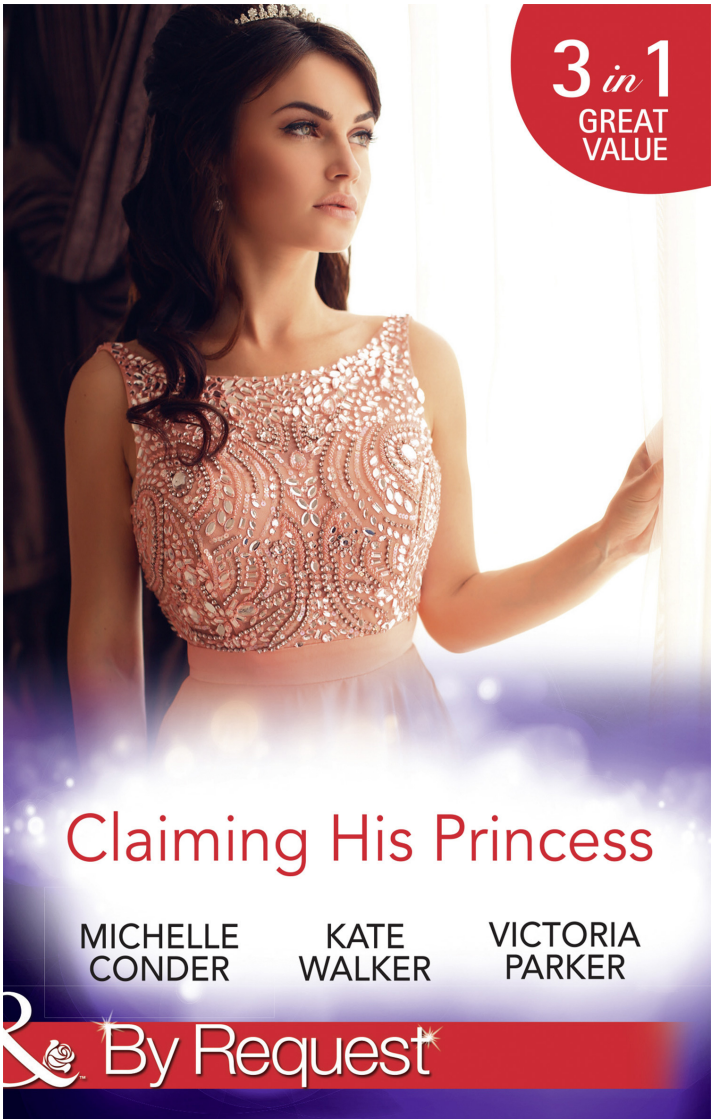

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GREAT VALUE
Claiming His Princess
MICHELLE CONDER
KATE WALKER
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Kate Walker
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Michelle Conder

Claiming His Princess: Duty at What Cost? / A Throne for the Taking / Princess in the Iron Mask

Аннотация

Duty at What Cost?To protect Princess Ava de Veers, James Wolfe must keep his mind on the job. Having shared one passionate night, Wolfe knows exactly how wilful, independent – and sexy – she is. But he will separate his feelings for Ava from the task at hand.Wolfe is the most daring man Ava has ever met and he drives her crazy! Yet as the threat to her life escalates, he's the only man she can trust and the only place she feels safe is in his arms. But, as royalty, Ava knows that duty always comes at a cost…A Throne for the TakingA kingdom's safetyBetrayed by those she loves, Honoria Escalona must now face the only man capable of bringing stability to the Mediterranean kingdom of Mecjoria. A cold, hard man who once called her his friend…Alexia Sarova – the true King of Mecjoria.In exchange for her happinessBut Alexei's tortuous past has changed him into someone she hardly knows. He blames Ria's family for his

bitterness and his help, when he offers it, comesPrincess in the Iron MaskA Princess in hidingDispatched by the King to retrieve his headstrong errant daughter, Lucas Garcia thought this was just another day at the office. That's before he meets Princess Claudine Verbault, who's adamant that returning to the kingdom that banished her as a child is never going to happen.A barely concealed attraction!Hidden from the spotlight, the now independent Claudine has learnt the art of being the anti-perfect princess. But Lucas does not look like the kind of man to accept insubordination! If only she could bargain with this frustratingly immovable man…and give him something to distract him from his duty!

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Duty at What Cost?

From as far back as she can remember **MICHELLE CONDER** dreamed of being a writer. She penned the first chapter of a romance novel just out of high school, but it took much study, many (varied) jobs, one ultra-understanding husband and three very patient children before she finally sat down to turn that dream into a reality.

Michelle lives in Australia and, when she isn't busy plotting, loves to read, ride horses, travel and practise yoga.

To Paul, with love.

And "a big kiss" to Anne-Emmanuelle for her wonderful friendship and even more wonderful French translations. Thank you.

CHAPTER ONE

AVA GLANCED OUT of the car window at the sparkling summer sunshine bouncing off the exquisite French countryside and wished herself a thousand miles away. Maybe a million. That would land her on another planet where no one knew her name. Where no one knew the man her father had expected her to marry was about to marry another woman, and felt sorry for her in the process.

'It's time you stopped messing around in Paris, my girl, and came home to Anders.'

That particularly supportive comment had come only this morning, making her blood boil. His condescending words filled her head, drowning out the singer on the car radio who was warbling about wanting to go home. Home was the last place Ava wanted to go.

Not that her father's anger was entirely unexpected. Of course he was disappointed that the man she had been pledged to marry since she was a child had fallen in love with someone else. the way he'd spoken to her—'A *woman your age doesn't have time to waste!'—as* if turning thirty in a year meant that she was over the hill—made it seem as if it was her fault.

But Ava *wanted* to fall in love! She *wanted* to get married! She just hadn't wanted to marry Gilles—a childhood friend who was more like a brother to her than her own—and he hadn't wanted

to marry her. The problem was they had played along with their fathers' archaic pledge for a little too long, sometimes using each other for a fill-in date when the need arose.

Oh, how her father would love to hear *that*… Somehow, after her mother's death fifteen years ago, her relationship with him had disintegrated to the point where they barely spoke, let alone saw each other. Of course if she had been born a boy things would have been different.

Very different.

She would have had different choices. She would have been Crown Prince, for one—and, while she had no wish at all to rule their small European nation, she would at least have had her father's respect. His affection. Something.

Ava gripped the steering wheel of her hatchback more tightly as she turned onto the narrow country lane that ran alongside Château Verne, Gilles's fifteenth-century estate.

For eight years she had lived a happy, relatively low-key existence in Paris; finishing university and building her business, stepping in at royal functions when her brother Frédéric had been absent. Now that Gilles, Marquis de Bassonne, was set to marry a friend of hers, she had a bad feeling that was all about to change.

Ava crinkled her nose at her uncharacteristically gloomy mood. Gilles and Anne had fallen in love at first sight two months ago and were happier than she'd ever seen either one of them before. They completed each other in a way that would inspire songwriters and she wasn't jealous.

Not at all.

Her life was rolling along just fine. Her art gallery, Gallery Nouveau, had just been reviewed in a prestigious art magazine and she was busier than ever. It was true that her love-life was a little on the nonexistent side, but her break-up three years ago with Colyn—the man she had believed she would eventually marry—had left her emotionally drained and a little wary.

At nearly twenty years her senior he had seemed to her to be the epitome of bourgeois intellectualism: a man who didn't care about her heritage and loved her for herself. It had taken a couple of years to figure out that his subtle criticisms of her status and his desire to *'teach'* her all that he knew made him as egotistical and controlling as her father.

And she really wished he hadn't popped into her mind, because now she felt truly terrible.

The only other times she'd felt this miserable had been during gorgeous evenings wandering by herself along the Seine, when she was unable to avoid watching couples so helplessly in love with each other they couldn't walk two paces without stopping to steal another kiss.

She had never felt that. Not once.

She frowned, wondering if she ever would.

After Colyn she had been determined only to date nice men with solid family values. Men who were in touch with their feelings. But they hadn't inspired much more than friendship in her. Thankfully her business kept her too busy to dwell on what

she lacked, and if she was getting older…

Pah!

Stamping on even more mood-altering thoughts, she adjusted the volume dial on the radio and wasn't at all prepared when she put her foot on the brake to slow down for a bend in the road and nothing happened. Imagining that she had put her foot on the accelerator instead, she'd moved to correct the oversight when the car hit a patch of gravel and started to slide.

Panicking, she yanked on the steering wheel to keep the car straight, but the car had gathered momentum and in the blink of an eye it fishtailed and rammed into some sort of small tree.

Groaning, Ava clasped her head where it had bounced off the steering wheel.

For a moment she just sat there. Then she realised the engine was roaring, took her foot from the accelerator and switched the car off. Her ears rang loudly in the sudden silence and then she caught the sound of one of her tyres spinning in midair. Glancing out through the windscreen, she realised her car was wedged on top of a clump of rocks and heather plants in full bloom.

Talk about a lapse in concentration!

She blew out a breath and gingerly moved her limbs one at a time. Thankfully the car had been going too slowly for her to have been seriously hurt. A good thing—except she could picture her father shaking his head at her. He was always telling her to use a driver on official engagements, but of course she didn't listen. Arguing with him had become something of a blood sport. A

blood sport he was so much better at than her. It was one of the main reasons she'd snuck off to study Fine Arts at the Sorbonne. If she had stayed in Anders it would have been impossible to keep the promise she had made to her dying mother to try and get along with her father.

His earlier edict replayed again in her head. She couldn't return to Anders. What would she do there? Sit around and play parlour games all day while she waited for him to line up another convenient husband? The thought made her shiver.

Determined to stop thinking about her father, Ava carefully opened the car door and stepped out into the long grass. The spiky heels of her ankle boots immediately sank into the soft earth.

Great. As a gallery owner it was imperative that she always look impeccable and there was no way she could afford to ruin her prized Prada boots. Since she'd decided a long time ago not to take any of her father's money she didn't have any spare cash lying around to replace them. Another decision that had displeased him.

She stood precariously on the balls of her feet and leaned in to retrieve her handbag. Her phone had fallen out and when she picked it up she saw the screen was smashed. Unable to remember Gilles's mobile number, she tossed it back in the car in frustration. She could always call emergency services, but then her little accident would be all over the news in a heartbeat—and the thought of any more attention this week for 'the poor jilted

Princess' made her teeth gnash together. Which didn't help her sore head.

No. She'd simply have to walk.

But standing on the grassy verge with her hands on her hips, she realised just how far it was to the main gates. Her beloved boots would be destroyed. Not to mention how hot and sweaty she would be by the time she got there. This was not the graceful and dignified entrance she had planned to make. And if one of those media vans she had seen loitering a few miles back saw her…

Wondering just what to do next, she had a sudden brainwave. A sudden and slightly crazy brainwave. Fortuitously—if she could describe running her little car into a ditch in such terms—she'd crashed right near a section of the outer wall that she had played on with her brother Frédéric and her cousin Baden and Gilles during family visits to the château in her childhood. Scaling the wall as revolutionary spies had been their secret game, and they'd even scraped out footholds to aid their escape from imaginary enemies.

Ava felt a grin creep across her face for the first time that day. She had to concede it was a tad desperate, but with Gilles's wedding only hours away that was exactly what she was. And, anyway, she had always loved to climb as a kid; surely it would be even easier as an adult?

'There's a woman stuck on the south wall, boss. What do you want us to do with her?'

Wolfe pulled up in the middle of an arched hallway in Château Verne and pressed his phone a little tighter to his ear. '*On* the wall?'

'The very top,' repeated Eric, one of the more junior members of Wolfe's security team.

Wolfe tensed. Perfect. Most likely another interfering journalist, trying to get the scoop on his friend's extravagant wedding to the daughter of a controversial American politician. They hadn't let up all day, circling the château like starving buzzards. But none had been brazen enough to go over the wall yet. Of course he'd been prepared for the possibility—the reason they now had this little intruder in hand.

'Name?'

'Says she's Ava de Veers, Princess of Anders.'

A princess climbing over a forty-foot brick wall? Wolfe didn't think so. 'ID?'

'No ID in her handbag. Says she had a car accident and it must have fallen out.'

Clever.

'Camera?'

'Check.'

Wolfe considered his options. Even from inside the thick walls of the château he could hear the irritating whine of distant media choppers as they hovered just outside the established no-fly zone. With the wedding still three hours away he'd better extend the security perimeters before there were any more breaches.

'Want me to take her back to base, boss?'

'No.' Wolfe shot his hand through his hair. He'd rather turf her back over the wall than give her even more access to the property by taking her to the outer cottage his men were temporarily using. And he would—after he had established her identity and satisfied himself that she wasn't a real threat. 'Leave her where she's perched.' He was about to ring off when he had another thought. 'And, Eric, keep your gun on her until I get there.' That would teach her for entering a private function without an invitation.

'Ah…you mean keep her *on* the wall?'

When Eric hesitated Wolfe knew right then that the woman was attractive.

'Yes, that's exactly what I mean.' For all he knew she could be a political nutcase instead of an overzealous journo. 'And don't engage in any conversation with her until I get there.'

Wolfe trusted his men implicitly, but the last thing he needed was some smoking Mata Hari doing a number on their head.

'Yes, sir.'

Wolfe pocketed his phone. This would mean he wouldn't be able to start the pre-wedding game of polo Gilles had organised. Annoying, but it couldn't be helped. He'd offered to run security for Gilles's wedding because it was what he did, and the job always came first.

Once outside, Wolfe found Gilles and his merry band already waiting for him at the stables, the horses groomed and saddled and raring to go. Wolfe ran his gaze over the roguish white

Arabian that Gilles had promised him. He'd missed his daily gym workout this morning and had been looking forward to putting the stallion through his paces.

Hell, he still could. Taking the reins from the handler, he swung easily onto the giant of a horse. The stallion shifted restlessly beneath his weight and Wolfe automatically reached forward to pat his neck, breathing in the strong scent of horse and leather. 'What's his name?'

'Achilles.'

His mouth quirked and Gilles shrugged. 'Apollo was taken and he's a bloody contrary animal. You should enjoy each other.'

Wolfe laughed at his aristocratic friend. Years ago they had forged an unbreakable bond when they had trained together for selection on an elite military task force. They'd been there for each other during the tough times and celebrated during the good. Inevitably Gilles had started sprouting reams of poetry and Greek myths to stay awake when they'd spent long hours waiting for something to happen. By contrast Wolfe, a rugged Australian country boy, had used a more simple method. Sheer grit and stubborn determination. A trait that had served him well when he had swapped special ops for software development and created what was currently the most sophisticated computer spyware on the planet.

Wolfe Inc had been forged around that venture, and when his younger brother had joined him they'd expanded into every aspect of the security business. But where his brother thrived on

the corporate life Wolfe preferred the freedom of being able to mix things up a little. He even kept his hand in on some of the more hairy covert ops some governments called consultants in to take care of. He had to get his adrenaline high from something other than his beloved Honda CBR.

'Always the dreamer, *Monsieur le Marquis,'* he drawled.

'Just a man who knows how to have balance in his life, Ice,' Gilles countered good-naturedly, calling Wolfe by his old military nickname. He swung onto the back of a regal-looking bay. 'You should try it some time, my friend.'

'I've got plenty of balance in my life,' Wolfe grunted, thinking about the Viennese blonde he'd been glad to see the back of a month ago. 'No need to worry your pretty head on that score.'

Achilles snorted and tossed his nose in challenge as Wolfe took up the reins.

'I won't be joining you just yet. I need to check on an issue that's come up.' He kept his tone deliberately bland so as not to alarm his friend, who should be concentrating on why he was signing his life away to a woman in matrimony rather than why a woman was currently sitting on one of his outer walls. 'Achilles and I will join you in a few.'

The horse pulled against the bit and Wolfe smiled. There was nothing quite like using all his skills to master a difficult animal, and he wondered if Gilles would consider selling him. He already liked the unmanageable beast.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't that much easier to scale a high brick

wall as an adult, Ava conceded. In fact it had been downright scary and had shown her how unfit she was. Her arm muscles were aching in protest. It hadn't helped when she'd discovered the ancient chestnut tree she had been relying on to help her down the other side had been removed, and then two trained security guards wielding machine guns had happened upon her.

She hadn't considered that Gilles would have hired extra security for the wedding, but in hindsight she should have done. Naturally the men hadn't believed her about the car accident, and now all she needed was for one of those media helicopters she could hear to zero in on her and her joyous day would just about be complete.

It was all Gilles's fault, she grouched to herself, eyeing the uneven terrain at her feet where the magnificent tree had once stood. And surely they'd raised the height of the wall since the last time she'd climbed it as a tearaway twelve-year-old.

Shifting uncomfortably, she eyed the two killers camouflaged in street clothes below, glad she was conversant in English. She knew no self-respecting Frenchman would ever be seen mixing flannel with corduroy. 'If you would just check a couple of hundred metres up the road you'll find my car and realise that I am telling you the truth,' she repeated, struggling to hold back the temper her father had often complained was as easy to strike up as a match. Which actually wasn't true. It took special powers to induce her to lose the plot.

'Sorry, ma'am. Boss's orders.' That from the one who looked

slightly more sympathetic than the other—although that was like saying snow was colder than ice.

'Fine. But I have a headache and I'd like to get down.'

'Sorry, ma'am—'

'Boss's orders,' Ava finished asininely, wondering what the two men would do if she decided to jump. Not an entirely practical option since she would likely break her ankle.

It had clearly been an oversight on their part as children only to whittle footholds on *one* side of the wall. A mistake no self-respecting spy in their right mind would have made!

Ava briefly closed her eyes and gently tested the injury on her forehead. It felt so large she was sure the House of Fabergé would weep to get their hands on it.

A wave of irritation threatened to topple her off the wall and impale her on one of those raised guns, and as much as she told herself it was irrational to be irritated with these men, since this whole situation was her own fault, she couldn't dispel her growing agitation. In truth, she felt like a fool sitting atop Gilles's wall like a silly bird.

'And where is this boss of yours?' she queried, injecting her voice with a calm she was far from feeling.

'Coming soon, ma'am.'

So was Christmas. In four months' time.

A low rumble of thunder brought Ava's head around as she tried to locate the sound. Her view was hampered by soaring parkland trees and wild shrubbery, and the only thing visible in

the distance were the rounded red brick towers of the château and a picture-perfect blue sky beyond.

Then a flash of white amongst the trees caught her attention, and she couldn't look away as a purebred stallion galloped into view. Ava's eyes drank in the beautiful creature—and then she felt slightly dizzy as her eyes took in its handsome rider.

Windswept sandy hair was brushed back from a proud face with a strong nose and square jaw, wide shoulders and a lean torso rippled beneath a fitted black polo shirt, and long, muscular legs were outlined to perfection in white jodhpurs and knee-high black riding boots.

She sensed he was absolutely furious, even though he hadn't moved a well-honed muscle. His narrowed eyes were boring into hers with the intense focus of a natural hunter. Even when the horse stamped impatiently beneath him, its nostrils flaring and its tail flicking with irritation, the man remained preternaturally still.

Ava's heart pounded and she found her fingers gripping the stone wall for support. Heat was turning her limbs soft. Of course it was the sun making her hot, not the ruthless-looking warrior staring at her with an arrogance that bordered on insolence.

'Are you the reason I'm still on this wall?' The confrontational words were out of her mouth before she'd known they were in her head and she could have kicked herself. She had meant to be pleasant, to make sure this ordeal was over as quickly as possible. She knew instantly from the firm jut of his jaw that she had well

and truly put paid to that.

Wolfe didn't move a muscle as his eyes swept over the fey gypsy on the wall. He'd been wrong. She wasn't attractive. She was *astonishingly* attractive, and his soldier's eyes noted everything. High cheekbones, honey-gold skin, eyes as dark as night and thick sable hair pulled into a ponytail, wisps from which floated around a lush, sulky mouth that looked as if it was waiting to be kissed.

By him.

Impatiently discarding the unexpected thought, he let his eyes drift lower over a white cotton shirt the gentle breeze was using to outline her rounded breasts, and fitted jeans that hugged long slender legs. And bare, stocking-clad feet!

Achilles swatted the air with his tail, as if he too was disturbed by the vision, and then Wolfe registered her haughty, royally pissed-off question and recovered himself. She was an intruder, and she was ruining a rousing game of polo, and if she was upset she could stand in line.

'No.' He shot her a cursory look. '*You* are the reason you're still on that wall.'

Ignoring her hissed exhalation he swung out of the saddle and approached his men. He could feel her eyes following him and wondered at their exact colour, immediately irritated at the irrelevant thought.

He waited for Eric to fill him in on how they had come across her, and then indicated for him to pass over the leather handbag

he held in his hand.

'Is the gun absolutely necessary?'

Her slightly bored question floated down from the wall.

'Only if I have to shoot you with it.' He didn't bother looking at her when he spoke. 'And keep your hands where I can see them.'

'I'm not a criminal!'

He ignored her little outburst and inspected her handbag. 'Find anything interesting in here?'

'No, boss. Usual women things. Lipstick, tissues, hair clips. No ID, as I said.'

He heard her exasperated sigh. 'I already told your watchdogs I had a car accident and my purse must have fallen out of my bag.'

'Convenient.'

'For whom? You?'

Wolfe gave her a stare he knew from experience made grown men think twice. 'You have an awfully smart mouth for someone in your predicament.' And he wished she would close it. The husky quality of her lightly accented voice was having an adverse effect on his body.

'I am Princess Ava de Veers of Anders and I demand you let me down from here immediately.'

Wolfe ran his eyes over her again, just for the sheer pleasure of it and because he knew it would put her on the back foot. 'What are you doing on a wall, Princess? Learning to fly?'

'I am a guest at this wedding and you are likely to lose your job if you insist on leaving me up here. I'm probably sunburned

by now.'

'By this watered-down version of the sun?' And on that golden skin? 'Unlikely. And honoured guests usually approach by the main gates. What outlet do you work for?'

Her brow crinkled. 'I don't—'

'Newspaper? Magazine? TV station? Nice camera, by the way. Mind if I take a look?'

'Yes, I do.'

He dumped her handbag on the grass and started checking through her photos.

'I said *yes*, I do mind.'

'Whether I look or not isn't contingent on whether you mind.'

