feel as though I should apologize for the way I acted out there. I'm usually not so forward."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I should be the one apologizing. I didn't mean to rush things. It's just that when I see something good, I go after it."

So did she. Maybe the problem was that Chris was too good. Too perfect to be true.

But wouldn't it be nice if he was everything he seemed to be?

Despite the late night, Chris woke before dawn and for the life of him couldn't get back to sleep. Too much on his mind. Namely Melissa. Things were progressing more quickly than he'd imagined. Than he could have possibly hoped. And he was eager to take it to the next step.

He also had the crops to think about. He'd been doing Internet research last night when he saw Melissa outside. And now that he was awake, he might as well see what else he could find.

He booted up his computer, opened his browser and returned to the site he'd bookmarked—a study of botanical diseases in organic crops—immersing himself in the text.

A while later Aaron poked his head in. "You're up early," he said.

Chris looked at the clock. "It's half past seven."

"Which is early for someone who spent half the night traipsing through the gardens," Aaron said with a cocky grin.

Apparently Aaron hadn't been asleep either. Chris shot him a look. "I don't *traipse*."

"I take it things are moving right along with your princess."

"You might say that." He could see that his brother wanted details, but he wasn't going to get any. And he didn't push the issue.

"Oh, and by the way," Aaron said, "nice e-mail. You have a twisted sense of humor."

Chris didn't recall sending his brother anything lately, much less something that could be defined as twisted. "What e-mail?"

"The one you sent last night. I never knew you were such a poet."

Poet? "Seriously, Aaron, I haven't sent you an e-mail."

Aaron unclipped his cell phone from his belt. He punched a few buttons, then handed it to Chris. “This e-mail.”

The address was definitely his. The subject was *Funny*, and the body of the e-mail read:

Eeny Meeny Miny Mo
String Prince Aaron by the toe
Light the fuse and watch him blow
Eeny Meeny Miny Mo

That was rather twisted, and it wasn't from him.

“That's my e-mail address,” Chris said. “But I didn't send it.”

Aaron frowned, looking perplexed. “Seriously?”

“I would tell you if I did. I've never seen it before.”

“Do you think it could have been one of the girls?”

That wasn't Louisa's style, but he wouldn't put it past Anne. “Why don't you ask?”

The words were barely out of his mouth when Anne appeared at his bedroom door. She was still in her pajamas, her long hair pulled back in a pony tail and her face freshly scrubbed. In her hand she clutched a single sheet of paper. When she saw Aaron standing there, she speared daggers with her eyes.

“You're a jerk,” she spat.

Aaron looked genuinely stunned. “What the hell did I do?”

She stormed over to him and shoved the paper at his chest.

He read it, his expression grim, then passed it over to Chris.

It was another e-mail with the subject *Funny*, and a similar, twisted version of a child's nursery rhyme:

Anne be nimble
Anne be quick
Anne jump over
The candlestick
Anne jumped high
But lost her foot
She burst to flames
And now she's soot

“I didn't send this,” Aaron told Anne.

“Nice try,” she snapped back, snatching the paper from Chris and pointing to the header. “It's your e-mail address, genius.”

It had indeed come from Aaron's address.

Chris and Aaron exchanged a worried glance. It was disturbing to say the least. It was one thing to receive threatening e-mails, but from their own e-mail addresses?

“I didn't send that, and Chris didn't send this.” He showed her the e-mail on his phone.

As she read it, the anger slipped from her face. “What the heck is going on?”

“I'm not sure, but odds are pretty good I got one, too.” Chris opened his e-mail program. Sure enough, there was a message with the same subject, *Funny*, and it was sent from Louisa. But the contents were anything but humorous.

Star light, star bright
Crown Prince Christian will ignite
I wish I may, I wish I might
Watch him burst in flames tonight

“Somehow I doubt Louisa sent this,” he said, gesturing to his monitor. Aaron and Anne crowded behind his desk to read it.

Aaron raked a hand through his hair. “Is it just me, or is there a theme here?”

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Anne said.

Chris shook his head. “I don’t know. But we need to talk to Louisa and see if she got one, too.”

“Is she up yet?” Aaron asked.

“If not,” Anne said, already heading for the door, “we’ll wake her.”

Chapter Five

Louisa opened her bedroom door, sleepy-eyed and ruffled in pajamas better suited an adolescent than a grown woman, looking surprised to see all of her siblings standing there.

“Have you checked your e-mail this morning?” Anne asked her.

She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “I just woke up. Why?”

“You need to check it,” Chris said.

Louisa frowned. “Right now?”

“Yes,” Anne shot back. “Right now.”

“Fine, you don’t have to get snippy.” She opened the door so they could all pile into her room, which was still decorated in the pale pink and ruffles of her youth. Typical Louisa. Always a girly girl.

She walked over to her desk and booted up her computer. “Is there anything in particular I should be looking for?”

“An e-mail from one of us,” Aaron told her.

“Which one?”

“Probably Anne,” Chris said, figuring that everyone else had already been accounted for.

“You’re not sure?”

Anne’s patience seemed to be wearing thin. “Bloody hell, Louisa. Would you just look for the damned e-mail?”

“My, someone woke up cranky this morning,” Louisa mumbled as she opened the program and scrolled through her e-mails. “Here’s one from Anne.”

“What’s the subject?” Aaron asked.

“Funny.”

Aaron turned to Chris. “That’s it.”

Louisa looked up at them. “Should I read it?”

“Please,” Chris said. “Out loud, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Louisa shrugged and double clicked. “It says: I love you, a bushel and a peck. A bushel and a peck, and a noose around your neck.” She paused and frowned before continuing. “With a noose around your neck, you will drop into a heap. You’ll drop into a heap and forever you will sleep.” She looked over at her twin. “Real nice, Anne.”

