Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE
Saved by the Monarch
Dana Marton

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Dana Marton is the author of more than a dozen fast-paced, action-adventure romantic suspense novels and a winner of the Daphne du Maurier Award of Excellence. She loves writing books of international intrigue, filled with dangerous plots that try her tough-as-nails heroes and the special women they fall in love with. Her books have been published in seven languages in eleven countries around the world. When not writing or reading, she loves to browse antiques shops and enjoys working in her sizeable flower garden where she searches for “bad” bugs with the skills of a superspy and vanquishes them with the agility of a commando soldier. Every day in her garden is a thriller. To find more information on her books, please visit www.danamarton.com. She would love to hear from her readers and can be reached via e-mail at DanaMarton@DanaMarton.com.

To Princess Judi. Long may she reign.

With many thanks to Allison Lyons.

Chapter One

Today he would meet his bride. Prince Miklos hurried along the narrow passageway. If all went well, in three months they'd be married. Given the political climate of the Valtrian kingdom, a traditional engagement in the public eye that lasted a full year wasn't an option. The Royal House of Kerkay desperately needed the positive publicity and all the goodwill a royal wedding would bring. They needed it quickly.

There came that noise again. His attention focused on his surroundings. He wasn't alone in the catacombs, the narrow corridors carved into stone that crisscrossed most of the city and culminated in a jumbled labyrinth under the Valtrian royal palace. Unease prickled his skin, a distinguishable sensation from the goose bumps the cool, damp air gave the prince every time he walked through here. Which wasn't often. But today his schedule was tight and he didn't want to waste time on the reporters who loitered around the palace entrances armed with pointed questions about the unrest in the south.

The lights flickered, but that wasn't unusual. The electric system down here was over fifty years old, currently scheduled for maintenance. He strode forward without hesitation, his military boots making a hard sound on the stone that echoed, mixing with the scrape of other footsteps up ahead.

Some of the catacombs under the city had been turned into a tourist attraction, with guided tours twice a day, but the closed-off section under the palace was guarded twenty-four seven. He expected a palace guard would pop around a corner in seconds.

Except that didn't happen.

Odd. Whoever was down here with him had to have heard him by now. A guard would have come to see who he was, would have properly greeted him. The sound of footsteps grew more faint, definitely not coming closer. Someone in a hurry. To get away from him?

The lights flickered again.

And he considered how he hadn't come across a single guard yet. He picked up speed, but couldn't catch sight of anyone, the footsteps always just around the next corner.

"Halt!" he called out, the intonation that of a military man—he was a Valtrian Army major.

The palace guard would have recognized his voice and obeyed.

Instead, the footsteps quickened.

He took off running toward them, then pulled up short when the lights went out and he was suddenly enveloped in complete darkness.

Ambush, his military-trained mind said. He stole forward slowly, taking care to soften his steps.

His hand moved to his sidearm, although, realistically, he didn't expect much more than an opportunistic tourist who had somehow gotten past a chained gate. Gotten too far while the guards were doing something else somewhere else. The catacomb system was vast.

He stepped to the side and put his back against the wall, ready for anything. But when the lights flickered on for one second, he found the corridor empty in front of him.

And yet his senses told him something was off. He slipped his gun from its leather holster and hadn't taken two steps forward when the lights went out again.

He could be walking into a trap—side tunnels frequently interrupted the corridor he traveled. He moved forward one slow meter at a time, preparing for whatever was to come next, cautioning himself to restraint. A prince beating up a lost tourist would make for terrible publicity, so he bade himself not to jump to conclusions and rash actions when he caught up with whoever was down here. But he kept his gun out, although he didn't take the safety off, not yet.

He followed the sound, turned when he had to, going by feel through twisting corridors in the darkness, enveloped by damp air and musty smells. Then the footsteps suddenly died.

He strained to listen, but couldn't hear anything. He braced his left hand against the wall to orient himself—the stone in the various passages was cut with different techniques, as the catacombs had been added to over the centuries—touched something wet, pulled his hand back.

In some places the walls were moist. There was even a small underground stream, but that was at least a mile from where he was standing.

Could be a water pipe was leaking somewhere beneath the palace. He would have to have that investigated.

He moved ahead, but could no longer pick out any sound beyond the muffled ones he made. The lights flickered back on again. He immediately knew where he was and turned the corner toward the palace entry he'd been headed for. He turned another corner, strode down another long walkway, then another. And spotted a guard, at last, by the steel security door.

"Your Highness." The man snapped his heels together and pulled his spine ramrod straight, staring ahead.

"Has anyone come up this way?" he asked.