'Why bother asking, then?'

He nearly smiled at the exasperation in her voice. 'Manners.'

She made a cute noise that said he wouldn't know what manners were if they conked him on the head.

Frowning at the photos on her camera, he glanced up at her. 'Nice celebrity shots on here. I repeat—what rag do you work for?'

She rolled her eyes. 'I am not a member of the paparazzi, if that's what you're suggesting.'

'No?'

'No. I own an art gallery. Those were taken at a recent opening night. Not that it is any of your business.'

Wolfe rubbed his jaw and pretended to consider that. 'Really? Given your current predicament, I'd say it's very much my

business.'

She looked as if she was holding on to her temper by a thread. 'I do understand how this looks. And I even appreciate how efficient your men were at spotting me—'

'I'm so happy to hear that.'

'But—' she carried on as if he hadn't interrupted '—I am who I say I am. My car is a couple of hundred metres that way, and your men would already know this if they had bothered to go and find it instead of holding their weapons on me as if I was a terrorist.'

Wolfe handed the camera to Eric. 'Oh, I'm sorry.' He didn't bother to hide the contempt he felt for her type. Haughty princesses—real or imagined—who thought their needs took preference over everybody else's. 'Did I forget to tell you? My men take orders from *me*, not you.'

Her pout turned even sexier. 'Convenient.'

He wasn't in the frame of mind to appreciate her wisecrack and nearly reconsidered his need to verify her identity before tossing her back over the wall.

'Eric. Dane. Take the Jeep and find her car. If it exists.'

She sniffed at his instructions and shifted her bottom on the wall. She must be completely uncomfortable by now. Serve her right.

'I told you to keep your hands where I could see them.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Do you think it might be at all possible that I could wait on the ground for your men to return? I promise

not to overpower you while they are gone.'

The air seemed to buzz with the antagonistic heat she imbued him with, and her accent lent her sardonic words a sexy edge. She was a wicked combination of beauty and spirit, and not even the way she spoke down to him was enough to keep his libido at bay. A truly annoying realisation.

'I think I can handle you.'

Her eyes dropped to his mouth and Wolfe felt a kick of lust all the way to his toes. He waited, breathless, for the heat in his groin to dissipate, but if anything it got worse. Then her eyes blazed into his and the chemistry he'd been trying to ignore sparked like a live wire between them.

The way her eyes widened he thought perhaps she had read his thoughts, but that was impossible. Fourteen years in the business and Wolfe knew how to hide what he was feeling—hell, he'd learned how to do that by the time he could walk.

Perhaps she'd just felt the same burn he had. And had liked it just as little, if her wary gaze was anything to go by. Which gave him a moment's pause. If she was a journalist—or, worse, some sort of political stalker—she'd have already used that connection to manipulate him, not shy away from it as if she'd just been singed.

His eyes took in wrists that looked impossibly slender within the cuffs of her masculine-style shirt, then moved down along fine-boned hands and nails buffed to perfection. She didn't do hard labour. That much was obvious.

He knew instinctively she was who she said she was. It was in her regal bearing, the swanlike arch of her neck, in her sense of entitlement and the way she looked at him as if he was staff. His mother had often looked at his father like that and Wolfe had always felt sorry for the poor bastard.

She shifted again, her eyes on the ground. 'Do you have any suggestions on how I might get down from here?' And with a degree of dignity, her tone seemed to imply.

'Perhaps you'd like me to unfold my trusty ladder from my back pocket?' Wolfe mocked. 'Oh, dear. Left it at home.' He opened his hands, palms facing upwards. 'Guess you'll just have to jump into my arms, Princess. What a treat.'

His horse snickered and her eyes used the excuse to glance at the stallion before returning to his. 'Channelling your inner Zorro?' she asked sweetly.

His lips twitched. 'Only because I left my Batman tool belt at home.'

'With Robin?'

Despite his less than stellar mood he chuckled. 'Cute. Toss down the boots first.' The last thing he wanted was to be stabbed by one of those dangerous-looking heels, and by the gleam in her eyes that was exactly what she was considering.

'I have a better idea. Why don't I just go back down the way I came up?'

'No.'

Her lips tightened. 'It makes perfect sense. I can—'

'Try it and I *will* shoot you.'

'You don't have a gun.'

'I have a gun.'

She paused, her stillness telling him she was weighing up whether he was telling the truth or not. Her eyes slid down his torso and over his legs and he felt a rush of unexpected excitement, as if she'd actually touched him.

'You are being overly obnoxious about this,' she fumed.

'Not yet, I'm not.' Wolfe barely managed to suppress his rising aggravation at this physical response to a woman he already didn't like. 'But I'm getting close.'

'If you drop me I'll sue you.'

'If you don't hurry up and get down from that wall I'll sue *you.'*

Her dark brows arched imperiously. 'For what?'

'Trying my patience. Now, pass down the boots. Nice and easy,' he warned softly.

With an audible sigh she dropped her boots one after the other into his outstretched hands. The kid leather was warm from her touch.

'Now you.' His voice had grown rough—a clear indication that some part of him was looking forward to holding her in his arms. And what was wrong with that? He might not be interested in starting up another affair straight after his last one had ended so tastelessly, but he *was* male and this woman *was* beautiful.

'I'd rather wait for a ladder.'

So would he.

'Then you'd better settle in. I run security, not rescue.'

Again she glanced dubiously at the ground. 'It didn't seem like such a big drop when I was younger. And What happened to the chestnut tree that used to grow here?'

'Now you're mistaking me for a gardener, Princess. What next?'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Certainly not for a nice man. Rest assured of that. And my correct title is Your Royal Highness.'

He knew the correct title. He might not be royal himself, but he'd met enough in his lifetime to know how to address one. 'Thanks for the tip. But I don't have all day. So let's go.' Time to stop thinking about the tempting swell of her breasts and her hot mouth.

'*You* don't have all day? Thanks to you, I'm impossibly late now,' she complained.

He beckoned her with his fingers. 'My heart bleeds.'

'You're really very rude.'

'Want me to leave you up there?' he prompted, fresh out of patience.

'Excuse me for being a little uneasy.'

Wolfe sighed and held his hands up again. 'I've never dropped a princess before.'

'You've probably never had the opportunity before now.'

He shook his head. 'You sure do know how to make yourself vulnerable, Princess.'

She muttered something in French, making him want to smile.

she was all fire and…*attitude*!

Balancing on her hands, she carefully swung her leg over the wall, so that she was perched on it like a little chipmunk, her fingers turning white as she gripped the edge. Still she hesitated, lifting first one thigh and then the other to make sure the fabric of her jeans didn't catch.

'Want me to count to three?' he drawled.

She threw him a dark look, her eyes fixed firmly on his, and then they snapped closed and she launched herself off the wall.

Wolfe felt her svelte torso slide through his hands as he caught her, his arms winding around her before she hit the ground. Her rib cage heaved as she dragged in an unsteady breath, the movement flattening her soft breasts against his hard chest.

Her arms clung tight around his neck, holding his face against the warm pulse at the base of her neck. His senses instantly filled with her heat and sweet perfume. He usually found perfume cloying. Hers wasn't, and was probably the reason he held her longer than he needed to. Held her moulded against him as if he'd been doing it his whole life. Held her long enough to wonder how it would feel to fit himself deep inside her.

Tight. Hot. Wet.

Wolfe's head reared back as his senses took over and he found himself staring into exquisite, wide-spaced navy blue eyes that made him feel as if he'd been hit by a land-to-air missile.

'You can put me down now,' she said a little breathlessly.

He could slide his hands down to her butt and wrap her legs

around his waist, as well.

As if he'd spoken out loud the air between them thickened, and he felt every hot inch of her go impossibly still against him.

Almost embarrassed by a stupefyingly strong urge to crush her mouth beneath his, which had held him spellbound for—God—he hoped only seconds, he none-too-gently set her on her feet and stepped back from her.

It was only then that he noticed the slight swelling above her right temple.

'You should get that looked at,' he instructed roughly.

Her eyes licked over his face before meeting his, her breathing as uneven as his heart rate. 'I'm fine.'

'Put your shoes on. It's time to go.' He busied himself with collecting Achilles while his mind came back on line. By rights he should search her, to make sure she was clean, but, *hell*, he wasn't touching her again. Bad enough he'd have to put her on the back of the horse since Eric and Dane had yet to return.

He frowned, wondering what was taking them so long.

'I'd rather walk.' Her eyes flitted from the stamping stallion and back to him.

Realising he was functioning below par, and that had he been on a real military expedition he might well be dead now, Wolfe re-engaged his instincts and gave her a hard stare. 'You can try my patience, Princess, but I wouldn't recommend it.'

She blinked, as if she hadn't expected his curt tone. 'Unlike your men, I don't take orders from you.'

Wolfe widened his stance in a purely dominant move he knew she hadn't missed. 'We have yet to establish your real identity, so you either get on that horse or I'll use one of these reins to bind your hands and drag you behind.'

'I'd like to see you try,' she invited him coolly.

He couldn't believe this posh piece of work was calling his bluff. 'Would you, now?'

She balled her hands on her hips and drew his sight to her slender curves. Not a clever move in his currently cantankerous state of combined anger and arousal. Of course he wouldn't drag her, but he'd subdue her and throw her over his saddle.

He saw the moment she realised his threat wasn't entirely idle.

'Only men with very small appendages play the tough guy.'

'And only women who are incredibly stupid challenge a man they've never met to prove his masculinity. Fortunately for you, I don't feel the least threatened to prove myself by shrewish females.'

'What can I say?' She cocked her hip towards him insolently. 'You bring out the best in me.'

Wolfe breathed deep at her intentionally provocative manner. 'I'm sure that's very far from your best, Princess,' he drawled.

Her brows slowly rose and Wolfe realised he'd inadvertently revealed how attractive he found her. No doubt it was something she was used to and, like all women in his experience, would take absolute advantage of it given half the chance.

Something he didn't plan to do.

Aggravated by his one-track mind, he was about to end her rebellious stance by physically dumping her onto the horse when his phone rang.

'We found the car, boss. She's legit. Her purse must have been thrown from her bag because it was lodged under the front seat.'

Wolfe grunted a reply and told his men to meet him at the cottage.

He looked up in time to catch her superior expression and knew that she'd overheard his conversation. 'Seems you are who you say you are. Next time use the gate.' He brought Achilles alongside her and grabbed the stirrup. 'Give me your leg.'

'You're not even going to apologise?'

Her tone spoke of generations of superiority that made any apology Wolfe might have given die on his lips.

'Your leg?' he repeated, his eyes cool and guarded against the fire pouring out of hers.

Moving forward, she tossed her ponytail over her shoulder, caught her heel on a rock and pitched straight into his arms.

Already highly sensitised to her touch, and not sure if the move had been deliberate, to throw him off balance, Wolfe immediately set her away from him. 'And don't try using that sexy little body to garner any favours, Princess.'

'Trust me when I say that touching you is the last thing I would want to do.'

She presented him with her stiff back, gathered the reins up in one hand and stamped her foot into his hand. Wolfe didn't

know whether to be amused by her or angered, and perhaps if he hadn't been about to head off after Gilles's wedding to oversee an important software installation he might have hung around to test her lofty challenge. But he was, and he wasn't stupid enough to get involved with another highly strung female.

'Shift back,' he grated. No way was she riding in front, where she would be cradled between his hard thighs.

'You know, all that masculine muttering is entirely uncalled for. You are unquestionably the most irritating individual I have ever had the misfortune to come across.'

Wolfe was just about to tell her the feeling was entirely mutual when she twisted the reins out of his slack hold and dug her heels into Achilles's side. The horse responded like the thoroughbred it was and sprang into an instant gallop.

Wolfe couldn't believe it!

Not only had the little spitfire turned him on just by breathing, she had completely got the better of him. Neither of which had happened to him in…It had *never* happened before!

'Dammit!'

Cursing under his breath, Wolfe whistled sharply. If Gilles had trained his animals correctly the horse should come to a complete stop.

CHAPTER TWO

ONE MINUTE AVA was flying across the uneven ground with breathless speed and the next she wasn't moving at all. The horse did little more than twitch its majestic tail as she tried to urge him forward. By the time she worked out what had happened the overbearing *inbecile* was almost upon her.

'Come on, horse. Do *not* listen to him. He is nobody.'

'You look like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, but you're a bossy little thing aren't you, Princess?'

'You are so arrogant.'

He settled his hands on his hips. 'That's rich, coming from you.'

'I am not arrogant,' she said in a voice that would have made her father proud. 'I am confident. There is a difference.'

He had the gall to laugh. 'And the difference would fit inside a flea's arse.'

Ava used her sweetest voice to call him a foul name in French, knowing he probably wouldn't understand her.

He shook his head and tsked. 'Temper, temper.' His gaze lifted to her hair. 'If I didn't know better I'd say there was a red streak running through that glossy mane of yours.'

A chauvinist. How original. 'I suppose you think I should be flattered you didn't say blond?'

'No, I would never confuse you with a blonde,' he said with

mock seriousness. 'I like blondes.'

'Then I *do* consider myself flattered!'

She thought about flicking the reins to try and ride off again, but he read her mind and his jaw clenched. 'I don't make the same mistakes twice. Shift back.'

Ava noticed how big the hand was that gripped the reins and instantly recalled how they had felt on her body as he'd caught her. Once again her pelvis clenched, sending delicious ripples of sensation through her whole body. Surprised, and a little breathless, she berated herself for the physical reaction. He was Neanderthal man two million-odd years later, his blood supply no doubt taken up by all the muscles in his body instead of his head, where he needed it most.

He moved a small handgun out from under the back of his shirt and tucked it inside his boot, and she felt another traitorous thrill shoot straight to her core. Peevishly she hoped the gun went off and shot him in the foot.

'I'm sure many women get turned on by your barbaric tactics, but I can assure you I am not one of them.'

'Good to know.' He stroked the horse's neck in long, smooth sweeps. 'Since I'm not trying to turn you on.'

His eyes glittered up at her and made her heart pump just that little bit faster. Lord, she hoped he didn't know she was lying, because she *shouldn't* find this uncultured beast of a man so attractive.

Grabbing the pommel, he fitted his foot into the stirrup. 'Now,

you can ride up in front between my legs if you want to, Princess. Who knows? It might be fun.'

Ava quickly scooted back and ground her teeth together when he gave a low, sexy laugh. His voice was rich and totally indolent, as if he was always thinking of ways to pleasure a woman.

He swung easily onto the great horse, his large frame filling the saddle. The horse shifted as it readjusted to take their weight. 'You might want to hang on.' He shot over his shoulder, drawing up the reins.

'I am.'

He glanced to where her hands gripped the saddle blanket before raising his eyes back to hers. Ava drew in a sharp breath at the impact.

'I meant to me.'

Ava had no intention of holding on to him. 'Dream on.'

He gave a half smile, as if he might do exactly that, clenched his powerful thighs, and the horse sprang forwards as if it had nothing more than a child on its back.

Instinctively Ava clutched at his shirt and found herself plastered up against the back of him. He was hard! And hot! Unable to help herself, she widened her fingers over his abdominal muscles as if she needed to do so to prevent herself from falling off. Colyn had always bemoaned the fact that she wasn't tactile enough for him, but right now she could barely resist the urge to explore this stranger's muscular physique. She thought she heard him blow out a hard breath and, slightly

embarrassed at her temerity, quickly moved her fingers to his narrow hips. the roll of muscle there told her that he worked out. A lot.

Fortunately it took no time for the spirited stallion to make it to the main buildings. Unfortunately it was still long enough for the friction from the saddle and his body to make the space between her legs feel soft and moist.

Mon Dieu.

Yes, it had been a long time since she had been intimate with a man, but this one was *so* not her type…

Focusing on her surroundings, instead of the man she could feel with every cell of her body, she realised they weren't at the stables but at one of the side entrances to the main building.

About to ask what they were doing there, she stopped when he twisted around in the saddle, grabbed her under her arm and effortlessly lifted her off the horse. Ava felt the slide of his thigh all the way down her body and closed her eyes briefly to block out the rush of heat coursing through her. When her feet finally touched the ground she locked her knees to take her weight and had to force herself to push away from his heat.

'Any time you want to learn how to fly again, Princess, you just call me, okay?'

Ava curled her lip, but before she could come up with a pithy retort he had dug his heels into the stallion and was gone.

Thank God. It would take two top-of-the-line masseurs to work the tension out of her back after that!

'Ma'am? Are you lost?'

A footman materialised at her side, and it was only then that Ava registered that her 'captor' had set her down in a private part of the castle, far from the prying eyes of arriving guests. It was probably more because he was used to using the servants' entrance than out of any actual consideration for her, but even as she had the ungrateful thought she had a feeling she was wrong.

Wolfe stood on the lime-green lawn at the side of the white marquee set up as a servers' area under the shade of a weeping willow. He wasn't on duty, but his eyes scanned the throng of wedding guests holding sparkling glasses of wine and champagne and recapping the beautiful service they had just witnessed.

The men mostly wore classic morning suits, as he did, and the women were tastefully attired in afternoon dresses and sunhats. Later, at the evening reception, they would all change into their ballroom best.

It was only when his eyes finally found the Princess, in a small cluster of women waiting to talk to the bride, that he realised he'd been searching for her.

He cursed under his breath. His reaction to her was annoyingly primal. And annoyingly still present. The problem, he decided as he studied her, was that she had an element of the conquest about her. All that snooty standoffishness combined with her natural beauty was like a summons to any man who had red blood pumping through his veins. But while he enjoyed a challenge —possibly more than most men—some inner sense of self-

preservation warned him to keep his distance.

He had very firm rules when it came to women and he never deviated from them. Keep it short, keep it sweet and, most importantly, keep it simple. This posh princess had *complicated* written all over her pretty face.

He'd seen enough relationships fall apart to last him a lifetime, and while logically he knew not all couples ended up on the scrap heap he wasn't prepared to take the chance. It was probably the only risk he wasn't willing to take, because when it all went pear-shaped the fall-out was usually devastating.

'I know that face. You're brooding about something.'

Wolfe glanced at Gilles, who had ambled up with two glasses of champagne in his hands. Wolfe took one and smiled. 'Just enjoying the frivolities.'

Gilles gave him a droll look. Previously they had both bemoaned any wedding they'd been forced to attend. 'I thought you were bringing someone with you today?'

Wolfe took a sip and tried not to wince as the warming liquid pooled in his mouth. 'Not while I'm working.'

Gilles lowered his own glass, amusement dancing in his eyes. 'She dumped you?'

Wolfe recalled the look on Astrid's angry face when he'd told her he wouldn't be seeing her again. 'Yep.'

'In…' Gilles glanced at his watch '…how many hours?'

Wolfe chuckled. He'd enjoyed Astrid's company for five busy nights while he was working in Vienna a month ago, and she

had enjoyed his. When he'd tried to say goodbye she'd kicked up a stink. Accused him of using her. Wolfe's anger had surfaced then. He knew he had a name for being a heartless womaniser but he was simply honest. He didn't see the point in beating around the bush and pretending to feel things he didn't. And nor did he sleep with as many women as his reputation would suggest. He wouldn't have any time left over for work if he did.

'What can I say? She was one of the smart ones.'

Wolfe waited for his friend to start up another good-natured lecture about settling down. Anne, it seemed, had reformed the once bad-boy Marquis to the point where Wolfe now almost preferred her company to his.

'Well, that works out well for me.'

'It does?'

Gilles chuckled. 'Don't look so relieved. I wasn't about to try and reform the unreformable.'

'Thank God.'

'But I do need a favour.'

Favours Wolfe could do.

'Sure.'

'There's a girl I need you to keep your eye on tonight at the reception.'

Wolfe didn't exactly look at the sky, but he came close. 'Friend of Anne's, by chance?'

'Yes, actually. But, no, I'm not trying to set you up, you suspicious clod. She's the woman my father wanted me to marry.'

Gilles's words sparked a distant memory of a late-night chat from years back that Wolfe had completely forgotten about. He took another pull of his drink and wished it was beer in an icy bottle instead of champagne in a tepid glass. 'I'm listening.'

'Years ago my father and hers came to the decision that we would forge a strong union if we married when we came of age.'

'I think you "came of age" about ten years ago, my friend, and isn't that a little last century?'

Gilles's mouth twisted into an ironic smile. 'You've met my father. Hers is worse. Anyway, the media have done a good job beating some life into the old story this past week, playing up the whole jilted fiancée thing, and Anne said it's been a bit rough on her.'

Wolfe knew what it felt like to be talked about behind his back. Even if the people in the small town he'd grown up in had been doing so out of sympathy rather than slander. At least for him and his brother, at any rate. 'What's wrong with her?' he asked suspiciously.

Gilles scoffed. 'Nothing. But I don't want you to sleep with her. Actually, I'd be downright angry if you did. She's gorgeous, and way too good for you. I just want you to keep an eye on her. Make sure she's having a good time.'

'Who is she?' he asked, premonition snaking down his spine.

'See the woman talking to Anne now?'

Wolfe didn't have to look to know it was the Princess from the wall and he nearly groaned. Anyone but her. But at least now it

made sense why she had been so familiar with the estate. They were family friends.

Wolfe turned his back on the woman he was intent on avoiding for the rest of his life. 'I'm sure she can take care of herself.'

Gilles gave him a quizzical look and Wolfe cursed his curt tone. He had nothing against the Princess, really. Except for the fact that she'd occupied his mind all afternoon and made him want to push her sweet skirt up around her waist and take her up against the nearest hundred-year-old oak. He definitely didn't want to find out that Gilles had once been with her. Had they been lovers? The thought left a sour taste in his mouth.

'I'm sure she will, too, but as she's attending the wedding alone I thought you could keep your eye on her for me. You know—ask her to dance, make sure she has a drink.'

Today he'd been mistaken for a rescue service, a gardener and now…'You've got waiters for that, and I'm not a damned babysitter.'

Gilles's eyebrows shot up, but before he could say anything his new wife stepped around Wolfe and curled her arm through Gilles's. 'Babysitting who?'

Her green eyes met Wolfe's speculatively and Wolfe saw Gilles's eyes fall guiltily on someone behind him.

'I hope you do not mean me, Gilles?' Ava's tone was as lyrical and as superior as Wolfe remembered it.