“I didn’t send it,” Anne said, casting a worried look to Chris and Aaron. “Hanged or burned alive? These are our choices?”

Louisa looked back and forth between the three of them. “Does someone want to tell me what’s going on?”

Anne handed her the printout of the e-mail she’d received, and told her about their brothers’ similar rhymes.

Louisa shuddered and hugged herself. “That’s creepy.”

“Maybe it’s just a prank,” Anne offered.

“But they were sent from our own e-mail addresses,” Aaron reminded her. “Personal addresses that few people outside of the family even know. That would be an awfully elaborate prank.”

“Should we tell Father?” Louisa asked.

Chris shook his head. “No. At least, not yet. He doesn’t need the extra stress.”

“He looked tired at supper last night,” Anne said. “And he hardly ate a thing. He looks as though he’s losing weight.”

Chris had noticed that, too. All the more reason not to say anything. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost eight. “I think we should take this to the head of security. Aaron, can I trust you to talk to him? I have a breakfast date with our guest. I don’t want to give the impression anything is amiss.”

Meaning she couldn't spend too much time with the king or she might notice his failing health, and he couldn't take her near the east fields or she might notice the diseased crops, and he certainly couldn't mention the e-mails.

At this rate, they would run out of things to do and say before the first week was up.

"God forbid she believe things are anything but blissfully perfect," Anne said with a snicker. "Pretty ironic, don't you think, considering the mess that she came from?"

Aaron shot her a look, then turned to Chris. "I'll see that it's done immediately. And I'm sure the first thing he'll want is to see the e-mails themselves, so we should all forward them to him."

"I bet this will turn out to be nothing," Louisa assured them in her typical optimistic way. "Probably just some harmless computer hacker trying to impress his friends."

Deep down Chris hoped she was right, but in reality he sensed a disaster coming on.

Melissa stretched out on a lounge chair on the back patio, sipping her latte, the morning sun on her face. She closed her eyes and tipped her face up, breathing in the fresh ocean air, feeling as though she could nod off. She'd slept poorly last night. She had tossed and turned for hours, filled with longing and regret. And confusion. A part of her wished desperately that she'd invited Chris into her room, while another part of her was scared to death to get too close.

Hadn't she endured enough rejection in her life?

The trick was not *letting* him get close. After all, how could he hurt her if she didn't care? The problem with that was, it had only been a day and she already liked him far too much for her own good.

She'd never understood how it happened so easily for some people. Love just seemed to fall in their laps when they weren't even looking. But despite her desperate longing for a family, the right man constantly seemed to elude her. Around about her thirtieth birthday, she'd begun to worry that she might never find Mr. Right. And now, at thirty-three, she'd nearly given up on the concept of marriage and family and resigned herself to settling for Mr. Right Now.

Maybe the trick was not to look. To just sit back and let it happen naturally. Which was tough when, as every day passed, her biological clock ticked louder.

She heard the door open behind her and turned to see Chris step out onto the patio. He wore a pair of dark slacks and a white silk dress shirt with the sleeves rolled loosely to the elbows that contrasted his deeply tanned forearms.

"I thought I might find you out here," he said, flashing her one of those heart-stopping, deliciously sexy smiles. The man was far too attractive for his own good. Or hers. She could just imagine the gorgeous children he would have with the lucky woman who eventually nabbed him. Which was inevitable. For a crown prince, marriage and children weren't a luxury. They were a duty. Like her half brother, Phillip. But he'd been smart enough to marry a woman he loved.

Not that she considered herself unlovable. But the sad truth was, when Chris did choose a wife, she would be considerably younger, with plenty of fertile, child-bearing years ahead of her. A commodity Melissa no longer possessed.

But she wasn't going to let that fact ruin her vacation. Love was nice, but there was also a lot to be said for smoking-hot, no-strings-attached sex.

She returned his smile and said, "Good morning, Your Highness."

He lowered himself into a chair across from her, his back to the sun, folding one leg casually atop the other. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very," she lied. "And you?"

"Quite." He gazed up at the cloudless blue sky, shading his eyes from the sun with one hand. "Beautiful morning."

"Yes, it is," she agreed. "The news this morning said it should be pleasantly warm this afternoon. Around seventy-nine degrees. And no humidity."

"Some might consider that a little too hot."

“That’s because they haven’t lived in the deep South of the United States. Seventy-nine is downright balmy.”

He grinned, and for a moment he just looked at her, a spark of amusement in his eyes.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“When you talk about the U.S., your Southern accent thickens.”

“Does it?”

He nodded. “I like it.”

And she liked that he liked it. He certainly hadn’t wasted any time with the flirting this morning. A full day of this and tonight she wouldn’t even think of telling him no.

“Hungry?” he asked with a smoldering grin that said he had more than breakfast on his mind.

“Famished.”

“Breakfast should be ready.” He rose from his seat and held out a hand to help her from the chaise. She took it and his warm fingers curled around her own. He had strong, long-fingered, graceful-looking hands. The thought of what they would feel like on other parts of her body made her shiver.

She hoped she didn’t have to wait too long to find out.

Despite all the natural beauty that Thomas Isle had to offer, Chris had found that most women grew bored with the tour of the family’s vast acreage and greenhouse facilities within the first hour. In fact, with the situation in the east fields he might have welcomed it. He should have known Melissa would be different.

She spent the morning in rapt interest, taking in the sights and sounds and information, asking a million questions, soaking up the answers much the way a parched sponge absorbs moisture. Either she was genuinely interested, or she was one bloody good actress. The morning didn’t lack for sexual teasing and innuendo, either.

