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VALUE

THE PRINCE'S  
TEXAS BRIDE

LEANNE BANKS

THE  
RELUCTANT  
PRINCESS

RAYE MORGAN

*Cherish*

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Leanne Banks

**The Prince's Texas Bride /  
The Reluctant Princess**

«HarperCollins»

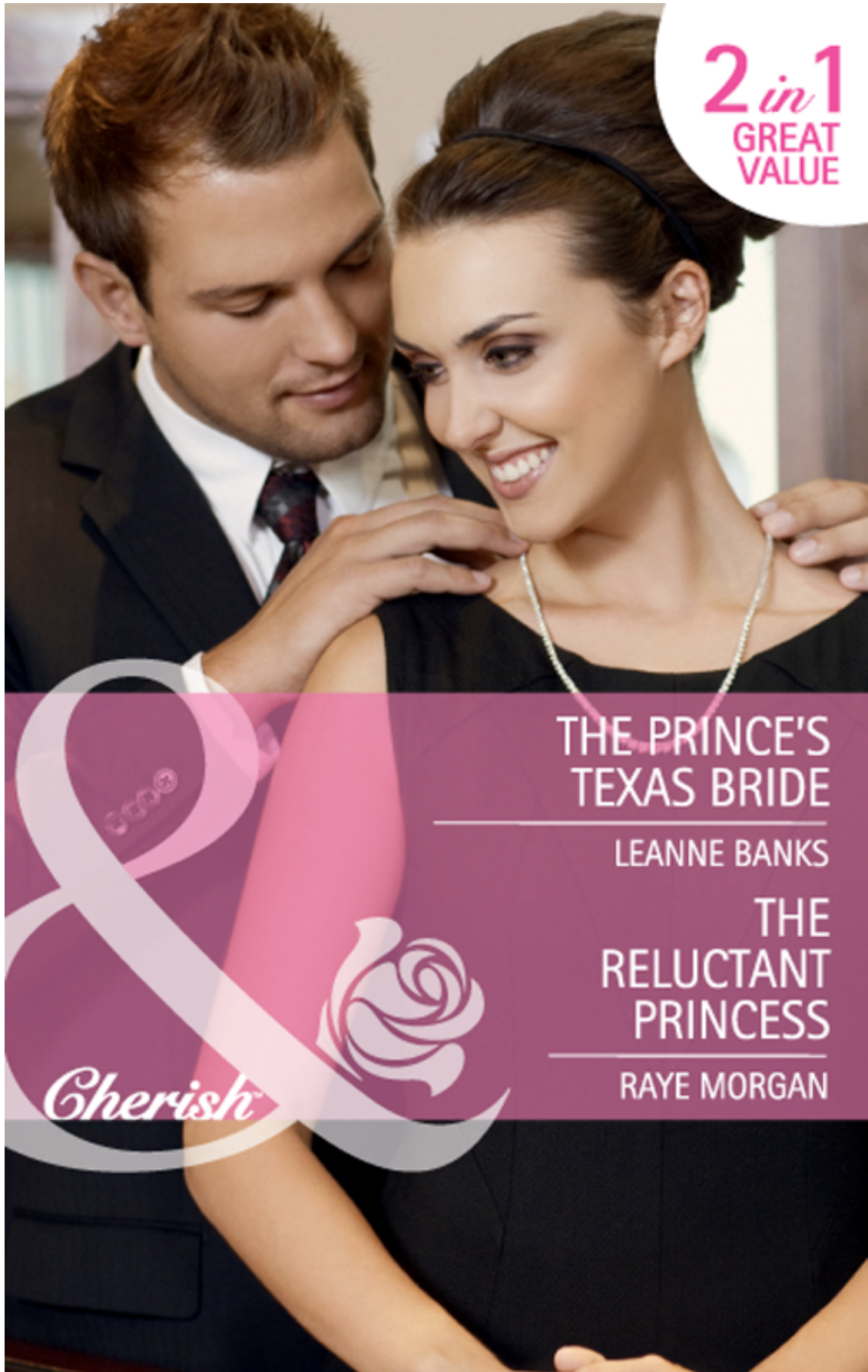
## **Banks L.**

The Prince's Texas Bride / The Reluctant Princess / L. Banks —  
«HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Cherish)

The Prince's Texas Bride Mediterranean Prince Stefan was hell-bent on being a true ruler, unlike the generations of playboys that preceded him. But the feisty Texan he'd just hired on staff proved quite a distraction. He'd never known a woman as challenging – or as irresistible. But this ordinary commoner was off-limits...unless he'd finally met his royal match! The Reluctant Princess Betrayal made Kim flee her fairytale life inside a castle. Now independent, the royal is struggling to raise her illegitimate baby alone in exile. Jake has been tasked with bringing the runaway princess home. And the last thing the emissary needs is to fall for Kim – yet his feelings for her and little Dede are growing by the day...

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**The Prince's  
Texas Bride  
Leanne Banks  
The Reluctant  
Princess  
Raye Morgan**



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### **The Prince's Texas Bride**

Dear Reader,

You may remember Prince Stefan Devereaux from *Royal Holiday Baby*. Well, the truth is Stefan is a strong man who can, on occasion, be a pain in the Patootie. I took one look at him and knew what he really needed was a strong woman who didn't give a flying fig about his title. Eve Jackson is just that woman. When Stefan hires Eve to get his royal stables in order, he has no idea how quickly Eve will get under his skin straight to his soul. When his life takes a screeching unexpected turn, Eve encourages him to be his best self. You'll see. Stefan learns that having Eve in his life is not optional, it's mandatory. But can he convince a woman who insists she's not princess material that she is the queen of his heart?

Enjoy this story!

xo,

*Leanne Banks*

## About the Author

**LEANNE BANKS** is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author who is surprised every time she realizes how many books she has written. Leanne loves chocolate, the beach and new adventures. To name a few, Leanne has ridden on an elephant, stood on an ostrich egg (no, it didn't break), gone parasailing and indoor skydiving. Leanne loves writing romance because she believes in the power and magic of love. She lives in Virginia with her family and four-and-a-half-pound Pomeranian named Bijou. Visit her website at [www.leannebanks.com](http://www.leannebanks.com).

This book is dedicated to Doris and Bud Banks.

Thank you for all your love and support and for teaching us the game chicken scratch!

## *Prologue*

The full moon wasn't offering any answers.

Eve Jackson sat in the small palace courtyard and drank in the scent of blooming flowers and ocean air as she debated the most recent offer she'd received from the official representative of the Royal House of Devereaux. She still wasn't sure she could possibly fit in as the chief stable master for the royal horses. She was from Texas, for Pete's sake, and had never traveled out of the States before this week. She'd been raised to say "yes, ma'am" and "no, sir," but the idea of performing a curtsy made her laugh every time she even thought of it.

The lure of the job, however, was too tempting for words. Her current job as a regional manager for a major hotel chain bored her so much that there were days she was tempted to poke herself in the eye with a pencil. Training horses was her first love, but when Eve had received the opportunity to go to college, she'd chosen a practical, marketable degree. Her parents had been so poor that she'd been sent off to her Aunt Hildie for most of her teen years.

Training this stable of horses was her dream job and she'd been offered a startling amount of money to do it. But she wondered if she could be happy here in a place and culture so far removed from rural Texas. And there was another concern. She felt a shift of air against her skin and her nerve endings prickled in awareness. She wasn't alone. Glancing around, she saw Prince Stefan Devereaux, tall with his chiseled features unsoftened by the moonlight, watching her from just a few feet away.

*Crap*, she thought, trying to remember what the proper protocol was for greeting the ruler of Chantaine. She stood because she figured she wasn't supposed to remain seated. *Crap*, she thought again. Was *he* supposed to speak first? It seemed rude to just stare back at him.

"Hi, Your Highness," she said. "How's it going?"

His lips twitched and he moved toward her. "Fine, thank you, Ms. Jackson. I hope you're enjoying your visit to my country."

"It's beautiful," she said. "Though much smaller than Texas. Not that there's anything wrong with that," she rushed to say, in case he thought she was insulting his country.

"Yes, it is, to both of your observations. My representative told me he presented you with the latest offer, but you haven't given him an answer," Stefan said. "The terms are generous. Why haven't you accepted?"

Demanding and direct, she thought, but she supposed he had the right. This was the third offer his representative had made to her, and the palace was paying for her trip to Chantaine. Eve had met Prince Stefan Devereaux of Chantaine on two other occasions. Both times, he'd surprised her. From his sister Tina, Eve had gotten the impression that he was a pompous prig. He was. For some reason, she'd also expected him to be prissy and ignorant. He was neither.

"Are you uneasy about living so far from your home?" he asked and paused a half beat. "I was under the impression you were more adventurous than that."

She lifted her chin at the subtle challenge in his tone. "It's a big move. I have to make sure it's the right one."

"You don't have children or a husband. You're young and free. What's holding you back?" he asked. "Or is there another concern?" He studied her for a moment. "If there is, you must tell me. If you're not going to accept the offer, we need to know. I must fill this position. My horses deserve consistent care."

"Your country is beautiful. I want to work with your horses," she said and decided to blurt it out. "I'm just not sure about this royal thing. I'm not big on the curtsy and I'm likely to mess up how to address you and others."

“No need to curtsy unless it’s a public situation. I can have one of the advisers prompt you if necessary. When you and I are alone, you may call me Stefan. In public, it’s Your Highness. It’s quite simple,” he said dismissively. “What else?”

“I’m not sure about the chain of command. Who is my boss? Your aide or you?”

“I am,” he said. “I may deliver instructions through an assistant, but you answer to me. If you have any questions or concerns, you may approach me directly if I’m available. Anything else?” he asked, a faint thread of impatience sliding into his voice.

“Just one thing,” she said, meeting his gaze but preparing herself for a big, fat turndown. “If you choose to fire me, I want six months’ pay and my airfare back to the States.”

His Royal Highness blinked. “Why would you request such a thing?”

“What happened to your last stable master?”

“He was fired because he wasn’t doing his job properly,” Stefan said.

“And the one before?” she asked.

“He was fired for negligence.” Stefan narrowed his eyes. “Are you suggesting I’m a difficult employer?”

“I’m suggesting that when prized horses, powerful men and women grow accustomed to getting their way they can become ... temperamental.”

Stefan met her gaze and his lips twitched once again. “I don’t recall ever being compared to a prized horse, but I’ll choose to take it as a compliment. I’ll meet your conditions if you’ll meet mine. You must move to Chantaine within two weeks.”

## Chapter One

Day two of palace orientation and Eve's eyes were glazing over.

"Wait for His Royal Highness to address you first. Wait for His Royal Highness to extend his hand first. If you are wearing gloves when greeting His Royal Highness, you need not remove them first. Women need not wear hats before 6:30 p.m.," the elderly male adviser droned on. "Call the prince by Your Royal Highness on first meeting. Thereafter, if the conversation continues, refer to him as 'sir.' Stand whenever a royal enters the room. Never turn one's back on a royal...."

"Oh, Jonathan, give the poor girl a break," a young woman said from behind Eve.

Eve whipped her head around, spotting Princess Bridget, whom she'd met during her previous visit to Chantaine. She remembered the underlying, not-quite-buried impatience she'd sensed when she'd met Princess Bridget, a young woman close to her age.

Eve immediately rose and attempted an awkward curtsy.

Princess Bridget waved the gesture aside and tossed her head of brown, wavy hair. "Please don't. Will you join me for lunch? I need a royal break," she said. "We can discuss American reality shows."

"Your Highness," Eve said, *trying* to follow the rules she'd just been given.

"Stop, stop," Bridget said, taking Eve's hand and pulling her away. "And if you dare call me ma'am, I'll scream the palace walls down. Please call me Bridget. I'm counting on you to forget everything you've learned today so that you and I can become great friends. Thank God we have an American around now. You're just what we need."

Eve felt a combination of relief at getting away from the interminable orientation session and anxiety at Princess Bridget's plans for her. "I don't really watch a lot of reality TV."

"Well, I'm sure we'll come up with something. You know, ever since Tina got pregnant and left Chantaine, I have to do most of the public appearances." Bridget stopped and met Eve's gaze. "I'm not well suited for this. Tina was born and bred for this job. It drives me crazy."

"What specifically about the job drives you crazy?" Eve asked.

Bridget paused, blinking. Her eyebrows knitted in a frown. "I haven't thought about that. I've just been so resentful to be thrust into this right when I was enjoying my time in Italy."

Eve nodded. "I hated my last job, but it paid very well. After working in that position, I realized that being able to do something that was my passion every day was a gift, if not a luxury."

Bridget paused again. "How profound. And I was hoping you would be a rebel."

Eve chuckled. "I am a rebel. I just try to be smart about it."

"Hmm," Bridget said. "Maybe I can learn from you. I think we should have champagne for lunch to celebrate your arrival. Dom Pérignon. If Stefan finds out, he'll be livid. I do so love to make him livid."

"No champagne for me. I don't want to start my second day on the job making my boss livid."

Bridget gave a pout and sighed. "You have a point. It wouldn't do for him to fire you right off the bat. Chardonnay?"

"And water, please," Eve said, thinking she definitely needed to remain sober around these Devereaux.

Bridget led her to a small table on a balcony that overlooked the east end of the palace grounds. Floral gardens were surrounded by lush, green grounds with trees that transitioned to rocky cliffs and sandy beaches. The ocean was a mouthwatering shade of azure.

"Beautiful view," Eve said, shaking her head in wonder. "Stunning."

Bridget stared out the window and nodded. "Yes, it is, but it can be a bit confining being surrounded by all that water. No easy way out," she said, then shrugged. "Can't change that at the moment." A staff member approached the table with a pitcher of water and filled two glasses. "Thank

you, Claire. Could you also bring us a nice bottle of Chardonnay? Is lemon-roasted chicken and a green salad okay with you?" she asked Eve.

"That would be great, thanks," Eve said, swallowing a secret laugh over the fact that she'd probably be eating peanut butter and jelly on the run if she were at the Logan Ranch.

Bridget met her gaze. "What are your interests? Besides horses, of course," she said. "Do you like to shop? Do you like music? Art?"

"Yes to music and art. I'm more fickle when it comes to shopping. With my new position here, I imagine I'll be busy enough in the beginning that I'll be getting most of my music fix from my iPod. What about you? Are there times of the year that are busier than others?"

"It seems as if it's always busy since Tina left, but I'm dragging my other sister and brother to participate in the royal appearances more often. I keep nagging Stefan for a vacation, but I think he's afraid once he lets me off the island, I'll never return," she said with a laugh.

"I apologize for my lack of knowledge, but does Chantaine have museums?"

"Two," Bridget said, not hiding her disapproval. "I've tried to talk Stefan into expanding, but he insists that both parliament and the citizens would balk when so many of our people are struggling economically."