Gilles stepped forward and kissed both her cheeks. 'Ava, you look as beautiful as ever.'

'I can see that you *do* mean me,' she berated lightly. 'And I can assure you I do not need babysitting.'

Her eyes briefly cut to Wolfe's with such aloof disdain it made him want to smile. He remembered her hands splayed over the ridges of his abdominal muscles as she'd clung to him on the horse. She might not like him very much, but he knew dislike wasn't the *only* emotion she felt.

'Of course you don't, *ma petite.*' Gilles humoured her. 'Now, let me introduce you to Wolfe, a good friend of mine.'

Unable to prevent himself from ruffling her regal feathers, Wolfe tilted his head. 'We've met. How's the head?' His eyes drifted to the wide-brimmed hat, tilted to one side to conceal the bruise on her forehead. The pale pink exactly matched a flirty two-piece suit that followed the line of her curves all the way to her perfectly shaped calves and slender ankles.

Exceptional legs, he thought, his gaze trekking slowly back up to her face.

She arched a brow that told him she hadn't taken kindly to his once-over, or to the implied intimacy in his tone.

'You know each other?' Gilles regarded Ava in surprise.

'No.'

'Oh?' Gilles cut his curious gaze back to Wolfe.

'Shall I tell him, or do you want to?' Wolfe drawled.

After briefly glaring all sorts of retribution his way, she turned a serene smile on Gilles and Anne. 'It was nothing. I had a small problem with my car and your friend *kindly* provided me with a

lift to the château.'

'A small problem with your car?' Gilles frowned.

Wolfe held her gaze as he felt the others turn to him and told himself to leave well enough alone. Ruffling her glorious feathers was not on his agenda, even if his body was demanding that he forge a new one—preferably starting with her naked on top of a set of silk sheets. 'What Her Highness means is that she had a car accident, climbed your outer wall and got captured by my men—'

'And stole your horse because you were being incredibly rude!' she provided, cutting Gilles's blustering in half.

Wolfe shifted his weight and stuck one hand into his pocket. 'And here I was thinking you stole him because you wanted to go for a ride.' He rubbed his hand across his abdomen, unable to stop himself from teasing her a little.

'I did think about it,' she murmured huskily, the quick dart of her pink tongue caressing her lower lip and sending a bolt of lust straight to his groin. 'But since he wasn't up to my usual standard I thought why bother?'

Wolfe laughed at her bald-faced put-down. Gilles was fortunately too worried about her accident to pick up on the subtext, but Anne's interested glances told him that she wasn't quite as obtuse.

'You weren't hurt?' Anne queried, concern lacing her words.

'A bump on the head,' Ava dismissed casually. 'Really, the whole thing was *incredibly* insignificant.'

Wolfe's lips quirked. 'You know, I wouldn't have described it

that way myself.'

'No?' Ava held his gaze. 'Maybe you need to get out more.'

'Maybe I do,' he agreed, noting the line of pink that highlighted her lovely cheekbones. Maybe he needed to get out with *her*. No. He'd already decided not to go there. But, damn, he was enjoying sparring with her.

'But what were you doing on the wall?' Gilles interrupted with a frown.

'Well, trying to get down, obviously,' Ava returned pithily. 'Which would have been a lot easier if you hadn't removed that lovely old chestnut tree.'

Gilles gave a typically Gallic shrug. 'I had no choice. It was a security risk.'

Wolfe laughed right up until the moment she shared a warm smile with Gilles. Again he wondered at their history. Had she been in love with his friend? Was she still? Was that why Gilles had asked him to watch out for her? Was it possible she would cause trouble if he didn't? Questions, questions, questions. And there was really only one he wanted answered.

How responsive would she be in his bed?

His name suited him, Ava mused absently, nursing a flute of champagne as she willed the evening reception to finish.

Predatory.

Intense.

Arrogant.

And utterly transfixing when he turned those molten toffee-

coloured eyes on her. Not to mention aloof and emotionally unavailable if the evening gossip was to be believed.

'They call him Ice, and apparently he has a heart as hard to find as a pink diamond,' one woman had said, giggling as she'd gazed longingly across the room at him.

Ava had rolled her eyes. She knew many women saw an unattainable man—especially a wealthy alpha male like Wolfe—as a personal challenge to go forth and rehabilitate, but she wasn't one of them. She was only interested in a man who was caring and considerate and who respected a woman as more than just a trophy to be admired and trotted out when it suited him. A gentle, sophisticated man, who was looking for love and companionship more than short affairs with a variety of women.

That thought reminded her of the luncheon she'd had with Anne last month. 'Hot' and 'divine' were words that had been bandied around when she'd talked about a friend of Gilles's called Wolfe. As had 'confirmed bachelor'. Ava remembered zoning out at that point, telling her friend she wasn't at all interested in commitment-phobes like her ex. Which put Gilles's 'hot' friend with the beautiful eyes and corrugated abdominal muscles firmly off her Christmas list.

Even if he *did* looked incredible in a custom-made tuxedo.

Oh, stop, she scolded herself. Lots of men looked incredible in tuxedos; they were the equivalent of a corset for women.

Of course lots of men hadn't made her burn just by looking at her, or made her want to touch them all over, but that was just

bad luck. Or maybe it was more to do with how uncomfortable she felt tonight. Maybe she was just looking for a distraction from all the polite smiles and curious stares from many of the other guests.

Those who were friends knew that she'd never seriously been involved with Gilles, but they were intent on having a good time and she felt curiously lonely in the large crowd.

Her mind was intent on remembering the way Wolfe had held her in his arms that morning, with such breathless ease she hadn't been able to stop herself from imagining what it would be like to kiss him. Embarrassingly, she had even held herself perfectly still as if in anticipation of that kiss!

Pah!

She was just feeling a little strained after having to put on a brave face all day. And, okay, she was also a little intrigued by Wolfe. It had been a long time since a man had caught her attention. A long time since she had wondered about his kiss. A long time since she had felt the warmth of a man's loving embrace. Not that Wolfe's would be loving—but it would be warm…

Ava pulled a wry face at herself. Before today she wouldn't have said she had missed a man's embrace at all. But right now, watching this one they called Ice nonchalantly circle the room but not quite participate in the frivolities made her ache for it.

And don't try using that sexy little body to garner any favours, Princess.

Ava's lips tightened.

Arrogant.

Rude.

Unsophisticated.

Uncultured.

So why had she surreptitiously touched his body at the first opportunity?

Ava shivered and raised her champagne glass to her lips.

Empty. *Drat.*

The doctor Wolfe had sent to see her—an unexpectedly nice gesture she still had to thank him for—had told her it would be best if she didn't drink tonight. Her position as 'jilted fiancée' in a room full of her peers told her it would be best if she did.

Taking another glass of Gilles's best from a passing waiter, she took a fortifying sip. It didn't surprise her that Wolfe had a reputation with women. A man who could lift a fully grown woman off a horse and lower her slowly to the ground with one hand held a certain *earthy* appeal.

For *some*, she reminded herself firmly. Not for her.

'My dance, I believe?'

For a minute Ava imagined the deep voice behind her was Wolfe, but it lacked a certain velvety-rough tenor and hadn't sent any delicious tingles down her spine so she knew it wasn't. Turning, she smiled at a nice English Lord who had been hounding her all night.

She didn't feel like dancing with him, but nor did she feel like

triggering more gossip by refusing every man who approached her. Smiling with a polite reserve she hoped he read as, *Lovely, but be assured I'm not interested in furthering our acquaintance*, she stepped into his arms. Which was when she caught sight of Wolfe, watching her yet again from across the room. Her eyes immediately ran over the woman at his side, who looked young, happy and relaxed. By contrast Ava felt old, surly and uptight. Which was partly Wolfe's fault, she thought churlishly, because she couldn't seem to stop thinking about him.

And the fact that he had a beautiful woman at his side while he held his eyes on her only confirmed that the talk about him playing the field was true. Unless he had been watching her all night because of Gilles's silly request that he 'babysit' her. For some reason the latter thought aggravated Ava more than the former.

Five minutes later, feeling as graceful as a goose under Wolfe's constant regard, she sent her dance partner to fetch her a glass of water so she could find out. She didn't need an audience when she told Wolfe that his attention was not only supremely annoying but totally unnecessary.

Orientating herself in the vast room, she located him lazily propping up a wall in a dimly lit section of the ballroom, feeling ridiculously elated when she found the bubbly blonde was no longer running her fingernails up and down his powerful forearm.

He didn't say anything when she stopped in front of him, just looked down at her through a screen of thick dark lashes that

made his mood impossible to gauge. Not that it mattered. She was here about *her* feelings, not his.

'You are eyeing me off because Gilles asked you, too, no?' She knew she'd mixed up her words—her English was always clumsy when she was agitated.

'I think the term you're looking for is *watching over you.'*

Amusement laced his tone and her spine stiffened in annoyance.

'I don't need watching.'

'I thought all women liked to be watched. Isn't that why you wrap yourselves up in those slinky dresses?' His drink swayed as he made an up-and-down motion with his hand.

Ava glanced down at her strapless jade-green gown, which was fitted to the waist and then fell to the floor in silky waves. 'My dress is elegant, not *slinky.'*

'Why don't we agree on elegantly slinky, for argument's sake?'

He was smooth, this handsome Australian, very smooth. 'I do not need babysitting,' Ava said, reminding herself that she had not approached him to flirt with him.

'I never said you did. In fact I told Gilles you could take care of yourself.'

'Presumably because I made off with your horse?'

'You didn't make off with my horse.' The pitch of his voice dropped subtly. 'But you did play a pretty dangerous game on him.'

Ava's heart kicked up a notch at his silky taunt. 'I'm quite sure

I don't know what you mean.'

Wolfe smiled. 'I'm quite sure you do.'

He took a lazy sip of his beer and her eyes were drawn to the strong column of his throat when he swallowed. She looked up to find that his eyes had closed to half-mast as she watched him and her breasts grew heavy.

Determined to ignore the sensation, she continued. 'So, if you are not doing Gilles's bidding, why do you watch me?'

'Why do you think?'

His eyes toured over her body and she had a pretty good indication of why. Something hot and quivery vibrated up and down her spine. The memory of the feel of his hands on her torso returned. They were so large they had almost swallowed her whole.

Perturbed by the physical response he so effortlessly created in her, Ava shook her head. Compared to her he appeared so cool and relaxed, and yet she was sure if she touched him he'd feel as tightly coiled as a spring.

'I think you are a man who gets what he wants a little too often, Ice!' she challenged, deciding that he was messing with her head. The way he looked at her. The way his eyes lingered on her mouth. She knew he felt the chemistry between them and she wondered why she wanted to push him to show her. Even more she wondered what it would take to make this self-contained man lose control.

'Is that so?'

'Yes.' Ava tried to match his careless tone even though her heart was thumping inside her chest. 'The word in the powder room is that you steal hearts wherever you go.'

'Have you been talking about me, Princess?'

Ava felt her temper spike at his evasiveness. 'That's not an answer.'

His eyebrow rose at her sharp tone. 'You didn't ask a question.'

Wanting to stamp her foot in frustration, she decided the smart thing to do was to bid him goodnight. She'd already decided to ignore the way he made her feel, and yet here she was almost begging him to make her change her mind.

Dragging her eyes from his sensual half smile, she took a step back and curled a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. 'Fine. If you'll—'

His hand shot out and snagged her upper arm. His hold was gentle, yet uncompromising, and she couldn't prevent a gasp of surprise at the unexpectedness of it. 'Don't play games with me, Rapunzel. I guarantee you'll lose.'

Ava barely contained her temper. If anyone was playing games here it was him, not her. And if a small voice in her head was asking her if trying to get the better of him on the lawn earlier had not been a game—well, she didn't much care right now.

'You have that wrong.' She lifted her chin. 'I am not the one playing games here.' Because deep down she knew it would be beyond stupid to invite this man into her life in any capacity.

He stared at her, finally letting the sensual heat she had felt in

him all night shine through in his eyes. She couldn't look away, like a deer caught in headlights as he inexorably drew closer—only realising it was she who had swayed towards him when a glass of mineral water was thrust in front of her face.

'There you are,' Lord Parker puffed, pushing his chest out in Wolfe's direction.

Half expecting Wolfe to challenge him, Ava was absurdly disappointed when all he did was slide a thumb across the rampaging pulse-point in her wrist before releasing her. As if as an afterthought he bent towards her, his mouth close to her ear, his intoxicating scent making her breathless.

'Careful what you wish for, Princess. You just might get it.' He straightened and inclined his head in her direction. 'If you'll excuse me?' He mimicked the cool words she'd been about to serve him moments earlier before striding across the marble floor and into another room.

Ava let out a long pent-up breath. She should be glad he was gone. He was arrogant, obnoxious, and too cool for school—and yet he made her burn hotter than any man ever had before. It was a powerful aphrodisiac. All-consuming and tempting. And despite the fact that he had just warned her off some obtuse part of her still wanted to know what it would feel like to have those capable hands on her heated skin—her *naked*, heated skin.

'Ladies and gentlemen…'

The MC interrupted Ava's conflicting thoughts.

'The bride is about to throw her bouquet before the couple

departs for the evening.'

A triumphant squeal rent the air as the bouquet was caught by one of Anne's American friends, followed by a stream of synchronised clapping as the bride and groom made their way upstairs. They would be spending the night at the château before leaving for their honeymoon after luncheon the following day.

Ava joined in the well-wishing but her chest felt tight. Anne and Gilles were so happy. So in love. An old fear that she would never get to experience that depth of emotion with someone special cut across the happiness she felt for them both.

Realising she must be more out of balance than she'd first thought, she decided to call it a night. Glancing around the room, she noted that Wolfe was nowhere to be seen and felt another stab of irritation at herself. She was torn between wanting him to want her and wanting him not to. It was as if she was somehow in thrall to him. As if her brain no longer functioned, or it functioned but was stuck in one groove, like the needle on an old-fashioned record player. The word *sex* was going round and round in her head like an endlessly exciting mantra.

Ava stared at her water glass and wondered if someone had drugged it. The last thing she wanted was sex with a man completely unsuitable for her hopes and dreams. Wasn't it?

Annoyed, she pivoted on her heel—and gasped when she nearly ran smack into the man who had occupied her mind pretty much the entire day and night.

'You're leaving before our dance,' he murmured silkily.

The balls of her feet hurt and she didn't want to dance. 'I did not think you played games.' She could barely hear her own voice above the sound of her thundering heartbeat. Had he been toying with her to heighten her awareness of him? If so, it had worked. She had never been more aware of a man in her life.

She saw his nostrils flare at her confrontational tone and something primal unfurled low in her pelvis, because she knew that he *did* play games. And even though it went against all her principles part of her wanted to play—with him—tonight.

'Maybe I want to feel you in my arms one more time.'

Heat rushed through her body as his husky words burned her up inside. *How did any woman stop herself from drowning under such blazingly sexual intensity?*

'Do you?'

As if sensing her near capitulation, he gave her a lupine smile. 'Yes.' He set her drink aside and swept her into his arms.

Ava's stomach flipped. She'd like to think that she'd *let* him walk her backwards onto the dance floor—although that would imply she still had some influence over her actions and she wasn't sure that she did.

'What about what *I* want?' The question was meant to establish some sense of control on her part, but she suspected that he knew what he did to her and had seen right through it.

He brought the hand holding hers towards her face and rotated it so that his knuckles gently drifted across her cheekbone. 'This *is* what you want, Princess.'

A cascade of sensations made her shiver and she told herself to tread carefully. Told herself that there was only one kind of man who parried around a woman all night and then approached her at the end. The kind her mother would have told her to steer well clear of. What it said about her wanting him regardless she didn't want to think about.

He was so sure. So confident. She should shoot him down in flames. Using his own pistol to do it.

Instead she braced herself against his magnetic sensuality and told herself she would walk away at the end of the song.

'One dance.'

CHAPTER THREE

DANCE? WOLFE DIDN'T want to dance with her. He wanted to possess her. And for a self-confessed non-game-player he had played a game of parry and retreat with her to rival all others.

Not intentionally.

His *intention* had been to avoid her. But once she'd entered the ballroom in a green dress that flowed around her body like a caressing hand he'd been lost.

Well, maybe not lost. More like mesmerised. And it had annoyed the hell out of him that he'd noticed that every other male in the room felt the same way. The married ones couldn't do anything about it, but the single ones had been lining up as if she was a participant in some secret speed-dating service.

He, on the other hand, had spent most of the night fighting the urge to muscle his way through the throng of wedding guests and throw her over his shoulder like the barbarian she had accused him of being. Hell, his body had been so attuned to hers he'd practically known every time she'd blinked.

Chemistry. He'd never experienced it quite so strongly. But he knew the quickest way to appease it would be to have her. So far he'd steadfastly stuck to his plan not to go near her but, hell, why not? He was only responding to her like any other healthy male who had held a beautiful woman in his arms and wanted

her. Nothing complicated about that. In fact it was so simple he didn't know why he was dwelling on it so much.

He would have had more to dwell on if he *hadn't* wanted her. And as for that instant tilting of the world he'd felt earlier when he'd caught her…well, it was only lust. Raw, pagan, blow-your-head-open lust. Perfectly rational. Perfectly normal.

Wolfe looked down into her face. her cheeks were pink and her lips were softly parted as she breathed shallowly. His gaze drifted lower, to the firm thrust of her breasts, her aroused nipples, and then back up. Her gaze was slumberous but slightly guarded, as if she too were a little taken aback by the strength of this thing between them.

Without making a conscious decision to do so, he spread his hand possessively over her hip, pressing her closer. He knew the minute she felt his hardness because she made one of those softly feminine sounds that had his body jerking in response.

It made him want to spear his hand in her upswept hair and drag her mouth to his, but at the last minute the sounds of the party still in progress penetrated his desire-drugged mind. Instead he cupped her chin in his palm and brought her eyes to his. 'I want you, Ava. I want to kiss you until you can't see straight and make love to you until you can't move. I've thought of nothing else all day.'

A shiver raced through her and Wolfe felt as if he was poised on the blade of a knife as he waited for her response.

'I…' She blew out a breath. Swallowed heavily. 'Okay.'

Exalted, and no longer questioning his need for her, Wolfe grabbed her hand and fought to keep his steps measured as he led her off the dance floor.

She'd been allocated a room in the east wing of the château and he didn't pause for breath until, on the second-floor landing, he felt a soft tug on his hand.

Turning, he watched her run her hands down the sides of her dress, the nervous gesture only serving to mould it closer. 'Wolfe.' She cleared her throat. 'I'm not sure this is such a good idea.'

Wolfe wasn't sure about anything except that the sound of his name in her husky, accented voice twisted his insides into a mess. A very hot mess. 'Not sure what is such a good idea? This?'

He backed her against the stone wall and raised his hands to frame her face. Then he used every ounce of skill he possessed and leant down to claim her mouth with his.

Immediately his senses became overloaded with the rich, intoxicating taste of her. He'd known it would be like this. Overpowering. Overwhelming. Her ruby lips were so much fuller and sweeter than he had imagined, and when she parted them and pressed closer the instinct to ravage her consumed him.

His fingers dug into her scalp to hold her steady as he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth to explore every corner.

'Wolfe, please…'

Her soft whimper of need inflamed him to the point of madness. He couldn't get enough of her. his hands shaped her

slender curves, desperate to delve under the dress, and he was keenly satisfied when she ardently returned his hunger. Her uncertainty of moments ago was flung into the flames of a desire so bright it burned him alive.

She was sensational, and he ground himself against her in ardent anticipation. He couldn't remember ever feeling this frenzy of need before, and it was just dumb luck that a door banged somewhere along the corridor and brought him back to his senses.

Fighting for control, he grabbed her hand again and didn't stop until they were both breathless and inside her bedroom, the door firmly closed behind.

He hit the light switch and stared at her.

She stood in the centre of the historically preserved room like a pagan offering, her lips already moist and swollen from his kisses. She sucked in a deep breath and he thought he saw a shadow of vulnerability chase itself across her face.

It gave him a moment's pause.

He had avoided thinking about a woman in any serious capacity his whole life, after having to clean up the damage his mother had caused by her actions. But this wasn't serious. Making love—having sex, he amended—with Ava de Veers was not a threat to his wellbeing in any way, shape or form.

It was about pleasure. Mutual, unadulterated pleasure. 'I like the light on,' he rasped.

She moistened her lips. 'I don't…mind.'

Satisfied that he knew exactly what he was doing, Wolfe shoved away from the door and paced towards her. He stopped a breath from touching her and gazed into her wide-spaced smoky eyes, searching out any further signs of apprehension, promising himself he would stop if she showed even a hint of uncertainty. Fortunately he didn't have to test that theory, because her gaze could have melted iron when it met his.

His iron will.

Shaking off the insidious devil of doubt that told him once was never going to be enough with this woman, he curled one hand around the nape of her neck and pulled her up onto her toes. She steadied herself by placing her hands on his shoulders. The air between them turned to syrup as she tilted her head back into his hand, presenting him with the elegant arch of her neck.

Wolfe felt his lip curl upward as he thought of the recent vampire craze in the cinemas. Suddenly he understood the draw. Lust pounded through his blood and he brought his other hand up to trace the tender skin she had exposed to his hungry gaze. She opened her eyes, stared into his, and then did something he hadn't expected—she took charge and pressed her lips to his.

He let her sip and nibble at his mouth for maybe ten seconds before that primal feeling she dredged up in him took over. Then his hands and lips firmed and he forced her mouth wide, demanding that she cede everything to him.

And she did. Without hesitation. Her slender arms snaking behind his neck, her body arching into his.

Wolfe told himself to ease off before he scared both of them, but her mouth angled more comfortably under his and he didn't know how it was possible but she took the kiss deeper. Wrapped her sweet tongue around his and made his head spin.

Without really being aware of his surroundings he wrenched his jacket off and pushed her fumbling fingers aside to tear at the buttons on his shirt. Shucking out of it, he welcomed the bite of cooler air on his overheated flesh and the layer of sensation it added.

He released the dark mane of her hair from its tight coil and felt his heart wrench as it cascaded past her delicate shoulders.