"None, Your Highness."

"You're the first guard I've seen since coming in through the stables." He'd entered the catacombs through the secret door at the royal stables at the foot of Palace Hill.

"I'll alert the captain immediately."

"See that you do. Are the lights working properly?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"They keep going off and on down there."

"It'll be seen to. Is there anything else, Your Highness?" The man's face was set in stone, but his voice betrayed his nerves. His unit had been caught derelict in their duties by none other than a member of the royal family.

And Miklos didn't feel like going easy on him. He was a military man through and through who considered his duty sacred. "Tell the captain I want a full sweep. There might be unauthorized personnel down there."

If the man was surprised, he didn't show it. A complete sweep of the catacombs was rarely conducted. The last time they'd done a full survey was over a decade ago, for architectural reasons. They were testing the rock bed for stability before beginning renovations on the East Wing of the palace. Before his father's death.

He left the guard behind and walked up the stairs, was greeted by another guard as he entered the palace proper. He checked his cell phone when he passed the man. Three unanswered calls from the chief of security. Cell phones didn't work down in the catacombs.

He checked the times for the calls. All in the last ten minutes. Since he was already late for a meeting, he didn't immediately return them. He crossed a receiving area and came out by the library, walked straight through and into the business offices, into the private meeting room where Chancellor Hansen was waiting for him.

"Your Highness."

"Chancellor." He nodded, hating that he was two minutes late. "Go ahead."

"Are you hurt, Your Highness?" The man was staring at his left hand.

And when Miklos brought it up, he realized why. His palm and fingers were stained with blood. He hadn't felt just groundwater seeping through the stone down in the catacombs when he'd leaned against the wall.

The full sweep would tell him what was going on. Miklos would make sure to check in later with the captain. He turned into the small bathroom off the office, left the door open as he pumped soap and thoroughly washed. "I'm fine. I would hear your report."

The chancellor knew better than to push with questions, and gave his usual twenty-minute update instead, leaving ten minutes at the end of their weekly appointment for questions and answers

as he always had. But when that was over, uncharacteristically, he didn't immediately take his leave. He was fidgeting, shuffling papers in his appointment book.

He decidedly lingered, although he was the type to plow through his report with the force of a steam engine then be gone, rushing to the next item on his endless to-do list. He had a propensity for believing that he single-handedly kept the kingdom running.

He probably wasn't too far off the mark.

"Is there anything else?" Miklos asked.

The chancellor closed his leather-bound folder softly and looked up with trepidation on his lined face. "The queen is…" He drew a quick breath. "The queen is…" Moisture gathered in his eyes under lids that drooped with age.

"The queen is dying." Miklos said what for most of the country was still unthinkable. He, himself, hadn't said it out loud until now, although he and his brothers had been aware of it for some time, communicating with half sentences and long looks of regret. "My mother is dying," he said it now, again.

The chancellor hung his head.

"Dr. Arynak is requesting audience?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

But the good doctor had asked the chancellor to break the news first. At another time, in a different situation, Miklos would have smiled at that.

Dr. Arynak never delivered bad news to any of the members of the royal family. He had an aversion, more of a phobia, perhaps going back to his predecessors, some of whom had been beheaded for being the harbinger of bad news during the less enlightened centuries.

His evasive techniques, which he took to the extreme at times, could be annoying. He was an excellent physician, however.

"I'm so sorry, Your Highness."

Miklos's heart darkened. The weight that had been straddling his shoulders for the last couple of months now slid to settle firmly in his chest. *How long?* He wanted to ask, but for that he had to wait for the doctor's audience.

"I'll see him as soon as we get back from the airport."

"Yes, Your Highness." But the chancellor didn't look relieved for being done with delivering the doctor's message.

"What else?"

"Have you talked to the chief of security?"

"Not yet." Miklos's voice picked up some impatience, which he regretted. But what could be worse than the queen's impending death? And the country in the worst turmoil already. He was tired of the political fires they were fighting at every level of government.

And still the chancellor wouldn't talk.

"We must leave momentarily," Miklos reminded him.

"There seems to be a plot to assassinate the crown prince." The words came in a rush, with a pained expression on the old man's face. And anger over the audacity that anyone would want to harm the royal family. And unease because he was treading on the security chief's territory by reporting that information first.

Information that made Miklos's head reel. "Arpad?"

The man in the catacombs…It had been a man; the footsteps gave that much away. Probably young. He'd been fast, and there hadn't been any shuffling. Miklos looked at his left hand. No trace of the blood remained. His body went still for a moment when he thought…Alarm and urgency filled him as he asked, "Where is my brother now?"