Eve nodded, her mind wandering the way it often seemed to do whenever someone presented her with a problem. "It might go over with everyone better if you could make it a children's museum," she mused, and took a sip of her water.

Bridget stared at her for a moment. "That's a brilliant idea. If you're this brilliant about everything, it's no wonder Stefan was so intent on hiring you. You're right about starting out with a heavy workload, though," she said sympathetically. "I just remembered there's a parade in three weeks. The royal horses are featured, ridden by several top leaders and advisers."

Eve swallowed her water the wrong way and choked. "Three weeks?" she echoed.

Bridget nodded in commiseration. "Yes, and I can't help but believe that the horses are a little green." She shuddered delicately. "I hate the image of Count Christo being thrown. He's eighty-two years old. Sweet man, a little daft. He always insists on bringing a whip with him when he rides in the parade."

Eve felt her heart sink to her feet. "A whip?" she said, appalled, then sucked in a breath of air. "A *whip*," she said again, her voice rising.

Bridget shot Eve a cautious glance. "He hasn't ever actually used it."

"But he carries it," Eve said, distressed. She'd learned the uselessness of whips a long time ago.

"He's an old man," Bridget whispered. "It gives him a false feeling of control."

Eve took another deep breath and clenched her fists in her lap. More than anything, she wanted to run to the stables and begin her work with the horses. More than ever the rest of this palace protocol and orientation seemed like horse crap. She didn't want to waste one more second. Glancing at Bridget, she saw that dashing away from the princess wouldn't be possible. She clenched her fists again then released them, resolving that she would head for the stables as soon as the meal was done.

Hours later, after Eve had skipped the afternoon orientation session, she worked with a third of the many palace horses. This one was a gentle palomino mare that, like the others, hadn't been ridden often enough. She pushed down her anger that the horses hadn't been exercised. Yet, at the same time, she knew Stefan had been stalling. For her.

A smidge of guilt mixed in with her anger.

The scent of horseflesh reached her on a cellular level as she reined in the palomino. The horse submitted to her, but Eve felt the mare's urge to run. She would need to ride most of the horses once a day, if not twice during the next weeks. And the whip—God help her. How was she going to get the whip away from Count Christo?

Eve returned the mare to her stall and walked to the separate building that housed the stallion. Black was Arabian and quite the handful. She would work with him first thing in the morning, she

decided as she leaned against the wall opposite his stall where he paced restlessly. The good news was that he wasn't beating down the walls of the barn.

She felt more than heard footsteps approaching and, even before she turned, her nerve endings went on alert. Turning, she saw Stefan's strong, tall form. Emanating a restless energy and power that reminded her of the stallion, he wore black riding pants and a half-buttoned shirt. His gaze was intent. "I'm the only one who rides Black," he said.

Eve refused to be intimidated. This was her job now. She would own it. "How often do you ride him?"

"Two or three times a week," he said. "Hard."

"He needs a minimum of five times per week," she told him. "Look at how restless he is."

"That's because he's a stallion," Stefan said. "Are you questioning my treatment of the horse?"

"Of course," she said. "That's why you hired me."

His mouth lifted in a half grin. "We'll do Black my way."

"For a week," she said. "If he's still restless, he'll be ridden more often, and I'll be the one riding him."

Stefan chuckled. "You?" He shook his head. "He's too much for you to handle. He was too much for the previous two men to handle."

"We'll see," she said, confident she could handle Black. She was not nearly as confident about Stefan. She watched him as he approached the stallion. The horse seemed to immediately calm. Stefan placed a bridle and saddle on the horse. He led him out of the stall, mounted him and galloped into the distance.

Chill bumps rose on her arms at the sight of man and horse flying into the moonlight. There was a mystic connection between the two of them that she couldn't deny. She felt a rush of excitement and tried to temper it with resolve. Stefan was a powerful man, but he had distractions. He wouldn't be able to ride the stallion every day. He had other demands. It wouldn't take long before she would step in as a substitute to help Black release some of his energy. Less than a week, she suspected, and she would be ready....

Exactly one week later, Stefan stared into the empty stall of his prized stallion and felt a stab of alarm. *Where is Black? Has someone let him out? Escaped?* He walked into the stall and stared at the walls. *What had—*

Realization hit him and his alarm shifted to anger. Eve had taken Black for a ride. She'd told Stefan her plans, but since he'd stated that he would be the only one to ride the stallion, he'd dismissed her statements. He'd assumed she would follow his orders. Frustration rushed through him as he glanced at his watch. He'd left his office later than usual for his ride this evening, but she still shouldn't have defied his orders.

He paced from one end of the barn to the other, his temper rising with each step. Hearing the sound of hoofbeats outside, he immediately strode to the barn door. He watched in shock as Eve swung off the stallion and led him around the corral for a cooldown. Black loped alongside her as docile as a lamb. He heard her voice, low and somehow seductive, as if she were making small talk with the stallion.

As she turned around, Black glanced upward. The horse must have caught his scent. His ears prickled and he gave a soft whinney before pulling away from Eve and trotting toward him. Stefan felt a measure of satisfaction that Black had left her behind so easily.

"There you go," Stefan said to the horse, rubbing Black's sleek throat. "I've missed you, too."

Eve, her hair escaping the long braid that hung down her back, stepped toward Black and Stefan. Her hands rested on her hips, her lips were firm and unsmiling.

"You were told not to ride him," Stefan said, deliberately keeping his voice mild as he patted the horse.

“And I told you that he needs to be ridden more frequently. If you don’t do it, then I will,” she said. “You’ve only shown up twice this week. He’s been so restless it’s a wonder he didn’t kick down the walls of his stall.”

“It seems you don’t understand. What I say goes about Black,” he said, turning toward her.

She met his gaze. “But you still expect me to be in charge of his health, well-being, diet, etc. . . .”

“Yes,” he said, relieved the impertinent woman was beginning to understand.

She nodded. “Okay. I quit,” she said and turned to walk away.

Stefan stared at her in shock, again. “Bloody hell,” he muttered under his breath. “You can’t quit.”

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Sure I can. You and I agreed that you would let me be in charge of running the stables. That includes Black. If you’re going to interfere with me performing my job—”

“Interfere,” he repeated, nearly speechless at her lack of respect. “As your employer, it’s my right to agree or disagree with how you conduct your duties. Particularly in regards to Black—”

“Not if your plan isn’t in the best interest of the horse,” she interrupted, surprising him yet again. With the exception of his siblings, very few people interrupted him. “And as far as Black is concerned, you’re not rational about him. Your insistence that you be the only one to ride him is ridiculous. You’re a busy man, leader of a country for Pete’s sake. You have obligations and responsibilities that are more important than making sure your favorite horse is getting enough exercise.”

“I don’t need you to inform me about my position. I *make* time to ride Black. It’s as much for me as it is for him,” he said, revealing more than he’d intended.

She stared at him for a long moment. “So is this about your ego, or about how going for a midnight ride saves you from the craziness of your position?” she asked softly.

He felt as if she’d stabbed him. What right did she have to judge him? His rides with Black were the only time he felt truly free.

“I’m not trying to step on your toes or prevent you from the pleasure of riding Black. I’m just being realistic. He’s a prize of an animal, smart, powerful and fast,” she said, glancing toward the horse. “But he’s full of energy and if he isn’t exercised more frequently he’s going to be miserable. I don’t think you want that.”

He clenched his teeth then sucked in a quick breath. “How did you do it? No one has been able to ride him except for me.”

She lifted her lips in a smile that made his gut twist. “That’s my secret,” she said. “I’m a horse whisperer,” she said in a self-mocking tone. “That’s why you hired me.”

“For the others,” he said.

“Hmm,” she said with a nod of understanding. “Looks like you have a decision to make. Let me know by morning, and I’ll take the first flight back to Texas.”

He caught her wrist as she turned around and she glanced at him in surprise. “You’re not getting out of the job that easily,” he said. “Ride Black, but do so at your own risk. I’ll let you know which nights I’ll ride him.”

Her gaze searched his face. “So you do have a reasonable bone or two in your body,” she said.

His lips curved in amusement despite the fact that he was still irritated with her. “Of course I do. I’m forced to be reasonable day in and day out with government leaders and advisers.”

“Which is why you really need those rides with Black,” she said.

Her perceptiveness was both a bother and a relief. There weren’t many, if any, people who Stefan allowed close, and he’d been told by more than a few that he was difficult to read. The truth was that his passions always felt as if they were just beneath the surface, ready to burst through, so he felt he had to exert enormous self-control.

Gazing down at her, he saw a combination of compassion and challenge in her dark eyes. Her lips were pursed as if she were trying not to smile. His hand still encircled her wrist and the skin there

felt soft in contrast to her spine of steel. What an odd mix of a woman, he thought. He wondered what she was like in bed. He wondered what she would do if he kissed her. A hot visual of her naked beneath him whipped through his mind.

His immediate surge of desire took him by surprise. Eve wasn't his type. She was argumentative. She had zero understanding of palace affairs. For God's sake, she worked in a barn. In that flash of an instant, he glimpsed a shot of awareness that deepened her already dark eyes. In the next second, he saw the same surprise he'd felt.

Taking a breath, she stepped back and pulled her hand from his. "If you can let me know by 8:00 p.m. on the nights you'll be riding him, that would help me," she said.

"Waiting till that late will tie up most of your evenings," he said.

"I don't have anything else on my calendar. You see, I have to get ready for this parade my boss neglected to tell me about," she said in a confiding tone.

"That's why I required you to come to Chantaine within two weeks," Stefan said, mildly amused.

"It would have been nice of you to let me know ahead of time," she said.

"I'm not that nice," he said. "Would it have made a difference?"

"I guess not," she said. "I just wouldn't have sat through any of those orientation sessions," she said.

"I was told you skipped the afternoon session," Stefan said.

"That's true," she said. "As soon as Princess Bridget told me there was going to be a parade with some kook waving a whip, I was outta there."

"Count Christo is eccentric, but I wouldn't call him a kook," Stefan said.

"You don't have to," Eve said. "And I'll tell you now, he won't be carrying a whip when he's riding one of your horses."

"Eve," Stefan said. "The count is an important and revered member of Chantaine society."

"He won't even miss that whip, I promise," she said.

"Eve," he said again.

She waved her hand in dismissal. "That's a week and a half away. No worries Your Highness," she said with a sparkle in her eye.

"Highness?" he echoed.

"That's what my aunt Hildie calls Tina every now and then."

The tidbit amused him. "I bet Tina loved that."

"Oh, you have no idea," she said and gave a pretty little salute with her right hand. "I should hit the sack, Your Highness. I rise early these days. Sweet dreams."

The next day as Eve was grabbing a sandwich at her office in the stables, she mulled over the possibility of providing Black with a companion. The stallion led such a solitary life he might be more content with a gelding as a friend, or perhaps a goat.

"There you are," Bridget, wearing a dress and heels, said from the doorway. She walked inside the small office without invitation, wagging her finger in disapproval. "You've been invisible during the last week. I was certain you'd flown back to Texas until I overheard one of the staff discussing how early you leave your quarters in the morning and how late you return at night. You're going to exhaust yourself before you've even been here a month, and Tina will have all our heads. This must stop."

Despite Bridget's propensity for exaggeration, Eve felt a little less alone by her presence. She'd been so busy with the horses that she hadn't had time to think about anything else except late at night before she fell asleep. She would die before she admitted it, but she was a little homesick.

"I'm fine," Eve insisted and set down her sandwich. "I just needed to jump in with both feet with the parade coming around the corner."

"Well, it's simply not acceptable," Bridget said. "I'm sure you haven't even taken off one day since you arrived. Therefore, you shall go shopping with me this afternoon," she said in full princess mode.

Eve shook her head. "It's sweet of you to ask, and I'm honored, but I can't. It would just put me behind. I have to start scheduling appointments with the riders so everything will go smoothly during the parade."

Bridget wrinkled her brow in confusion. "We've never had appointments before. We just show up on parade day, mount the horse and ride."

"How did that work out?" Eve asked, already knowing the answer.

"Fine with me. There have been a few little problems. One of the mares bucked her rider and took off through the crowd. One of the geldings stopped halfway through and refused to go any farther."

"And what about that year when one of the horses reared up and a half dozen of them went to the beach? Not just to the beach," Eve said. "But in the water."

Bridget winced. "Oh, yes. I couldn't really blame them. It was a very hot day and the master of ceremonies was long-winded, which meant we had to wait forever to get started. I guess you're right. Good luck getting some of the old guys to agree to the appointments, though."

"Thank you," Eve said in a long-suffering voice.

Bridget sighed. "Well, if you won't go shopping with me, then you must join us for dinner tonight. It's family night. Stefan requires us to have dinner together every week since Jacques is on break from college. He'll be there as well as Phillipa."

Eve immediately began to shake her head. "I'm not family. I wouldn't want to intrude," she said, also confident that she would feel totally out of place at a table full of royals.

"No intrusion," Bridget said. "Besides, you're like family because of your association with Tina."

"Oh, no, thank you, but—"

"I won't take no for an answer. You must eat. You may as well eat with us. The food will be better than that sandwich," she said, waving her hand in disgust at Eve's lunch. "If you don't come, then I'll have to tell Tina, and she'll fuss at Stefan and me. Trust me, it will get messy."

Eve sighed, realizing it would be easier to give in to Bridget's invitation and beg off early. She could pretend to be a fly on the wall and resolved to keep her mouth shut. "If you insist," she said.

"I do," Bridget said, smiling broadly. "We'll dine at seven on the third floor. It's a bit smaller and more intimate. I'm delighted you'll join us. Ta-ta," she said and turned to leave.

"Bridget," Eve said before the woman vanished. Geez, that woman could move like the wind despite the fact that she was wearing high heels. "What should I wear?"

Bridget glanced over her shoulder. "Oh, it's not formal. Just a dress will do."

Eve had brought only a few dresses with her since she figured she would be spending most of her time with the horses. Her choices were black, brown and black. She decided on black and pulled her hair out of her braid. For her corporate job back in the States, she'd always dressed in a conservative, businesslike manner, with careful attention to grooming.

Looking in the mirror made her wince. She'd been so focused on getting the horses ready for the parade that she'd done the bare minimum in the grooming department. Her fingernails were all broken down to the quick, her hair was out of control, her lips were chapped and smudges of violet rimmed her brown eyes.

"Thank goodness for concealer," she muttered under her breath, then got to work. Nerves danced in her belly and she chastised herself. She shouldn't be nervous. Although she'd never shared a meal with a roomful of royals, she knew which fork to use and when. Her aunt Hildie had made sure she knew her manners. Eve felt a jab of homesickness take her by surprise, then pushed it down. It wasn't as if she were being sent away from her parents when she'd become a teenager. She'd made this choice of her own volition. She was here for her dream job.