Ignoring the swirling emotions ebbing and flowing through his mind, he cupped her breasts and moulded them in his hands. Soft and round, the nipples already poking through the silky fabric of her dress like tiny diamonds. He kneaded and shaped her, his eyes on her face as he roughly dragged his thumbs across both her nipples at once.

'Oh, Wolfe. *Mon Dieu.'*

Her husky groan urged him to draw the hidden side-zipper of her dress down until her pale, perfect breasts stood proud and taut in front of him.

'Ava, you're—' He swore as words failed him and bent to draw a dusky pink nipple into his starving mouth. The taste of her made him throb, and when she clutched his head to hold him closer he gave up any pretense of finesse, scooping her into his arms and yanking off the ugly floral bedspread before depositing

her on crisp white sheets.

She leant up on her elbows and watched him through heavy-lidded eyes as he dragged the silky gown from her long legs and tossed it aside.

Wolfe took her in as he stripped off his remaining clothing: her wavy hair a dark ripple down her back, her sweet breasts rising and falling in time with her heavy breaths, her narrow waist, and the sheer purple panties that revealed more than they hid.

Her woman's scent rose up to tease him and he climbed onto the bed and came over her, his hands braced on either side of her face. 'Now, my lovely, I have you right where I want you.'

Her hands came up between them, curling into his chest hair. Her smile was full of womanly provocation. Her actions thankfully belying her earlier hesitation. 'You like to think you're in control, but I am stronger than I look.' She scratched her nails lightly against his skin like a cat.

She shuddered beautifully beneath him and turned her head to capture his mouth with hers. He groaned, sank into the kiss, let himself become absorbed by it. His free hand smoothed down over her torso, learning her wherever he went.

Her own hands were busy, stroking up over the muscles of his arms. When she pushed playfully against his shoulders he didn't budge. 'It feels like you're made of steel. You're completely immovable.'

'Where do you want me to go?' he growled with husky

promise. 'Up?' He kissed his way along her neck and bit down gently on her earlobe. 'Or down?' His tongue laved her collarbone and dipped lower, circling ever closer to the centre of her breast.

Her eyes glazed over with desire.

'Ava?'

'Quoi?' She arched off the bed, her breasts begging for his mouth.

'Which way?'

She gave a low moan as he continued to tease her, and when she wrapped one leg around his lean hip he guessed her intention and let her flip him onto his back. She pushed up until she straddled his waist. 'Now who's got whom exactly where they want them?' she said, a look of triumph lighting up her face.

Wolfe grinned and repositioned her until her hot centre cradled his erection. 'That would be me.'

'Ohhh.' Ava spread her palms wide over his chest. 'I know you think—'

Wolfe leant up and suckled one of her peaked nipples into his mouth, cutting off whatever she was about to say. Her wet heat was shredding his control and the time for banter was well past. 'I think you're sensational.' He switched to her other breast and realised that he meant it.

Usually a woman was content to let him lead all the play in bed, but this was much more fun. And the taste of her cherry-red nipples blew his mind.

While she was distracted by his mouth he smoothed his hand

down her belly and cupped her where she was open and already wet for him, her filmy panties no barrier to his questing fingers. Her eyes flew open as he found her and pushed a finger inside her slick centre. She cried out his name and balanced over him as she rocked against his hand.

Wolfe's erection jerked painfully but he forced himself to wait, enjoying having her at his mercy. Enjoying the astonished look of pleasure that came over her when he lightly circled her clitoris. And especially enjoying the way she flung her head back in ecstasy and screamed his name as she came for him.

He rode out her orgasm with her until her head flopped forward, her long hair falling around his face like a silky veil. Needing to be inside her with an urgency that was shocking, Wolfe flipped her onto her back, chuckling softly when she just lay there in silent supplication.

'At least I know how to get your absolute cooperation now.'

Ava pushed her hair back from her face and stretched sinuously. 'What did you just do to me?'

'I made you come.' He rolled on the condom he'd pulled from his wallet and nudged her thighs wider, entering her on one slow, luxurious thrust. 'And now I'm going to do it all over again.'

It took every ounce of control he possessed to keep his movements even and gentle until her body had grown accustomed to his size, but when he felt her completely relax and take all of him fully he couldn't hold back, driving them both to the edge of reason a number of times, until with a sob she gripped

his hips and forced him over the edge into a space that was so white-hot he felt as if their bodies would be fused for eternity.

His last coherent thought was, what did he do after an experience like that?

With sexual release came clarity, and Ava could barely believe what had just happened. Had she *really* just had sex with a man she'd met merely hours ago? A friend of Gilles's, no less?

Yes, she had. The evidence was still there in the tiny aftershocks of pleasure rippling through her core, not to mention the harsh breaths of the man lying beside her who looked as if he was choosing his best exit line.

She made a small sound in the back of her throat. 'I told myself I wasn't going to give in to this.'

Her voice had him rolling towards her and the bed dipped under his powerful frame. Ava's skin burned where his eyes raked over her, and as casually as she could she pulled the top sheet up to cover her nudity.

'Why did you?' His voice was gravelly. Sexy.

Was that a serious question? She'd done it because at the time she'd felt she didn't have a choice. As soon as he'd taken her into his arms she hadn't been able to help herself.

'Curiosity,' she said, the word sounding much better to her ears than, *I couldn't help myself*.

'That sounds a bit calculated.' His eyes narrowed as if he was assessing her. Judging her.

'Hardly.' Did he think she had set out to sleep with him?

Embarrassed by the thought, Ava wondered what happened now. Did they engage in polite conversation? Did he get up and leave? Well, he had to, because this was her room, but…

Unsure of herself, and hating the way that made her feel—as if she was standing in front of her father about to be told off for not living up to his expectations—she decided that she had no choice but to fall back on her usual tricks of feigned indifference or taking charge. Since indifference seemed too far out of her reach right now, she chose the latter.

'Please do not feel like you have to stay around because of me. You must be tired, and I'm not the sensitive type.'

Wolfe propped his hand on his elbow, a lazy smile curling his lips. 'This is your idea of pillow-talk?'

No. It was her idea of self-defence. She feigned a yawn. 'Or if you're not tired, I am.'

His golden-brown eyes grew flinty. 'Are you asking me to leave or telling me?'

'Isn't that what you were just thinking you should do?'

His eyes flickered from hers for the briefest of seconds, but it was enough for her to know she had been right in her assumption.

'Actually, I was thinking of inviting you out to dinner.'

His comment took her by surprise, and she was sure he was making it up. She swallowed heavily and pushed aside the tiny kernel of pleasure his words had imbued her with. 'I'd love to, but you're about five hours too late.'

He shook his head in amusement. 'Are you always this prickly

after a bout of hot sex?'

Ava swallowed. She didn't know. She'd never had sex like that before. The whole thing both alarmed her and set her body on fire in equal measure. What had happened to her promise only to go out with men who wanted the same thing she did? Love. A family.

Hating the feeling of uncertainty that had her in its tight grip, and hoping she appeared as casual as Wolfe, she let her eyes drift over his stubbled jaw and broad shoulders. When she noticed a small patch of puckered skin right beneath his collarbone she frowned.

'That was a bullet from a semi-automatic.'

Ava's startled gaze met his. Was he serious?

He'd said it as if he was ordering a sandwich from a deli.

'Ouch!' Keeping her voice light to match his as she noticed another scar lower down, she said, 'And this?'

He wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger and started to play with it. 'Shrapnel.'

She pointed to another small mark on his arm. 'Spurned lover?' she queried flippantly, understanding on some level that these wounds weren't badges of honour for him, but represented the deep pain and suffering brought by the uglier side of the life he had once led.

'Accurate sniper.'

He brushed the ends of her hair across her upper chest, where the sheet stopped. Ava felt goose bumps shimmer across her skin

and hoped he didn't notice.

'I take it you're not very good at your job?' she teased.

His eyes glittered with amusement. 'That's one way of looking at it.' He let go of her hair and replaced it with his fingers, his movements causing the fabric to drag across her sensitised breasts.

Anticipation made her body throb and, powerless to stop herself, she let her eyes drift lower, taking in the thin trail of hair that bisected his ripped abdomen and moving down towards the magnificent erection rising straight out from his body—which was when she saw a jagged white scar that ran along his outer hip towards his thigh.

Her attention torn between the two, she was only vaguely aware of him chuckling. 'You sure you want to know about that one?'

'The scar?'

'That, too,' he teased.

She shook her head. 'What happened?'

'An unfortunate rendezvous with a piece of barbed wire, thanks to one ferociously competitive younger brother. Not very glamorous.'

'Glamorous!' Her brows drew together. 'None of them are *glamorous!'*

'You'd be surprised how many women find them a turnon.'

She shuddered. 'I don't.'

'No?' He touched her face almost reverently, gently stroking

around the bump on her head that—thankfully—painkillers had taken care of.

Ava smiled and again surprised herself by touching her lips to his. Something flickered in his darkened eyes as she pulled back. It was some unnamed emotion, and the air between them seemed to pulse. She saw the instant Wolfe rejected whatever it was he was feeling and then, in a move that startled with its swiftness, she found herself flat on her back, with him once again braced over the top of her. He captured her hands in one of his and raised them above her head, the completely carnal smile on his lips making her heartbeat quicken.

'Wolfe, we probably shouldn't do this again,' Ava breathed, wishing there was a little more conviction behind her words.

Wolfe lowered his mouth to hers and nudged her thighs further apart with his knees, grabbed his last condom and slipped inside her wet, welcoming heat. 'We probably shouldn't have done it in the first place,' he said on a long groan.

CHAPTER FOUR

WOLFE SCOWLED AS he marched across the circular driveway of the château towards the outer cottage, the quartz driveway crunching loudly beneath his boots in the morning air. It was still early, the sky etched in palest blue with a ribbon of orange rimming the horizon.

Why the hell had he invited her to dinner? And would she take it to mean tonight?

He wasn't even meant to be in town tonight. He had a huge meeting first thing tomorrow morning in Hamburg. He didn't have time to wine and dine a woman. So he'd tell her. Apologise. Explain that he'd forgotten about the business meeting.

He winced inwardly. She'd no doubt think it was an excuse… but what else could he do?

An image of waking up beside her caused him to clench his jaw. After years of practice his body had clicked on just before dawn, and he'd come instantly awake to find a warm, sexy woman curled into his side, with her head cushioned on his numb shoulder and her hand curled over his heart, the soft skin of her upper back silky smooth beneath his rough hands.

No.

There was no way he could have dinner with her—tonight or any other night. The sex had been great—more than great—but he rarely visited Paris, and even if he did he'd have very little

time to see her again. And the last thing he needed was another ear-bashing from a woman who wanted more than he could give.

Would Ava be like that? Start accusing him of using her even though they'd both agreed on short-term? He didn't know. And then he almost missed a step as he realised that he and Ava hadn't agreed on anything Last night. They'd been too busy ripping each other's clothes off.

Wolfe grinned. Blew out a short breath. Last night had been something else. *She* had been something else. Hot beneath all that regal perfection. He knew if Gilles found out he'd slept with her he'd hop into him, but…His smile turned to a frown. Had Gilles ever held her so intimately? Come to think of it, had *he* ever held a woman so intimately after sex? Didn't he sleep on his stomach as a general rule?

No.

Entering into an affair with his friend's ex-fiancée wasn't going to work for either of them. Better to nip it in the bud now. Tell her it had been wonderful—more wonderful than he'd had in…What did that matter? It had been great. She had been great. But they were adults whose lives were vastly different.

Hell.

He stopped with his hand on the cottage doorknob.

He *had* to take her out to dinner. He might not have been one hundred percent truthful when he'd told her he had been thinking about asking her last night, but he wasn't a complete bastard. The least he could do after the night they'd shared was take her out

for a meal.

So, okay, they'd go out. He'd choose a nice little out-of-the-way restaurant, make her feel special, take her home, maybe finish the night off with more sex—not that *that* was a dealbreaker—then he'd leave and his world would be right again.

Nice and simple. Job done.

He turned the knob and greeted his men as he entered the cottage, not at all sure whether he should be bothered by the unusual level of excitement he felt at the thought of seeing her again.

Ava woke alone and realised immediately from the heat in the room that it was late. Then memory kicked in, facilitated by the lingering scent of Wolfe on the other pillow and the fact that she was naked.

She didn't know what had possessed her to sleep with him last night, but she knew she had definitely not been thinking with her head screwed on straight. No way would she have done all those things if it had been. No way would she have given herself so completely to a man she hardly knew if…A wicked thrill raced through her as images of Wolfe's magnificent body filtered through her mind and she frowned. She wasn't into cavemen, no matter how charismatic, and she had never been one to drool over a gorgeous face and body.

Before, a little voice chirped annoyingly.

Ever, Ava countered decisively.

She pushed her hair back from her face and smoothed

out some of the knots caused by Wolfe's warm fingers. Her core pulsed with remembered pleasure and she groaned at her body's willingness to relive every erotic moment. Yes, there was definitely something to be said about all the dips and bulges of warm, sold muscle, and the man certainly knew his way around the female body. But so he should. According to Anne, he had enough experience for ten men. And she didn't have time in her life for someone like that. She was over shallow hook-ups where the male wanted sex and the female wanted a relationship.

Last night had been…Last night had been sensational, yes. But it was an aberration. One of those things out of the box that you couldn't quite explain but you knew you probably shouldn't have done. Too much champagne, too much anxiety about being at the wedding, too much overpowering testosterone in the form of one blond, godlike male.

Jumping out of bed to distract herself, Ava winced as long-unused muscles registered all that godlike male possession. He was just so big. So strong. When he'd manacled her hands and held her prisoner…Ava shivered and rejected her body's instant softening. But he'd just played with her and then he'd left. His actions spoke more loudly than his words ever could.

That old insecurity she'd thought long gone raised its knobbly head like a sleepy dragon and yawned. But she wouldn't go there. She'd dealt with that childish feeling when she'd moved to Paris, and it was no longer relevant to who she was now.

Maybe this whole business—her father's phone call combined

with her emotional response to the wedding—had affected her more than she'd allowed herself to consider, made her act out of character.

Another one of Anne's comments snuck into her consciousness. 'Women drop like lemmings around him,' she'd said at lunch. 'But he lives a fast-paced life. According to Gilles, the man is never in the same city for longer than a few days at a time. It's like he's combing the globe for some holy grail.'

More like variety in his bed, Ava thought with a burst of asperity. And good luck to him. She hoped he enjoyed himself.

He did invite you to dinner, that devil's voice reminded her.

Yes, out of some sort of guilt, she told herself. He'd sensed her uneasiness after the sex and had made the invitation on the spur of the moment. It had been a nice gesture but his voice had lacked conviction. And his actions this morning only backed that up.

No.

She wouldn't be having dinner with Wolfe. He didn't really want to take her out and it would only be prolonging the inevitable. Also, she could think of nothing worse than forcing someone to do something they didn't want to do. That was her father's *modus operandi*, not hers.

Okay.

Shower. Get dressed. Hire a car. Drive back to Paris. She had a meeting with a new artist she was sure was going to be a pain in the backside but who had the potential of van Gogh and she

couldn't be late.

She didn't have time to dwell on a man who had taken as much pleasure as she had without any promises for the future.

When the right one came along she would know it, and until then—well, she was nearly thirty. She didn't have time to waste time on casual encounters with ripped Australian security experts. And if fate was kinder than it had been yesterday she wouldn't run into him this morning and would be spared the whole awkward morning-after thing.

Feeling more like her normal self after a shower, she smiled as she crossed the marble foyer and propped her small suitcase beside the front door. Bending down, she'd retrieved the thank-you note she'd written to Anne and Gilles, which she planned to leave with Gilles's butler, when she heard a dark voice behind her.

'Leaving so soon?'

Ava wheeled around, her hair flying over her shoulders in a slow arc. Wolfe stood in the arched doorway, ruggedly handsome in worn boots, black low-riding denims and a basic white T-shirt that drew her eye to every solid inch of him.

Placing her hand against her chest, Ava tried to smile into his hard face. 'You scared me.'

He crossed his arms over his chest. 'Obviously.'

'I…ah…' God, she sounded like a silly debutante! And why did he look so angry all of a sudden? It wasn't as if she had been the one to walk out on *him* before the birds had started chirping.

'I have a busy day lined up.'

Wolfe could tell instantly that Ava had put last night behind her. It was in the regal tilt of her head, the squared shoulders and the way her gaze didn't quite meet his. Not to mention the small, reserved smile she bestowed on him, as if all that had passed between them last night had been polite conversation instead of intimate body fluids. It was the same smile he'd seen her give plenty of other men the night before, and to say he felt infuriated by it would be a grand understatement.

He recalled the way she'd told him he could leave her room after sex. At the time he'd thought she had been politely trying to *give* him an out, but what if she'd been trying to *get* him out instead?

'On a Sunday?'

Her chin came up, most likely because of his sceptical tone. 'Yes.'

'And what about dinner?' he asked casually.

It appeared she had a guilty conscience, because her gaze cut to the left before returning to his. 'Tonight?'

Damn.

Wolfe read her meaning in that single word and knew she had no intention of having dinner with him, that night or any other. He didn't like it. 'Yeah. You, me, a bottle of red. Or do you prefer champagne?'

'Actually, I have a meeting with someone this afternoon, so I won't be able to make tonight.'

Someone she was sleeping with, perhaps?

Wolfe raked her slender figure in a floaty summer dress and lightweight sandals and tried to rein in his uncharacteristically possessive response as his mind immediately stripped her naked.

On some level he knew he was behaving completely irrationally. Really, he should be rejoicing that she didn't want to complicate things between them by prolonging the inevitable, because—well…he knew his interest in her would wane at some point.

'And it's probably better this way, don't you think?' she said a little too quickly.

'Better what way?' He refolded his arms and rocked back on his heels. No way would he make this easy for her.

Her gaze snapped irritably to his and then cast over him, lighting little bushfires in its wake. 'Better if we forget dinner. Forget last night.'

'Forget last night?' Wolfe wasn't sure if this had ever happened to him before. A woman waking up after a night of phenomenal sex who not only didn't want to have dinner with him but looked as if she never wanted to see him again either.

'Oh, come on, Wolfe.' Her slender hands fitted around her hips just as his had done last night. 'I'm sure this isn't a novel concept for you. In fact it's probably a relief.'

His eyes rose to hers as he forced himself to focus. A relief? Yes, it *should* have felt like a damned relief. The fact that it felt more like an insult only increased his aggravation.

'You think I pick women up and sleep with them every time I go out?'

'I don't know.'

And she didn't care, if he read her tone correctly.

'But why are we arguing? Did you want more from last night than just sex?'

He stiffened, suddenly uncomfortable as she turned the tables on him. Saying no just felt wrong, but…'No.'

She nodded quickly, as if she'd expected his answer. Wanted it, in fact. Did *she* do this all the time? Pick up men for a night of no-strings sex? The idea made his stomach knot.

'Great, so we're on the same page. Last night was lovely. I had a good time. Hopefully you did, too.'

She shrugged almost apologetically and he had an unpleasant moment of wondering if this was how women felt when he walked away from them. But then with all the previous women in his life he'd established the parameters from the start. Perhaps he was just reacting badly because this time he hadn't done that.

'What more is there to say?'

Ava's challenging question brought his mind back to her.

'Clearly nothing,' Wolfe ground out. 'You seem to have it all worked out.'

She mashed her lips together, as if confused by his tone, and Wolfe warned himself to stop being stupid. This was the perfect scenario, wasn't it?

The sound of footsteps coming down the grand staircase drew

his eye, and then he heard Ava swear in French.

'Gilles is coming. I don't want…Can we just pretend this never happened?' She tinkled a laugh. 'Yes, the wedding was gor—Oh, Gilles. *Bonjour*. Where's Anne?'

Wolfe thought about telling her never to try her hand at acting. She looked as innocent as someone trying to make off with the family jewels.

He narrowed his eyes as Gilles put his hands on her waist and gave her a kiss on each cheek, disturbed by the unexpected urge to pull him off her.

'As quaint as Anne finds the ancient staff bell in our room, it didn't work this morning—so I've been sent in search of coffee.'

'What a fantastic idea.' Ava nodded enthusiastically. 'I think I might join you.'

'You want one, Wolfe?' Gilles rubbed his eyes, as if he hadn't had much sleep.

Wolfe knew how he felt.

'No. I've had enough coffee to last me a lifetime.' Ava's pout firmed, and Gilles threw him a quizzical look.

Deciding it was past time he left, he shoved his hand into his pocket for his keys and felt the phone he'd put there to give to Ava.

'This is for you.' He held out a silver smartphone. 'I took the liberty of placing your SIM card into a spare after my men found yours broken in your car.'

'Oh.' She looked confused by the gesture. 'You didn't have to

do that.'

He knew he didn't. He'd wanted to.

He turned it on and passed it to her, before informing Gilles of his plans to hit the road earlier than he'd intended.

While Gilles tried to convince him to reconsider, Ava's phone beeped a string of incoming messages. They both turned to see her frowning at it.

Wolfe immediately felt his guard go up. 'What's wrong?'

'My father has left ten messages. Excuse me while I retrieve them.'

She dialled a number and pressed the phone to her ear at the same time as Gilles's butler hurried into the foyer.

Momentarily distracted when he handed Gilles a piece of paper, Wolfe returned his gaze to Ava in time to see the colour leach out of her face.

She turned almost blindly to Gilles, her breathing erratic. 'Frédéric has been involved in an accident. Gilles…' Her voice trailed off when Gilles looked at her, and if possible she lost even more colour. *'Quoi?'*

Wolfe didn't think she'd realised that she had reached out and was gripping his forearm in a talonlike hold.

Gilles shook his head as if in a daze.

Hell.

'I need to speak with my father. Find out what hospital he is in.' Ava's shaky hands fumbled with the phone, and it would have dropped if Wolfe hadn't swiftly bent to catch it.

'Ava, he's not in hospital.'

'*Ne sois pas absurde*, Gilles. The accident sounds serious.' She shook her head, unable to say more.

Wolfe cursed under his breath.

'Ava—'

'No.' She held up her hand and cut him off, backing away from both of them, so disorientated she would have bumped into the wall if Wolfe hadn't reached out and grabbed her by the elbows.

'Breathe, Ava,' he instructed levelly. 'In. Out. That's it.'