The pale-orange sundress she wore barely reached mid-thigh and left all but a few narrow strips of her back exposed. She obviously spent a lot of time either in the sun or the tanning bed. Her skin looked bronzed and smooth and was suspiciously lacking any bathing suit lines, and her legs were a work of art. Long and slim and shapely. About as close to perfection as he’d ever seen.

She wore her long hair down, draped in shiny waves over one shoulder. The effect was exotic and sexy, as was her accent. He liked to test himself, guessing which dialect would emerge next. In serious instances, when she was asking questions about their business or meeting their employees, she sounded more east-coast U.S. When she was excited, she sounded decidedly more Southern. Only when she was teasing, or slaying with that sharp wit, did the deep drawl come through.

If he had to choose, he would say he preferred the drawl the most. And the sassy smile that partnered with it.

At one, when he suggested they head back to the castle for lunch, she seemed genuinely disappointed to be ending the tour.

“But we didn’t see the east fields yet,” she said.

“They’re not going anywhere,” he promised. “Besides, aren’t you hungry?”

“Starved, actually.”

He walked her to the car, hand pressed gently to the small of her back. They had done an awful lot of touching all morning. A caress here, a soft touch there. The accidental brush of their shoulders, or her elbow against his arm. Or maybe it wasn’t accidental at all.

And frankly, he couldn’t wait to get her alone.

“Couldn’t we see the east fields, then have lunch?” she asked.

“I could call ahead and have the cook pack us a picnic lunch,” he suggested, knowing most women ate that romantic sort of thing up.

Her eyes lit and he knew he had her.

She smiled and said, “I suppose the east fields could wait.”

Using his cell phone, he rang the kitchen, arranging for a variety of fruit, crackers and cheese, caviar and a bottle of their best champagne to be prepared. After he hung up, he helped Melissa into the car.

When they were comfortably seated, she turned to him and said, “I get the feeling, Your Highness, that you’re trying to soften me up.”

She didn’t miss a thing. He liked that about her, and at the same time it could prove to be quite an inconvenience. Although there didn’t seem much point in denying it.

He grinned instead and asked, “Is it working?”

She returned the smile, but added a touch of sass. “*Ridiculously* well.”

Chris knew without a doubt that it would be a very interesting afternoon.

Chapter Six

Melissa couldn't help but wonder if something was up. While the tour of the fields he did show her was thorough, she had the distinct impression that the foremen she'd been introduced to were on edge about something. They seemed wary of her questions, especially when she brought up the subject of the downfalls of growing organic, things like pests and disease. And it hadn't escaped her attention that, although the east fields were the closest to the castle and had the largest of their greenhouse facilities, they were the only ones he'd chosen to skip.

That couldn't possibly be coincidence.

There was definitely something going on, something secret, and it could be any number of things. Possibly even something illegal.

Or maybe she was letting her imagination run wild. Just because the royal family of Morgan Isle was riddled with scandal, it didn't mean the Alexander family was as well. She would just be sure to keep her eyes open and her ears perked.

When they got back to the castle, a basket packed with everything Chris had requested was waiting for them, along with a thick, soft flannel throw to sit on.

"We could walk down to the bluff and eat by the water," he suggested.

That sounded like a wonderful idea to her, and she couldn't help but think that if he really was trying to soften her up, he was doing an excellent job. "I'd love to."

"Shall we?" he asked, offering his arm.

She took it and they walked to the bluff together, choosing a pleasant spot in the shade of a knotty old oak that looked as if it had stood on the property as long as the castle. It conveniently blocked the view from the castle windows. Which could be a good or a bad thing.

He spread out the blanket and they sat across from each other. Melissa kicked off her sandals and stretched out, breathing in the salty air, feeling the breeze ruffle her hair and hearing the rush of the ocean against the rocks below. They couldn't have asked for a more beautiful afternoon for a picnic.

Chris popped the champagne—which sold for several hundred dollars a bottle—and poured them each a glass while she investigated the contents of the basket.

She found a box of gourmet crackers, a can of caviar, a variety of cheeses already sliced and a plastic container with different kinds of fresh fruit. "Everything looks wonderful."

He handed her a glass of champagne and lifted his in a toast. "To new friends," he said. "And new beginnings."

Amen to that. She clinked her glass to his and sipped, the bubbles tickling her nose. She reached for the box of crackers and he gently pushed her hand away. "Why don't you let me?"

He opened the caviar, spread a dollop on a cracker, and handed it to her, then fixed one for himself. She took a bite and the caviar exploded like little bombs of salty flavor across her tongue. She closed her eyes and savored the decadent sensation. "Delicious."

"Try a strawberry. They were picked just this morning."

He held one out to her, already hulled and cut in half, and on impulse, rather than take it with her hand, she leaned forward and took it directly into her mouth, grazing the tip of his thumb with her tongue.

The fruit was plump and juicy and sweet. She moaned and closed her eyes as another explosion of flavor overwhelmed her taste buds.

Maybe it was the atmosphere, or the company, but it was probably the tastiest thing she had ever eaten. When she opened her eyes and looked at Chris, saw the way he was watching her from under lids heavy with desire, she knew that he enjoyed her enjoying it.

“Let’s do that again,” he said. This time he chose a chunk of pineapple, and as he fed it to her, she caught his finger in her mouth to lick off the juice.

“It’s so sweet,” she said. “You should try it.”

She fished a piece out of the bowl and held it out for him. His eyes locked on hers, he leaned forward and took it from her fingers, his tongue brushing the pad of her thumb, and she went limp all over. She watched him chew, mesmerized by his mouth and his jaw and the movement of his throat as he swallowed.