The prospect of interacting with Stefan on a semisocial level still made her uncomfortable. She was at ease dealing with him over matters concerning the horses, but beyond that, she found the man

unsettling. After hearing his sister Tina talk about how overbearing he was, she'd been certain she'd find him a selfish chauvinist. But she was beginning to see that he was far more complex than she'd first thought. He had a lot on his shoulders and he didn't shift one bit under his responsibilities. To her, it appeared that he was trying to bring the siblings together for the sake of Chantaine, and the independent-minded Devereaux weren't making it easy.

Eve finished getting dressed and walked from the staff quarters to the palace. A guard allowed her entrance, and she climbed the marble steps to the third floor and wandered down the long hallway to an open doorway from where she heard voices—Bridget's in particular.

Eve peeked around the corner and caught her first glimpse of the lavish dining room. With a different table, the room could have easily held twenty people. Instead, a round table dressed in a crisp white cloth and set with crystal glasses, sterling silver and bone china sat in the center of the room.

The elegance and luxury of the room reminded her of the differences between her background and that of the Devereaux family. Her parents had moved frequently to stay a step ahead of the debt collectors, which meant she'd never stayed in one school very long. A flood of memories washed over her of walking into school, wearing clothes with holes in them, suffering the stares of her classmates and feeling completely out of place.

Her stomach knotted. What was she doing here? She took a deep breath and told herself this was a different time, a different situation. The siblings distracted her from her panic.

Bridget, Phillipa and Jacques stood beside the table.

"The goal for this evening's meal is to get Stefan to cut me some slack," Bridget said. "I need a vacation in Italy. Phillipa, you can cover for me for just a couple weeks—"

Phillipa shook her head. "You know I'm in the middle of my dissertation. I can't take off for two weeks."

Bridget sighed. "Maybe we could cut down some of the appearances." She glanced at Jacques, who bore a striking resemblance to Stefan. "And you could help."

Jacques looked appalled. "Me? I'm playing in a soccer match in Spain this weekend."

"Well, I can't keep doing all this on my own. Lord knows how Tina managed it," Bridget said.

Eve strongly considered turning around and leaving at that point, but Jacques glanced up and looked at her as if she were a lifeline. "Please do come in. Eve Jackson?"

"Yes, Your Highness," she said. "I'm surprised you remember since we met so briefly last month."

Jacques's lips lifted in a flirtatious grin. "Please call me Jacques, and I make a habit of never forgetting the name of a beautiful woman."

Eve couldn't resist smiling in return. She could tell Jacques was on the road to be a class-one heartbreaker. "Thank you, Jacques. I appreciate the flattery, especially since I haven't spent much time outside the barn since I arrived."

"I'm determined to change that," Bridget said. "Just because your position requires you to work with the horses doesn't mean you're married to them. Tomorrow you can join me for a day at the beach."

Eve shook her head. "No beach for me until after the parade."

Bridget scowled. "Tina is going to—" She broke off as Stefan walked into the room. "Welcome, Stefan. I persuaded Eve to join us tonight. She's been cooped up in the barn far too long. I'm sure you don't mind."

Eve blinked at that last remark, feeling a stab of chagrin. She'd assumed Stefan had already been informed and approved of her presence at the meal.

Stefan looked at her, his gaze falling over her from head to toe and back up again. "Of course not. I'm glad you thought of it, Bridget," he said, his gaze not straying from Eve's. "Our pleasure, Eve."

"Thank you, Your High—" she started, but stopped when he sliced his hand through the air.

"Stefan, please. Shall we sit?"

As if on cue, three staff members immediately entered the room.

"I chose Chateaubriand for the menu tonight," Bridget said. "I asked the chef to choose everything else ... well, aside from the chocolate mousse torte. Do you like chocolate, Eve?"

Still self-conscious, Eve fidgeted with her hands in her lap. "*Like* is an understatement. I've been known to make dessert the main course when it's chocolate."

Bridget laughed in approval. "Well, you won't want to skip any of the courses tonight. Our newest chef is fabulous."

"Here, here," Jacques said. "Much improved over food at the university."

Eve lifted her water glass and took a swallow. "Newest," she echoed. "How new is he?"

Bridget glanced at Stefan. "Three months, would you say? The employment director had to replace the former chef."

Hiding a grin of amusement behind her glass, Eve took another sip and met Stefan's gaze. "Is that so?"

He raised a dark eyebrow as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. "The employment director made that decision. I had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, I know why he was dismissed," Phillipa said. "He was coming to work later and later due to a drinking problem. The employment director set him up with a special rehabilitation program."

Stefan lifted his glass of wine, his lips twitching in amusement before he took a sip. "Eve seems to be under the misguided impression that I fire so many staff members we may as well have a revolving door for them."

All four Devereaux stared at her with questions in their eyes. Eve coughed as her water went down the wrong way.

"What on earth made you think that?" Phillipa asked. "Stefan delegates almost all of the hiring to the employment director."

"I never said that. I—" The gleam in his eyes told her he was enjoying her discomfort far too much. Eve frowned at Stefan, rising to the challenge. She was a Texan, for Pete's sake, and she refused to be intimidated. "How many horse managers have you gone through? How long did my predecessor last before you bumped him off?"

Shocked silence followed, and Eve lifted her chin even as she felt herself being stared down by everyone in the room.

Stefan's bark of laughter broke the silence and the tension. "To Americans," he said and lifted his glass. "You don't take crap from anyone."

Stefan's siblings gaped at her in surprise. Bridget recovered first, lifting her glass in salute. "We can learn by her example."

Stefan lifted his hand in disagreement. "There's a difference between defending oneself and constantly quarreling."

"But, Stefan—"

"Enough, Bridget," he said and turned to Phillipa. "How are your studies progressing?"

Stefan held her attention with how he conducted himself. He exhibited a magnetism that combined power, intelligence and complete masculinity. She'd never met a man who possessed such a combination. She was accustomed to sly cowboys and corporate managers with egos bigger than their paychecks.

She studied his hands as he cut his beef and lifted his glass of wine to his lips. His fingers were long, and she remembered feeling the faintest bit of a callous in his palms when he'd shaken her hand. She'd liked that about him.

Now, as she watched him talking to his siblings, she liked the way he focused on them instead of himself. She wondered if he kept his concerns and worries from his siblings. She wondered if he'd protected them a bit too much.

“If everything works out, I may do an exchange course in Italy this summer. Florence,” Jacques said with a half grin. “My advisers say I’m spending enough time on soccer and they want me to be well-rounded.”

“Florence,” Bridget muttered and gave a low, barely audible growl. She cleared her throat. “Speaking of art, Eve and I were talking just a couple of weeks ago about the idea of building a children’s art museum in Chantaine.”

Eve cringed at being dragged into Bridget’s power struggle with Stefan.

“Bridget, you know the agreement about our family dinners,” Stefan said with a sigh. “No discussion about financial proposals or arguments about politics. This is a time for us to be family.”

“Well, it’s hard for me to be family when all I do is work, work, work,” she said. “Have you noticed that you haven’t asked me anything about my personal life? Why?” she demanded. “Because I have no personal life. If I can’t have a personal life, then I’d like to have a sense of satisfaction. Even Eve said being happy in your job is making sure you have a passion for what you’re doing.”

Eve felt Stefan’s hard glare. She felt stuck in the middle of a place she absolutely didn’t want to be. Lifting her glass of wine, she took a sip and latched onto the first thing that came to her mind. “Anyone here know how to play the game Chicken Scratch?”

## *Chapter Two*

With the exception of Stefan, it had been like taking candy from a baby. Stefan had actually won the third game. Eve spread out her hands to collect the dominos. “Well, this has been fun, but I need to visit the barn one more time tonight.”

“No,” Jacques said. “I was just getting used to it.” “Me, too,” Bridget said. “I almost won the second game.”

“Afraid you’ll lose again?” Stefan challenged. Her stomach did a crazy tumble at the expression on his face. “Not at all,” she said. “I really do need to visit the barn again. If you liked the game, I’ll leave my dominoes here so you can practice.”

“Please do,” Phillipa murmured. “We need it.” Eve smiled at the brainy princess determined to master the game. “If we play again, I bet all of you will beat the pants off of me.”

“I’d like to see that,” Jacques said with a devilish look in his eyes.

“Jacques,” Stefan said with a frown. “Ms. Jackson is our guest while at dinner. She deserves our respect.”

“Exactly,” Eve agreed. “Your elders always deserve your respect.”

Jacques laughed. “If you’re my elder ...”

“Jacques,” Stefan said again, this time a touch of amusement slid into his tone as he gave a barely perceptible shake of his head.

“Thank you all again for everything. Joining you for dinner was an—honor,” she said and smiled. “Good night and sweet dreams,” she said, turning to leave.

“Sweet dreams?” Phillipa echoed.

“It’s an expression,” Eve said. “I’m wishing you sweet dreams.”

“That’s lovely,” Bridget said. “Sweet dreams to you, too.”

“Thank you,” Eve said and felt Stefan studying her. She felt a quiver of something strange in her belly and pushed it aside. “Your Highnesses,” she said and walked away.

The family dinner had gone much better than usual due to Eve’s presence, Stefan thought as he paced his quarters. She’d amused him by the way she’d pushed back when he’d teased her. The sound of her Texas drawl slid over his nerve endings like a smooth brandy. Her little game had distracted his family from the usual squabbles and griping, and allowed them to enjoy their time together. He would make sure she was included again.

Glancing at the clock, he thought about his early meeting with dignitaries from Russia in the morning. It would serve him well to go to sleep, but he was too restless. Lately, he’d been even more restless than usual. Bumping up his exercise routine hadn’t helped. The advisers had been pressing him more than ever on a matter that he’d avoided like the plague. But he knew they were right. He couldn’t delay this part of his duty forever. He glanced out the French doors of his balcony and watched the clouds slide over the moon. Inhaling, he caught the scent of impending rain. The atmosphere felt moody. Like him, he thought with wry chagrin.

An impulse shot through him and he considered it for thirty seconds. As ruler, he’d learned early on he would have to be selective about giving in to impulses. This one would help him sleep and quiet his spirit. He changed his clothes and called his personal guard, Georg. “I’m going to ride Black.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Would you like me to arrange for the horse to be saddled before you get to the barn?”

“Not necessary. I’ll do it,” Stefan said.

“Enjoy your ride, sir,” the security guard said.

“Thank you,” Stefan said and headed for the barn.

He heard her talking with Black before he looked inside the horse's stall. Black nodded as Eve talked as if he understood exactly what she was saying. "So, how do you like the idea of a goat?" she asked. "I have a feeling you would do better with a pet than another horse."

"A goat?" Stefan echoed and watched Eve whirl around in surprise. She adjusted her black Stetson. "Black would stomp the poor animal to smithereens."

"Maybe not," she disagreed, stroking the stallion in question. "By nature, horses aren't solitary animals. He's so restless. I think a pet might help him calm down."

Stefan stroked his chin. "I'll think about it," he said and wryly wished a pet goat would solve his own restlessness. "Did you ride him this evening?"

She shook her head. "No. I just visited him because I had a feeling you might want a ride tonight."

He appreciated her perception. "Family night can be an obstacle course, but I think it's necessary."

"I agree with you. Were you and your sisters and brother ever close?"

"That's a good question," he said as he entered the stall. Black immediately approached him, and Stefan felt a rush of pleasure at the way the horse responded to his presence. "We had different assignments, different nannies, even different advisers. Tina and I shared some similar training. I think that's why we're so close. Then Fredericka had her substance abuse issues and it became a priority to make sure that none of the other Devereaux went down that same road. If anyone was the glue between us all, it was Tina. When she left, it was a terrible blow."

"Bet you're still bummed about it," Eve said, resting her hand on her hip as she studied him.

"Bummed, but mostly resigned. I'm glad she's agreed to visits," he said, feeling a pang of missing his sister.

Her lips twitched. "And now you get to deal with Bridget," she said. "My aunt would say that should be a character-building experience for both of you."

"Is this the same aunt who addressed Tina as 'Your Highlyness'?"

"The one and only Hildie," Eve said with soft smile. "She's the best."

"And you miss her," he said, reading the combination of affection tempered with sadness on her face.

Eve glanced away then lifted her chin. "Probably more than I expected, but I'm too busy to spend much time feeling homesick. Speaking of time, I shouldn't keep you from your ride. Your boy is ready for you," she said, nodding toward the stallion.

He realized he'd just been dismissed and he wasn't sure he liked it. A surge of strange feelings rumbled through him. Sympathy for Eve ... curiosity ... something else he couldn't name. "Would you like to join me?"

Eve blinked in surprise. "Join you?" she echoed in disbelief.

"You can bring one of the geldings. It will be a short ride tonight since the weather is threatening," he said. "If you think you're up to it," he added, deliberately challenging her.

"I'm up to it," she retorted immediately. "I'll get Gus and meet you out back."

Moments later, she joined him and Black. "Where are we going?" she asked, leaning forward to give Gus a reassuring stroke on his neck.

"The beach," Stefan said and, even in the darkness, he saw her face light up.

"I haven't ridden there yet," she said. "I've stuck to the trails on the palace grounds."

"You won't after you've ridden on the beach," he said, urging Black into a fast trot. Leaving the confines of the stable yards behind, he led Eve on a winding path through dense woods. In the past, his security had wanted to ride with him and he'd always felt it was the worst kind of intrusion. He'd known forever that his life would never be totally his, but Stefan just wanted a few moments to breathe and escape. He'd never invited anyone with him on his night rides, but tonight he'd sensed the same combination of claustrophobia and loneliness in Eve that he often felt himself. Hers came

from adjusting to living on an island and homesickness. A ride on the beach might offer her the same temporary cure it did him. He pulled his horse to a stop as they entered a clearing that offered a view of the beach below.

"It's beautiful," she said in a low, but awed voice.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "I wanted to warn you that the slope's a little steep down this hill. Black could find his way down this hill blind, but Gus may need some extra time."

"No problem. I wouldn't do it any other way," she said.

Just as Stefan had said, Black made it down the hill in no time. As soon as Black hit level ground with the beach mere yards away, Stefan could feel the stallion pulling on the reins. He knew what was coming. "Patience," he said as the horse pranced. "She'll be here in just a moment or two."

Hearing the sound of Gus's hooves behind him, he turned, expecting the gelding to stop. Instead, Eve urged the horse into a fast trot and rode right past him. "See ya!" she called with a laugh, and Gus took off.

Black gave a snort of protest as Stefan watched in surprise. Seemingly one with the horse, she rode better than any woman and most men he'd met. Exhilaration raced through him. With her hair flying behind her and her compact body huddled closely against Gus, she was pure pleasure to watch. Black pulled against the reins, and Stefan allowed him to run. It wouldn't take long to catch them.