"Meeting with a team of security advisors."

He acknowledged the brief moment of relief and headed for the door. “Where? And why am I not there?”

“We have another appointment.”

He stopped in his tracks. How could that slip his mind even for a moment?

He appreciated that the chancellor said “We,” even though he spoke of a burden Miklos alone must bear. “I should still go and see my brother.” He glanced back.

“But Your Highness…” The Chancellor paled. “You must receive her.”

He wasn’t in the mood for *musts.* “I must nothing. Am I not still a prince?”

“Which is exactly the reason.” The chancellor took a tone he’d employed often during the princes’ childhood, using it for the same argument once again—duties of royalty.

Which hadn’t chafed in a long time, but they did now, when his mother and brother needed him, and Miklos had to go on a side trip to receive some girl he hadn’t met in twenty some years, all because protocol demanded. He almost told the chancellor that protocol be damned. Then reminded himself that a Kerkay never shirked any duty of the crown.

In an hour’s time—two at the most—he would be rid of the girl, and he would be back at the palace. He glanced at his watch. “Where is the meeting?”

“The Map Room. Shall I come along, Your Highness?”

“I’ll only be a moment.” He glanced at his watch again. “You should probably start getting ready.”

The Map Room was called as such not only because the floor displayed the map of the world in various colored granite, but because the shelves housed all the royal maps that had survived the tumultuous centuries of Valtria, starting with an outline of the country’s hills and rivers, hand-painted on scraped sheepskin in the tenth century.

His five brothers looked up as Miklos entered.

“We weren’t expecting you,” Arpad, the crown prince, said with obvious pleasure in his voice, although Benedek and Lazlo—the twins—looked rather guilty.

“The chief of security and the rest of the advisors aren’t here yet.” Janos stated the obvious. He was a prominent economist and involved with politics, as well. His face showed the shadows of sleepless nights.

“And yet you’re all here,” Miklos remarked, glancing at the old leather-bound book Janos had shoved behind his back as Miklos had entered but now was pulling out again.

Not *the* book?

Miklos put a scowl on his face, regretting that none of his brothers was easily intimidated. “No,” he said with emphasis.

“The times are calling for—” Lazlo, a brilliant entrepreneur and born gambler, started to say.

Miklos cut him off. “When were you going to tell me about this?”

“Tonight.” Arpad leaned against the fifteenth century massive walnut desk. “We thought you were, er, otherwise engaged?” His right eyebrow slid up, an amused look on his face.

“Leaving momentarily,” Miklos said with utmost restraint. “You can put that book away. I’ll take care of this with the security chief. You’ll be safe, Arpad, I swear to that.”

Arpad was a colonel in the air force, but he was the crown prince and could not be part of the kind of foolishness that had been cooked up, no doubt, by the youngest princes. Arpad was to be protected.

Miklos was the only other one with military training among the six brothers. He was the one who was involved with state and palace security anyway. “The Brotherhood of the Crown is a legend,” he snapped at them.

“A legend that is about to be resurrected.” Lazlo was grinning from ear to ear. That one had way too much taste for adventure.

But all of them, Miklos noticed, looked rather pleased with themselves. They were looking at this as a chance to have some fun, a great change of pace from the sheer dullness of palace protocol and state duties. He hated to be a drill sergeant all the time, but their wild ideas did need someone to corral them.

Not that he didn't feel just a twinge of excitement, looking at the beat-up book.

The story had been his favorite in his boyhood. He and his brothers had spent endless time acting out the glorious deeds of the Brotherhood on the back stairs of the palace, in the secret garden and in the catacombs. But what had been grand entertainment for young boys was surely not a worthwhile discussion for grown princes.

"The queen is not well," he reminded them. And from the way their faces turned somber, he knew that they, too, had heard the latest news about their mother.

"That means the country needs the Brotherhood now more than ever," Janos countered with a dark look.

Miklos drew himself straighter and deepened his frown, then stifled an impatient growl when none of his brothers looked like they took him seriously at all. "We have other duties. Real duties," he pointed out. "You can trust the military with protecting our family and the country. If you want to escalate things, we can always bring in General Rossi," he offered, aware that his words lost some of their conviction.

His brothers didn't miss a thing. Now they were all grinning. Damn, but they knew they had him. They were circling him already, never mind that there were only six Kerkay brothers, unlike the eight original princes of the Brotherhood of the Crown who had banded together two hundred years ago, a secret society to protect the kingdom during civil unrest and outside manipulation. The story of their wild adventures had been spread far and wide. And was vastly exaggerated, no doubt. But they were the heroes of every Valtrian boy for the past two centuries.