He licked his lips. “Hmm, delicious.”

She wanted to try that again. This time she held out a cherry. He took it with his teeth and when the juice dripped down her finger, and he took the entire thing into his mouth, sucking it clean.

Oh. My. God.

He grinned, a lazy, sexy smile, and said, “Tasty.”

His lips looked so full and inviting, tinted pink from the cherry juice, that she couldn’t resist leaning in for a taste. And though the kiss was meant to be a brief one, he hooked a hand behind her head, tangling his fingers through the silky locks of her hair, and pulled her closer.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning into the long, lean length of his body, and a low moan rumbled in his throat. He broke the kiss and gazed down at her, eyes glazed and half-closed. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?”

She knew exactly what she was doing. “You like it?”

He took her hand and placed it palm down on his chest, so she could feel the heavy *thump-thump* of his heart. “What do you think?”

She slipped her hand inside the collar of his shirt and touched his bare skin. “Then maybe we should do it some more.”

He reached for her, but she pushed him backward onto the blanket instead, moving the food containers aside so she could scoot closer.

He reached up with one hand to brush her hair back from her face and tuck it behind her ear. “I thought I was supposed to be seducing you.”

She leaned down, brushed her lips against his, whispered against them, “That’s not my style.”

His arms went around her and he pulled her down for a deep, searching kiss. He tasted sweet and salty and even more delicious than the food. She fed off his mouth, feeling as though she could eat him up. His hands were on her face and in her hair, stroking her shoulders and her back. She may have been the one seducing him, but he was definitely in on the action. When he rolled her over onto the blanket she didn’t try to stop him. She opened her eyes to find him propped up on one elbow, grinning down at her.

“I’m supposed to be seducing you,” she reminded him. “That’s harder to do from down here.”

“Sorry, love. That’s not my style, either.”

Well, someone was going to have to relinquish control. “I think this could be a problem.”

He shrugged. “So don’t think.”

She was poised for another snappy comeback, but before she could get the words out he was kissing her again, and she completely forget what she’d been about to say. In fact, she forgot everything but the feel of his mouth on hers, and his hands on her body. She wished they were in the castle, in her bedroom, where their clothes wouldn’t have to be in the way.

He kissed her chin, down her throat and she let her head fall back against the blanket. He kissed lower still, across her collarbone, over the swell of her cleavage, whispering sweet words, telling her she was beautiful.

They may have only been words, but he wielded them skillfully and they cut through her defenses like the lethally sharp blade of a gilded sword.

Through a haze of desire, she gradually became aware of a presence beside them. She felt something warm and damp and foul-smelling against her cheek.

Dog breath, she realized.

She opened her eyes to find a small, canine face not an inch from her own. One of those cute little yappy dogs that people like Paris Hilton carted around with them, with bulging eyes and long, ginger-colored hair tied up with a blue ribbon.

“Well, hello there,” she said, and he or she let out an excited yap, which had Chris looking up from Melissa’s cleavage.

He cursed under his breath and said, “Get lost, Muffin.”

Such an adorable name coming from a big tough prince like him made her laugh. “You named your dog Muffin?”

“It’s not my dog.” He sat up and shooed the furry invader away, which only made it jump around and yap excitedly. “He’s Louisa’s bag of fleas.”

“He’s so cute!” She sat up beside Chris and held out a hand for Muffin to sniff. He sniffed daintily, then lapped at her fingers with his tiny pink tongue. “Aren’t you just a sweetheart?”

From a distance, behind the tree somewhere Melissa heard Louisa call out, “Muffin! Here, boy!”

Muffin’s ears perked and he let out a short yap, as if to say “*Here I am!*”

“Shoo,” Chris said. “Go get her.”

Muffin didn’t budge.

“Over here!” Melissa called to Louisa, and Chris cursed again, but at this point an interruption seemed inevitable. She just hoped her hair wasn’t too much of a mess, or her makeup smeared. Though she was sure Chris has kissed away whatever had been left of her lip gloss.

Louisa rounded the tree, looking young and fresh in white capri pants and a pink blouse. Her hair looked soft and cute pulled back in a low bun. She was graceful and petite, almost to the point of looking fragile.

When she saw the three of them there—Chris, Melissa and Muffin—she smiled. Then she pointed a finger at her dog and said sternly, “Bad boy, Muffin. You know you’re not supposed to run off like that.”

“He’s so cute,” Melissa told her.

“I hope he’s not bothering you.”

Melissa said “no,” and Chris said “yes” simultaneously. Melissa gave his shoulder a light shove and told Louisa, “He’s not bothering us at all. Is he a shih tzu?”

“Purebred.” Louisa said proudly, scooping him up and tucking him into the crook of her arm. “He probably smelled the food. He’s a little eating machine. I swear, he’s part pig.”

“Would you like to join us?” Melissa asked, in part to be polite, but also because they had hardly eaten a thing and she hated to see all of that food go to waste.

Louisa opened her mouth to answer but Chris interrupted her. “Actually, we were just getting ready to pack up. Melissa was just saying how tired she is from her trip yesterday, and that she’d like to take a nap. I was going to walk her back to her room.”

Oh, yes, that fifteen-minute plane ride from Morgan Isle was absolutely *exhausting*. Although she was pretty sure that *napping* was the last thing he had on his mind.

“The nap can wait,” she said.

“No,” Chris insisted, spearing her with a sharp look. “I don’t think it can. We wouldn’t want you to get too tired.”

“That’s okay,” Louisa said. “Muffin and I are going to take a walk.” She smiled brightly and told Melissa, “Have a good rest.”