A moment later, Black pulled alongside Eve and Gus. Eve glanced over at Stefan and her breathless laughter drifted over him with the ocean breeze. The sound of her exultation made him smile. The night was dark; a storm was on the way, but he suddenly felt as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud.

Black increased his speed and Gus struggled to keep up. "Go ahead," she called with a wave. "It's your time. Take it."

Stefan gave Black the reins and the stallion sped down the beach. He felt the rush of adrenaline punch through him. His heart raced, and he felt free. The speed and wind blew the clutter from his mind. This never got old. For Stefan, this was what got him through his worst days. Black loved this run, too. If given the chance, the horse would run around the entire island, but Stefan had made a deal with security. Another fifty yards and then he would turn back. He reined in the horse. At the turn, Black slowed even more, sensing that turning around was the beginning of the end of the ride.

In the near distance, Stefan saw Eve riding Gus at the edge of the ocean. Surprising him again, she slid off the horse, kicked off her boots and rolled up her jeans. He rode closer as she waded into the water. "Careful," he called. "The bottom drops off sharply. You don't want to get—"

She took a step and sank in up to her chest, holding on to her hat. She let out a squeal that sent a shot of alarm through him. He swung off of Black, ready to pull her from the water. But then he heard her laughter. The sound reminded him of happy bells. As she trudged out of the ocean, she tugged at her wet shirt, pulling it away from her stomach, still giggling.

"You're drenched," he said. "I tried to warn you."

She waved her hand and lifted her gaze to meet his. Even in the dark of the night, he could see her eyes glint with amusement. "It's just water. I couldn't resist. I haven't left the barn long enough to visit the ocean since I've been here. It was just too tempting and I knew Gus wouldn't go anywhere without me."

Her lack of concern over the dunking was refreshing. Every other woman he knew would have been embarrassed and disgruntled. "I never intended for you to chain yourself to the barn. You're entitled to take some time for yourself."

"Not until after the parade," she said. "I don't want these babies misbehaving when they're on my clock." She put her foot in the stirrup and began to lift herself, then stepped back on the ground, shaking her head as she pulled up her jeans. "A little heavier than usual," she murmured.

"A good soak will do that," he said in a wry tone.

“To be perfectly honest, if my boss weren’t with me, I’d ditch the jeans until I got back to the barn,” she said and lifted herself again.

When she wobbled, Stefan gave her an extra boost on her backside. “Don’t let my presence deter you from your—comfort.”

Eve glanced down at him and for an instant he felt the scorching heat of sensual assessment in her gaze. She shook her head as if she were trying to clear it. “You surprise me, Your Highness. I didn’t know you were capable of flirting with your stable maid,” she drawled.

“You’re far more than a stable maid,” he said and then mounted Black. The way she’d emphasized the difference between his position and hers irritated him. This ride represented a time out for him. He wanted no reminders of his position. Determined to hold on to the last few moments of the ride, the sea air, the breeze, the darkness, he kept the stallion moving at a trot instead of a canter. Still it was no time before he and Eve arrived at the barn. She took care of Gus while he cared for Black. The stallion still seemed a bit restless as Stefan stepped from the stall.

He felt Eve move to his side. “He acts like he needs another ride,” Eve murmured.

Stefan glanced down at her, noticing the way she rubbed her arms. The shirt was still dark from her stroll in the ocean, and he suspected her jeans were very uncomfortable. He swore under his breath. “You’re still wet and I can tell you’re chilled. You need to get back to your room immediately.”

She wrinkled her brow in surprise and shrugged. “I’m fine. Like I said, it’s just water. I’m seriously considering a goat for Black. I think—”

“Enough about Black tonight. Go to your quarters and dry off,” Stefan said and, when she didn’t move, the next words automatically came out of his mouth, “I command it.”

Her eyes widened like saucers. “You *command* it?” she echoed in disbelief.

Stefan bit back an oath. He’d known from the beginning that Eve wouldn’t respond well to orders. He rarely pulled rank. Why in hell did she bring out the urge entirely too often? He bloody well couldn’t back down now. “I do.”

She blinked. “I’m not sure I like that.”

“It’s not that difficult to understand. You insist that my horses behave correctly because they are on your clock. In a way, you are on my clock,” he said. “I won’t have you getting pneumonia on my watch.”

“Are you comparing me to a horse?”

“No,” he said. “Besides the fact that Tina would kill me if anything happened to you, I wouldn’t be able to stand it myself.”

“But I’m not your responsibility,” she argued.

“You are in my country. Therefore, you are my responsibility.”

She stared at him for a long moment and shivered. His gaze lowered to her damp shirt stretched taut over her breasts, her nipples forming a tempting outline. He felt an immediate visceral response. Instinct urged him to rub her arms with his hands, to pull her against his body and make her warm. He clenched his hands into fists. Denial had been drilled into him since the day he was born, even more so when he’d come to understand the playboy image of his father and grandfather. When he’d come of age, many people had expected that he would follow in his father’s footsteps.

Stefan had wanted more. He wanted the opportunity to change and improve his country. For that, he had to be taken seriously. He’d kept his affairs scrupulously private. His duty and the sins of his father had forced him to hold his libido in check. Right now, though, for the first time in a long time, he fought the urge to pull the mouthy American Eve Jackson into his arms and make love to her against any flat surface available.

He reined in his surprising need. “I’ll walk you to your quarters,” he said.

“Oh, that’s so not necessary. I walk to my quarters by myself every night,” she said.

“You’re not dripping wet every night,” he said, extending his hand, determined to maintain control. “Come, now.”

Eve rolled her eyes, but placed her cool hand in his. “Sheesh, did anyone ever tell you that you take this Highlyness thing a bit far?”

“No one except my sisters,” he said as he led the way to the staff quarters. He rarely walked this path. Now that he saw it, he decided it needed a few more lights. “How late do you usually stay at the stables?”

She shrugged. “It depends. I usually grab a sandwich for dinner and head back around nine or ten.”

“I’m not sure it’s best for you to be walking back to the staff quarters unescorted every night,” he said.

“Oh, give me a break. I’ve spent my life going anywhere I need to go unescorted. Besides, I’ll bet you didn’t tell your previous stable master that he shouldn’t be walking around the grounds unescorted.”

“Trust me, he didn’t look at all like you. Plus, he never felt the necessity to work full-time let alone overtime. I prefer you leave the stables before dark for the next couple of nights. I’ll get motion lights installed.”

“We’ll see,” she muttered.

He gave a double take. “We’ll see?” he echoed. “I just gave you a very reasonable order.”

She sighed. “Do you really think you have criminals wandering around the palace grounds?”

“I’ll admit it’s not likely, and the security here is as good as it gets without causing claustrophobia, but nothing is perfect. I will be more comfortable if you avoid walking alone at night until there’s more lighting.”

“So this is about your comfort and not mine?” she said.

Damn, the woman was difficult, he thought. “Perhaps. You need to remember that you’re not just an employee. Because of your relationship with Tina, you’re also a friend of the family. We protect our friends.” He noticed her fighting a shiver and swore under his breath and rubbed her arms. “I shouldn’t be keeping you out in the cool air. Go inside and get warm.”

Her gaze met his for a moment and he saw a shot of liquid heat flash through her eyes. He saw the possibility of passion and felt it deep in his gut. She took a quick breath and her lips parted, drawing his attention. He wondered how that argumentative mouth would feel beneath his. He wondered how she would respond.

For once, Stefan had finally met a woman who didn’t give a damn about his title or position. She had no interest in pacifying him and would argue with him at the drop of a hat, yet he sensed that a part of her wanted him. Tempted, more so than he’d felt in a long time, he wondered if Eve could handle an affair with him. He suspected she met his requirement of being discreet. How messy would it be once their affair ended? Because they all ended.

She closed her eyes as if she were trying to shut down her emotions. That annoyed him. He wanted her open to him. He wanted to see the desire in her eyes again.

Taking another breath, she opened her eyes and took a step away from him. “Thanks for the night ride,” she said in a husky voice that brushed over his nerve endings. “Good night.”

He watched her jog inside the back door to the staff quarters and felt a surprising urge to go after her. He snuffed it out, of course. Even though Eve aroused more than his curiosity, he couldn’t rush into anything. There was too much at stake to be impulsive. There always had been and there always would be.

At ten o’clock the next morning, Eve was returning one of the horses to the stall when she heard Bridget’s voice.

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle Jackson,” she called. “I am your rescuer and have come to help you escape your drudgery for a while.”

Eve sighed, although she couldn’t deny she was amused. Bridget would do anything to get out of palace duties. She closed the door to Gus’s stall. “Bridget, that’s very sweet of you, but—”

“No refusals allowed,” Bridget said. “You and I have received orders from on high.”

Eve turned to face the princess and blinked at the sight. It was clear what the plans for the outing were from Bridget’s beach cover-up, gigantic sunglasses, a large-brim, black straw hat and designer beach bag.

“Orders from on high?” Eve echoed.

Bridget nodded. “Stefan has spoken. He says you need a day off, and I’ve been assigned to take you to the beach.” She lifted her finger. “Don’t you dare fight me on this. It wasn’t my idea, but it’s my first opportunity to have a little fun in what must be a century. If I have to attend another charity tea, I’ll scream. Besides, Stefan is right. You must take a break. Forgive me for being blunt, but you’re looking a bit, well, haggard.”

Eve hardly knew how to respond to Bridget’s mouthful of drama. She’d already shot down Eve’s objections before she’d had a chance to voice them. “I have difficulty believing the palace protests other members of the staff working too hard.”

Bridget gave a *tsk*-ing sound. “Eve, other members of the staff take every possible break. Besides, you’re not just staff. Tina gave you to us. The rules are different. Oh, for goodness’ sake, I’m suggesting a day at the beach. Not the guillotine. Your reluctance is insulting. Do you dislike me so much?”

Eve laughed in exasperation. “I don’t dislike you. I just need to stay on top of my duties. The parade is days away—”

“And everything is going to go brilliantly. In the meantime, the sun is shining and the beach is calling.” She clapped her hands lightly. “Come, come. You do have a swimsuit, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts,” Bridget said.

“You Devereaux drive a hard bargain,” Eve said.

“Oh, good,” Bridget said. “I smell the sweet scent of surrender. Don’t worry about sunscreen. I have plenty. Move along.”

Within forty-five minutes, Eve and Bridget were reclining in lounge chairs on a semi-private beach where, magically it seemed, servers appeared to deliver refreshing beverages and snacks.

“Are you sure you don’t want more than water?” Bridget asked.

“For now,” Eve said, closing her eyes and enjoying the feeling of sunshine and gentle ocean breeze over her skin. “You and Stefan were right. I needed this.”

“Of course I was right,” Bridget said, neatly eliminating Stefan from the equation. “The staff has prepared lunch. We can eat in an hour or two. They’ll also be putting up umbrellas soon. It has occurred to me that you’ve been too busy to make new friends in Chantaine since you arrived. In the same vein, you haven’t had the opportunity to meet any men. While I’ll confess that the selection is much better in Europe than here,” Bridget said in a dry voice, “I could introduce you to someone who could amuse you. You and I could visit one of our nightclubs.”

“Not my thing,” Eve said, keeping her eyes closed.

“Why ever not? What do you do for fun?”

“I enjoy riding and taking care of horses. I enjoy the beach. I like to read. I like to play card games and Chicken Scratch—”

“Oh, well, I can agree with Chicken Scratch. We are all determined to have you return for family dinner night and another round of it,” Bridget said.

“Great,” Eve said wryly. “I can’t wait to have the entire Devereaux dynasty gang up on me.”

Bridget laughed. “It’s your fault. You started it.” “I thought this was supposed to help me relax,” Eve muttered, but focused on the sound of the ocean waves.

She cautioned herself not to get used to it, but this was bliss. She drifted off...

“Is she getting too much sun?”

The voice, which seemed to affect her on a cellular level, awakened her with no warning and she sat up, disoriented. “What?”

The tall, strong body of Prince Stefan towered over her, casting a long shadow. Eve covered her eyes at the bright sunlight.

“Not at all. She applied sunscreen, and the staff put up an umbrella to shield her. Poor thing must be dead tired. She’s been asleep for the last half hour. Stefan, you’re working her too hard,” Bridget said.

“It’s not me,” he said. “She insists on working from before dawn to after dusk. The American way.”

Eve drew in a mind-clearing breath and tried to dismiss the effect Stefan had on her. She noticed he was dressed in a dark suit and the contrast with the white sand distracted her. She wondered how he would look wearing just a swim suit. Or less. “I’m awake now. You can talk *to* me instead of *about* me.”

Bridget giggled. “I tried to talk Eve into going to a nightclub with me, but she wasn’t interested. You should wave your imperial wand, Stefan. That was the only way I was able to persuade her to join me at the beach. I’m sure Tina would want to make sure we’re introducing her to new friends, including new male friends.”

“Perhaps Eve isn’t interested in the kind of men she would meet at a club,” Stefan said.

“Won’t know till she tries,” Bridget said in an airy voice. “However, I would be more than willing to escort her to Italy. I have the perfect club selected for tonight, thought—”

“I couldn’t be less interested in a club tonight,” Eve said. “The little trip to this perfect beach has relaxed me so much it scares me. Even though I’m being a slug today, I’m certain I’ll sleep like a log tonight. I think it’s the sea air.”

“Good to hear it,” Stefan said with a nod. “The family is having an early dinner with Jacques since he will be returning this weekend. We want you to join us.”

Eve slid a sideways glance at Bridget, who looked as innocent as possible in her black bikini and straw hat with a martini in her hand. “I’m sure you would prefer to keep the night to just your family. I don’t want to interfere.”

“We insist,” Stefan said, using the royal *we*.

“This is about Chicken Scratch, isn’t it?” Eve said glumly.

“My siblings are compelled to hold a rematch,” Stefan said.

“Okay, okay,” Eve said. “But only two games.”

“That leaves no opportunity for a tiebreaker,” Bridget said.

“Exactly,” Eve said.

Stefan met Eve’s gaze and shot her a grin that mixed challenge and sensuality. The combination sent a ripple down her spine. “I look forward to the evening,” he said and walked away.

Eve sank back against her lounge and groaned. “I thought you intended this to be relaxing.”

“It is,” Bridget said cheerfully as she lifted her martini glass.

“How can I relax knowing I’m attending a family dinner at the palace where all of you want to rip me to shreds?” Eve asked.

“The dinner will be delicious,” Bridget said. “We only want to best you at Chicken Scratch. It’s a matter of honor.”

“Good luck,” Eve said. She was from Texas, and a Texan fought till the bloody end.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Not until we’re finished with the game,” Eve said.