Lazlo formed a fist and extended his hand into the middle, always first into mischief. Benedek went next—the twins were always on the same page. Then Istvan, a cultural anthropologist who really should have known better, put his fist in. Then Janos. Then Arpad. And Miklos felt himself swept along in the spirit of the moment. In any case, he had to be in. God knew what trouble they would get into without him.

"Duty and honor, our lives for the people and the crown." They swore as one the oath of the Brotherhood, their voices deep and strong, amplified in the cavernous room.

Then Miklos broke up the circle, mindful of the time. The next second, the chief of security was coming through the door.

Janos shoved the book into his waistband at his back and greeted the man with a nonchalant expression. "There you are. Any news?"

Miklos stayed another minute to listen to the sordid details of the plot against his eldest brother and the kingdom. What had emerged kept him preoccupied all the way to the airport in the royal limousine.

And then, God help him, they were there.

For most of his life, his arranged marriage was a distant thought. So distant, in fact, that sometimes he completely forgot about it until he was reminded by the chancellor's annual report about the girl his parents had handpicked for him at the moment of her birth.

He was a prince of Valtria, second in line to the throne. He knew all about responsibility, had always known this day would come, had always been careful to keep out of deep entanglements. But knowing that he must one day marry for the good of the crown, and stepping out of the royal ceremonial limousine at the national airport to receive his future bride, were not the same.

Arpad was the crown prince and the eldest. He'd been supposed to marry first. But that agreement had fallen apart two years ago, and Arpad had been dragging his feet since, putting off selecting a new bride.

"Splendid, Your Highness, splendid." The chancellor beamed now in full ceremonial regalia. He had found a minute to change to give the occasion its due before they left the palace.

That much velvet could not be good for a body.

Being an army major, Miklos was spared the frills and allowed to wear his military dress uniform to the momentous occasion, which he'd donned at his rooms at the military base before coming up to the palace.

"She's an excellent choice, Your Highness," the chancellor said for the hundredth time, probably sensing the prince's hesitancy and working hard to dispel all last-second doubts.

He was downright cheerful, as if their conversation at the palace a short while ago had never happened. His smile fitted the occasion. He always fitted the occasion. Rose to it, by God, come hell or high water, and age hadn't slowed him any. He had served, in one position or another, since the queen had been crowned at the age of twenty-nine, forty years ago, the year Miklos had been born. The chancellor had been a constant part of the six princes' lives as much as their parents, had always been loyal, always on their side against the media, critics, political slandering, whatever.

Which was why his excitement over the arrival of Lady Judit Marezzi felt a lot like betrayal.

"Her background is spotless. A very sensible woman. As soon as she is tried and tested in situ, and you've had a little time to spend with her, the official announcement can be made. If all goes as expected."

Did that mean it wasn't a done deal? Miklos perked up a little.

"I already have the press releases ready to go."

Resignation defeated hope.

Close to forty, he was used to freedom. And he had more than enough responsibility on his hands; he didn't need the addition of a wife and all the drama that went with it.

His parents, the king and queen of Valtria, had presented a picture-perfect marriage on ceremonial occasions, but life had been far from heavenly at the royal palace. Theirs, too, had been an arranged marriage—for the sake of alliances—that would have been perhaps better off left unarranged. The princes' childhood had plenty of rough spots because of that.

He watched the press, cameras lined up in the distance. The time and place of the arrival had been leaked to a few favored sources in an attempt to control coverage while not appearing as if they were completely shutting the public out. But given the riots in the south, he'd hoped the paparazzi would have better things to do today. The political climate of the country was at the moment somewhat chaotic.

"Odd that she should choose to show up now to claim her due. At the worst possible time," he said, hoping that the chancellor would have some insight about why she'd suddenly decided to come.

The man watched him for a moment. "I suppose there never is a right time to lose one's freedom," he responded simply, warm sympathy in his gaze.

Which was one of the many reasons all the princes loved him. He understood what went on inside a man just as well as he understood what went on inside the palace.

"I expect that things such as this are different for the young ladies," the old man observed gently.

And Miklos felt a sudden shot of guilt for not having considered that she'd probably been planning this day and her wedding for a decade. If not two. Girls were like that.

"Maybe her arrival will save us. If the union goes well, if the people get behind this marriage, it might have the power to stop civil war yet."

Miklos considered the truth in the chancellor's words as he returned his gaze to the Valtrian Airline Boeing Airbus. The stairs were at the door and the red carpet rolled out. The ceremonial army guard stood to line her path to the limousine, keeping the paparazzi back. General Rossi had insisted on the guards to honor the occasion.