Her gaze cleared a little and her body went rigid as she pushed his hand away. 'I'm fine.'

Wolfe's mouth tightened. 'Give me the phone,' he ordered. 'I'll call your father.'

She swallowed heavily, her navy eyes bruised. He would have wrapped his arms around her then, pulled her in close, but she was so rigid she might as well have been wearing armour. He'd thought he'd sensed fragility in her—the same as he'd sensed last night—but if he had it was long gone.

Ignoring the voice in his head that told him he should butt out of her affairs and mind his own business, he scrolled through her phone. When he couldn't find an entry under 'Dad' or 'Father' he glanced at her. 'What's his name?'

'It's listed under "The Tyrant".'

Her chin came up, as if defying him to make a comment; the action told him that the moniker hadn't been given in jest. But was her father really a tyrant? Or was she just another spoilt little

girl who threw tantrums when things didn't go her way? And why did he even care?

Dumping a lid on the list of questions forming in his mind, he quickly dialled the number and introduced himself when the King answered on the first ring. 'Your Majesty, this is James Wolfe, head of Wolfe Inc. I have your daughter here. Yes, Gilles is with her. Ava?'

She took the phone with a shaky hand. 'Sir—'

Her voice trembled and despite trying to keep himself detached the sound of it cut Wolfe to the quick.

'Of course. *Oui*. I can get a flight. Yes. Okay.' She rang off and frowned at the phone as if she didn't know what it was doing there.

'Ava?'

She glanced at Gilles as if she didn't know what he was doing there either.

Shock. She was going into shock. Wolfe recognised the signs.

'I have to…' She gave a tiny shake of her head, collected herself. 'I…Frédéric has died. He…I have to organise a flight home.'

Gilles barely blinked, but Wolfe could see his friend's utter devastation below the façade of calm. 'Wolfe, can we borrow your plane?'

'Of course. But there's no we, Gilles. I'll take her.'

'Frédéric was a good friend. I'll—'

'You should be with Anne—'

'I can organise myself,' Ava cut in.

Wolfe's hands clenched into fists when Gilles put his arm around her shoulders. 'Don't be silly, Ava. You can't be alone at a time like this.'

'Shouldn't your priority be to your new wife and your house guests?' Wolfe hated himself for reminding Gilles so flatly. Hated himself for the stab of jealousy over a woman he'd never planned to see again.

'Would you two stop?' Ava demanded. 'I am more than capable of—'

'Getting on my plane and letting me escort you home,' Wolfe commanded.

She scowled up at him. 'I don't want to put you out.'

Wolfe didn't know if she was being stoic or just obstinate, but he knew he wasn't letting Gilles take her to Anders. 'Too late,' he growled.

When the butler approached Gilles again Wolfe stepped closer to Ava, invading her personal space. 'Is that your only suitcase?'

She stepped back. 'I told you before. I don't get off on barbaric men.'

Her view of him grated but he pushed his feelings aside. 'Do you really have time to argue?'

'No.' His words seemed to trigger something inside her and her eyes grew distant. She paced. Looked at Gilles and then turned back to him. 'Fine. You may take me.'

Wolfe mentally shook his head, almost awed at the way she'd

managed to turn her acceptance into an order.

Ava was functioning on autopilot and barely registered Wolfe buckling her seat belt while the plane taxied down the runway. Somehow he had got her to Lille and on board a plane without her conscious awareness of it.

Her brother was dead.

The news was shocking. Indescribable.

A helicopter accident. Ava couldn't think about it, her mind incoherent with grief. Her brother was the rock of the family. The future heir. He was five years younger than her and, while they had struggled to be close after her mother died, she had always looked out for him. Anticipated that he would always be there. He couldn't be gone. He was only twenty-four.

She shivered and felt a soft blanket settle over her shoulders. She clutched it.

Wolfe placed a glass of water on the table in front of her. 'Do you need anything else?'

She shook her head. 'I'm fine.'

'So you keep saying.'

But he didn't push it, and Ava was grateful. She watched him return to his seat. When he'd come across her in the foyer her heart had turned giddy at the sight of him. It had taken a lot of effort to remind herself that there was no point in seeing him again and even less in sleeping with him! His increasing anger at her response had thrown her a little but then he'd confirmed that, no, he didn't want more than sex from her, and she'd known she

had made the right decision.

After they arrived in Anders she would likely never see him again, and that fact made her feel instantly bereft.

Her mind linked the feeling with a time when she was fourteen and her father had continued with a state trip even though she'd been hospitalised with chicken pox. He'd monitored her condition from afar, as usual, but coming so soon after her mother's death his behaviour had done little to alleviate her loneliness and her sense of powerlessness at being alone.

That same sense of helplessness and loneliness engulfed her now, and she pushed it back. Her father would expect her to demonstrate more fortitude than that.

More childhood memories tumbled into her mind, like dice on a two-up table. Memories of Frédéric as a boy. Of her mother.

Rather than becoming *more* available after her mother's death from cervical cancer, Ava's father had withdrawn and focused on his work, seeming not to know how to connect with her. He had been fine with Frédéric. Ava had grown more and more resentful of the disparity in the way in which he treated his children, and more and more determined to show him that his views of women were archaic and demeaning.

But nothing she did ever seemed to be good enough for him. Perhaps if she'd been more like her mother, had been able to put his needs first, they might have seen eye to eye. But Ava couldn't. She had witnessed her mother's sadness whenever her father chose duty over family, and it had made her want something

entirely different for herself.

Now, with Frédéric gone—a thought that just wouldn't stick in her head—she was next in line to the throne. She could only imagine how her father must be cringing over that, and she felt slightly nauseous at the prospect of having to step into the role.

Wolfe's voice telling her to refasten her seat belt cut across her tumultuous thoughts, and she glanced outside her window and saw the Anders mountain range as they came in to land.

Imposing a rigid shut-down on her fears about being home, she blanked her mind and switched to cool indifference. From the plane doorway she could see her father's royal guard standing alongside a line of official black cars, and she nearly turned and asked Wolfe to restart the engine and fly her some place else. Really, she felt about as strong as a daisy in a hailstorm—and she hadn't even seen her father yet.

Sensing Wolfe directly behind her, Ava had a debilitating urge to turn and rush into his arms, have him tell her that everything would be all right. But that was weak, and Wolfe was the wrong man to lean on in this situation. She wasn't special to him, and he wasn't the type to sit back and go unnoticed. He was used to taking charge, and there was no way she was going to let him sideline her in front of her father. She had been handling things on her own for a long time now, and she could handle this, as well.

Images of last night, of falling asleep in his arms after their wonderful lovemaking, filtered through her mind and made her pause. Then the empty space he'd left in the bed that morning

intruded and stiffened her resolve. It would be a mistake to think she could rely on James Wolfe even for a short time.

'Thank you for the use of your plane but I can take it from here.'

'I told you I would take you home and I will.'

His hot toffee eyes glittered down at her dangerously, and his controlled voice told her he was as determined to have his way as she was.

'I am home.'

'Ava—'

'Wolfe. I'm fine. Really.'

'You don't look fine. You look like you're about to break apart.'

Did she? She'd have to work on that between here and the palace. Practising now, she squared her shoulders and stared him down. 'I'm not. I thought I told you already. I am not the sensitive type.'

Wolfe arrogantly slashed his hand in the air to cut her off in a move that was reminiscent of something her father would do. 'It's not open for discussion.'

That was *exactly* what her father would say, and *exactly* the reason she couldn't have Wolfe with her. That and the sudden sense that if she let him Wolfe would hurt her as Colyn never had.

'No. It isn't,' she agreed tightly, hardening herself against the sheer force of his will, the sheer force of her desire for him, which appeared to be even worse now that she had experienced

what passion really was.

For a moment neither one of them moved, facing off against each other like two adversaries in a gunfight.

Wolfe's mouth tightened as he made to turn away from her. Then his fist clenched and his eyes, when he brought them back to hers, were seething with frustration. 'You are without a doubt the most infuriatingly stubborn female I have ever met.'

His voice, for all its aggression, was as soft as silk and sent a flash of fire beneath the surface of her skin.

He was without a doubt the most beautiful, the most powerfully dangerous male she had ever met, and she was afraid she would dream about him for ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

'DID MATTHIEU SAY what my father wanted to see me about, Lucy?'

'No, ma'am.' Lucy, her new lady's maid, returned from the wardrobe with two jackets for her to choose from.

Ava shook her head and immediately felt terrible as Lucy's face fell. Two weeks home and she still wasn't used to being waited on hand and foot again. She felt sorry for the young girl whose services she'd barely used.

She glanced at her reflection and smoothed her messy ponytail. She hadn't done her hair properly in days, but her father had requested her presence and she would not let him see her as anything less than perfect.

'You don't like my choices, ma'am?'

'I love your choices.' She gave Lucy what she hoped was an appreciative smile. 'But it's hot. In fact, why don't you take the afternoon off? Go and see your boyfriend.'

The girl bobbed her head deferentially and Ava sighed heavily and headed out.

She hated being home.

Hated the cold stone walls of the palace that felt more like a prison. She had barely seen her father since she'd returned, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing—except she had barely seen anyone other than staff, and it had given her far too much time

to dwell on her grief.

Glimpsing bright summer sunshine through the long row of Gothic windows as she moved from one hallway to the next made Ava feel bleak. It just felt wrong. The sky should be grey, not blue.

Her brother was dead. The royal duties she had always shied away from were upon her, and there was no escape.

As her father had said, the people needed hope in these black times and she was it. They looked upon *her* to lift them out of the bleak mood caused by the loss of her brother—and, more than that, Ava now knew that her father was ill. One day, sooner than she had expected, she would be Queen—and the thought was completely overwhelming.

What did she know about running a country? Having all those people depend on her? It was criminal how little she knew, and even though that was mainly due to her father's chauvinistic views that women were trophies, not leaders, it gave her no pleasure that he now had to rely on her to preserve Anders' future as an economically viable entity.

And what of her gallery? It was closed for the whole of August, but she had dithered about what to do with it. Although of course she knew in her heart that she would most likely have to close it. It was devastating to think that the life she had built for herself could be so easily dissolved. As if nothing she had done in Paris mattered.

Steadying her breath, she hid her pangs of dismay and a

gnawing sense of foreboding behind a smile as she stepped inside her father's plush outer office and greeted his personal assistant.

'He's waiting, Your Royal Highness.'

'Thank you, Matthieu.'

She tried to relax her face as Matthieu opened an inner door and Ava saw her father, as always, behind his enormous rosewood desk. He looked pale and more drawn than usual, and Ava tried to keep her immediate concern from showing in her voice. 'You wished to see me?'

'Yes, Ava. Take a seat.'

'You're starting to worry me, sir,' she said, sitting in one of the leather-bound chairs opposite, wondering why he had greeted her in English. 'Have you received bad news from your physician?'

'No.' Her father's response was clipped. 'I've received disturbing news from the security expert who brought you home from France.'

Wolfe?

Ava's heart leapt behind her rib cage as an image of him that seemed all too close to the surface of her mind clouded her vision. For two weeks he had filled her thoughts right before sleep took her, and he was the first thing she thought of when she woke up. Even on the morning of Frédéric's funeral, when she had felt at Her lowest.

Ava sighed. She really needed to stop thinking about those hours they'd spent in bed together. Her dreams of him left her feeling weak and needy, and the man probably couldn't even

remember her name, let alone conjure up her image in his head.

Unlike her good self, who could not only conjure up his image oh, so easily, but his scent as well—woodsy and masculine. It was so vivid that he might as well have been in the room with her right now.

'What does Wolfe have to do with anything?'

She had tried to keep the query light, but a sudden fear that her father knew that she had slept with him came at her from left field. Surely Wolfe hadn't told anyone? The tabloids? Could her father's health withstand a salacious story about her at this time?

'I have to do with a lot of things, Your Royal Highness.'

The deep, familiar drawl from the man filling her head space had her twisting around in her seat to where he stood across the room, his body half turned away, as if he'd been doing nothing more than studying the scenery outside the high arched windows.

'But in this case it's about your safety.'

Her eyes drank in his beautifully cut black trousers and white dress shirt that pulled tight across his wide shoulders. He'd had a haircut, the shorter style drawing even more attention to the roguish quality of his perfect bone structure.

Those remembered toffee eyes were fixed on her face, touching her mouth ever so briefly, and Ava felt singed all the way through.

'What about my safety?' She hated that she sounded as breathless as she felt.

'Monsieur Wolfe has some news concerning your car crash at

Gilles's château.'

She heard the underlying censure in her father's tone and guessed that he was angry she hadn't told him about the accident herself, but she had no time to ponder that as Wolfe prowled towards her, his loose-limbed gait impossibly graceful for a man his size.

He effortlessly dominated the large room and as he drew closer she realised that her heart was racing. He, of course, could have been a mummy for all the emotion he displayed.

Using years of practice to keep her expression from revealing any of her inner turmoil at having this man—her one-night lover—in the same room as her father, Ava forced herself to maintain eye contact with him. 'Such as?'

'Yesterday I spoke to the mechanic who repaired your car,' he informed her, a touch of fierceness lining his words.

'Why would you do that?'

'A hunch.'

'A hunch?'

'Yes. One that paid off. You didn't crash because of a loss of concentration. You crashed because a vial of potassium permanganate mixed with glycerine had been dropped into your brake master cylinder.'

Ava's brow furrowed. 'Is there a layperson's version of that?'

'Your brakes were tampered with.'

Did he mean deliberately? 'Maybe they were worn.'

'Yes. With a special chemical compound that, when it got hot

enough, rendered your brakes useless.'

Ava struggled to digest what he was saying. 'You think my car was deliberately sabotaged?' The very idea was ludicrous. It was true that Anders had once experienced conflict with the neighbouring country of Triole, but that had died down years ago. Her brother had even been set to marry the young Princess of Triole when she came of age.

'Not only that,' her father interjected. 'We now know that Frédéric's helicopter crash was not an accident either.'

'What?' Ava's startled gaze flew to her father. 'I…How is that possible?'

Wolfe's voice was hard when he answered. 'A section of the rotor was altered in such a way that the pilot had no chance of detecting it.'

'You're suggesting Freddie was *murdered?'*

'Not suggesting. Stating. And whoever did it went after you, too.'

Ava reflexively pressed her hand into her stomach. This was too much to take in. 'But that is absurd. Who would do such a thing?'

'Enemies. Freaks. Stalkers. Shall I go on?' His tone was deadly serious.

'Monsieur Wolfe has kindly agreed to investigate that side of things.'

'Wolfe.'

He'd corrected her father. Something no man ever did. Half

expecting him to put Wolfe in his place, she was surprised when her father nodded.

Men!

'Really? You volunteered?' Ava didn't bother hiding her incredulity. 'Why would you do that?'

'Ava!' Her father's reprimand at her outspokenness was loud and clear in the still room. 'Wolfe hasn't volunteered. I have hired him.'

Of course. She thought asininely. *Why would a man who keeps his affairs short and shallow volunteer to help out a woman he is clearly finished with?*

It galled her to recall just how many times she had checked her mobile phone for a missed message from him over the past weeks. She could have called him, she supposed, but pride had stopped her from even considering it. Calling him would only prove that she hadn't been able to move on from their night together while he had.

'Why would you do that, sir?' Ava turned her back on Wolfe to try to block out the overwhelming physical attraction she still felt for him. 'Why not use the local police?'

'It's a question of trust, Your Highness,' Wolfe answered.

His frigid formality made her feel despondent, and that in turn made her feel annoyed. 'We don't trust our own police force now? We're a peaceful nation, *Monsieur* Wolfe,' she said, stamping her own formality on the situation. 'No political uprisings anywhere.'

'True. But in this situation you don't know who is intending

to hurt you. I won't.'

His tone was bold and confident and she wished she shared his assurance. After the way she had dreamt about him for two weeks she wasn't so sure. Although she did believe he wouldn't hurt her in the way he was referring to.

His thick lashes acted like a shield against his thoughts and Ava couldn't wait for the meeting to end. 'I'm not sure I believe this.' She appealed to her father. 'It could just be coincidence.'

'Chemical compounds kind of mitigate that possibility, Your Highness.' Again Wolfe answered for her father.

'I trust Wolfe's judgement on this, Ava.'

Over her own? What a surprise.

'Fine.' She waved her hand dismissively. 'Is that all, sir?' She needed to get out. Back to the sanctuary of her suite. Wolfe's steely indifference was like a red rag to her overly sensitised senses.

On the one hand she was glad he was treating her like a stranger, but it made her feel inadequate when all *she* could do was remember the feel of his body when it had been joined to hers, his hands on her skin, his mouth…Oh, his mouth!

And Frédéric had been *killed*. Someone might be trying to kill her as well…

'No, that is not all.' Her father brought her attention back to him. 'Wolfe has also been hired as your personal bodyguard for the duration of the investigation.'

The breath stalled in her lungs and the room spun. 'I don't

think I heard you correctly, sir.'

Neither did Wolfe.

Her *personal* bodyguard?

He glanced at Ava's shocked expression and hoped his own didn't mirror it. The King had requested that he organise personal security for her, not that he be responsible for her himself. He didn't have time for that kind of grunt work on top of his corporate responsibilities. And guarding a woman who already occupied too much of his head space was not something he'd let any of his staff do.

'I know you don't like security being assigned to you Ava,' the King said. 'But things have changed. You are now the Crown Princess and you need to be protected at all times. This situation highlights how important that is.'

'Yes, but we have our own security detail.'

Her father sighed, as if he was settling in for a familiar battle. 'I believe hiring an outsider is the best course of action until this situation is resolved. Wolfe comes highly recommended and is a personal friend of Gilles.'

'I disagree.'

Determination vibrated through her voice and got Wolfe's back up.

The skin on the back of his neck prickled and he resisted the urge to rub it; he was a master at not giving in to those physical signs that demonstrated when a man was under extreme stress. He had tried to convince himself that his sleepless nights

with Ava on his mind were just because he had a niggle about her accident. he'd assumed that once that niggle had been investigated and the King was apprised of the danger surrounding his daughter he'd be able to re-establish his normal routine.

The driving need that had hit him in the gut as soon as Ava had stepped into the room made a mockery of that. It wasn't ruminations over her accident that had kept him awake—and hard—for the past two weeks. It was her.

Absently Wolfe wondered if she had relived their night together as much as he had, and whether she'd be interested in taking up where they had left off.

What?

He silently mocked his wishful thinking. By the look of her she'd prefer to run him through with one of those swords lining the King's private study.

Maybe he just needed to get laid.

And, no, not with her. If he took her on as a client—

'Wolfe is clearly too busy, sir. But I'm sure there's another person out there just as capable.'

She was right about him being too busy, Wolfe thought, but there really was no one else he would trust with her life.

Feeling that he no longer had a choice, he gave the King a curt nod of acceptance.

'No!'

The King cut an irritated look at his daughter. 'Ava, this is not open for discussion. My word is law, and it's time you realised

that you have a responsibility, a *duty*, to your country. You *will* do it.'

Did that mean she didn't want to? Wolfe wouldn't have been surprised. He understood the fickle nature of women better than most.

She stood beside the window with her arms crossed and the afternoon sun turning her hair a deep glossy brown. Wolfe could feel her frustration, her fury, in every tautly held muscle of her slender body.

His own body flushed with heat as he took her in, and he couldn't help resenting the effect she had on him. He didn't want to be this caught up by the sight of a woman. *Ever*.

'I'll need absolute control,' he said, overlaying unwanted thoughts with the professionalism he prided himself on. 'Access to everything.' Wolfe addressed his words to the King. 'Every nook and cranny and secret entrance and exit to the castle. Ava's diary. Her itinerary. I'll employ my own chef to do her meals, and I want the final word on everything she does and every person she sees.'

'You're asking a lot.'

Wolfe knew what the King was saying. *This is my daughter and you'd better not stuff up*. 'Yes, I am.'

'Perhaps Monsieur Wolfe would like my firstborn, as well?' Ava said, injecting her voice with bored insolence, tapping her foot agitatedly on the marble floor.

The King nodded his agreement before addressing his

mutinous daughter. 'I have organised a ball in your brother's honour this coming weekend and you will need security for that.'

'It's too soon,' Ava whispered softly.

Her arms enfolded her waist in a protective gesture her father didn't seem to notice, but it tugged at some unwanted place inside Wolfe's chest.

'It's not too soon. And the ball is not only to honour your brother's life—it is to find you a husband.'

A *husband?*

Wolfe's eyes locked on Ava's face, which had suddenly turned ashen. His own gut felt as if it was twisted up with his intestines, and a flash of adrenaline rushed through his system as if he'd just been physically assaulted.

'I can find my own husband, sir.'

'Not now that you're Crown Princess, you can't,' the King rasped. 'The stakes have been raised, Ava, and you've had more than enough time to find a suitable partner and Anders badly needs a celebration *and* an heir.'

The tension in the room as Ava stared at her father could have cracked the Arctic shelf. Wolfe thought of the island paradise he had planned to visit next week, after his round of meetings. The warm sparkling blue waters of the North Atlantic. A new set of sun loungers that edged one end of his lap pool.

'Do I even need to be in attendance, sir?' Ava stared down her nose at her father with bored enquiry. 'I'd hate to mess around with your plans.'

The King's eyes hardened. 'Don't be smart, Ava. You have a duty to do. You know that.'

'And is it *my* fault that I am entirely underprepared to carry out that duty?' she retorted.

Her words were underscored by a subtle vulnerability that called to every one of Wolfe's protective instincts and threatened his determination to remain detached from everything at all times. It was an aspect of his nature that had never been challenged before—regardless of what he had seen and experienced. It was the reason he had acquired his nickname.

Instead of following that troublesome thought down what could only be a dead-end street set with an ambush, he focused on what he could see and hear. The facts.

'You chose to run around Paris for eight years.' The King's face had the motley hue of a man on the edge.

'Because I didn't have any choices *here,'* Ava returned icily.

'I won't argue with you, Ava. You need a husband. Someone who understands the business and can support you when you need it.'

Wolfe noticed the King's hand shook slightly as he picked up his water glass. 'Wolfe, if you would accompany my daughter back to her quarters? I'm sure you'll want to get started on the best way to carry out your duties as soon as possible.'