## Chapter Three

After consuming a gourmet meal, Eve and the Deveraux clan engaged in a death match of Chicken Scratch. They cajoled her into playing more than two games and each of them won once, but Eve won most overall, much to the siblings' dismay. Stefan had been forced to leave early to take a call.

Jacques bared his teeth playfully. "You're in our targets now even more than ever. Don't get used to winning."

"I'll try not to," Eve drawled, "but since most of my experience is with winning ... " She gave a mock shrug.

Phillipa giggled. "She pummeled us even after all our practice."

Eve smiled. "You have to remember that I've been playing this game practically since the cradle."

"That's okay," Bridget said, putting her nose in the air. "We're just getting started. We *will* conquer Chicken Scratch *and* you."

"Well, you'll have to do it without me for a while since I'm returning to university," Jacques said.

Bridget rose and gave her brother a big hug around his neck, which seemed to surprise him. "I'll miss you. Just be careful with the girls. You know how Stefan is about living down the Deveraux playboy image."

"I'm careful, but I'll never lock myself away from the women the way Stefan does."

"Yes, well, that may be part of the reason he's always in a bad mood. I may put together a plan to change things in that area," Bridget said, her eyes glinting with a diabolical gleam.

Eve almost felt sorry for Stefan. "Time for me to go. Thank you again for the wonderful dinner and company. Good luck at university, Jacques."

"Thank you," Jacques said, rising. "I'll look forward to a rematch when I return on break."

"My pleasure, Your Highness," she said, then looked at Bridget and Phillipa. "Sweet dreams."

"And to you," Phillipa said, smiling.

Eve left the palace and headed for the staff quarters, when she overheard a muttered string of oaths followed by a succession of what she suspected were more expletives in a language she didn't understand coming from behind a tall hedge. What she did understand was that Stefan was the one voicing the litany. For a millisecond, she considered continuing down her path away from him, but some part of her wouldn't allow it.

Turning around, she took in a breath of the night air filled with the scent of flowers, and then peeked through a large hedge. Stefan stood with his back to her, hands on hips, still hissing in frustration. "I hope it's not the landscaping that has you so upset," she said. "If that's true, then your groundskeepers better grab a canoe and get off the island."

Silence followed, then a heavy sigh. He turned toward her voice and his gaze found her immediately. "Join me," he said. "If you dare."

For a moment, she wondered if she really did dare. Then she shook off the silly thought. Sure he was a prince, but he was still just a man. She walked through the maze of hedging to step inside the small courtyard. "Needed some fresh air, eh?" she asked. "What's got you so pissed off this time?"

"This time," he said, lifting a dark brow of disapproval. "The way you say that suggests I'm pissed off most of the time."

"If the shoe fits," she said. "You stayed upset with Tina for a long time."

"She abandoned ship with zero notice," he pointed out.

"True, but pregnancy trumps charity teas," she countered. "And when are you not frustrated with Bridget?"

"Tell me the truth," he said, dipping his head close to hers. "Would you want her for your employee?"

He made an excellent point, but she didn't want to contribute to the strife-ridden relationship between the two of them. "I don't think Bridget is the reason you were swearing at the shrubbery a few moments ago."

He held her gaze for a long moment and sighed. "That's correct," he said, then turned away, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Just curious," she said. "What language were you using?"

"Italian, French and Greek," he said with a shrug.

"Must be something big to require swearing in four languages," she said.

He stood with his back to her for a long moment and she wondered if it might be best if she left. She didn't appear to be helping.

"For some time, I've been trying to recruit a new medical specialist for Chantaine's health care. Our current chief of health and medicine is retiring soon and we need to bring in a younger M.D. for this position. I'd all but sealed the deal when the doctor of choice announced he'd chosen another position."

Surprise rushed through her. "Wow, you have your finger in a lot of pies. I didn't know you were involved in health care. I figured someone else was in charge of that."

"There have been other people in charge of Chantaine's health care, but I'm taking a more active role than my predecessors. It's not acceptable to me to coast when my family has received such an enormous benefit from our birthright. It's time for us to give in return. Some in the government welcome my input and some do not."

The passion in his voice emanated throughout the space they shared. "I don't know what the position of ruling prince entails, but I had thought it was more about decorum than governing."

"I've been extensively educated in matters of government, world economics, health care policy and infrastructure design. I'm not going to let all that go to waste by sitting on a yacht in the Aegean Sea and showing up for photo ops every couple of months."

"Okay," she said warily. It was obvious this was a touchy subject. "I wasn't suggesting you spend your life on yacht, although it may not be a bad idea for a vacation every now and then. You seem pretty wound up. Maybe you *should* take a little vacation."

He met her gaze and his lips twitched. "How many vacations have you taken?"

"I wasn't born into your world. My family was very poor," she said. "I worked as a matter of survival, through high school, then paid for most of my own college education. As soon as I finished, I worked that job until I came here. There's been no time for vacation."

"But even if there were, I suspect you wouldn't take it. You had to be forced to spend a day at the beach today. You and I are alike. We don't want to take a break until the job is done."

"Yes, but your job will never be done," she said. "If you don't pace yourself, you're going to burn out everyone around you, including yourself."

"You sound almost as if you care," he said.

His response took her off guard. "Maybe I shouldn't, but I guess I do," she said, surprised at how much she was beginning to care for the whole Devereaux family, including Stefan. Unnerved, she decided to leave. "Well, since I don't think I'm helping you get to your royal Zen state, I'll head to my room—"

He reached out to wrap his hand around her wrist. "Au contraire, you underestimate yourself."

Her heart jumped at the sensation of his thumb skimming the underside of her wrist. "I have enormous confidence," she said more breathlessly than she'd intended, "that I have very little effect on you except to irritate you."

His eyes darkened with a hint of challenge that made her a little nervous. "Again," he said, tugging her closer. "You underestimate yourself. You make me curious."

He lifted one of his fingers to her lips, and she felt a buzzing sensation that started at her mouth and seemed to travel down every nerve ending in her body. “No need to be curious,” she said, wondering why her lungs weren’t functioning properly. “I’m boring.”

He gave a low laugh and shook his head. “No chance. I think you may be a little curious about me.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but the lie stuck in her throat. The truth was she found Stefan much more fascinating than she’d expected. He leaned closer and closer, and she held her breath in a mix of expectation and—strangely—fear. She would have to figure out the latter. Why on earth should she be afraid of—

His mouth took hers and every thought except him left her. His lips felt smooth and sensual. There was a reason she should hold back, but she couldn’t quite muster it from her cloudy mind. His tongue teased the seam of her lips and she instinctively opened, wanting more. Something inside her cut loose and she arched against him, craving the sensation of his hard chest against her breasts.

She lifted her hands, sinking her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. It was surprisingly soft while the rest of him was oh, so hard. In an instant, the tenor of the kiss changed from exploring to hot and aching. She felt his hand slide to the back of her hips, pulling her against him intimately.

Her heart hammered in her chest, her blood roared through her veins like wildfire. She felt an indelible connection that seemed to go deeper than her cells. Crazy, some part of her said, but it was faint compared to the desire, need or whatever it was that filled her to bursting.

He gave a low groan that vibrated deliciously through her. The need inside her grew exponentially.

“I must have you,” he muttered against her mouth. He swore. “I want you here, now,” he said and took her mouth in another, more passionate, less controlled kiss.

She craved more of his passion, less of his control. Some part of her trusted him like she’d never trusted any other man.

Groaning again, he pulled his mouth from hers and tucked her head beneath his chin. The sound of their breaths mingled with a bird calling in the distance. Eve’s mind spun like a water spout. Even though she knew she would drown, she didn’t want it to stop.

“I’ll figure this out,” he said in a low voice. “We’ll have an arrangement. We can meet in secret. I’ll call you and give you a key to—”

“Arrangement,” she echoed, her mind starting to function again. “Secret?” She looked up at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Surely, you don’t expect a public relationship with me.”

She blinked, not sure what she’d expected.

He gently squeezed her shoulders. “Eve, neither you nor I want to carry out an affair in public.” *Affair*. It just sounded dirty. Icky.

“Do you really want the press investigating every bit of your past? Every bit of your family’s past? Do you want to endure the speculation of being a prospective princess of Chantaine?”

“Princess?” she finally was able to say. “I have never, nor will I ever be, a princess in any sense of the word.”

“Exactly,” he said and chuckled. Then he turned serious and laced his fingers through hers. “Does that mean you and I should deprive ourselves?”

His touch almost short-circuited her brain function. She frowned as she tried to concentrate. She closed her eyes and tried to think. His scent slid past her self-defenses. She frowned. “I don’t know about this. I’m going to have to think about it.”

Silence followed. “Excuse me. You’re going to have to think about it?”

Eve opened her eyes and nodded. “Yes. You’re not just my boss, you’re a prince, for Pete’s sake. This could turn into one big, hot mess.”

“You’re refusing my suggestion because I’m a prince?” he said more than asked, and he didn’t sound particularly pleased.

She shrugged. “Well, yes. It’s not as if a relationship between you and me could go anywhere. Obviously, you agree it’s a dead-end adventure. And if you fell in love with me, it would be terribly messy.”

He stared at her in amazement. “If I fell in love with you?”

She nodded. “It has happened before.”

“I suppose it didn’t occur to you that you could fall in love with me,” he said in a lethally sexy voice.

She swallowed over a knot of denial. “It’s not likely,” she said.

He tilted his head to one side. “Why is that, *chérie*?”

Her nerve endings were still leap-frogging over themselves, but she refused to give in to the situation. “Because I’ve never fallen in love before. Why on earth would I start with you?”

He blinked as if he hadn’t heard her correctly.

“Well, other than the fact that you’re sexy, intelligent and probably loaded,” she said and felt as if she were digging herself deeper into a hole. She didn’t like the quicksand sensation at all. Eve preferred staying in control and that was what she would do right now. “I think we should just forget this ever happened.”

He laughed, which infuriated her. “Do you think you can do that? Do you think it will be that easy?”

“We’re both adults,” she said, pushing aside her doubts. “I’ve had to exercise mind over matter many times during my life. I’m sure you have, too. There,” she said, extending her hand. “Let’s shake on it.”

He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he shook his head. Then he lifted her hand and turned it so her wrist was open and vulnerable. He pressed his mouth against her skin, and she felt her pulse jump. “Sorry, Eve, I don’t make promises I don’t intend to keep.”

Eve successfully avoided Stefan for the next three days. She told herself that if she created some distance between herself and the kiss that had somehow turned into an *event*, then she would gain the proper perspective, which was that it had been just a kiss and the reason she’d experienced all those feelings was because she’d been tired. Most important, she felt more in control when she wasn’t around Stefan.

The day before the parade, she was checking off the items on her countdown list. She couldn’t deny a bit of nerves in anticipation of the event, but was satisfied she’d done as much preparation as possible during the time she’d been in Chantaine. She’d touched base with all the riders except for Count Christo. The man had completely ignored her calls. He was the one who liked to wield a whip, and she was determined to find a way to extract it from him before he mounted one of her darlings.

She picked up the phone to call the groomer, when she heard a knock on her door. Glancing up, she found Phillipa in the doorway. “Well, hello, Your Highness. What brings you here?”

Plastering a smile on her face, Phillipa laced her fingers together, then unlaced them. “Please call me Phillipa. This is just a little visit. I know the big day is tomorrow and I wanted to see how you’re doing.”

Eve noticed that the bookish princess shifted from one foot to the other. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, what could be wrong?” Phillipa asked, walking into the small office. “Have you been here all day? Did you go out for lunch?”

Confused, Eve wondered what was behind Phillipa’s discomfort. “We’ve been grooming today, so I’ve been here since 6:00 a.m. I ate a sandwich at my desk for lunch. Are you sure there’s nothing bothering you? Are *you* concerned about the parade tomorrow?”

Phillipa waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, no. People don’t focus on me. I know how to keep a low profile.”

“Okay,” Eve said, still confused by the visit. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Phillipa shrugged and smiled again a bit too brightly. “Not a thing. Stefan and Bridget both have events today, so they asked me to stop in and visit you.”

“That was nice,” Eve said, torn between the royals’ compassion and her desire for them to have complete confidence in her. “I’ve hammered out all the details.”

Phillipa clasped her hands together. “What are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“Double check my to-do list for tomorrow, give the beauties a little extra attention, then hit the sack,” she said. “Why?”

“Just curious. I can have chef deliver a light dinner to your quarters,” she said.

“Not necessary. I won’t be eating much anyway.”

“Oh, I insist,” Phillipa said. “All of us are very pleased with the job you’re doing. We’re very happy that you’re here in Chantaine.”

“Thank you,” she said, wishing she could feel more pleased, but something just didn’t ring right about this situation. Although Phillipa had been warm and friendly to Eve, she’d never visited her in the stables. Eve had been told the youngest princess was working a grueling schedule to complete her advanced degree as quickly as possible.

“You’re welcome. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow,” Phillipa said and turned away.

Eve frowned for a moment. Something was going on, but she wasn’t sure what it was. She groaned in frustration. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

After a restless night, Eve arose when it was dark and dressed in a formal riding outfit. She much preferred to stay in the background but had been told that the press might ask her a few questions. After eating a protein bar and drinking a cup of coffee, she went to the stables and supervised the rest of the grooming. The parade was scheduled for two o’clock and would depart from the Palace Square.

One of her missions was to separate Count Christo from his famed whip. The elderly man strutted around his assigned horse. Eve had assigned the man Pilar, a lovely older mare. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Eve said to the count. “Pardon me, I’m Eve Jackson, the royal stable master. I’ve heard of you. Aren’t you the famous Count Christo?”

The count lifted his shoulders and chin in a show of pride. “Yes, I am, and yes, this is a lovely mare. Are you sure she’ll be able to keep up with me? I’m quite the horseman, you know,” he said, pulling out his whip and tapping it against his hand.

Eve’s stomach dipped at the sight of the whip. “Pilar has one of the best pedigrees in the prince’s stable. She has spirit and she responds well to a gentle lead. I’m sure you’ve encountered that kind of mount before.”

“Of course,” he said, still tapping his hand with the whip.

“Would you mind if I looked at your whip? I’ve never seen one quite like that before,” she said.

“It’s been passed down through generations of my family. Napoleon gave it to one of my great-uncles,” he said as he handed it to her.

“It looks as if it’s barely been used at all,” she said, sliding her fingers over the leather.

“Oh, of course not,” the count said. “It’s mostly for show. A true horseman only uses a whip in the direst circumstance.”

A sliver of relief slid through her and she smiled. “You’re a wise man.”

“You were worried I would whip the horse,” he mused, surprising her with his perception.

“It’s my job to be protective of them and anyone who rides them,” she said.

His lips lifted in a half smile. “Don’t worry. The whip shall remain sheathed.”

She sighed and dipped her head. “Thank you very much, Count Christo.”