Like the chancellor, General Rossi had always been a major source of support for the royal family. He was the reason Miklos had entered the army. Rossi had been his mentor for longer than he could remember.

Miklos scanned the plane. “Tell me again why she refused the royal carrier?”

“She isn’t officially a princess and a royal person yet, Your Highness. Maybe she’s eager to enjoy the last few weeks of her civilian life. It might be better this way. People might appreciate seeing her for the first time as an average person. She could become the people’s princess and all that.”

Or not. England had had one of those. Everyone knew how tragically that had worked out.

“This better not be an indication that she’s going to buck protocol every chance she gets,” he said tightlipped, so that the cameras recording him from afar wouldn’t catch his words. “God knows what sort of liberal upbringing she received in America.”

She was twenty-nine, an age that suddenly seemed too young for him to comprehend. What could she possibly know about life? At least she would know all about Valtria and its royal customs and heritage. Her people would have seen to that. She would know what was expected of her. But would she do it?

Why wouldn’t she? He pressed down on an unexpected wave of unease. If she weren’t prepared to do her duty, she wouldn’t have come here.

Some movement showed at last at the plane’s door. The military band struck up Valtria’s national anthem. Two little girls dressed in white formal dresses appeared out of nowhere with a spectacular bouquet of Valtria’s signature purple roses, their national flower. Judging by the chancellor’s pleased expression, he had arranged that.

Miklos stood ramrod straight, not a twitch betraying his impatience. He wanted to be done with his official duties of meet and greet and get back to investigating just who’d been down in the tunnels with him earlier. He didn’t have to worry about Lady Judit feeling neglected. Her weeks were booked touring the palace and country with a receiving committee, meeting everyone who counted, interspersed with only brief visits from him. They would have enough time to get to know each other once they were married.

The airplane’s door opened, a flight attendant appearing first as she pushed the door to the side with a nervous smile on her face.

Followed by Lady Judit Marezzi—his future princess.

The first thing he noticed was that she was not, in fact, a girl. She was a stunning woman, a thousand times more beautiful than the snapshots in the chancellor’s reports. Waves of auburn hair reached to the middle of her back, glinting bronze in the sun. She was lithe, her movements graceful, her simple ivory dress accentuating her feminine figure.

His suppressed reluctance eased a notch.

Then he noticed the shock, surprise and confusion on her face as she looked at the receiving line. There was no greeting smile, no little wave, no pose at the top of the stairs for the cameras as was customary on state arrivals. In fact, she clutched her oversize handbag as if she were ready to bolt. Almost as if…

As if she hadn’t expected him to be there at all. Almost as if all this was a surprise to her.

WHEN IN ROME, DO AS the Romans do. Judi looked down the stairs, took a deep breath and moved forward, aware that a planeful of weary travelers waited to deboard behind her. Maybe Valtria always went all out for arriving tourists. She only wished, as she walked the red carpet, that when she’d been bumped up to first class she hadn’t received the first seat in the first row. She wouldn’t have minded if another passenger was first off the plane, somebody who’d been here before and knew what to do.

Then she reached the ground and two adorable little girls came to curtsy before her and hand her an enormous bouquet of the most gorgeous pale purple roses she’d ever seen. Cameras flashed,

reporters shouting in various languages. She recoiled from them as she caught a few questions in English, “Why now?” and “What are your plans?”

Which pretty much told her that there was a misunderstanding of giant proportions going on here. Either that or she was on some hidden-camera show, but for the life of her she couldn’t think who would set her up like that.

She was a little cog working at a large company that made video games. In other words, a complete nobody.

A portly, official-looking man stood at the end of the red carpet in front of a black stretch limousine. He was smiling from ear to ear, looking at her, his outfit straight out of some Renaissance painting, wearing enough velvet to do Elvis proud. But it was the military official next to him who drew Judi’s attention. He looked vaguely familiar.

His dark eyes watched her with disquieting intensity. He was a head taller than the man in the funky robes and filled out his uniform in a way that could make a girl sigh. The way he carried himself meant he was the man in charge. He had a charismatic smile that made looking away from him nearly impossible. If all Valtrian men looked like him, she might have a pretty interesting holiday yet.

More men in uniform lined her path. If it weren’t for the red carpet, she would have thought this was all some sort of security measure and the handsome stranger the security chief. As it was, she figured there had to be someone important on the plane, a celebrity even, and tried to think back to her fellow passengers in first class. Then glanced back. The two guards who’d been standing just outside the airplane’s door when she’d stepped out were still there, holding everyone else back.