Either she hadn't recognized the innuendo in the nap scenario, or she was just polite enough not to let on. Either way, she waved good-bye and walked off with Muffin trailing obediently while Melissa and Chris gathered the leftover food and packed it back into the basket.

"A nap, huh?" she said.

He grinned. "Yeah. You look *exhausted*."

"She's very sweet, isn't she?" Melissa asked. "Louisa, I mean."

"Yes." His brow tucked into a frown. "Far too sweet for her own good."

"I get the impression she's a bit...naive."

"More than a bit." He closed the basket, then rose to his feet and shook out the blanket. "I fear someday someone will take advantage of that. And I think we've only perpetuated the problem by sheltering her."

"She may be tougher than you think."

"I hope so." He folded the blanket, grabbed the basket, then held out an arm for her to take, flashing one of those sizzling smiles. "Shall I walk you back for that nap?"

She wrapped her arm tightly through his and pressed herself against his side, smiling up at him. "The sooner the better."

She doubted it would be restful, but it would probably be the most pleasurable *nap* she'd ever taken.

Chris dropped the basket in the kitchen on the way in and led Melissa upstairs to her room. The halls were blissfully silent, and thankfully they didn't run into anyone on the way up. Not that it would have stopped Chris from going into her room. He'd have fabricated some reason they needed to be alone.

If Louisa hadn't interrupted them, he might have made love to Melissa right there on the blanket under the tree, the consequences be damned. Everything about her was so sweet and soft and sexy. He might not have been able to stop himself. He was pretty sure she wouldn't have put up much resistance, it was obvious she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

They were mere steps from her door, and Chris was already plotting just how he would get her out of her clothes, when a bodyguard named Flynn caught up with them.

"Sorry to interrupt, sire," he said, bowing his head to both Chris and Melissa. "Prince Aaron is looking for you."

Yeah, well, Prince Aaron was going to have to wait. "Tell him that I'll speak with him later."

"He said it's urgent," Flynn insisted. "Regarding the matter this morning, with the e-mail."

"Right!" Chris said, before the man said too much and piqued Melissa's curiosity. Aaron had obviously discovered something important. "Where is he?"

"The tech office, your highness."

"Fine, tell him I'll be right down." When he was gone, Chris turned to Melissa. "I'm sorry. I need to take care of this."

"Trouble getting your e-mail?" she teased.

If only it were that simple. "A security issue," he said, not wanting to give any more than that away.

"It's all right. I actually am a little tired. Maybe I'll lie down for a while." She grinned. "Reserve my strength for later."

"I'll try to make it quick."

She rose up on her toes and pressed a lingering kiss to the corner of his lips, and it took everything in him not to say *to hell with it* and back her into her room. But he didn't want to feel rushed. When he made love to Melissa, he was going to take his time. With this security thing hanging over his head, he would be distracted.

"You know where to find me," she said, then she slipped into her room and closed the door.

Bloody hell. He lingered another second, tempted to follow her in, then he forced himself to turn and head down to the tech office, hoping Aaron had answers and they could wrap this up quickly. But the instant he stepped inside and saw the look of concern on Aaron's face, he knew this was going to take a while.

Chapter Seven

Chris stepped into the tech office and closed the door. "I'm guessing the news isn't good."

"Good guess," Aaron said.

The systems administrator, Dennis Attenborough—though everyone called him by his hacker name, Datt—gazed grimly at his computer screen. "This guy knows what he's doing."

"Guy?" Chris asked.

Datt shrugged. "Guy, girl, whatever."

"So we don't know who it is?"

"No, but statistically, most hackers are men."

"Whoever it is," Aaron said, "they managed to hack into the e-mail system undetected."

That wasn't good. "Were any other systems breached?"

Datt shook his head. "Nothing critical."

"Can you trace the ISP?"

"As I said, he knows what he's doing. He was in and out like a ghost. Completely untraceable."

"Could it be someone on the inside?"

"It's possible, but I doubt it."

"Could it happen again?"

"With any luck, yes."

At Chris's surprised look, Aaron told him, "Datt is setting a trap."

"How do you trap someone who sneaks in and out undetected?"

"You put out a net," Datt said.

"A net?"

"Think of it like a spiderweb," Datt told him. "If he gets back in, he'll get stuck. Although odds are he won't try it again."

"Why is that?"

"He's smart. He'll anticipate our next move."

"Meaning he'll just give up?"

"Or try to find another way in, through a different system."

Bloody fantastic. "Will he get in?"

Datt looked up at him. "No, sire, he won't."

"See that he doesn't. And if you learn anything, I want to be informed immediately."

"Of course."

With a jerk of his head, Chris gestured his brother into the hallway. When they were alone, he said in a low voice, "We need to keep this to ourselves."

"The staff has been advised that the king should be left out of the loop. Although if he does find out, he'll be furious."

"Then we'll make sure that he doesn't. With any luck we've heard the last of this."

Somehow, Chris doubted they would get away that easy.

Melissa checked her e-mail, then fired off a quick message to Phillip, giving him a rundown on her day so far. Almost immediately a reply appeared in her inbox. It said simply:

Keep me posted.

Nice to hear from you, too, she thought. Though she wasn't the least bit surprised.

There was another e-mail, one from Chris that she had received early that morning. That was sweet, she thought. It read:

Meet me in the maze.

Midnight.

She smiled, and wondered exactly what he had in mind. If he would let her find her own way through this time, or send her on another wild-goose chase. Or it was possible he had other plans for her that didn't involve the maze at all?

She replied, I'll be there.

She hit Send, then shut down her computer.

She stretched out on the bed and closed her eyes. She would rest for just a few minutes, then maybe take a walk in the garden until Chris had finished with his business. When she opened her eyes again, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, smiling down at her.