“My pleasure,” the count said. “It’s nice to see the prince’s new stable master so conscientious. A refreshing change.”

“Thank you again,” she said, this time unable to resist a smile, then left to check on the other riders and horses. She came upon Bridget on one of the geldings.

“Everything okay?” Eve asked, automatically checking the security of the saddle and stirrups.

“Peachy, as you Yanks would say,” Bridget said. “The good news is that Stefan found a way to take care of those pesky protesters.”

Eve blinked. “Protesters?” she echoed in confusion.

Bridget grimaced. “Oh, no. Stefan’s assistant didn’t call you? We thought he would be the best one to explain the problem.”

“What problem?” Eve demanded, her mind whirling at all the problems protesters could cause. What if they decided to throw rocks at the riders or horses? She shuddered at the thought.

“There was an article in the newspaper yesterday. Stefan and I were busy, so we sent Phillipa around to check on you until Stefan’s assistant got in touch with you. I can’t believe he didn’t do that,” Bridget said with a frown. “I assure you Stefan will be furious. But he’s fixed it. The royal guard will march alongside the parade to protect us.”

Eve frowned. This was supposed to be a joyous occasion. A celebration of Chantaine’s beautiful horses. “Why the protest?” she asked.

Bridget sighed. “The citizens think Stefan is spending too much money on the horses ... and his new horse master. To them, the horses don’t earn their keep.”

“Well, that would be easily fixed,” Eve said.

“How?” Bridget asked.

“Put Black out to stud. The payment for his sperm could feed a third-world country. Sounds like it’s time to spread it around,” she said.

Bridget snickered. “Can’t wait to see you convince Stefan of that.”

Furious that he hadn’t discussed this with her, she balled her fists, but hid them behind her back. “No time like the present. Later, Your Highness.”

Eve searched the crowd for His Highness and immediately spotted him. He stood tall and confident, resplendent in his dress riding clothes next to Black. She marched toward him.

“Your Royal Highness,” she said and bent her knees. As a curtsy, it sucked big-time, but it was better than nothing.

“Ms. Jackson. Good to see you. All the horses are in good form,” he said.

She moved closer. “I just hope they *remain* in good form. The *protest* I never heard about could cause problems.”

“I’ve taken care of it,” he said.

“I should have been informed. It will look ridiculous to have an army of soldiers escorting the horses. This is supposed to be a celebration of pride in the heritage of the royal stables of Chantaine.”

“Unfortunately, not all the citizens see it that way,” he said.

“There’s an easy solution to the money problem,” she said.

“What’s that?” he asked, glancing around the crowd.

“Release Black’s seed,” she said.

His head whipped around as he focused on her. “Pardon me?”

“You know what I’m saying. You need to let Black provide stud service. You’ll make tons of money.”

“I’ve been waiting—”

“For what? The perfect filly?” she asked.

His eyebrows knitted in disapproval. “Who are you to tell me when I should send my stallion out for stud?”

“I am the royal stable master. You hired me for this very purpose,” she said, lifting her chin.

A trumpet sounded. “We’ll discuss this later.”

“Darn right, we will,” she said. “And you better cut the number of guards for this party in half or you’re going to look like you’re headed into war.”

## *Chapter Four*

Eve walked the route of the parade next to the horses. Actually, she ran, trotted, skipped and walked, dividing her attention between the horses and potential protesters. At one turn in the street, she heard hecklers and searched the crowd. Within seconds, the palace guard swarmed like bees. She wished she could talk to them and tell them the value of the prized horses that represented their country, but she knew it wasn't her place.

Pushing aside the effects of the heat of the afternoon, she returned to the last of the parade where Stefan rode astride Black. At every turn, the crowd screamed and clapped in delight. Understandably so. Both Stefan and Black were prime specimens. The spectators threw flowers at them, and she was relieved to see Black take it all in stride.

Suddenly from the corner of her eye, she saw a child streak out of the crowd toward Stefan and Black.

Instinctively, she chased after the boy child. She barely caught him in her arms.

"Prince Stefan," the child wailed. "I want to ride with Prince Stefan."

"Sorry, sweetie," she said as the child struggled in her arms. "I don't want you to get caught in the horse's legs. I don't want you to get hurt."

She felt Stefan's glance at her and looked up at him. Her gaze met his, and the connection between them zinged again. He glanced at the boy and lifted his hand, waving her to bring the child to him.

"Are you sure?" she called, surprised yet not.

He nodded and she carried the little boy to him. One of the guards stepped forward to help lift the boy into the saddle in front of Stefan. The crowd roared with delight. "Find his parents to meet me at the end of the route."

Eve searched the crowd and immediately spotted the astonished, beaming parents of the boy. The young couple were already walking down the street. The father carried a sleeping infant in an infant carrier on his back.

Eve caught up with them. "Hello, I'm Eve Jackson, the royal horse master. Is that your son taking a ride with Prince Stefan?"

The woman gave a huge nod, clearly still stunned. "My son, Ricardo, he is so active. He got away from both my husband and me. Thank you for catching him. I can't believe he is riding with Prince Stefan."

Eve couldn't help smiling at the joy on the couples' faces. "His Royal Highness asked that I make sure you meet your son at the end of the parade. We don't want your son to be frightened."

"Frightened," the father echoed. "I can only wish. The boy shows no fear."

"I understand," she said sympathetically. "Mr.—?"

"Benito," he said. "Raul and Gina Benito, thank you for your kindness."

"My pleasure," she said and gestured for a guard to escort the young couple through the throng of observers. She ran ahead to make sure her assistants were taking care of the horses and riders properly. She knew there would be hundreds of photographs taken by the press of all the horses and riders.

The next hour passed in a flurry of activity as the horses were released from their royal duties and guided back to the barns.

"Ms. Jackson," a man called from a few feet away. "Welcome to Chantaine. Your first royal parade is a huge success."

"Thank you. I'm thrilled for the citizens of Chantaine to get the opportunity to see the beautiful horses that represent their country," she said and motioned to one of her assistants to take two more of the horses back to the stable.

“Oh, but they are not Chantaine’s horses. Everyone knows Prince Stefan has a weakness for fine horseflesh. These are Prince Stefan’s horses.”

“Number one, I wouldn’t call it a weakness. Number two, these horses do represent Chantaine just as your beautiful beaches and the palace and palace grounds do.”

The man lifted his eyebrow. “Easy for you to say. You make a much better salary than most of the citizens of Chantaine. The prince’s horses aren’t remotely self-sustaining.”

“It wouldn’t be hard for them to be self-sustaining,” she couldn’t keep from saying in defense of the stable.

“What do you mean?”

“Black. He’s worth a fortune as a sire,” she said, then feared she’d revealed too much. He didn’t look like a member of the press and she didn’t see a camera. “I need to go. I was taught to earn my keep,” she added meaningfully, and then walked away.

Much later that evening after she’d showered and put on her pj’s, her cell phone sounded, signaling a text message. She glanced up from the book she was reading and glanced at her phone. Meet me in the lower courtyard in thirty minutes. SD

Eve was torn between irritation and curiosity. The man was way too accustomed to giving orders. In other circumstances, she would have laughed and said forget it. But this was Stefan and the situation was totally different. Plus she was dying of curiosity.

She jumped out of bed and changed into a pair of jeans and a white button-down shirt. With her hair still damp from the shower she’d taken earlier, she just decided to let it air-dry. After a few moments of feeling antsy, she gave in to her restlessness and decided to take the long way to the lower courtyard. She stopped by a bush of blue flowers that reminded her of Texas bluebells and felt a twist of homesickness. Back home, she’d stayed busy with her job, working with the horses on the ranch where her aunt worked and volunteering. Staying busy kept her from thinking too much about how much she missed her brother since he’d left all those years ago. It also kept her from getting involved in a serious relationship. From a young age, Eve had been determined to steer her own ship, and she’d never met a man with whom she’d willingly share the wheel.

She heard the snap of a twig, but before she could turn around she heard his voice.

“Congratulations, Eve. Well done.”

Pleasure welled up inside her and she turned around to find Stefan, his shirt partly unbuttoned, his hair mussed and carrying a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Surprised by his gesture, she felt a secret rush of delight. “Congratulations to you, too. The crowd loved it when you gave Ricardo a ride on Black. Champagne?”

He shrugged. “You worked hard. I thought you deserved to celebrate.”

“You could have just sent the bottle to my apartment, couldn’t you?” she asked, unable to resist the chance to tease him.

He shot her a look with a glint of the devil in his eyes. “Okay, *I* deserve to celebrate, too. Come on,” he said and walked toward the lower courtyard. They entered the area surrounded by tall hedges and he gestured toward the stone bench. “Hold these, please,” he said and handed her the glasses.

“Wow,” she said.

“What?” he asked as he released the cork without spilling a drop. He tilted the liquid into the two glasses.

“You said *please*. I don’t hear that word from you all that often,” she said and offered him a glass.

“Are you always this charming when someone tries to thank you?”

“You knew what you were getting when you hired me,” she said and lifted her glass in salute. “Congratulations on choosing such spectacular horses for your stable and for giving a little boy and his parents the story of their lives.”

“Congratulations for pulling it all together,” he said and clicked his glass against hers.

They both took a sip of the champagne. “I must confess I was worried about the combination of the protestors and your royal cavalry.”

He smothered a chuckle. “Royal *guard*.”

“Close enough,” she said and took another sip. “Have you been busy with interviews with the press?”

“And a cocktail party with the riders. I told my assistant to make sure you were invited.”

She shook her head. “I thought it would be better for me to make sure the real stars were taken care of after the show.”

“Of course,” he said. “Next time, remember you have staff for that.”

“No one refuses the prince?” she said. “Except for his family.”

“Are you saying you don’t want to attend a party at the palace as a guest?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. “It’s a little out of my everyday routine,” she confessed.

“I can’t believe you would be intimidated. I haven’t seen anything else intimidate you,” he said.

“When I was eight years old, my brother told me to never let them see me sweat.”

“That’s pretty young for that kind of instruction. What was the occasion?” he asked.

Another move due to her parents’ inability to keep jobs and pay bills. Another new school when she’d wondered how long they would stay in this place. How long until people found out her father drank away most of his paycheck? “One of those times in elementary school when the kids teased or bullied. It happens to most kids at one time or another.”

He looked at her for a long moment and frowned. “I don’t like the idea of that.”

“What?” she asked, his intent gaze making her stomach slip and slide.

“The idea of someone bullying you.”

Something in the way he looked at her made her feel as if she were taking a free fall with no net. She tried to shake it off, but wasn’t completely successful. She wasn’t accustomed to someone being protective of her. “It didn’t happen often,” she drawled.

He chuckled. “I bet it didn’t,” he said and chucked her chin with his index finger. “Do you see him often? Your brother?”

His question slid under her radar, right through her ribs. She rarely mentioned her brother because his absence from her life was still painful to her. “Eli left a long time ago. He had to go. It was the only way.” She took a quick breath and shook her head, hating the fact that Stefan had found her vulnerable spot. “Can we talk about something else?”

He paused a half beat, then nodded. “Of course. We’re here to celebrate,” he said with his most charming smile and clicked his glass against hers again.

She took a quick sip but spilled the champagne on the front of her shirt as she pulled the glass away. Frustration prickled through her. “This is why I don’t drink very often,” she muttered, futilely pulling at her shirt.

“I can see where it would be distracting during a date,” Stefan said.

Glancing up, she saw his gaze fixed on her breasts. She looked down and was mortified by the outline of her nipples against the shirt. “Oh, great. This is embarrassing,” she said and crossed her arms over her breasts. “See why I’m not big on formal parties? Even a private celebration in the seclusion of a faraway courtyard is not safe.”

Stefan took her glass and tossed it onto the soft bed of grass along with his, then took her chin in his fingers. “Trust me, Eve. If a man chooses to be with you in a courtyard, he’s not thinking of safety,” he said and lowered his mouth to hers.

Her heart stuttered in her chest. In another lifetime, she wondered if she could have turned him away. She’d turned so many others away. But she sensed that Stefan was strong enough. Man enough. She paused a heartbeat, then opened her mouth, opened herself to him.

Something between them clicked and snapped at the same time. If she believed in that kind of thing, she would have said it was electrical. But Eve didn’t believe. At least, she never had before.

He deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue past her lips, tasting and testing her. She slid her hands upward to his strong shoulders, wanting to absorb his strength and power into her. The kiss turned deeply passionate, almost carnal, making her cling to him.

He murmured something delicious against her lips, and suddenly she felt the night air against her back as he unbuttoned the bottom of her shirt. His hand on the bare skin of her waist stopped her breath. Seconds later, one of his hands slid upward to her breast, and she pushed against it, resenting the barriers of her shirt and bra. She wanted to feel his skin.

Part of her was shocked at the force of her desire, but another part of her knew she'd been waiting for this—for him—for years. She felt as if she were riding a tsunami of sensation and refused to fight it. She tugged at his shirt, he pulled at hers, and buttons flung loose. Seconds later, he unfastened her bra and her breasts sprang free. He immediately covered one of her breasts with his hand.

Her nipple was hard and sensitized to his touch. He swore under his breath as he toyed with her nipple at the same time as he French-kissed her. She drank in the spicy, masculine scent of him and felt as if the world was turning sideways.

Stefan clasped his hand beneath her hips and lifted her upward. At the same time, he lowered his head to take her nipple into his mouth, she felt his hardness pressed against her.

Dizzy with want, she slumped against him.

Stefan groaned, lifting his head and pulling her tightly against him. "We need to be together," he whispered. "I want you in my bed."

A shiver of the need he expressed raced through her. "How? Where?"

He gave a rough sound of frustration. "If it were up to me, it would be here and now. But I want privacy for the both of us."

She sighed and tried to gather her wits. Was this what she really wanted? Was he what he really wanted? Eve was only certain of one thing. She couldn't *miss* him. Stefan affected her in a way no man ever had, and she craved the ultimate closeness with him. She wanted him so much it scared her, but she wasn't going to let her fear keep her from him.

"Then when?" she finally asked and met his gaze.

His dark eyes met hers, and she saw the strained passion there. The strength of it reassured her rather than frightened her. "You make it difficult for me not to take you now, *chérie*. Tomorrow night," he said. "I'll make arrangements for you to come to my suite. I'll work it out tomorrow."

A ripple of anticipation and nerves raced through her. "It may not be wise—"

He covered her lips with his fingers. "It's beyond choice. We both feel it."

She nodded, savoring the heat of his body. "Okay," she said, then whispered, "But this is totally against all my rules."

He chuckled and lifted her hand to his lips. "Mine, too, Eve. Mine, too. Now, before I give into my darker urges, I'd better walk you back to your quarters."

"What about the champagne and the glasses?" she asked.

"Don't worry. I'll send a member of my security to collect them," he said and took her hand. "Let's go."