Her steps faltered right in front of Liberace and the army guy. Their smiles widened as they looked at her expectantly.

She was pink-eared embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I’m who you think I am,” she whispered to them and looked for a way to gracefully disappear. Sadly, a trapdoor on the tarmac did not conveniently present itself.

Liberace looked confused. Army guy looked as if he might have expected her to say something like that.

But before he had a chance to respond, Liberace inclined his head and said, “Your Highness, may I present the Lady Judit Marezzi.”

The air stuck in her lungs. And stayed there permanently when his Highness—his Highness?—took her hand and brushed a warm kiss over her knuckles. Oh my God, he was! She recognized him from media photos now, although the Valtrian royal family was never as big news in U.S. tabloids as the British. But because of her Valtrian roots, the few times they had been mentioned, she’d paid attention.

His lips were utterly masculine and bone-meltingly sexy, and might have twitched, whether with annoyance or amusement she couldn’t tell.

“Welcome back to Valtria. I hope your flight was pleasant.” His voice was low and rich timbered, a voice made for seduction that resonated in her chest and seemed to nestle there.

She didn’t breathe again until he let her hand go.

Liberace looked up to the airplane. “And your social secretary and entourage?”

Entou—what? Her head was beginning to spin.

“I’m sorry, there must be a mistake.” She offered a painful smile, hating to make a fool of herself in front of the handsome prince. Oh man, the stories she was going to tell the girls at the office when she got back.

His Highness caught on first. He nodded to one of the guards next to him, who opened the limo’s door. She was ushered in efficiently, away from the flashing cameras and the most awkward public moment of her life. It bordered on ridiculous how grateful she felt for the reprieve.

The two men got in after her and, for a moment, tense silence ruled.

Then Liberace said, “I’ve sent a detailed outline of the reception, protocol and hour-by-hour plans of your entire stay to Lady Viola, your social secretary.” He seemed bewildered and scandalized by her behavior.

His Highness simply observed her. And managed to unnerve her completely just by doing that.

Her brain slowed to a crawl. “Aunt Viola?” She stared at the older man. Her aunt had just had emergency gallbladder surgery. Judi would have canceled the whole trip if her aunt hadn’t forbidden her to do it. The only time the short, timid, fairy godmother-type of a woman had ever put her foot down as long as Judi could remember.

“Who do you think I am?” she asked tentatively.

“Lady Judit Marezzi, daughter of Lord Conrad Marezzi and Lady Lillian.”

Okay, the names matched. Except for the lord and lady part, although she did remember her father mentioning to her they were from an old, important family. She didn’t remember her mother, who had died when Judi was three. She did remember her father, however. He’d gotten remarried, to an American, before dying just days after Judi’s fifth birthday. Her American stepmother wasn’t the type to dwell on the past. Neither was Aunt Viola, who’d moved to the States after her father’s death.

The limousine began to move. And for a long while, as Liberace went on about impossible and incomprehensible acts, she was frozen in place, unsure what on earth was going on and how to act. Then the car left the airport and entered a busy highway, and she was aware all of a sudden that she was being carted off to an unknown location by two strange men.

“Stop.” She raised her hand, palm out. “I need you to let me go right now.” Where was her luggage, anyway? Never mind. She would take that up with the airline later. Right now she needed to return to reality posthaste. “I want you to let me out right here.”

His Highness flashed her a somber, I-don’t-think-so glance. She appreciated the manly, sexy and formidable look on a guy as much as the next girl, but not when said guy was standing in the way of her freedom.

“Now listen—” She might have wagged her index finger for a second there before she caught herself and found her very last smidgen of ladylike restraint.

Liberace gasped. “Please consider…The press…This is…We are miles from the city proper.”

“And who are you?” She was running out of patience.

He looked puppy-eyed hurt. “I’m Chancellor Hansen. You might recall that we *have* corresponded.”

Uh-huh. And she kept in regular touch with Mick Jagger and the Dalai Lama, as well. She was beginning to feel on the edge of desperate.

“I need you to take me to my hotel. I’m staying at the Ramada at center city.” She dug into her purse to get the paper with the exact address.

DID SHE THINK SHE WAS in a taxicab?

“You’ll be staying at the royal palace,” Miklos said. Security would be impossible at a hotel. If that was what she wanted, she should have notified the chancellor months ago so they could have properly set it up.

“I don’t think so.” She gave him a look full of attitude. Her lavender eyes shone like jewels.

The chancellor sucked in a sharp breath.

Miklos cocked his head as he took in the woman. He wasn’t used to his word being questioned. Definitely not in the military, where a superior officer’s word was the law, and not in civilian life, either.