She sat up, hazy and disoriented. The curtains were drawn and the room dark. She couldn't tell if it was morning or night. "What time is it?"

"Seven," he said. "It's time for dinner."

"How long have you been sitting here?" She hoped she hadn't done anything embarrassing, like snore or drool on the pillow.

"Only a few minutes."

She covered a yawn with the back of her hand. "I didn't mean to sleep so long. Did you just finish your meeting?"

"Hours ago. I came by to see you, but you were sound asleep."

"You could have woken me."

He shrugged. "I figured you could use the rest."

"For our date tonight?"

"Date?"

"I answered your e-mail," she said. "I guess you didn't get it yet."

There was a flicker of emotion in his eyes, something that looked almost like apprehension, then it was gone. "You got an e-mail from me?"

He didn't remember? "Well, I assumed it was from you. Your name was on it."

"Refresh my memory. What did it say?"

"Meet me at the maze. Midnight."

He nodded slowly. "Oh, yes, right."

How could he not remember? It was only this morning. "Is something wrong?"

"This is going to sound a little strange, but would you show me?"

"The e-mail?"

He nodded.

Something was definitely not right here. "Of course."

She walked over to the desk where her laptop sat. She opened it and booted it up. Chris averted his eyes while she typed in her password, then she opened her e-mail program and scrolled down to find the message from him. "Here it is."

He leaned over her shoulder to read it, brow furrowed with concern.

"Isn't that your e-mail address?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, sounding somewhat grim. "It is."

There was only one explanation for his behavior. "You didn't send that, did you?"

He hesitated, then said, "It's complicated."

That was a non-answer if she'd ever heard one. "Does it have to do with your e-mail security issues?"

"It's just a prank. I can't say more than that. Rest assured, there's no reason to be concerned."

If that was true, why did *he* look so concerned?

"Seems weird that whoever sent it would choose the maze as a meeting place," she said. "It's almost as though they saw us out there last night."

She could tell by his disturbed expression that he was thinking the same thing.

"You think it's someone on the inside?" she asked.

“I really can’t say.”

She wondered if that meant he couldn’t tell her, or he didn’t know.

“Would you mind if I forwarded this to our systems administrator?” he asked.

She stepped away from the computer and gestured him over. “Knock yourself out.”

He hit Forward, typed in the e-mail address, then sent it off. He turned to look at her. “I’m not sure how to word this, so I’m just going to say it. I would appreciate your discretion on this.”

“As in, don’t go running to my family with this?”

“Yes, that, too...” He raked a hand through his hair, cursing under his breath.

“What?”

“Please don’t say anything to my parents. Specifically, the king.”

“He doesn’t know?”

He shook his head. “As I said, it’s complicated.”

“Is it his health?”

Her question seemed to surprise him, and she could see she’d hit a nerve. “What do you mean?”

“I’m a fairly intelligent woman, Chris. I’d have to be daft or blind not to notice the way everyone pampers him. The logical explanation would be that he’s in poor health.”

He didn’t seem to know how to answer that.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” she said. “I have a tendency to let my mouth run away from me.”

He seemed to choose his next words very carefully. “It’s just that it’s a...*sensitive* issue.”

Heaven knew, her family had its share of sensitive issues, too. “I haven’t said anything to my family, and I won’t. Your secret is safe with me.”

“I appreciate that.”

“If you ever need someone to talk to, to vent to—”

“It’s congestive heart failure,” Chris said, and his honesty surprised her. It seemed to surprise him, too. Maybe he did just need someone to talk to.

“And the prognosis?” she asked.

“Not good. At the present rate he’s deteriorating, six months. Maybe a year.”

Oh, how terrible. No wonder they wanted to keep it a secret. “What about a transplant?”

“He has a very rare blood type. The chances of finding a match are astronomical.”

She could see that he loved his father very much, and the idea of losing him hurt Chris deeply.

She rested her hand on his forearm, gave it a gentle squeeze. “I’m so sorry.”

“There is one treatment that he’s considering. It’s still experimental. He would be hooked to a portable bypass machine. The machine would take over all function, giving his heart a chance to heal.”

She’d never heard of such a procedure. “That sounds promising.”

“But it carries risks.”

“What kind of risks?”

“The surgery itself is risky because his heart is so weak, and after the pump is in he would be prone to blood clots and strokes.”

“How long would he be on the pump?”

He shrugged. “Six months. A year. The doctors don’t know. They can’t even say if the treatment will be effective. It depends on the patient, and the degree of damage.”

“Your poor mother,” Melissa said. “This must be awful for her.”

“It’s not something we talk about outside the family,” he said. “I shouldn’t have even said anything to you.”

But the fact that he had made her feel even closer to him. “I won’t say a word to anyone. I promise.”

He laid his hand over hers. “Thank you, Melissa. For listening.”

On impulse, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. His were soft and warm. His hand slipped behind her neck, drawing her in closer. His tongue teased the seam of her lips and they parted. The kiss was deep and searching and loaded with emotion.

Deep down she was a hopeless romantic, which had earned her a good share of bumps and bruises in her life. Mostly to her heart, but more than a few to her pride as well. She had learned to be tough. But Chris seemed to be pushing all the right buttons, knocking down all of her carefully constructed defenses. Whether he meant to or not.

She wanted him. The way she had never wanted anyone in her life.

“This is going to sound a little crazy,” she said. “But despite the fact that it’s barely been a day, I feel as though I know you, Chris.”

“Strange, isn’t it?” His eyes searched her face. She couldn’t help but wonder what he was looking for. If he saw something the others hadn’t. Something special.