The next morning, she awakened a little later than usual. Stefan had insisted she take a day of vacation. So she slept until 9:00 a.m. This was the first morning she'd woken up not feeling like she was going to hyperventilate. Not that she would admit that to a soul.

Stretching her arms, she yawned, then smiled, pleased that the parade had gone off without a hitch. She'd passed her first test. Thank goodness. A sliver of anxiety rippled through her at the thought of Stefan's plans for tonight. Had she lost her mind? He was not only her boss, he was a prince.

He was also a man, she told herself. A man she wanted and who wanted her. Taking a deep breath, she slid out of her bed and stepped onto the carpet. Her toes appreciated the soft cushion

for her first steps of the day. She realized she'd hit the ground running so much she hadn't noticed the small comfort.

Stretching again, she walked to the tiny kitchenette and started her coffee. She peeked inside her mostly bare refrigerator and pulled out cream for her coffee, marmalade for her toast and orange juice. She popped bread in the toaster and wandered toward the door of her quarters to pick up the paper. She'd made double sure she would receive the daily paper. After the incident with the protestors, she'd decided she needed to stay informed even though the Chantaine newspaper read like an odd combination of a scandal sheet and traditional news.

The front page was filled with photographs of the parade, featuring the royal family and government officials on horseback. The largest photo showed Stefan riding with the young boy on Black. Her heart twisted at the image of him. Lord help her, the man was so handsome. She noticed the way his hand curled around the boy, holding him securely. The boy smiled broadly while Stefan's mouth lifted in a ghost of a smile.

Fascinating man, she thought. For a moment she wondered what Stefan would be like if he weren't a prince. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine him as a Texan. He would be a Renaissance man, she decided, with a huge empire. Obscenely successful, she thought. Nothing less would be acceptable. His woman would be ... She frowned in concentration. Blonde, beautiful, but brainy. The perfect accessory on his arm.

*Nothing like me.*

She frowned again, feeling a stab of displeasure and immediately pushing it aside. She shook her head at herself. This was what happened when she had time on her hands. Her mind traveled down all kinds of crazy paths. She rattled the paper and refocused, scanning the rest of the front page. A headline at the bottom of the page grabbed her attention. Royal Stable Master Reports Prince's Horse Is Worth Billions for Sperm.

*Billions!* She'd never said billions. Who was reporting this? She hadn't talked to anyone ... except the man at the end of the parade. Her stomach sank in realization. Even though she'd cut the conversation short, she'd obviously said more than she should.

Less than a moment later, her cell phone rang. She darted through the living area to her bedside table where she'd left it and immediately glanced at the caller ID. Her stomach sank even further. The palace office was calling.

"Hello. Eve Jackson," she said and began to pace.

"Ms. Jackson, this is Louis calling for Franz Cyncad. We have a public relations concern. Your presence is required in the Palace Office."

*Great*, she thought. Franz was right up there at the top of the food chain. "I can be there in twenty minutes."

"Mr. Cyncad is finalizing the appropriate strategy. He will meet with you after lunch at fourteen hundred."

Eve bit back an oath. Not only did she know she would be disciplined or perhaps even fired, now she had to *wait* to hear about it. "I'll be there."

"Very well. Goodbye," he said and disconnected the call.

Adrenaline pumping through her, Eve immediately went into survivor mode. With her upbringing, it was second nature. She wondered if she should go ahead and make a call to her former boss. She'd made sure to leave on good terms. She might not be able to get her exact position, but the company had been pleased with her work. Or she could start contracting for several horse ranchers. Stefan would pay her severance.

Her heart was hammering and her stomach was twisting as she glanced out her window at the cobblestone drive, the lush green trees and pink flowers. She felt a deep sense of regret twist through her. For the first time in weeks, she was acutely aware of the fact that she didn't want to leave. She loved the horses, and her feelings for Stefan ... were overwhelming. Until now, she'd been totally

absorbed with the parade and intermittent bouts of homesickness she'd pushed aside. Eve had learned at a very young age that denial was an important tool of survival.

But this wasn't her childhood, and she wasn't going to be chased out of her home due to bankruptcy. So maybe she shouldn't jump off the first available cliff. She took a deep breath and slowly released it.

If she was going to be fired, how did she want to spend her remaining hours on Chantaine?

Stefan? Impossible. Tonight, the night they would have made love, was never going to happen.

She swallowed over a hard lump in her throat. Pushing that option aside, she made her plans. The horses, then the beach.

Eve took a micro-shower, French-braided her hair, then visited the royal beauties in the barn and petted and cooed over them. Her heart twisted at the way they all seemed to know her. Even Black indulged her for a few moments before he stamped away.

She stood for a long moment, inhaling the scent of fresh hay and clean horses, branding it into her memory. Then she grabbed a taxi for the beach and made the driver promise to return to fetch her at twelve forty-five. Eve spread her towel on the sand, stripped down to her bikini and sat down on the beach.

She stared at the waves. Whitecaps topped azure water as the tide crashed into shore. The surf was a little rough. She would test it in a few moments, she decided. For the moment, she would focus on the sensation of sun shining on her and the way the ocean looked as if diamonds flickered on top of it.

Inhaling the unique scent of Chantaine, she tried to find a way to preserve the vanilla beachy smell in her mind, the memory of that evening ride with Stefan. All that would never happen between them flashed through her mind. Eve couldn't stand it. She picked up her towel and scrambled up the sandy hill to the road to hail a taxi.

An hour later, Eve sat in Franz Cyncad's office trying to look cool as she resisted the urge to drum her fingers on her black pants-clad leg. Franz was frowning. Not a good sign. He glanced up at her from behind his desk and his gold-rimmed glasses. "You spoke to Marco LaChalle yesterday during the parade," he finally said.

"I didn't meet anyone named Marco. I was focused on the horses and our surprise child rider. A man approached me toward the end of the parade. I barely spoke to him."

Franz pulled off his glasses. "You told him Black could earn billions in stud fees."

"I told him Black could earn a fortune in stud fees," she corrected, still determined to remain calm.

"He apparently interpreted a fortune as a billion," Franz said.

"That was his interpretation, not mine," she said, now barely resisting the urge to fidget. Was she going to survive this or not? Based on Franz's dour expression, she suspected not.

"Unfortunately, we must deal with Mr. LaChalle's report. We need you to recant your position."

It took a full moment for Franz's comment to sink in. "I can't do that. It would be an outright lie," she said at the same time Stefan walked through the door. "Black *is* worth a fortune in stud fees."

"He's not ready," Stefan said.

"Your Highness," Franz said and stood.

Suddenly, Eve remembered she was supposed to do the curtsy thing. "Yes, Your Highness," she said and stood. "But I disagree. As a professional," she added. "It's appropriate to have a specialist assess a stallion for stud purposes at the age of four. Black is over four. His pedigree is phenomenal. He has the potential to produce amazing foals."

Stefan shot her a cool glance. "You are not the appropriate person to assess when Black should breed."

She nodded in agreement. "True. I'm only the stable master you hired to train and advise you on your horses. So, whatever."

Stefan blinked. “Whatever?”

“American version of do what you want. I’ve done what I can do,” she said.

His eyes narrowed. “What would you suggest, Ms. Jackson?”

*Oooh*, she thought. The Ms. Jackson wasn’t a good sign. “I suggest you get Black assessed by the veterinarian, then get moving with providing his sperm, at a cost, to superior mares. Spreading his sperm is part of his purpose. I’m sure Black would agree with my assessment,” she said wryly.

Stefan lifted an eyebrow and paused. “Put out a press release saying the palace is having Black assessed for stud service. Be prepared for a deluge of calls. Keep records. We’ll return calls later,” he said.

Silence followed. “Will Ms. Jackson be remaining on as stable master? Or will she be moving on?” Franz asked.

“Ms. Jackson remains,” Stefan said and turned and left the room.

Eve stared after him, stunned and uncertain.

Franz glowered at her. “God help us. More records. More return calls. Would it have been so hard to recant your position?”

“Sorry,” she said. “But yes.”

Franz sighed again. “Double the workload,” he muttered.

“It will ultimately be double the money. Black will earn his way and make your job easier. Just give it a little time.”

“We don’t have a lot of time, Ms. Jackson,” Franz said. “Chantaine’s economy is in the loo. Our people are suffering.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Cyncad, but the world economy is struggling. Everyone is suffering. We’re all going to need to get creative to find a way to get Chantaine on the high road. I’m on your side.”

“Hmm,” Franz said, putting his glasses his face and returning his attention to the laptop in front of him.

Eve waited a long moment. “Do you need anything else, Mr. Cyncad?”

“Not now, Ms. Jackson. I shall contact you if I need to. You may proceed with your plans for the day.”

Eve paused, still confused. “Thank you,” she said. “Have a good day.”

Franz gave a short nod, and Eve left the man’s office, still unsure of her status. She hadn’t been fired. Still, what about her relationship with Stefan? Would she be meeting him tonight? Or not?

## Chapter Five

After her meeting with Franz and Stefan, Eve felt at loose ends. She checked on the horses, but it was a day off for them, too. After the weeks of preparation, the royal horses seemed determined to laze their day away. She did busywork in the barns and returned to her room, but she didn't know what to do with herself.

In the back of her mind, she wondered if Stefan still wanted to be with her, but based on his curt appearance this afternoon, she couldn't imagine her phone ringing. Her cell rang, catching her off guard. Her stomach clenched. Was it Stefan? She glanced at the caller ID and felt a stab of disappointment. It was Bridget.

"Hello," Eve said. "How are you?"

"Bored and irritated. I was supposed to go to dinner tonight with a friend, but she bailed because she's not feeling well. You must come with me," she said, sounding autocratic, then changed her tone. "Pleeeeeeeeeeease."

Eve laughed despite herself. "Sorry, Bridget, but I don't think I would be very good company tonight."

"Oh, why not? The parade was a huge success. I took a quick glance at the photographs in the newspaper. You should be flying high," she said.

"You obviously didn't read the entire front page. There's been some controversy about breeding Black, and I was called to the woodshed by Franz Cyncad."

"Woodshed?" Bridget echoed. "What woodshed?"

"It's a figure of speech. The woodshed is where you're taken for punishment, a spanking."

Bridget gasped. "Franz struck you? Does Stefan know? This is totally unaccepta—"

"No, no, no," Eve said. "Franz didn't spank me. He's just very unhappy with me."

"Oh, well, Franz is always unhappy. It's in his job description. If you had a meeting with Franz, it's all the more reason you should come out to dinner with me. Put on a dress and I'll have my driver pick you up in an hour."

"Bridget—"

"I'm not taking no for an answer," the princess insisted. "Oh, for goodness' sake, this is getting insulting. Am I such horrid company that you won't join me even when you have nothing else to do?"

Eve sighed, still full of conflicting emotions. "Okay, okay. Thank you for inviting me."

"That's the spirit," Bridget said. "Ta-ta for now."

Although she would far prefer a barbecue place where she could wear jeans and a T-shirt, she couldn't fight the urge to *get out*. She took another quick shower and pulled on a black halter dress. Instead of putting up her hair, she blow-dried and fluffed it. Since she had time, she applied a little makeup, mascara, a little bronzer, lip gloss ...

Her cell phone rang. She glanced at it, hoping desperately that it was Stefan. But it wasn't. She picked it up. "Hello. Eve Jackson," she said.

"This is Raoul, Princess Bridget's chauffeur," the man said.

Her heart twisting in disappointment, she took a deep breath. "Thank you. I'll be right down." Grabbing a sweater, she took the stairs down to the limo.

Raoul stepped outside. "Ms. Jackson?" he said as he opened the door to the backseat.

"Thank you," she said and climbed into the limo.

"Welcome," Bridget said, smiling as she held two glasses of champagne, one in each hand. "Girls' night."

Eve remembered last night and the champagne she'd shared with Stefan. She slid into the seat and closed her mind to the memory. She accepted the glass extended to her and clicked hers to

Bridget's. "Girls' night," she agreed, determined to forget her rotten meeting with Franz Cyncad and the fact that Stefan was clearly displeased with her.

They went to a restaurant in a swanky section of the capital of Chantaine. Eve felt self-conscious at first because they were seated in the center of the restaurant, but Bridget chatted constantly, distracting her. The princess was clearly happy to be away from the palace.

"Do you want to get married?" Eve asked, after Bridget had stared at a hot guy who passed by them.

Bridget shrugged. "Not too early," she said. "There's danger in marrying too young, and I'm determined to avoid it. No kids until I'm thirty years old. I want to have some fun. What about you?"

"I haven't thought much about marriage. I've always thought I would take care of myself. Safer, that way," she said.

"Hmm," Bridget said. "I could find a man who would take care of me. I just don't want to give up what little freedom I have in exchange for that."

"Same here," Eve said and lifted her water glass in salute to Bridget. She'd switched to water awhile back.

"I'm not ready for the night to end," Bridget said. "I know of a club close by."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Eve said.

Bridget pouted. "Why not?"

"I'm not much on clubs," Eve said.

Bridget shook her head. "It will be a good change for you. We'll just stay for a few minutes."

"I'm not sure—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake," Bridget said. "It's just one night and trust me, our clubs are nothing compared to Rome or Milan."

"Never been to clubs in Rome or Milan. Don't really need to go," Eve muttered, but felt as if she were being swept forward by a force of nature. Tonight she would ride it. Tomorrow she would return to her boring self.

Forty-five minutes later, she found herself sitting at the bar while Bridget danced with a friend of a friend of a friend on a crowded dance floor. Her bodyguard, Rodney, stood nearby, shifting from one foot to the other, clearly as uncomfortable with the scene as she was. Because Eve was bored out of her mind, she decided to torture herself and checked her cell for messages. So far, there'd been none. She shouldn't be surprised, she supposed.

She glanced at the phone and saw one missed call from Stefan. Her heart jumped, skipping several beats. Suddenly a text appeared. Where are you?

With Bridget, she texted back.

Why? Never mind.

Eve frowned. What did that mean? She shook her head. This was insane. She'd never gone crazy for any other man. Why should she start now? Stuffing her phone into her purse, she was determined not to give him another thought. At least, not tonight.

The woman was going to drive him insane, Stefan thought as his chauffeur and two of his security detail drove closer to the bar where his sister and Eve were apparently enjoying Chantaine's nightlife. He ground his teeth at the thought of it.

"I'm sure Rodney's had enough of this unplanned excursion," Stefan said. He'd seen this coming with Bridget. He'd just hoped she grown more mature about accepting her duties and security protocol. "If Princess Bridget protests, escort Ms. Jackson to my limousine."

"If she goes calmly, sir?" Georg asked.

"In that unlikely event," Stefan said drily, "Ms. Jackson can ride with the princess."