She was pretty but it would only get her so far with him. He happened to have too much on his plate today to deal with her drama and theatrics.

The four younger princes—Janos, Istvan, Lazlo and Benedek—were better at diplomacy than the two eldest. Arpad, the crown prince, and Miklos were more of cut-to-the-chase type of men. “If you have no interest in honoring our parents’ agreement, then why are you here?”

"As a birthday present to myself." She sounded and looked thoroughly exasperated. "I thought it was time I discovered my roots a little," she went on, then paused and looked at him with full-on suspicion on her beautiful face. "What agreement?"

He cast a sidelong glance at the chancellor, who was now looking positively ashen.

"Our *engagement."* He said the last word with emphasis so there would be no way she could misunderstand him.

Her nearly translucent skin lost all color. "A what?" she asked.

Chapter Two

He didn't have time for this.

"Aunt Viola?" Miklos drew up one eyebrow as he glanced toward the chancellor. The future princess's companion and social secretary seemed to have been amiss in her duties. To say the least.

"Lady Viola Arynak. A distant relation to Lady Marezzi," the chancellor supplied, looking thoroughly off balance.

"Arynak?" Foreboding filled the prince.

"Dr. Arynak's cousin."

Which might have explained a lot. Was she also averse to delivering bad news? Had she left the princess's engagement out of her education altogether? Although he couldn't comprehend why anyone would think of the prospect of being married to him as bad news.

"Engagement?" she asked again, color returning to her face. She had the fine features of Valtrian aristocracy and lively eyes that made it near impossible to look away from her.

"An agreement was reached between our parents at the time of your birth, then reinforced at the time of your leaving Valtria." When her father was appointed Valtrian ambassador to the United States.

She really had an attractive mouth. Even when it was hanging open.

"I was two when my family moved to America. You—you pedophile!" Outrage shook her voice.

"I was not quite thirteen at the time and wasn't given much say in the matter," he said mildly. "You came up to my knee and hugged it. The families took it as an agreement." She'd been a charming toddler, large blue eyes that had turned lavender over the past decades and curly red hair that had grown into auburn waves.

She flashed him a look of contempt.

Far from the look of adoration she'd regarded him with back then. He hadn't known what to do with her, felt lucky that protocol required nothing but a short introduction. He'd been relieved that she was so young, that the alliance he was expected to make with her wouldn't have to happen for endless years yet. Two decades had seemed an eternity to his thirteen-year-old self.

But that particular eternity had just come to an end. And his fond fantasies of an obedient wife who toed the line and understood the responsibilities of the monarchy were rapidly coming to an end with it.

The fire in her eyes was something to behold. "This is the twenty-first century. You can't be serious," she admonished him.

He didn't even answer that. Duty was everything to him. That she would question hers the moment she was required the first small thing annoyed him to no end and didn't fill him with optimism regarding his future wife's character.

He would marry her anyway. He was prepared to make that sacrifice. She could be key to uniting the country again. Her father had been an extremely popular lord and political figure, a son of the Italian minority living in Valtria. Her mother had been a descendant of the Austrian-related branch of Valtrian nobility. Her marriage to him would be far more than just a happy occasion for all the people to come together at last and celebrate. Their joining would be symbolic, could even start the country on the path of healing ethnic wounds if it were played in exactly the right way.

"I'm an American citizen. I got that when my stepmother adopted me. You can't make me do anything I don't want to do." She threw him a so-there look that was haughty enough for a princess while also incredibly hot.

"Valtrian-American," he corrected and wondered if that, too, might not have some use yet. She'd spent most of her life outside the country. She had no alliances yet, no preferences, no past here

to dredge up. She could be seen as a fresh breath of air to the royal family, impartial, sympathetic to all the people of the kingdom. Something to discuss with the chancellor when they had a sane minute.

His cell phone rang. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have picked it up in the lady's presence, reserving his full attention for her. But at the moment, he was glad for any diversion from the disaster their meeting was turning into. Seeing the chief of security's number on the display made his decision for him.

"What happened?"

"Two bodies were found in the catacombs. Palace guards." The man's voice was grave and apologetic at the same time.

"Procedure followed?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Emergency procedures for the possible infiltration of the palace are being put in place. The royal family will leave for a weekend hunting holiday to Maltmore within the hour."

He loved Maltmore, a fine hunting castle, had fond childhood memories of the place and Monsieur Maneaux, the Frenchman who had taught the young princes sword fighting there. Under the current situation, to remove the royal family to the castle from the royal palace for a few days was the best course of action.