She reached up and touched his cheek, felt the hint of evening stubble under her fingertips. “What do you think it means?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But I’d like to find out.”

Chris sat beside Melissa during dinner, listening to her chat with his family. If they knew what he’d done, they would be furious with him. He and his siblings had made a pact, a promise to their parents and each other to keep the king’s condition a closely guarded secret. Great pains had been taken with his doctors to keep his medical records restricted.

He wasn’t one to confide in family or friends, but finally admitting the truth to someone outside the family seemed to take a bit of the pressure off. And as promised, she didn’t say a thing about the king’s health or the e-mail situation, nor did she give even a hint that she knew anything was amiss. He could only hope that she would keep it from her family as well, as it could jeopardize a potential alliance.

If she felt wary of the consequences, she hadn’t let it show. Perhaps she wasn’t familiar enough with the way the monarchy worked to recognize the potential complications the king’s death could generate. Or maybe she just didn’t care. It was possible that she believed the potential benefits would outweigh the disadvantages. And after all, when his father died, or was no longer physically capable of performing his duties, Chris would be crowned king, and if they were married, Melissa would be queen. That had to hold a certain appeal.

Whatever her motivation, she seemed willing to give this partnership consideration. He just needed a bit more time to make sure this was right before he made his move and formally asked for her hand. He needed to be sure that they were sexually compatible. If he was going to be forced to marry, then damn it, he was going to marry someone who could please him in the bedroom.

After dinner, the king retired to his quarters and Melissa and the queen went for a walk in the garden. Chris gestured his siblings into the study for an impromptu meeting regarding the latest developments with the e-mails. They fixed themselves drinks at the bar then took seats by the ceiling-high windows across the room. The last threads of evening sun shone in warm, golden-orange shafts across the oriental rug.

“Aaron showed you Datt’s report?” he asked his sisters, and they both nodded. “Well, something else has happened, something involving our guest.”

They listened grimly as he told them about the e-mail Melissa had received, and how the sender mentioned the maze.

Aaron and Anne wore identical frowns. Louisa looked downright scared. “Was someone watching you?” she asked.

“It could just be coincidence they chose the maze,” Chris told her, but she didn’t look reassured, and he didn’t blame her. “I’d like to have security stake it out tonight, just in case. I forwarded the e-mail to Datt.”

“She didn’t find that at all suspicious?” Anne asked.

“She figured out that I hadn’t sent it. And of course she was curious as to what was going on.”

“What did you tell her?” Aaron asked.

“That it was a prank, and there was no reason to be concerned.”

But it was clear that his siblings believed there was a damned good reason, and Chris agreed. He planned to talk to Randall Jenkins, the head of security, just as soon as he was finished here. He planned to have them keep a close eye on Melissa, just in case. They certainly couldn’t risk something happening to her while she was in their care.

“Did she believe you?” Anne asked.

“She seemed to. I asked her not to mention it around our parents, or to her family. She promised not to.

” “Can we trust her?”

Chris shrugged. “We don’t really have a choice.” Louisa drew her knees up and hugged them. “I don’t like this. Maybe we should tell Father.”

“No,” Chris said. “Not until we absolutely have to.

” With any luck, Datt would get to the bottom of this and they could solve the problem without the king ever being the wiser.

Chapter Eight

Melissa walked arm in arm with the queen along the slate path through the gardens. She had been concerned, after the horror stories she'd been told about the queen of Morgan Isle, that Queen Maria might have the same cold and dreadful disposition. Instead she was warm and friendly and surprisingly down-to-earth. She was smaller than Melissa by several inches and very petite. Her hair was always perfectly in place, her makeup flawless and her clothes immaculate. If Melissa had to chose one word to describe her, it would probably be *classy*.

They slowly strolled along, chatting about their two countries, and what it had been like for Melissa growing up in the U.S. Did she miss it, or was she happy to be home on Morgan Isle? Melissa didn't see any point in sugarcoating the truth.

"It's been an adjustment," she admitted. "My family means well, but the last few months, I feel as though I've been in a sort of limbo."

"You feel out of place?"

She nodded. "I supposed I can't blame them for feeling wary of me."

"Well, we've very much enjoyed having you here as our guest," the queen told her, sounding as though she genuinely meant it. What reason did she have to lie?

"I really like being here," Melissa said.

"You feel welcome?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes, very."

"It seems that you and Chris are getting along rather well."

That was something of an understatement.

"He's an excellent host," she said. *And an aboveaverage kisser.*

"You know, I've never seen Chris look at a woman the way he looks at you." She smiled, an undeniable hint of mischief in her eyes. "There's something there, I think."

Her words warmed Melissa from the inside out and she felt her cheeks flush. It was good to know that she approved.

She flashed Melissa a conspiratorial smile. "I can see that you think so, too."

"He's an intriguing man."

"He's a lot like his father," she said. "The strong, silent type. And he does have something of a stubborn streak. All the Alexander men do."

"I think all *men* do," Melissa said.

"Chris is very loyal. His family means everything to him. He'll be a good husband and father some day. And a strong leader."

"I don't doubt that he would be." If the queen thought she had to sell Chris to Melissa, she couldn't be farther off the mark. She could already feel herself falling hard and fast.

The queen smiled and patted Melissa's hand. "I'm so glad you feel that way."

"How long have you and the king been married?"

"It will be thirty-seven years this Christmas," she said, but the smile she wore didn't quite reach her eyes. She was probably thinking of how little time they might have left with each other.

Melissa wished she could talk to her about the king's condition, tell her how terribly sorry she was, but she'd promised not to say anything. She just hoped that if he chose to try the heart pump, it would be effective.