Four minutes and forty-five seconds later, his sister burst through the door with the assistance of two security men, screaming at the top of her lungs. Eve walked behind them. "You can't do this.

It's my night off. I can do what I want. I could have ditched Rodney, but I didn't. Just wait until I get my hands on Stefan. Just wait—”

Stefan watched as Eve put her hand on Bridget's arm as if she were trying to calm her. Bridget pulled back her arm and continued to scream. His sister would likely be embarrassed tomorrow.

“Open the door and offer Ms. Jackson a ride in peace,” Stefan said to his top bodyguard, Franco. “Yes, sir.”

Stefan could tell Eve needed some extra explanation in order to leave his wailing sister with her bodyguard. She slid into the seat across from Stefan and he made a mental note to thank his sister when she decided she was speaking to him again. Eve usually wore jeans, but tonight she wore a dress that revealed her long, shapely legs.

“Your Highness, your sister's gonna be ticked off with you for a long time,” Eve drawled.

“She'll get over it when I let her take a vacation to Italy soon,” he said. “It's unfortunate that you had to witness her—” He wanted to choose his words carefully.

“Hissy fit?” Eve said. “She's on a short leash and doesn't like it.”

“There's good reason for it,” he said. “I insist on her safety.”

She frowned and studied him. “Have there been threats?”

“Threats? Rarely. Risks, always. It's part of the job,” he said. “Does that frighten you?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I don't like the idea of any of you being hurt.”

“Neither do I,” Stefan said. “That's why I have only the best security and that is why Bridget and you shouldn't have been in that club tonight. Bridget knows she's supposed to submit her schedule to security before she goes anywhere. She's in a high-profile position now. She can't take the same kinds of risks she could before. Plus, she put you at risk.”

Eve's eyes widened in surprise. “Me? The only risk I was facing was boredom at that club.”

“I intend to keep it that way,” he said and paused. “Why didn't you wait for me? Did you get cold feet?”

She lifted a dark eyebrow. “Based on our lovely conversation during my meeting with Franz, I didn't know what to expect.”

“That was about your slip to the press,” he said, dismissing the concern. “You are still my employee. Can you compartmentalize or not?”

She met his gaze for a long moment. “I don't know. I know I was raised to say please and thank you and I prefer being treated the same way, even by royalty. I respond better to an invitation than an order.”

Stefan realized he would need to take a step back and frustration nicked at him. He wanted Eve in his bed. He couldn't totally explain it, but something about the woman made him keep turning toward her. It was almost as if she had some sort of magnetic pull on him, which was rubbish.

He supposed he could tell his chauffeur to return to the staff quarters at the palace and he and Eve could go their separate ways, but Stefan wasn't willing to give up his time with Eve even if she wouldn't be spending the night in his bed as he'd planned. He pressed a button to talk to the driver. “Send security ahead to my Aunt Zoe's house at Gerando Beach. I'll give her a call to see if she minds me dropping in.” He turned to Eve. “Would you like to go to the beach tonight?”

“I don't have a suit with me,” she said, but her eyes lit with interest.

“No need for one. We'll be on a balcony of a private home listening to live music and watching the surf. Interested?”

She paused a half beat, then smiled and he felt as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud. “Yes, that sounds nice.”

Aunt Zoe was in Switzerland, but she'd left instructions with her staff that her house was always available to the royal family. After Stefan's security finished securing the seaside home, Eve and Stefan walked inside. The two-story foyer featured large windows, an unusual chandelier of crystal and copper, and a double staircase.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“Yes,” Stefan agreed and extended his hand to her. “But upstairs is better.” He led the way upstairs and down a hallway to a den with a swirling paddle fan overhead, white cushy-looking furniture, a bar and kitchen.

“Aunt Zoe designed it all. It’s a hobby for her. She also has homes in Switzerland, Bellagio and Manhattan,” he said.

“Sounds like she’s a woman on the move,” Eve said. “And very talented.”

“You like it?” he asked.

“It’s luxurious, but soothing at the same time. I just probably wouldn’t go with a white couch. I’d be afraid of getting it dirty.” She laughed. “No. I’d definitely get it dirty.”

He liked the way she enjoyed the house and saw herself in it with a modification. “It’s nice being with a woman who’s not so—” He paused. “Overly fashion conscious.”

She smiled. “Or prissy.”

He smiled in return. “That word didn’t occur to me.”

“Bet it will now,” she said.

He swallowed a chuckle. “You still haven’t seen the best part. Come on,” he said and led her through the glass doors to the expansive balcony with two chaise longues, a table with an umbrella, and a view of the hippest beach in Chantaine. The music of an American R&B band rose from just beneath them.

She tilted her head quizzically. “That sounds awfully familiar. Are they a cover band for ... “ She glanced over the balcony. “Americans? Here in Chantaine?”

He shook his head, amused again. “We have many American visitors every year. Some Americans like it here, Eve.”

“Well, of course they do,” she said. “I just didn’t expect to see one of my favorite R&B bands playing on one of Chantaine’s beaches.”

“Think about it. You play a lot of cities and concert halls. Then you get a chance to play in paradise, all expenses paid.”

“How come you never see these gigs listed on the band website?” she asked.

“Privacy’s also one of our charms.”

“Hmm. Maybe it shouldn’t be,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he asked, unable to conceal a trace of indignation. “Part of Chantaine’s attraction is that we’re not overexposed.”

“I hate to bust your ego, but before I met your sister Tina, I didn’t know Chantaine existed. Granted, I’m not a world traveler, but I’m college educated and always got As in Geography. If Chantaine’s economy is suffering, maybe it’s time to let the cat of the bag about what a great place this is.”

“It’s a delicate balance,” he said. “The advisers and state officials can’t agree.”

“Makes you wish you were the boss of everything,” she said and smiled.

“Enough about business. Let’s enjoy the music,” he said, joining her at the balcony railing.

“And the ocean breeze,” she said, lifting her chin and closing her eyes.

He skimmed his hand down the inside of her arm. “And the company. Would you like a drink?”

Her eyes flashed open, and she leaned close to him, and she whispered, “Are you sure we should raid your aunt’s liquor cabinet?”

Stefan laughed, full and hard, at the ridiculous question. He hadn’t laughed this hard in a long time. The notion that his aunt would be upset at his use of anything in her home was ridiculous. He led Eve inside to the bar. “I’ll replace anything we use,” he assured her. “What’s your pleasure?”

“I’m not a big drinker,” she said, looking at the rows of liquor, but stopped when she saw a bottle of bourbon. “But I could sip on a Texas Rose.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

She gave a mock gasp. “You mean I know something you don’t?”

“What’s in it?” he asked. “I’ll fix it.”

“You?” she asked, her eyes rounded in surprise. “I thought you had staff for everything.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I can’t do most of what my staff can do,” he said. “Why do you think I fired so many stable masters?”

She winced. “That’s scary.”

“Ingredients,” he demanded and stepped behind the bar.

“I’ve only had it a few times,” she said. “Bourbon, orange juice, cherry liquor ... and champagne.”

He lifted an eyebrow, but grabbed the bourbon from the second shelf. The bottle was dusty. “Prissy drink.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But if you drink it, too, you can always say you’ve had a Texas Rose.”

Stefan paused as he pulled out a chilled can of orange juice and met her gaze. “I’ve never needed to embellish my successes.”

“There’s always a first,” she returned and pulled her long bangs behind her ear.

Her ears were naked except for silver studs. It struck him that he would love to see her dripping with Chantaine’s royal family’s jewels ... and nothing else. He felt himself grow hard and ground his teeth. On impulse he mixed two drinks at once, then poured the liquid into two glasses filled with ice. Walking from behind the bar, he gave Eve her glass and lifted his. “To a Texas Rose,” he said, “transplanted to Chantaine.”

She clicked his glass with hers and took a sip. “Not bad for a prince,” she said.

Stefan resisted the urge to seduce her to lie down on one of those white couches and make wild, crazy love with her. “Let’s go outside, Mademoiselle Texas Rose,” he said and guided her to the balcony again.

They stood at the balcony and she sipped her drink, the wind lifting her hair from her shoulders. Stefan slid his arm around her waist. “You’re homesick,” he said. “What do you miss most?”

“You weren’t supposed to notice,” she said, giving a soft smile as she looked at him. “I was trying not to let it show.”

“You didn’t answer my question. What do you miss most?” he asked.

“The familiarity, my aunt, barbecue. This isn’t my turf,” she said.

“It will be,” he said. “It won’t take long. Chantaine is small compared to Texas.”

“But complex and still very foreign to me,” she said.

“That will change soon enough.”

“If you say so,” she said.

The doubt in her voice surprised him. She was usually so confident, so ready to come back at him. “What made you question your ability?”

“Today shook me a little,” she confessed.

“Franz?” he said and gave a short laugh. “He’s a necessary nuisance. This won’t be your last run-in with him.”

She made a face. “I’d like it to be. I didn’t know whether I would be staying or going.”

“You’re too expensive to let go,” he said.

“I feel so much better now,” she said in a dry tone.

“You’re good at what you do. You’re just not accustomed to the way our press works. Just don’t talk to them until you learn the ropes.”

“Who’s going to teach me the ropes? Franz?” she asked with dread in her voice.

“No. My assistant or me. You can always call him,” he said. “You can always call me.” He couldn’t remember when he’d told any other woman such a thing.

The band eased into a slow, sensual tune. Stefan’s hands itched to touch her in ways he knew wouldn’t happen tonight. “Dance?” he asked, setting down his glass on one of the tables.

Meeting his gaze, she let him take her glass and do the same with his. Then she walked into his arms, and Stefan sighed at the sensation of her body close to his, where she belonged. He drank in the subtle spice and sweet combination of her scent. Her silky hair skimmed his jaw and her breasts brushed against his chest with each movement.

Holding her eased something inside him at the same time he felt need stretch inside him. He tried to ignore the need and focus on how good she felt. For a full moment, the only sounds were of the sultry song, their hushed breaths and in the background, ocean waves rolling into the surf.

“Have you ever had a more perfect moment than this?” she whispered, lifting her mouth just beneath his ear.

He searched his brain and came up empty. “No,” he murmured, pulling her even closer.

The song finally faded away, and she lifted her head, searching his eyes. The expression of wanting he saw there made his gut twist. The connection between them was shocking in its intensity. He lowered his head and took her mouth in a kiss. She immediately responded, tasting of oranges, bourbon and something forbidden.

Although he was already aroused, he couldn't resist feeding himself on her mouth. He felt her arms climb around his neck as she kissed him with equal intensity. He slid his own hand to the small of her back, bringing her intimately against him. He wondered if she would pull away. Instead, she wriggled against him. His heart stuttered in his chest.

“You make it difficult for me to show restraint,” he muttered against her mouth.

“Is that what I'm supposed to be doing? Helping you show restraint?” she asked, her voice husky, her lips already swollen. She grazed his neck with an almost kiss and another twist of need ricocheted through him, this one stronger than before.

“You need to understand that everything will change once we become lovers,” he told her.

“Is this the standard warning required by the advisers?” she asked, pulling back slightly with a sliver of wry amusement in her eyes.

“No,” he said. “It's just me being straight with you.”

“Aren't things already different between us?” she asked.

“Yes, but I am determined to be discreet. I don't want you or your reputation to be affected.”

“Can we just make this between you and me?” she asked.

“My position makes it difficult,” he said.

“I don't want the position. I want the man,” she said.

Her words nearly put him over the edge, nearly made him pick her up, lay her down on the couch and take her that moment. He'd spent a lifetime being the prince instead of a man. “You really don't care about my title, do you?”

“To be perfectly honest, Stefan, I'd probably like you more without it,” she drawled.

A sliver of exultation rushed through him. “I like your honesty,” he said, lifting a strand of her hair. “I like you too much.”

Her eyes darkened in awareness. “It's good to know I'm not the only one feeling this way.”

“No fear of that,” he said in a dry tone and gave in to the urge to sink his hands into her hair and pull her head toward him.

They kissed again and he linked one of his hands with hers.

Eve's heart hadn't beat regularly since she'd first laid eyes on Stefan tonight. She wasn't sure when she would breathe normally again. The world was tilted upside down, the night was spinning and heaven help her, she liked it. She liked the way his mouth moved against hers. The way his body felt against hers. The way his voice felt against her ears and skin ...

She wanted to feel more of his skin. More of him. Seeking his lips, she tugged at his shirt, unfastening one button, then two ... She spread her hands over his chest and sighed at the indulgent luxury of feeling his muscles beneath her fingertips. He sighed, too, and the sound was more delicious than the most decadent chocolate. The sea air and the sound of the surf only added to the ambiance.

“You have muscles,” she said. “When do you *ever* get the chance to work out?”

His laugh rumbled through her. “Every morning at 4:30 a.m.”

She winced, still sliding her hands over his bare chest. “That’s insane.”

“And what time do you get up?”

“Five-thirty,” she said. “Compared to you, I’m a slacker.” She kissed him again. “But maybe if I had to deal with your advisers, I’d get up at four-thirty to work off some of my frustration to keep from wringing their skinny necks.”

He chuckled again. “Some of their necks are fat.”

Shaking her head, she sank her face into his bare shoulder and inhaled deeply. “I like the way you smell.”

“I’m not wearing cologne,” he said and lifted her head. The expression in his eyes was just this side of ravenous. “Eve, you’re not acting like a woman who wants me to hold back.”

Fighting a flutter of nerves, she licked her suddenly dry lips. Fish or cut bait, she told herself. “Maybe my actions are doing all the real talking.”

She felt him slide one of his hands all the way down her back and he pulled her against his arousal. He made sure she knew just how thoroughly he was aroused. “Are you sure? I want you to be sure.”

“Another disclaimer for the advisers?”

He narrowed his eyes. “No. For me.”

She took a deep breath. “I’m sure.” She smiled. “Ravish me.”

He shook his head. “What an invitation,” he said and pushed her dress down her shoulders. Three heartbeats later, her bra snapped loose and his mouth covered hers.

Eve knew she was venturing into new territory, but she was determined not to be shy about it. She wanted to feel everything. She wanted to feel bold and in control, but the truth was she felt vulnerable. Eve refused to give in to weakness.

Instead she focused on her senses. She traced her fingers through his crisp hair, down to his strong shoulders and chest. He slid his hands over her bare breasts and she shuddered. Her internal and external temperature rose exponentially. Eve had never been high, but she suspected this was what it might feel like. Her head was spinning, she found it difficult to breathe and a wicked euphoria raced through her veins.

Somehow, during the next kiss, her dress and panties were pooled at her feet. She scrubbed at his arms and felt remnants of his shirt. His pants-clad thigh slid between hers.

“You have on too many clothes,” she said, her voice sounding husky to her own ears.

He shook his head. “Once my clothes are gone, my control will follow.”

“Thank goodness,” she said.

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