Wolfe wasn't sure about anything right now except two things. His need for this woman was stronger than it had ever been, and taking on the role of her personal bodyguard was absolute

insanity.

Ava rounded on him as soon as he'd followed her into her private sitting room. *"I'll need absolute control. Access to everything."* She mimicked his voice, her tone scathing. 'Are you kidding me?'

Wolfe couldn't stop himself from running his eyes over her slender curves as she stopped in the middle of the room, her body vibrating with tension.

Had she lost weight?

He studied her face. Her cheeks were flushed, her mouth was tight and she had dark smudges under her eyes that told him she had been sleeping as poorly as he had. All the same, she looked magnificent, and he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her so soundly it was all he could do to remain where he stood. 'It's for your own good.'

'According to some so is whale oil, but you won't find me firing a harpoon any time soon.'

Wolfe sighed, realising this meeting was going to be even more difficult than he had anticipated. 'Ava, this doesn't have to be awkward.'

She paced away from him and then turned back sharply. 'Don't mistake my fury for awkwardness, Wolfe. I can't believe you've agreed to take this job.' She paused and locked her eyes on his. 'You know, if you wanted to see me again you could have just picked up the phone.' Her navy eyes glittered challengingly.

'My taking this job has nothing to do with whether I want to

see you again. And I believe it was you who cancelled dinner,' he reminded her stiffly.

She gave a dismissive shrug. 'I didn't see the point in going out with you when it was a spur-of-the-moment request made out of guilt.'

Wolfe contemplated her answer. Was that why she'd cancelled? 'It wasn't guilt.'

She arched a brow. 'No? So why run off so early? I don't even think the birds were up when you left.'

Wolfe's mouth tightened at the insouciant boredom he heard in her voice. It was the same tone she'd used with her father before. 'I left because I had to provide last-minute details to two of my men before they left on another job.' And he'd wanted to surprise her by replacing her damaged phone with one of his.

Her eyes flicked to his briefly, as if she hadn't considered that. But why would she? In hindsight, it had probably looked bad to her, waking up alone after the passionate night they had spent together. Which, he acknowledged to himself now, was another reason he'd left. He'd woken up with such a strong sense of wellbeing his instinct had been to pull back. It was so ingrained in him he hadn't even thought to question it at the time. Hadn't *wanted* to question it. Now, looking at it from her point of view, her reactions that morning made more sense.

'I'm sorry if I hurt you,' he murmured sincerely.

Ava's chin came up and her eyes shot sparks at him. 'Hurt me? You didn't *hurt* me, Wolfe.'

Wolfe's mouth tightened at her vehemence.

'Quite the contrary. In fact you did me a favour, because I didn't have time to have dinner with you and…' She shrugged again. 'It's too late now anyway.'

Was it?

Yes, of course it was.

'You're right.' For one thing he was now her bodyguard and she was his client, and for another he wanted her just a little too much for comfort. 'That ship has definitely sailed.' Wolfe paced the length of an antique rug, agitated by the situation he had inadvertently created for himself. 'And your father wants you to marry!' Which would effectively remove her from his orbit altogether.

'Something you'll never do!' The heated statement was almost a question.

'Something I'll never do,' he agreed. He'd spent his adult life avoiding that particular institution, and he'd never felt any need to reconsider his views.

Ava nodded sharply, as if somehow his response had been predictable, and Wolfe ground his teeth together. This situation —his total physical awareness of this woman, his total *agitation* at this woman—was going to make his job almost impossible. Never before had he felt as if he was at the mercy of his emotions as he did with Ava, and he hated the feeling that he was not as in control as he would like to think he was. So much for his old nickname. Thank God his army mates couldn't see him now!

Ava started pacing in front of the high bevelled windows again, as if she had too much energy that was searching for an outlet. Her fitted trousers pulled tight across the rounded curves of her backside.

'You do realise if my father knew of our history together there is no way he would let you guard me?'

Wolfe brought his attention back to her face. 'So will you tell him or will I?' he asked silkily, irritated with himself and with her hot-headed stubbornness. She threw him a look and he swiped a hand through his hair. 'Will you just sit down?'

'Another order? Let me just set you straight on something, Monsieur Wolfe.' She set her hands on her sexy hips. 'If you think I am going to do everything you tell me to do you have another thing coming.'

Her accent had thickened with her agitation and it drove his mind right back to the bedroom.

Wolfe released a slow breath. 'Believe it or not, I'm trying to help you.'

'Oh, that's right—my own personal protector.'

He crossed his arms and waited for her to run her anger out, determined not to get into any more arguments with her.

Seeming to sense his newfound resolve, she prodded at it like a child poking its fingers inside a lion's enclosure. 'So, do I get to order you around, as well?'

'I work for your father.'

Her gorgeous mouth thinned. 'Two peas in a pod. How cosy.'

'All that energy you're burning up is just going to tire you out unnecessarily,' he offered amiably.

'You should be glad I'm using it up on pacing,' she snapped.

Wolfe's body caught fire at her words. *Down, boy*. She didn't mean *that* was an alternative. It would probably never be an alternative again after today. No, it definitely *couldn't* be.

He watched her ponytail trail over the soft skin of her neck before he sat on the edge of the low, plump sofa that was surprisingly modern in a room that dated back centuries. 'Take your time. I have all night.'

She crossed her arms over her chest, pushing her breasts up so they swelled just above the opening of her shirt. 'Well, I don't. So I'd like you to leave.'

'I need to ask you a few questions first.'

'You're really pushing your luck.'

'Maybe we should clear the air about that night at Gilles's wedding.'

'Us having sex, you mean?'

Her cool indifference again made him wonder just how many other men she had spent the night with, and the fact that he was at all interested only added another layer of heat to his spiralling annoyance. Was she just like his mother, willing to slake her lust whenever the urge arose and with any man handy? The thought made him sick.

'Yes.'

Her eyebrows rose at his churlish tone and she leant back

against the windowsill. 'What's to clear up? Have you forgotten how it's done?'

'Ava—'

'Oh, don't worry, Wolfe. I'm not about to strip off my clothes and ask for a repeat. Unless that's what *you* want? Is that why you took the job?' Her voice dropped, lowering to a sultry purr. 'Are you going to order me to take my clothes off, Monsieur Wolfe?'

'I don't sleep with my clients,' he informed her sternly, ignoring the lie his body's response begged him to make of that statement.

She raised a mocking brow. 'My father will be chuffed to hear that. He's not into men, as far as I know. Although every family has their secrets.'

Her unexpected humour broke the rising tension between them and Wolfe laughed. 'Tell me, Princess, what is it about me being your bodyguard that you hate the most if it isn't our history?'

She threw him a droll look. 'Do you have a spare year?'

Wolfe took a deep breath and offered up an olive branch. 'Why don't we start over?'

'Pretend we've never met?' she asked, somewhat dubiously.

'If that works for you.'

She shrugged. 'As long as you don't order me around I can do that.'

Could she? He wasn't sure he could. 'Good. Take a seat.' He spoke briskly, indicating the sofa opposite him. 'I need to ask you

some things to help my investigation.'

When she didn't move Wolfe frowned. Was their ceasefire over so soon?

'Ava?'

'You can call me ma'am. And I believe you just issued another order?'

Yes, perhaps he had.

'So did you,' he ground out.

'You didn't say I couldn't order *you* around.'

'Av—Dammit, you need to cooperate or I can't do my job.' His mind conjured up the last time he'd teased her by telling her that he knew how to make her cooperate and he swallowed. Hard.

'So quit.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I've given my word to your father and there's no one else I'd trust with your safety.'

'What do you care about my safety? We're strangers.'

Wolfe sucked in a silent breath. Seriously, The woman would try the patience of a saint. Reminding himself to keep control, he settled back more comfortably on the sofa. The cat sleeping in the corner rose and stretched, sniffed him and then crawled onto his lap.

'Hey, mate.' He stroked it absently. 'You look like you've seen better days.'

'He belonged to my mother.' Her mouth turned down slightly

at the corners, indicating that she was still affected by the loss. In some way he envied the fact that she cared.

The cat nudged his hand. 'I take back what I said,' he told the cat. 'You're in top condition for a man your age.'

He looked up to find Ava watching him. When their gazes collided she flushed, and he wondered what she had been thinking.

'I think I hate you.'

Well, that was definitive, and unfortunately the feeling wasn't mutual. 'I'm not your enemy, Ava,' he said softly.

The words *but someone is* lay unspoken between them.

Her shoulders slumped as if she had the weight of the world bearing down on her. 'Can't my father answer your questions?'

'That depends on whether he knows anything about your love-life. From what I saw of the interaction between you two before I would have said you're not that close.'

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'Why do you want to know about my love-life?'

'Everyone in your sphere will be investigated.'

'Even you?'

'I have an alibi for the night Frédéric was killed.'

'Really?' She finally sat down and crossed her legs. Slowly. 'What is it?'

Wolfe regarded her wryly. 'And I don't have any motive for wanting to kill you.'

Yet.

She smiled, clearly sensing his frustration. 'Am I getting to you?'

'You don't want to get to me, Princess.'

'No, I want you to quit.'

'Get over it.'

Suddenly her gaze turned serious. 'Are you planning to investigate my artists?'

'Of course.'

'Be nice. Some of them are sensitive.'

'Unlike you?' It was both a statement and a question.

'Unlike me.'

He didn't believe her. Just the fact that she cared about her artists told him more than anything else. And then there was the look of concern that had briefly crossed her face when she'd first walked into the King's office. She had a heart. She just guarded it well. He could relate to that. He'd put his in a box years ago, and that was exactly where he intended it to stay. It was a timely reminder to keep his head on straight around this woman. She got to him as no one else ever had, and that made her dangerous and him volatile.

'Who was your last lover?'

She threw him a look.

'Before that,' Wolfe said gruffly.

Her eyes widened. 'You want a list?'

No, he did *not* want a damned list. 'Yes.'

She looked as if she was about to tell him to take a hike. 'A

lovely American took my virginity when I was eighteen because he thought it would be fun to bed a European princess. Then I met a novelist who wanted to write the great Parisian novel. We were quite serious—unbeknown to my father—but three years ago I realised that we weren't after the same thing and we broke up.'

Wolfe could tell that both men had hurt her and he wanted to run them through with a blunt instrument.

'Did you love him?' The question was irrelevant and he hoped she wouldn't pick up on that.

'How is that relevant?'

Damn. 'If you're going to question me at every turn this won't work.'

'I already know it won't.'

'Ava…'

She huffed out a breath. 'I thought I did at the time. Now… I'm not so sure.'

He wanted to ask what had happened since to make her question that but he wasn't sure he really wanted to know. 'And since then?'

The look she gave him made his stomach knot.

'Apart from the Anders football team…' She recrossed those long legs in the other direction and stared straight at him. 'You're the lucky last, Monsieur Wolfe.'

Wolfe sucked in a litre of air at her admission, ignoring her snipe about the football team. How had he so completely misread

her? But he'd known, hadn't he? He'd needed to believe she was as sophisticated and jaded in the art of seduction as he was. It had made it easier to let her go after the night they'd spent together. Made it easier to believe that what was between them was nothing more than mutual biological gratification. Not that it had worked exactly…

He stood up and startled the cat, who promptly jumped down and crossed to Ava. She reached down, her movements as graceful as the animal she scooped into her arms to cuddle.

'I'll need to see your itinerary for the next few days,' he said gruffly.

She didn't look up. 'I'll have Lucy forward it to you tomorrow morning.'

Wolfe moved to the picture window and stared out at the acres of grass that ringed the palace to the sprawling mountains beyond. Incredibly, he was thinking how happy he was that she'd never slept with Gilles.

Hell.

If he was going to protect her he had to stay on task. He had to stop thinking of her as a person. As a desirable woman. And he especially had to stop thinking of her marrying some stupid fool her father was planning to choose for her.

CHAPTER SIX

AVA WASN'T SURE how she was supposed to find a husband when she compared every man she came across to Wolfe. Not that she had taken her father's oppressive statement seriously. She had no intention of letting herself be bullied into a convenient marriage just to suit his wishes. Not on something this important.

Fortunately she was getting a reprieve from having to pretend to go along with it in the arms of her debonair cousin Baden.

'Quite the *soirée* your papa has put on for you, cuz.'

'Yes,' Ava agreed flatly, glancing around the gilt-edged ballroom filled to the gills with beautifully attired guests. Alcohol consumption had lifted the mood considerably since the beginning of the night, and even though she hated being here she had to admire her father's opportunistic streak.

He was a man who didn't stop until he got what he wanted. And he wanted her married, it seemed. In a hurry. Of course the supreme and lately suppressed romantic in her knew that there was every possibility she would meet someone tonight and fall in love at first sight. After all it had happened to Anne and Gilles. But…Her eyes drifted to Wolfe, standing nonchalantly towards the back of the room.

There was her problem, right there.

He was supposed to look like one of the guests. Undercover.

What he looked like was a man who could kill with his bare hands and not put a crease in his bespoke tuxedo. But perhaps that was only because she knew it was true. Perhaps to the other women watching him so closely he just looked like a sexy, rakish male who was good in bed. Something else she knew to be true…

As if sensing her appraisal, he meshed his eyes with hers. Ava felt the impact of his stare from across the room. She couldn't fathom the effect he still had on her. It was instantaneous and totally consuming. She sensed that he felt it, too, but he had much more control over it than she did. Or the attraction just wasn't as strong for him as it was for her. Given that he was only here because her father was paying him, she put more weight on the latter.

And at night dreamt of shedding him of the former…

'Who is he?'

'Who?' Ava gripped Baden's hand and swung him so that Baden had his back to Wolfe.

'The cowboy leaning against the wall who hasn't taken his eyes off you all night.'

Ava glanced over Baden's shoulder as if she was searching for whoever he was talking about. 'I don't see anyone special, but then Father has every single man on the planet in attendance tonight. How are you enjoying the evening?'

Baden scoffed. 'It's a little soon after Freddie's death, but… You're trying to change the subject, dear cousin. There's a story here you don't want me to know about. Come on.' He tickled

her ribs as he'd used to do when they were children. 'Tell Cousin Baden.'

'Arrête, Baden. This is hardly the place.' Ava hadn't meant to snap, but Baden wasn't the most socially savvy individual at the best of times. 'You're letting that wild imagination of yours run away with you again.'

'I don't like him.'

'I don't either,' she grumbled, knowing that it wasn't dislike she felt for James Wolfe, but something else entirely.

If only he wasn't so arrogant. So self-assured. So lethally male. Ava sighed. Who was she trying to kid? She loved those aspects of Wolfe's nature. Colyn had never been so overcome with passion that he had dragged her from a dance floor and kissed her senseless the way Wolfe had.

'You slept with him, didn't you?' Baden mused. 'I can see it in your eyes.'

Pressing her fingers to her forehead, Ava wondered if it was possible for a headache to materialise out of thin air. 'Please, Baden…' There was no way she was going to confirm anything to her blabber-mouth cousin. 'Keep your voice down.'

'You don't want your papa to find out?'

'He's…' Ava struggled to come up with some plausible reason as to why Baden might see Wolfe around the palace over the next little while without informing him as to why he was really here. 'He's trying out for a staffing position, I believe.'

'You slept with the hired help. You naughty girl.' Baden

laughed. 'Not that I can't see the attraction. All that hard muscle!'

Ava cringed as she realised that Wolfe had moved to within hearing distance. 'Would you *please* keep your voice down?' she pleaded.

'What position is he going for?'

'I don't know and I don't care. Ask Father.' Ava knew that he wouldn't, because he had never had an easy relationship with her father.

Baden sipped his wine. 'How is the old tyrant bearing up?'

Relieved to be talking about anything other than Wolfe, Ava latched on to the change in topic. 'You never know with Father. But honestly I think he's in denial. Hence the party tonight.' She swept the lavish ballroom with a rueful glance.

'And you? How do you feel about being Anders' first Queen?'

Baden knew her life at the palace had never been easy. It had always been something that had bonded them together since he had lost his own father, her father's twin brother, when he was five. Then his mother had deserted him, taking his baby sister with her, and he hadn't seen either of them since.

'Oh, I'm definitely in denial.' She gave a dismissive shrug, not wanting to dwell on the future when she still had no answers about how to handle it. 'Can you excuse me? I need the powder room. Why don't you ask the lovely Countess over there to dance?'

Baden followed her gaze and raised an eyebrow. 'Because she's ugly.'

'Baden!' Ava rebuked him again. 'That's a terrible thing to say.'

'If you don't like the truth, don't get in the way of it.'

Ava gave him a look that told him exactly what she thought of his tasteless comment, and then kept her gaze down as she wound her way purposefully through the throng of guests. She didn't have a specific destination in mind but somewhere quiet and—

'I told you not to go outside.'

The sound of Wolfe's deep voice directly behind her shimmered down her spine.

Ava looked up and realised she had been so preoccupied with Baden's horrible comment that she had walked outside the glass doors leading to her mother's rose garden. A golden moon hung like an enormous balloon on the horizon, and fairy lights twinkled strategically from various trees and bushes, giving the summer evening an ambient glow.

'I needed some air.'

'Is it any wonder?'

She stopped walking and looked back at him. 'What does that mean?'

'It means I'm surprised you're still standing after all the dancing you've done. Husband-hunting looks like difficult work.'

Ava glared at him. Really, she wasn't in the mood for the uncivilised version of Wolfe tonight. 'Why are you even here still?' she asked, her English skewed by her testiness. 'I thought you were the best, but so far you haven't come up with anything, and it has been a week already.'

A long week, in which she had once again locked herself in her

room in a petulant sulk. Partly she still wasn't ready to embrace the duties her father wanted her to take on, and partly she had been hoping that Wolfe would get so bored he would quit.

'Unfortunately the invitation I put out over the internet for the bastards responsible to come forward hasn't seemed to work. Maybe I'm losing my touch.'

'Maybe you never had it.' As soon as the words were out she regretted her provocative tone because his golden eyes sparkled with amusement. 'Now, that's just plain nasty, Princess. Fortunately my ego is strong enough to withstand that kind of a slur.'

She snorted. 'Your ego is like a cockroach. It could withstand a nuclear holocaust.'

Completely unprepared for Wolfe to throw his head back and laugh, Ava struggled to prevent a smile from forming on her lips. 'Stop that.' She absolutely loved his deep chuckle. 'People are looking.'

Not waiting for him to follow her instructions, she continued down the stone steps past small clusters of guests enjoying the fragrant garden.

'So, any contenders you need me to vet for you?'

Wolfe's lazy drawl sounded too close, and Ava stopped and swung around to face him.

It took a minute for her to ascertain his meaning and when she did she gasped. 'You're vetting my future husband?'

'It's part of the package.'

Ava bit back the first retort that came to mind, knowing it wouldn't lead anywhere good. 'Well, it's a useless part,' she informed him shortly. 'Just because my father says something should happen it doesn't mean that it will.'

'You're against marriage?' His brow rose in surprise.

'No, I'm against marriage without love.'

'Ah, a romantic. I somehow didn't take you for that.'

'You don't know me very well, that's why,' she said stiffly.

The look he gave her told her that he knew part of her very well, and was remembering it just as vividly as she was.

Ava felt a blush creep up her neck and quickly added, 'And you don't have to be romantic to want to fall in love.'

'No, just deluded.'

The wealth of emotion behind his brief response made her hesitate. Everyone had a story that coloured their actions and decisions, and she had a sudden urge to know what his was. 'Is it that you're afraid of intimacy, or that you like variety too much to settle down?'

'Since I'm not afraid of anything, and I move around continuously, I think it's safe to go with the latter.'

Ava studied his brooding expression and knew he was afraid of one thing at least—revealing anything personal about himself.

'Choosing that kind of lifestyle would indicate that you're running away from something.' She watched his response to her comment and just saw bland enquiry. Then another idea popped into her head. 'Or is it more that you're searching for something

to add meaning to your life?'

The slight narrowing of his eyes was the only sign that she might have punctured his cool reserve in some form.

'Why complicate things unnecessarily, Princess? It's always better to lead with the head, not the heart.'

His use of the word *Princess* in his sardonic drawl told her it would be pointless to push him. He was a man who did what he wanted regardless of anyone else. 'You should take coffee with my father,' she said with measured indifference. 'You'd get on well.'

His piercing gaze scanned her face and she knew he'd picked up on the bitterness that was never far from the surface at the mention of her father.

'What's up between you and your old man?'

About to tell him that she didn't answer personal questions either, Ava found herself responding anyway. 'The truth is we've never seen eye to eye. He is a man who is very set in his ways. Very practical and logical. I was never his idea of the perfect daughter.'

'Why not?'

She could see his curiosity was well stirred and paused. She never talked about her relationship with her father—or lack thereof. Ever. But some small part of her wanted Wolfe to understand her. She'd seen the look on his face when she'd revealed how few lovers she'd had in her twenty-nine years—as if he'd expected there to have been a cast of thousands—and she

hated that she cared what he thought of her. But it was senseless to deny that she didn't—at least to herself.

'I was too much of a tomboy growing up. Too impetuous. I liked bareback horse-riding and climbing trees and he wanted me to dress in pretty clothes and speak only when spoken to. I did like the pretty clothes, but…' Her voice trailed off.

Wolfe gave her a small smile. 'The speaking when spoken to…?'

She returned his smile, but it felt hollow. The pain of the past still had too tight a grip for her to find any lightness in those memories. 'Not so much. When my mother died he got worse. My brother was sent to a military academy to start his leadership training and I was home-schooled because my job was to look pretty, not to go out and work. Nothing I ever did was good enough in his eyes. Do you know he's never once visited my gallery in Paris—?' she cut herself off with a self-conscious laugh when she realised just how much she had revealed to him. Why not blurt out that she was afraid she'd never find love either, and tell him *all* her deepest fears?

'Does that make you feel like you're still a disappointment to him now?'

Ava felt her stomach churn. 'No. I don't need his praise. I'm not a child.' She cleared the strident note out of her voice. 'But I resent that he wants everything his way.' She bent and sniffed at one of her mother's prized flowers, the scent faint now in the late evening. 'Why do you think he wants me to marry?'

'To make sure the monarchy is secure.'

'To make sure there is someone beside me who can do the job, you mean.'

'You think he doesn't believe you're capable?' Wolfe's brows rose in surprise.