"Life is fleeting," the queen told her, "you have to seize the moment. Live life to the fullest." *Amen to that.* "That's always been my motto."

"And it's served you well?"

"So far."

"Oh, speak of the devil."

Melissa looked up and saw Chris walking down the path toward them. The pride in his mother's eyes was genuine and intense. It was clear that she truly adored all of her children.

"The king is requesting your presence," he told his mother, and though her smile didn't waver, there was worry in her eyes.

"I'll go right in." She took both of Melissa's hands and gave them a squeeze. "I'm so glad we could talk. Let's do this again."

Melissa smiled and nodded. "I'd like that."

She watched the queen hurry off, asking Chris, "Is anything wrong?"

"No more so than usual." He offered his hand and asked, "Can I walk you back to the castle, Your Highness?"

She smiled and took it, threading her fingers through his. His hand felt so big and warm and sturdy.

"What did you and my mother talk about?"

"Lots of things. You, mostly."

"I'm almost afraid to ask what she said."

"She told me how loyal you are, and what an exceptional leader you'll be. And that you'll be a good husband and father."

He winced. "Not very subtle, is she? I'm sorry if she embarrassed you, or put you on the spot."

"Actually, I thought it was kind of sweet."

"I almost forgot to mention, tomorrow I've arranged a tour of the village."

"And maybe afterward we can see the east fields?"

"I doubt there will be time. Another day." He looked up at the darkening sky and said, "We should get inside."

"Wouldn't you like to walk for a while? Maybe let me take another shot at the maze?"

"It's nearly dark."

"I think we already determined I'm not afraid of the dark."

"Maybe tomorrow," he said.

She wondered what the rush was. And maybe it was her imagination, but there seemed to be an unusually large number of security officers patrolling the grounds. She wondered if it might have something to do with the rogue e-mail. Maybe there was more to it than he'd led her to believe. An element of danger. Or maybe it was just a precaution.

She didn't question him as he led her inside the castle. It was barely nine-thirty and already it was quiet and dark.

"Are you ready to retire for the night?" he asked.

"Are you forgetting I took an afternoon nap? I'm wide awake."

"What would you like to do?"

"Something fun."

He flashed her a sizzling, suggestive grin. "What did you have in mind?"

"Do you play cards?"

She could see from his disappointed expression that he had something altogether different in mind. But he asked, "What sort of cards?"

"I was thinking along the lines of poker. I used to be quite the card shark back in college."

"Were you really?" he said, looking intrigued. "I'm sure I could scrounge up cards and chips around here somewhere."

"Great. Although..."

"What?"

"Instead of chips, why don't we wager something a bit more...*interesting*?"

One brow rose a fraction higher than the other. It made him look young and mischievous. "Such as...?"

“I don’t know. How about...our clothes?”

A wicked grin curled the corners of his lips. “Strip poker?”

“Have you ever played?”

“I can’t say I have, but that does sound interesting.”

“I have to warn you, I’m pretty good. But I’ll go easy on you,” she said, even though she had no intention of doing any such thing.

“I appreciate that.”

“So, that’s a yes?” she asked, not that she thought he would say no. Since they both knew exactly where it would lead.

He took her hand in his and asked, “Your room or mine?”

Chris found them a deck of cards, and they decided on his room to play. Unlike the full suites at the palace on Morgan Isle, Chris’s room consisted of only a bedroom and full bath, but both were spacious and modern, decorated in a masculine theme of blues and grays, with a splash of red here and there, and dark cherrywood furnishings. The room was dim, lit only by a lamp beside the bed, and smelled of his aftershave. She couldn’t help but think how well it suited his personality.

He shut the door and locked it, which sent a little shiver of excitement up her spine. He gestured to the king-size—or in his case, would that be prince-size?—bed. “Shall we sit?”

They sat across from each other, she by the headboard and he by the foot. His inexperience with the game showed. He kicked off his shoes before he sat. Knowing better, she left hers on, not that she thought he had a snowball’s chance in hell of beating her. Hardly a night passed when she didn’t play poker on her computer. It helped her relax after a long, stressful day.

It would be a nice change to play with a real person. She’d tried to get games going with her half siblings, but they were always too busy with their children or their spouses.

“How about five-card draw?” she asked. “Nothing wild.”

“Sounds simple enough. Although you may need to give me a few hands to brush up on the rules.”

Oh, this was going to be too easy.

She smiled sweetly and said, “Why, of course I will.” She took the cards out of the pack, fished out the jokers, and shuffled. “Oh, one more thing. Rules are, we don’t stop until someone loses.”

“In other words, someone has to be naked.”

She nodded.

He shrugged and said, “Okay.”

Oh, yeah, *way* too easy.

They played a few practice hands so he could get the hang of it, and of course he lost miserably. “We could practice awhile longer,” she offered, but he shook his head.

“I think I’ve got the gist of it,” he said.

She didn’t want this to go too quickly, so she suggested, “Best two out of three hands takes off one article of clothing. Fair?”

“Fine with me,” he said. He obviously had no idea what he was getting himself into. Or maybe he just didn’t care if he lost. Her philosophy was that if you were going to play, play to win. And she would.

She dealt the first hand, and though Chris still seemed a bit fuzzy on the rules, his defeat wasn’t quite as bad this time. Three sixes to her straight. Unfortunately he lost the next hand, too. A pair of queens to her aces and tens.

“Let’s have it,” she said. “One item of clothing.”

He sighed and peeled off one sock. He had nice-looking feet. Almost...elegant.

They started the second round. She took the first hand with a flush, but he came back strong with three kings to her measly pair of jacks. Despite that, she rounded out the match with a full house, which beat his two pair.

She gestured to his other foot. “Take it off.”

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