'I'm a woman. That speaks for itself as far as my father is concerned.'

Wolfe seemed to consider this and Ava moved farther along the path, wishing she'd never let this conversation progress as far as it had.

'Do you?'

His question stopped her and she glanced back at him. 'Do I what?'

'Think you're capable?'

'Yes,' she said, internally cringing at the defensiveness in her tone. She had a Fine Arts degree and a Master's in Business and while she might not know everything involved in running a country, she…'I run a successful gallery.' Which surely counted for something.

'A small business,' he dismissed, shoving his hands in his pockets and strolling closer. 'It hardly translates, wouldn't you say?'

A wave of heat coursed through Ava at the slight. She might struggle to feel worthy in her personal relationships, but hadn't she always backed herself professionally. 'No, I would not say that.' She didn't even try to keep the indignation out of her voice.

'Do you know how hard I had to work to prove myself in Paris? To make my *"small"* business successful?' She straightened her spine. 'How difficult it was to get anyone to take me seriously? To get artists to trust me to work for them when everyone just expected me to be a vacuous party girl?'

She was breathing so hard when she'd finished she nearly missed Wolfe's soft grin.

'Oh, you are *horrible!'* she spluttered. 'You were playing devil's advocate with me!'

'You have a fire in your belly I guess you would never show your father.'

It pained her to acknowledge he was right. She had built a wall up where her father was concerned and she used it to keep him out. To show him that she didn't need him. More than that, she was afraid he would shoot her down in flames if she tried and failed in replacing Frédéric.

She was a grown woman who had never got over wanting her father's approval. She'd moved to Paris so she could avoid facing that.

Feeling dismayed by her unexpected realisations she shook her head. 'He doesn't respect me.' And, boy, did that hurt.

'So make him.'

Ava's startled gaze connected with Wolfe's.

'And if you stop pretending you're not sensitive about things when you are, that might help.'

She felt her mouth fall open at his gentle ribbing and quickly

snapped it closed. She wanted to argue that she'd mastered that unwelcome aspect of her nature years ago, but just looking at Wolfe made her awash with a certain type of sensitivity she couldn't deny.

She turned away, only to have him grasp her shoulders and turn her back before she'd taken a single step. He reached out and secured her chin lightly between his fingers, his eyes glittering down at her in the glow of the mood lighting. 'Maybe you need to think of your duty as being to your people now, Ava, not your father.'

Her breath caught. He hadn't called her Ava since that morning at Gilles's. Trying to hold on to her equilibrium, and reminding herself that there was nothing intimate behind his unexpected tenderness, she gave a rueful quirk of her lips. 'I never looked at it like that.'

'Because you're focusing on the past. That's gone. It's only the future that counts.' His tone was firm, the words delivered with such a resounding sense of resolution she knew he had said them before.

'You're right.' She let the silence build between them as her head spun with ideas. His words *'make him'* settled inside her. Perhaps if she stopped reverting to the recalcitrant teenager she had once been that would be a start. 'I cannot keep fighting my father. It is not only futile, but he's sick. And I do have obligations now that require my full attention.' She released a noisy breath and smiled wearily. 'Do you think perhaps I have felt sorry for

myself for long enough?'

Wolfe's head came up, surprise lighting his gaze, as if he hadn't expected her to admit to such a flaw. Then he laughed. 'You're one out of the box, Princess.'

She smiled back at him, warmed by the admiration in his voice. Warmed by the fact that he somehow made her feel valued.

She was instantly transported to the single night they had shared together. As much as the passion between them had shocked her, it had also thrilled her. She wondered—*No, Ava*. Not only was Wolfe not interested in fostering a long-term relationship with a woman, he had said himself that their *'ship'* had 'definitely *sailed'*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'WE ARE NOT stopping, Ava, and that's that.'

Ava knew her father's face had taken on the stony hue that had used to scare her as a child, but she steadfastly kept smiling at the sea of people waving flags along the tree-lined boulevard as the royal coach trotted slowly down the centre of Anders.

Every year citizens and tourists came out in droves to celebrate Anders Independence Day, with a plethora of sumptuously themed floats and gaily designed costumes. This year there was a more sombre mood to the proceedings, with many of the floats carrying her brother's picture. It made Ava want to reach out to her people to make up for Frédéric's loss. After her conversation with Wolfe three nights ago she knew that she could either let her insecurities control her or…try.

So she had.

And it felt like a blessed release finally to make some of the hard decisions she hadn't realised she'd been actively resisting. One had been to inform her artists that she would be helping them find new representation when her gallery closed down the following month, and the other had been to start sitting in on business meetings with her father's advisors. The workload was intense, and there were aspects of ruling her country that made her head spin, but she felt as if she was making inroads. Slowly.

Slow inroads into everything except her relationship with her

father. Just this morning he had been lecturing her about making a decision on the five 'expressions of interest,' as he referred to the marriage proposals he had already received on her behalf, without even considering her view. As far as he was concerned she should bow down to her destiny, and he saw nothing wrong with the fact that one of those proposals had arrived from a man she hadn't even met!

But Ava wasn't ready to compromise on that point. And with Wolfe sitting opposite her, sublime in a designer suit, his gaze scanning back and forth over the joyous crowd, she didn't even want to think about it.

Instead she marshalled her determination to make her father respect her and kept a calm smile on her face as she addressed him. 'I need to walk some of the way.'

Her father nodded benevolently to his people. 'I won't repeat myself, Ava.'

'I know it's not the way we've traditionally done the avenue ride,' she said. 'But if I am going to rule Anders it's important to me that our people don't see me as a distant figure. Especially since I have lived in Paris for so long.'

Her father glanced at Wolfe. 'Tell her it's too dangerous.'

'The King has a point,' Wolfe conceded. 'It is never a good idea to make last-minute changes to your itinerary.'

Ava felt her stomach plunge as he sided with her father, instantly recognising the emotion that gripped her as a feeling of betrayal. After the gala ball she felt as if they had formed

a friendship of sorts. She had enjoyed his company as he had escorted her to and from meetings, had enjoyed him sitting in with her to ensure her safety, and been surprised and thankful when on a couple of occasions he'd offered some keen business insights that had been beyond her understanding at the time.

Most of all, though, she loved how when everyone else had left for the day he brought her a cup of her favourite tea without her having to ask. Nobody, she had realised that first time, ever did anything for her without her having to ask first.

She looked across at him, willing him to understand. 'But it *can* be done.'

Her father's face tightened. 'Why are you always so determined to defy me?'

'This is not about defiance, sir,' Ava insisted, holding back her tendency to disconnect from her father in order to keep her goal in sight. 'If you can give me one good reason why I shouldn't walk amongst our people then I'll listen.'

'It's a break in tradition.'

'Why can't I start a new one?'

'A safety risk, then.'

Of course Ava knew he was right, but she also recognised that fear was debilitating. 'Is it important to rule safely, Father?' she asked softly. 'Or with integrity?'

Her father turned from the window and stared at her, his expression pained. 'You always were a smart child, Ava, but you're still not leaving this carriage. Wolfe—' he spoke while

still smiling and waving '—stop her before she does something stupid.'

Ava hated the fact that yet another man held something so important to her in his power. She lifted her chin, wondering how she would react when Wolfe sounded the death knell to her idea. It was important to her on so many levels…

Fortunately her determination wasn't to be tested on this as Wolfe, his expression stern, broke her steady gaze to address her father. 'My job is to keep her safe, Your Majesty, not to stop her.'

'Thank you.'

Wolfe turned from the narrow window that had once formed part of a parapet when he heard Ava step into the small room he was using as an office. He'd thought she would want to make an early night of it, worn out after walking for miles that day and thrilling her people with handshakes and good wishes. On the contrary, she looked fresh and still buzzed, dressed in some sort of yoga outfit that left little to his hyperactive imagination.

He knew why she was thanking him, but she'd put him in an impossible position with her earnest request and he was still fuming about it. 'It was a foolish thing to do.'

'Maybe.' She threw him a brief smile. 'But I needed to do it and you understood that.'

'I understood you had a crazy idea and it came off okay this time. Next time it might not.'

'Life's a risk, no?' She cocked her head. 'I would have thought your job was full of them.'

'Calculated risks are different from spontaneous reactions.'

'It wasn't a spontaneous reaction,' she said indignantly. 'I'd thought about it all morning.'

'Next time you might want to share that,' he said dryly.

'Okay.' She shrugged. 'I take your point, but it doesn't stop me from being happy that I did it.'

Wolfe grunted in response and made the mistake of moving to stand behind his desk. He'd had to train himself to ignore her delicious scent all week, but this close, in the confines of this suddenly overheated room, it was nearly impossible to do.

When she didn't make a move to leave he glanced at her. 'Was there something else?'

'Yes. Do you have any news on who might have killed my brother?'

'No.' He had some leads to go on but he had no intention of telling her that. Keeping a client apprised of his intel was not the way he operated.

'Okay, then.'

Her slender fingers trailed over the top of his desk, but just when he thought she was going to give him a break and leave she swung back towards him.

'I'm going for a walk outside. Just in case you need to know.'

Of course he needed to know.

'If you go I'll have to go with you.'

Her eyes met his. 'Okay.'

Her voice had a husky quality, and all he wanted to do was

haul her across his desk and push that stretchy top up her chest. 'I suggest you get a jacket. It's cold outside.'

'I don't know where you get your weather information from,' Ava said ten minutes later, her sneaker-shod feet crunching the gravel footpath underfoot. 'It's not cold at all.'

She shrugged out of her lightweight jacket and draped it loosely over her shoulders. 'I love these cloudless summer nights in Anders. The cicadas singing and the mountains in the background. When I was small I used to lie on the grass with my mother and count the stars. It's not possible to do that in Paris.'

'No stars?'

'It's not the stars; it's the grass. If you so much as look the wrong way at the lush lawns in a Parisian park a *gendarme* will come over and slap you with a misdemeanour charge.' She wagged her finger playfully. 'One can look but never touch.'

Wolfe knew exactly how that felt.

'Even princesses?'

She threw him an impish grin. 'Afraid so. The only people who get special treatment in Paris are the Parisians.'

Wolfe laughed, finding himself relaxing under the vast velvet sky, intrigued as Ava relived her time in Paris and made comparisons between France and Anders. He'd found himself making similar comparisons between Australia and Anders during the week. It was most likely because it had been years since he'd spent so long in one place, but as much as he would have said he was a beach lover he found the small mountainous

nation of Anders surprisingly serene and peaceful.

'How do you feel about being back?' he asked.

Ava stopped walking and turned to face the mountains, their high peaks barely discernible in the night sky. 'Two weeks ago I would have said I hated it, but now…now it's growing on me again.'

She hesitated, and he could see her wrestling with herself about whether to continue. Surprisingly he wanted her to. He liked listening to her talk.

'Because?'

'Because I've missed the fresh scent of pine in the air and the tranquillity of being surrounded by every shade of green. It feels like home, and being here has made me realise that I miss that more than I allowed myself to think about.' Her hand trailed a clump of lavender and she raised her fingers to her nose and inhaled the sweet scent. 'The only fly in the ointment is my father,' she continued, almost to herself. 'He's so determined that he's always right it becomes exhausting trying to deal with him at times. What about you?' she asked lightly.

'No. I find him easy to get along with,' Wolfe deadpanned.

She stopped in the middle of the path and arched her brow. 'You know what I mean.'

He did. He just had no intention of talking about his parents.

Stepping off the path onto the well-tended lawn, he walked a short distance and laid his palms against the trunk of an ancient pine tree. He wasn't sure if she would follow, but then he heard

her soft tread on the pine needles and felt glad that she had. 'They say if you hold your hands against the trunk like this you can feel its secrets.'

'Really?'

She spread her fingers wide against the trunk beside his and stirred up all sorts of unwelcome responses inside his body.

'What do you feel?'

Wolfe paused, quite sure she didn't want to hear what he was really feeling. 'Bark.'

She laughed and shook her head. 'And for a minute there I thought you were going to go all deep and meaningful on me.'

'Mmm, not me.' Wolfe caught her lingering gaze and moved back to the worn path.

'You grew up on a farm, didn't you?'

'Yep.' He hoped his short answer gave away just how little he wanted to talk about his past.

'What was it like?'

No such luck…

'Dusty.'

'Pah!'

He glanced at her and couldn't help chuckling at her disgusted expression.

'Do you know you close up like a crab whenever I ask you anything personal?'

'Clam.'

'That's what I said.' She studied him as if she was trying to

work him out. 'Why do you make it so hard to know you?'

Wondering what to say to that thorny question, Wolfe was relieved when his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and saw that it was his brother. 'Excuse me, but I have to take this.' He pressed the answer button. 'Ad-man, what's up?'

His brother hesitated on the other end of the line. 'Oh, sorry, bro. Have I caught you in the middle of a run?'

It took Wolfe a second to understand his brother's comment, and then he became conscious that his breathing was tense and uneven. *Great*. 'Just work. Don't tell me you're still in the office, too?'

'With you living it large in a European castle, guarding a beautiful maiden, where else would I be?'

Wolfe told his brother he'd trade places with him in the blink of an eye but even as he said it he knew he was lying. Quickly changing the subject, he tormented his brother a little more and then ran through a few work-related issues before ringing off.

'Well, that was convenient.'

Wolfe lifted his gaze to the woman who was slowly driving him mad and realised that other than his brother she was the only person who had ever teased him about his behaviour.

Feeling overly hot, even though the air temperature had dropped a couple of degrees, he focused on the small cluster of flowers she held in her hands, not unlike a bride waiting to walk down the aisle. Shaking off that disconcerting image, he made his voice curt when he spoke. 'We should head back inside.'

'Okay.' She sniffed the small posy and fell into step beside him. 'Was that your brother?'

He thought about changing the subject, but knew if he did her interest would only grow, not wane. 'Yes.'

'You sound close to him.'

'I am.'

'So, no sibling rivalry?'

He shook his head. 'We're less than two years apart so we did everything together.'

'Does he travel around like you?'

'No. He's based in New York.'

'Does he have a wife? Kids?'

Wolf stopped so abruptly she'd taken two more steps before she noticed.

'This is starting to feel like an inquisition.'

She shrugged one slender shoulder. 'I'm just trying to know you a little better.'

'By asking questions about my brother?'

'You won't answer questions about anything else.'

That was because he had never seen the point in talking about himself. And, if he was completely honest, because he was starting to like her in a way that transcended the physical and that scared him. It was dangerous to bond with a client. It caused sloppy work and unrealistic attachments to develop.

'Look, don't worry about it.' She gave him a half smile that seemed paper-thin. 'When you're like this…' She gave another

one of those Gallic shrugs that drove him bonkers. 'I forget you work for my father.'

If she had tried to wheedle information from him, or tried to make him feel guilty, he would have held his line. Faced with the stoic indifference he now knew she used to mask her true feelings, he caved. Or perhaps it was just that she looked so beautiful in the light of the crescent moon.

'What do you want to know?' he asked, not a little gruffly.

'What do you want to tell me?'

Wolfe blew out a breath. It was so typical of her to make him work for something he didn't even want.

'My father died ten years ago.'

Ava stopped and looked at him. 'I'm sorry. Were you close?'

Had they been close? Probably not, if he had to think about his answer. 'At times.'

'And your mother?'

Wolfe turned to continue walking. 'I don't know where she lives. She left when I was younger.'

'Oh. That must have been hard.'

'It is what it is.'

He felt her glance and knew she was seeing more than he wanted her to. 'Is she the reason you avoid long-term relationships?'

There was a lengthy silence in which he realised even the cicadas had stopped singing. As if they too were waiting with bated breath for his answer. Wolfe made a sound in his throat

at the uncharacteristically fanciful thought and nearly missed her next word.

'Love?'

He did not want to talk about this with her. It was time to end the conversation. 'Love is the most unstable emotion I've ever come across,' he said fiercely. 'My mother didn't just leave once. She left over and over. And every time she returned she told us how much she loved us. It was the only time she ever said it.'

As soon as the bleak words were out he regretted them. The look of pity on Ava's face only made the feeling ten times worse.

'Where did she go?'

Wolfe thrust his hand through his hair and promised himself next time he'd stick to monosyllabic answers or none at all, as he usually did. 'We never knew. Sometimes she would meet a man in town and take off, other times she just went on a "holiday".'

'But that's awful. What did your father say? Was he even there?'

'He was there,' Wolfe said grimly. *Usually out on his tractor, ignoring reality*. 'But he didn't say anything. When she came back, sometimes months later, we all just pretended she'd never left.'

'That hurts the most, no?' Her delicate brows drew together in consternation. 'I used to hate it when my father would go off on extended business trips, or lock himself away in meetings and then totally ignore how it made us feel.'

'I wasn't hurt by her actions,' Wolfe denied. 'But Adam was.

Whenever she'd go he used to run away and try and find her.' He hated remembering those hours of searching for his brother, worried about whether he'd find him alive or dead in the hot, arid bushland that surrounded their farm.

'But not you?'

Wolfe realised with a start that she had somehow sucked him back into the past against his better judgment, and he felt excessively relieved to find they had arrived back at the palace. 'No. Not me. I was older. I understood.'

She looked up at him with such a penetrating gaze he felt every one of his muscles grow taut.

'Understood what, Wolfe?' Her gaze bored into his. 'That you were a child who couldn't rely on his mother's love?'

CHAPTER EIGHT

AVA VACILLATED BETWEEN the two evening gowns laid out on her hotel bed. She could smell the fragrant Parisian air through her open window, and outside she knew the night sky was streaked with pink and orange, the Seine sparkling under the glow of the street lamps that had just gone on.

She tapped her foot in time with her favourite jazz album, blaring from the hotel's sound system, trying to feel okay about her coming dinner with Prince Lorenzo of Triole and not to torture herself about where Wolfe had got to last night.

For a whole week he'd barely uttered a word to her—ever since he'd opened up about his childhood and she'd made that rash statement about his mother. The words had been out of her mouth before she'd thought it through, but she had felt so outraged on his behalf. And clearly he'd felt outraged by what *she'd* said, because he had stopped sitting beside her in meetings and had even stopped making her evening cup of tea. It was a silly, inconsequential thing to care about, but it had come to mean a lot to her. His support had come to mean a lot. Somewhere along the way she had forgotten that she was just his client. Forgotten that, although they had been lovers, they had nothing else between them.

The devil on her shoulder told her he'd been out with a woman. That he was a man with a large sexual appetite he had not slaked

for weeks. Her hands knotted into fists and she forced herself not to think about the heaviness in her heart. Forced herself to concentrate on the *crucial* task of choosing a gown for the evening. She smiled wryly at Lucy, who clutched the ornate mahogany bedpost with a dreamy expression on her face.

Ever since Ava had submitted to the changes in her life and accepted Lucy's help their relationship had blossomed into the beginnings of a genuine friendship.

'Which do you think, Lucy?'

'Depends on the look you're going for. The silver is stylish and understated, while the red is very "look at me". Very racy.'

Which would Wolfe prefer? The thought winged into Ava's mind before she could stop it. The silver. He'd want her to blend into the background.

'The red,' she said decisively, angry with herself for wanting to dress to please Wolfe. And *racy* might help pick up her mood. Ava rolled her shoulders to ease the tension her warm bath had failed to alleviate.

'Great choice.' Lucy beamed. 'Prince Lorenzo will find you irresistible!'

The sound of the music being clicked off made Lucy's last words ring loudly in the sudden silence. Lucy gasped, her hand pressed against her chest. 'Monsieur Wolfe!'

'Leave us, Lucy,' Wolfe commanded icily.

Lucy hesitated, her eyes darting to Ava's.

Ava handed Lucy the red gown. 'If you could have this pressed

and return it when it's done, Lucy, that would be lovely.'

She could tell instantly that Wolfe was in a dangerous mood; the expression on his face was as black as his clothing.

After waiting for Lucy to close the sitting room door, she turned to face him. 'I didn't hear you knock.'

'That's because I didn't.'

Their eyes connected and Ava couldn't have looked away to save her life. Then he prowled to the other side of the room and slammed her window closed before turning to face her. 'Big night tonight?' His eyes fell on the silver dress draped over her bed.

'A state dinner is always important.' Her heart thumped in her chest and she moved to sit on the stool facing the dressing table, started unwinding her hair from the topknot she'd put it in while she bathed. If nothing else it gave her hands something to do. Although she knew he was angry, she had no idea why. 'Did you want something?'

Now, *there* was a loaded question. But it wasn't one Wolfe was in a state of mind to answer. Not with her wearing that flimsy midnight-blue kimono that perfectly matched her eyes and most likely nothing underneath.

He was in a foul mood and he knew why. He was frustrated with the lack of progress he'd made on her case—and frustrated with himself. He'd lost focus somewhere in the middle of last week and stopped thinking of her as a job. Somewhere along the way he'd started to admire her work ethic, her commitment to master a duty she'd never thought would be hers…and then he'd

gone and exacerbated the situation by spilling his guts to her.

'Understood what, Wolfe? That you were a child who couldn't rely on his mother's love?'

Wolfe silently cursed as her nosy question replayed once again inside his head. That's what you got for opening up to a woman. Psychobabble and a week-long headache.

He'd made a mistake—too many where she was concerned—but as long as he made the other night his last he could live with it.

Now all he had to do was to reinstate the cool professionalism he was renowned for and get back on task.

In some ways he had hoped taking last night off would help with that. He'd met a mate in Rome at a nightclub he'd hated before he'd even made it past the officious bouncer. When he'd hit the dance floor with a super-sexy Italian girl his head had started aching from the loud music and his body had all but yawned with boredom. Boredom? At breasts bursting out of a short dress that would send any normal man into a frenzy of desire? Ridiculous. Or so Tom had informed him.

'Wolfe?'

His name falling from Ava's delectable lips was like a husky invitation to his senses. In his mind's eye he imagined her rising gracefully from the cushioned stool on which she sat. Saw her loosen the sash on her robe, knew that it would fall halfway open, catch on the crest of her nipples and hold, revealing the temptation of her flat belly and the brunette curls he longed to bury his face in. She would hold his gaze, tilt her cute nose and

saunter towards him. Then she'd arch her imperious brow, wrap her arms around his neck and pull his mouth to hers.

Of course she didn't do any such thing.

Instead she picked up her hairbrush and ran it through her hair in long, languid strokes. Wolfe glanced sideways and saw the discarded jodhpurs and billowy white shirt she had worn riding earlier that day with suitor number two hundred and one, and all he wanted to do was ride *her*. Hard.

For nearly three weeks he'd held it together. Held his desire for her at bay. Held his self-control in check. Why was it pulling at him now? Making him sweat?

But he knew, didn't he?

Lorenzo, the urbane Prince of Triole, wanted her—and her father had decided he was the one. He'd asked Wolfe to do a special security check on him to clear the way. Tonight Lorenzo would no doubt try to stake his claim on her. Knowing how much she sought her father's approval, how much she wanted to do the right thing by her country, he was very much afraid she'd go along with it. Not that he should care. It wasn't as if he had made a claim on her himself.

'Wolfe?' Her voice had risen with concern at his delayed response to her question. 'Do you have news about who caused Frédéric's accident?'

'No.' Wolfe grated harshly, holding up the crumpled piece of paper he'd printed out five minutes ago. 'I'm here about this.'

She glanced at the document before cutting her eyes back to

him. 'Am I supposed to know what *"this"* is?'

'Your itinerary.'

'Oh, that.' She turned back to the mirror dismissively. 'You told me to tell you in advance when I planned to make changes to it.'

'I remember telling you it was dangerous to change it.'

Her nonchalant shrug ratcheted up his tension levels. 'It's going to be a lovely day tomorrow and—'

'You've been to Paris before,' he interrupted impatiently. 'Hell, you lived here for eight years. Why do you need to go on some convoluted walking tour?'

'I have not been here for nearly a month. I want to see the city again.'

Wolfe bit back a string of curses at her determined expression. 'Look out of the window.' He gestured to the one behind him without really seeing anything. 'To the right the Eiffel Tower, to the left Notre Dame.'

'Actually, that's Hôtel de Ville to the left. You cannot see Notre Dame from that window.' She regarded him steadily. 'Have you ever actually walked around Paris before, Wolfe?'

'Sure. I've strolled from the airport to the car and from the car to whatever building I needed to enter.'

'Well, that at least explains why you don't understand my need to reconnect with the city,' she said. 'I might not be back here for some time and I want to wander up through Montmartre to Sacré Coeur, have lunch, and check out the new installation in

my gallery before it is disassembled.'

'You agreed to let *me* decide when you could visit your gallery.'

'I've changed my mind.'

'You're angry because I'm calling the shots.'

'That has nothing to do with it. Did you have fun last night?'

The unexpected question threw him, and he watched through narrowed eyes as she rose and slowly approached the bed, gripping the bedpost in a provocative pose he wasn't even sure she was aware of.

'I can fit in Sacré Coeur, but you're not walking around Montmarte and your gallery is off-limits until I say so.'

He had leaked a fake itinerary to a couple of key suspects and the one she had devised for herself came too perilously close to it for comfort. Letting her have her way would put her in danger, and he couldn't live with himself if something happened to her. If she should—

'Look at you,' she said testily, her knuckles white where she gripped the bedpost. 'You are frustrated and angry with me and yet you won't show it. So controlled. So cool under pressure. Maybe the rumours are true and you *are* made out of ice.'

She turned, flicking her hair back over one shoulder in a quintessentially feminine gesture that dared a man to follow through with his baser instincts. Wolfe was not in the mood to let such a direct challenge go uncontested.

Within seconds he was on her, the flat of his hand slamming

loudly against the wardrobe door as she was about to open it. 'You think I'm made out of ice, Princess? How quickly you forget.'

She spun around, her eyes wide, her breaths punching the air. Was that fear or anticipation he read in her dilated pupils?

He looked at her. At the silvery striations in her dark eyes and the tiny row of freckles that lined one side of her upper lip. Unable to help himself, he slid a hand into her hair and tilted her face up to his. Their eyes clashed in a battle of wills. He told himself to back off, settle down, but his gaze dropped to her soft mouth and he couldn't think of anything else but kissing her. Taking her.

Her nostrils flared as if sensing his need, and instead of crushing her lips beneath his he lightly brushed against them.

Once.

Twice.

She moaned and tried to draw his tongue into her mouth, but he'd thought about kissing her like this for weeks and now he didn't want to be rushed. He slipped his other arm around her waist and drew her against him, all the while teasing her lips with his. She twisted in his hold, her mouth moving beneath his as if she was as desperate for the contact as he was. As if she'd thought about this as often as he had. His hands swept over her back, cupping her firm butt and bringing her in closer against his pulsing hardness.

Her own hands were just as busy, roaming his chest, curving around his shoulders, burning him wherever she touched.

The sensation of her velvet tongue flicking against his threatened to drive him to his knees, and he pressed her against the wardrobe and wedged his leg between her thighs to keep them both upright. Her head thudded lightly against the wardrobe door and he cupped the nape of her neck and urged her mouth to open wider. She was like molten silk in his arms, sliding against him, urging him on with her husky whimpers for more.

Wolfe had felt his control slipping the moment he walked into the room. Now he had none. Even the thin barrier of their clothes was too much between them, and his hands stroked over her, shifting the slippery fabric aside as he sought the sweet perfection of her breasts.

For God only knew how long he was lost. A slave to sensation. A slave to her soft scent and even softer body. A slave to her heat, to the tug of her feminine fingers in his hair. If there was some reason he shouldn't be doing this he couldn't think of it.

Behind him he heard the snick of the latch as the door was quietly opened.

Thrusting Ava behind him he spun, his gun drawn, but even as he did so he knew he was at least two seconds too late.

The maid gasped softly and nearly fainted, but other than the sound of his own ragged breathing you could have heard a feather float to the floor.

So much for not making any more mistakes, Ice.

Hell.

If he needed a clearer example of just how poorly he was

doing at the job of protecting her he didn't want to know what it was.

Wolfe stood motionless at the back of yet another extravagant ballroom and knew that despite donning yet another squillion-dollar tux he was doing nothing to blend into the glitterati of Paris. He was too angry with himself to care.

He should never have kissed her.

Now it was not only uncomfortable to watch her in the arms of another man, it was downright impossible. How his father had taken his mother back time after time Wolfe didn't know. He only knew he couldn't do it. If Ava chose someone else—Lorenzo—then she could have him.

Hell.

Of *course* she was going to choose someone else. That was the whole point of these elaborate tea parties and gala events. She was husband hunting and he thanked God he wasn't on her list.

Didn't he?

Of course he did. Even posing that question was a sign that he needed to step back. A very long way back.

And he would. In fact he already had. In—he checked his watch—fifteen minutes everything would have changed for the better. He blew out a long breath and dragged in some perspective with his next inhalation.

He knew how it felt to feel that someone you loved didn't love you, and…Oh, hell. He couldn't keep thinking like this. It felt as if his precious rules were in tatters, and he'd already thought

and spoken more about his past in the last week than he had in twenty years. Next he'd be imagining that lust was love, and then where would he be? Hung out to dry like his old man, that was where. Talk about perspective.

It was a cliché that the client often fell for the bodyguard. It was just a hot mess if the opposite occurred, and he *fixed* hot messes—he didn't create them.

Telling himself she was just like any another woman wasn't working either. He wanted *her*. Not just any woman. *Her*.

When he had taken this gig his arrogant fat head had led him to believe he could control himself around her. *Yeah*, *right*. He'd proved in her hotel room two hours ago that he showed about as much control around her as a shark in a blood bath.

As a special ops soldier he had been trained to dig deep when every bone, muscle and tendon in his body was screaming for rest. He was trained to hold his line under extreme forms of torture no man should ever have to face. Apparently they hadn't thought to train him to resist desire of this magnitude. Of course in reality he *could* resist her—there was simply some part of him that didn't want to. And that was the part that scared him the most.

Ten minutes.

He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet and searched the baroque-style ballroom for her. She wasn't hard to find in that showstopper of swirling scarlet that hugged every inch of her lush curves—those it managed to contain anyway. If she'd wanted to

make a statement of availability she'd succeeded. And Lorenzo was in the market and had the correct weight to buy.

But not Wolfe. his life was mapped out just as surely as hers. Work, women and play—in that order. It was a great life. A life any man with his head screwed on right would envy. A life he had never questioned before and, dammit, still didn't. That soft, sexy sound she made every time he slipped his tongue into her mouth was nothing he wouldn't forget with time.

Raucous laughter from somewhere behind him brought him out of his daze. Where the hell was she? The ever-moving crowd kept blocking his view, but even so his sixth sense told him she wasn't there.

An icy chill slid down his spine.

Glancing to the left, he caught the eye of one of his team acting as a waiter. Jonesy subtly signalled towards the patio doors leading to the gardens. His mouth tightened. He'd told her not to leave the room. No doubt the perfect Prince of Triole had taken her outside, and that wasn't going to happen on *his* watch.

Furious with himself for yet another lapse in concentration, Wolfe wove a determined line through the throng of guests until he was outside. Giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light, he strained his hearing for the sound of her voice. Then he saw the flash of her strapless gown through the trees and the matching red stripe down the side of the Prince's trousers. His and hers. Perfection in the making, he thought acidly.

Lorenzo had caught her hands in his, the expression on his face

one of earnest concentration. Was he about to propose? Wolfe didn't wait to find out.

'Nice night for a stroll, *ma'am.*'

Ava stiffened at the sound of Wolfe's voice behind her and tugged her hands out of Lorenzo's. She knew Wolfe was reprimanding her for going against his orders, but she didn't care.

Since he'd walked out of her hotel room she'd been more determined than ever to find Lorenzo attractive. She didn't want Wolfe to be the only man who could make her melt with mindless passion, because she knew he was determined to stay unattached for ever and she needed the opposite. She *wanted* the opposite! And wanting something more with him was just asking for heartache. Especially when the look on his face as he'd stormed out of her hotel room had left her in no doubt as to how appalled he was by the attraction that still simmered between them.

He moved now, blocking her way, his legs set wide apart, his hands clasped behind his back. He was so intensely male he took her breath away and, try as she had all night, she couldn't forget the way it felt to be pressed up against all that hard muscle.

Previously she would have said she wasn't a woman who could get turned on by a powerful man. But of course previously she hadn't met Wolfe. Hadn't felt this explosion of chemistry that made her tingle and burn. Hadn't felt such a strong need to be with someone not just sexually but…always.

She let out a silent, shaky breath she hoped he wouldn't notice and stared him down.

'Prince Lorenzo and I would like some privacy, Wolfe.'

'I need to talk to you.'

Ava shook her head. Talking was a bad idea. Forgetting about what had happened in her hotel room was what was required. 'Not now.'

Wolfe cut his eyes to Lorenzo and she knew he was on the verge of ordering him to leave. Only Wolfe would consider doing that with a man who was second in line to the throne.

'Wolfe, please.' She hated the way she sounded as if she was begging but she was. She couldn't do this any more. First thing tomorrow morning she was going to contact her father and tell him to organise another bodyguard. Wolfe could still head up the case if he liked, but she knew there was absolutely no way she could feel anything more than friendship for any man she met while Wolfe was by her side. Even when he wasn't with her she thought of him, ached for him. She was starting to fear that no one would measure up to him. *Ever*.

His jaw clenched, as it always did when he was annoyed with her, and if possible his expression grew even more remote.

God, he was impossible! That kiss back in her hotel room… Her lips parted…

Don't think about it, she ordered herself.

Not easy when he blocked her path, giving her no choice but to either wait for him to step aside or turn around with her tail tucked between her legs and retreat back inside as he wanted her to do.

Ava knew which option she *wasn't* going to take.

Stepping closer to him was a mistake, though, as her senses became immediately overloaded with the faint trace of musk and man—a combination that instantly flooded her body with heat and need.

She shivered and Lorenzo placed his hand on her shoulder. Straight away her undisciplined mind compared its size and texture to Wolfe's. It felt cool, where Wolfe's always felt so warm it bordered on hot, and it didn't make her want to wind herself around him until she didn't know where she ended and he began.

'Are you cold, *piccolina?*'

For a minute Ava thought Wolfe might do Lorenzo damage, and she quickly smiled her reassurance at Lorenzo before throwing Wolfe a baleful stare. 'We can talk later. Right now I need you to move out of my way.'

In more ways than one, her mind quipped unhelpfully.

Ava waited, remembering the time he had threatened to toss her onto his horse. Back then she hadn't believed he'd really do it. Now she knew better. Wolfe always got the job done, no matter what.

He glanced at his watch and then stepped aside, but it didn't feel as if she had won a major victory.

In a fit of frustration she tightened her hold on Lorenzo's arm in an attempt to disconnect her senses from Wolfe.

Oh, who was she kidding? She'd done it to send a message to Wolfe that his rejection of her hadn't affected her in the slightest.

That she didn't *need* him. But silently she accepted that if Lucy hadn't interrupted them they'd have made love again. And she couldn't dislodge the sensation that it just felt so right to be in Wolfe's arms.

'Ava?'

'I'm sorry, Lorenzo. I was…you were telling me about how we could integrate the telecommunications networks between Anders and Triole?'

Ava let him fill her head with possibilities and murmured appropriately, but her heart wasn't in it and, feeling Wolfe's steely silence behind her, she experienced an overwhelming need to escape both men and take stock. And she would have done exactly that if Wolfe hadn't cleared his throat and stepped forwards again.

'Ma'am.' His voice was dark and official. 'We need to have that talk now.'

Ava glanced from Wolfe to the burly man in an expensive suit and with a grim expression standing beside him. Did he have news about her situation?

Excusing herself from Lorenzo, Ava waited for Wolfe to speak.

'Ma'am, this is Dan Rogers. He's a security specialist who has worked for me for a number of years. He'll be taking over your security detail from now on.'

It took a minute for Wolfe's words to sink in, and when they did Ava's stomach bottomed out. 'You're quitting?' She couldn't

believe it. He'd told her he would *never* quit, and she realised with a start that she'd come to rely on that.

'Not quitting. I'm rearranging the team to better utilise our skill-set.'

Ava heard what he said but she didn't believe it. This wasn't about skill-sets. This was about that kiss in her hotel room.

With her thoughts and feelings swirling around inside her like leaves in a whirly wind, she said the first thing that came to mind. 'My father won't like it.'

Wolfe's jaw clenched and released. 'I'll deal with your father.'

Before she could think of anything else except the sick feeling growing in the pit of her stomach he turned to the other man.

'Take care of her. Once she's secure for the night call me and I'll come and give you a complete brief.'

The man nodded.

Wolfe nodded and then turned his eyes briefly to hers. 'Goodbye…ma'am.'

Ava closed her eyes and leant her head back against the butter-soft leather seats inside her limousine. She was alone in the car, having forbidden her new bodyguard from riding with her. He hadn't liked it, but she'd given him the super-special superior look that had never worked on Wolfe and he'd acquiesced.

Now she felt horribly alone and hankered for something familiar. Something to anchor her in a world that kept moving and changing at a pace she was struggling to keep up with. She'd had so many decisions to make lately she was completely

exhausted. No wonder she felt so out of sorts. Life-changes usually happened one at a time and with some sense of order. Didn't they? At least that had been her experience to date. But these past few weeks nothing had been as it should. Least of all her.

In a split-second decision she knew Wolfe would call a *'spontaneous reaction'* Ava instructed the driver to take her to her gallery, and immediately felt better.

The restless energy flowing through her was somewhat appeased at the thought of seeing Monique's new works. They'd been installed two weeks ago, and viewing them on her smartphone wasn't the same as standing back and inspecting them in person.

She smiled as her change in plans was relayed to the other two cars. No doubt Wolfe would have a kitten…but he had chosen to abandon his post and there was nothing he could do about it. She imagined the conversation they might have if he were here. Was it wrong to enjoy their mental tussles with each other so much?

When the car stopped Ava didn't wait for her chauffeur to open her door but did it herself, breathing in the sweet damp air of Place des Vosges.

Her new bodyguard stopped beside her. 'Ma'am, I'd like you to wait a few minutes before heading inside.'

Ava considered that briefly and then realised why. 'Is Wolfe on his way?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Ava cursed. 'I thought you were in charge now?'

'I am. However—'

'Never mind. And, no, I won't wait for your boss to join us.'

Pivoting on her heel, she set off across the square to the row of shops she knew like the back of her hand. Her footsteps echoed in the quiet night that was only broken by the low hum of fast-moving cars on the main road and the squeak and clunk of a garbage truck as it rattled along the cobbled streets.

Dan reached the solid metal door to her building before her and held his hand out for the key. 'I'll do that, ma'am.'

A car door slammed somewhere close behind her but she ignored it.

'I can do it.' It might be the last time she ever did, and she wanted to take in every moment.

'Ava!'

Wolfe's hard, angry voice made her fingers fumble the key, and that made her mad. He wasn't going to ruin this for her by muscling his way in. She wouldn't let him.

Of course her stupid key chose that moment to become stuck and, frustrated, she twisted it in the opposite direction. Wolfe's harsh, 'Get back!' confused her, and then a strong arm wrapped around her middle and yanked her sideways seconds before a deafening bang exploded in her ear.

CHAPTER NINE

SHE SCREAMED AND then lost her breath as she felt as if a giant boulder had fallen on top of her.

'Secure…the…area.'

Wolfe's deep voice, laden with pain, instructed the men running towards them. Ava coughed as she tried to breathe the filthy air around them, but her lungs were constricted. Feeling winded, she tried to twist onto her back and realised that it was Wolfe who was smothering her with his body.

When he shifted she dragged in a bucketload of acrid-smelling air. 'What…?'

'Ava. Don't move.' Deft hands ran over her body with mechanical efficiency, and when he was satisfied she wasn't seriously injured he hovered over her, his movements somehow lacking their usual fluid grace.

Hearing a ringing sound in her ears, she peered around to see that the front of her building was completely blown apart. The fire door she had installed as a precaution lay crumpled as if a giant fist had tried to punch holes in it.

Bewildered by the chaos and devastation around her, and only peripherally aware that Wolfe's men surrounded them, Ava glanced at Wolfe. 'Mon *Dieu*, you are hurt.'

Ignoring The pain in her hands and hip where she had hit the pavement, she reached out to the jagged tear down the sleeve of

his jacket. The white shirt beneath was already turning crimson under the glow of the street lamp that remained intact like a silent sentinel above them.

'Get her…into the car,' Wolfe rasped, shrugging out of his torn jacket.

'No.' Ava tried to reach for him, her only thought to help him, but he slashed his hand in the air.

'Now.'

His voice brooked no argument and before she could do anything his men had gripped her arms and steered her back towards the limousine. She could hear Wolfe ruthlessly issuing orders and the distant wail of a police siren. Concerned voices filtered through the dust and smoke and then faded away as Wolfe's men held back any curious onlookers drawn by the explosion.

Within minutes of the police arriving Wolfe was beside her in the car, wearing a black leather jacket; nothing about his appearance suggested that he'd just thrown himself on top of her as a bomb had blasted glass, bricks and plaster all over him.

He seemed calm and eerily controlled.

By contrast Ava couldn't stop trembling. She was to blame for what had happened. Wolfe had told her not to change her itinerary and she hadn't listened. She had wanted—what? The comfort of the familiar? To get back at Wolfe for leaving her? To make him come after her?

She let out a shaky breath. Right now all she knew was that

she had put those assigned to take care of her in danger and she felt awful.

On top of all that the threat to her life was obviously real! Somehow she had held on to the notion that Wolfe was wrong. But it wasn't he who had been wrong, it was her.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered helplessly. 'I feel terrible.'

'It's not your fault.' His voice was clipped, withdrawn. It made her feel worse because she could tell he was blaming himself.

Tears welled behind her eyes but she told herself not to get emotional. That now was not the time. But emotion was stronger than logic even on a good day. 'That is nonsense. I should have—'

'No! *I* should have.' His eyes met hers and he stopped. 'Where are you hurt?'

'I'm okay.'

'Ava.' The way he said her name was a warning that he was going to go completely macho if she didn't cooperate, but all she could think about was how much she loved the way it sounded on his lips.

'My wrist.' And her hip. And she could really use a glass of water.

As if she'd spoken out loud he retrieved a bottle from the mini-bar and untwisted the top.

'Merci.'

After she'd finished he took the bottle. 'Give me a look at your hands.'

Shaking, Ava held them out and he gently felt along her

wristbones. She winced as he pressed on her tender palm, but he continued his inspection undeterred.

'I don't think bones are broken, but your palms are badly scraped.'

'They'll heal,' she dismissed, catching his brooding frown.

'Thankfully.'

His phone rang before she could ask what would happen next and he released her hand to answer it.

She closed her eyes as the night-dark city whisked by. Wolfe didn't try to touch her or talk to her again but she wanted him to. She felt chilled, as if she'd never be warm again. And for once she didn't argue when he took complete control of the situation. Right now it was easier to sit back and let him do what he did best.

She stole a glance at his austere profile. His jaw was packed with tension, his expression tough. He would do anything to keep her safe because he *had* to, and all she wanted was for him to do it because he *wanted* to.

With a start she realised just how much she trusted him to take care of her. How much she trusted him to have her best interests at heart.

'Please don't be angry at Dan,' she said, suddenly realising that she might have put the other man's job at risk. 'He tried to stop me.'

'I'm not angry at Dan,' he said flatly.

No. He was angry with her. With himself, perhaps.

'You won't fire him?'

'Your concern for his future is a little misplaced. Your behaviour tonight could have got him killed. It could have got you—Hell! What were you thinking?'

Although his words were angry his tone sounded more… devastated. And that sent her own sense of guilt higher.

'I wanted…something familiar. Closure.'

'Closure?'

'I felt restless after you left and I knew I wouldn't sleep. It seemed like a good idea.'

He shook his head. 'I should have told Dan to physically waylay you.'

'Why didn't you?'

His gaze was intense when it connected with hers. 'I didn't want him touching you.'

Ava swallowed at the raw admission.

'Just another mistake on my part.' He blew out a breath and turned away from her, his hands knotted into fists on his thighs.

'Do you think any of Monique's paintings survived?'

He looked at her as if she'd grown another head, but then his expression softened. 'Unlikely. Your fire door sent most of the explosion inward instead of outward. It tells me that whoever set it was more rank amateur than stalwart professional.'

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