Which was going to be questioned by the media, since it had been unscheduled, but the chancellor would come up with some innocent reason. Maybe even involving the arrival of Lady Judit.

"Very well." His ancestors had built Maltmore in the foothills of the Alps, a location as majestic as it was well defensible.

But also a hundred miles from the capital. Which meant he would have a hard time investigating the goings-on at the royal palace from there. "I shall be staying in residence." The rest of the "Brotherhood" could just investigate from the safety of the castle walls. Actually, that suited him pretty well.

"Your Highness, I must advise—"

"I shall be staying in residence with the Lady Judit." The perfect excuse for him to lag behind his family.

The prince and the future princess are getting to know each other. Courting.

The press would turn it into something mushily romantic, and nobody would guess the dire situation at the palace, news of which could not come out under any circumstances. With all the upheaval in the country, the supposed Freedom Council that worked to bring down the monarchy would capitalize on information like that, use it as proof that the people were fed up with the royals. The council would gain more power, and their power was even now almost too much to handle.

His mother was ill—she had to leave. His brothers, if they stayed, wouldn't be able to help themselves, but would try to investigate and look for any excuse to perform some heroic deed. He could never hope to keep an eye on all of them. They were better off at Maltmore. But he should be able to keep a close eye on Judit. How hard could it be to keep track of one young woman? And the monarchy's enemies didn't know her yet anyway. She wasn't a target.

"We'll talk when I get there." He hung up the phone, then addressed Lady Judit. "I'm sorry, but your official schedule will have to be changed."

Under the circumstances, maybe it was best if she weren't out there, prancing around the countryside. He'd see to it that she would be kept busy at the royal palace, while guarded heavily. They might even spend more time together than originally planned. He found that he didn't altogether mind that prospect.

"I don't have an official schedule." She glared at him.

The chancellor drew up his shoulders and shook his head, nonplussed. He seemed completely out of sorts and taking this mix-up badly. He probably felt responsible.

"If we were engaged all this time like you say, how come you never contacted me? If I hadn't decided to come here, would you have just forgotten about it and let it all go?" Judit asked.

"I've been busy. I've been patient, trying to give you the time you needed." And relieved that she'd stayed away, to be truthful. He had a full life, a career in the army, a pretty busy schedule. It'd always seemed that they would have plenty of time yet. Which led the chancellor to his ultimatum. Might as well tell her some of that.

"If I hadn't made arrangements before my fortieth birthday—" he felt a moment of embarrassment "—you would have received an official contact from the royal family that requested your presence here. Chancellor Hansen would have organized the confirmation of our engagement."

"When is your fortieth birthday?" she inquired.

"At the end of summer."

"Procrastinate much?" She actually looked amused for a second.

His turn to glare at her.

"I think you want this as little as I do," she observed.

"I want to do my duty." That was all he ever wanted. Whatever it took to help the country and the monarchy. When one was a prince, personal feelings did not figure into the equation.

"I don't want anyone to marry me out of duty," she snapped, as if offended. But then she added on a softer voice, that suited her much better, "Can you understand that?"

"Lady Arynak mentioned none of this to you?" Miklos asked.

NOT REALLY. JUDI SAT ramrod straight on the leather seat, not allowing her shoulders to slump. *Don't let them see you scared.*

The limousine felt smaller than a Mini Cooper. The prince had what could be called an imposing presence, his intense energy filling the space and then some. Grainy pictures in tabloids were one thing. Sitting face-to-face with all that charisma was vastly different, heaven help her.

She wondered for a second if anyone had ever naysayed him. That probably didn't happen too often. A man like him wouldn't be used to resistance from women.

"My aunt is a sweet old lady." She sounded defensive even to her own ears, but couldn't help it. She loved Aunt Viola. Who *was* sweet. Too sweet, even. She had a tendency to say whatever anyone wanted to hear. But, hello, that was exactly why she was so very likable and had a gazillion friends.

"She did bring up from time to time that I should visit Valtria." But Judi had always put it off, focusing on her studies at first, then on her career. And her aunt *had* mentioned marriage, urged her more and more often lately to consider that it might be time to start thinking along those lines, but Judi had been reluctant.

Not that she was commitment-phobic, although she'd been accused of just that by more than one ex-boyfriend. But it did seem that everyone she'd ever truly loved always ended up dying. Her mother when Judi had been three, her father when she'd been five, her stepmother when she'd been ten.

Maybe she *was* scared to fully fall in love and commit to a man. And her aunt hadn't pushed or played matchmakers like older family members or some of her friends. She just wasn't the pushy kind, which Judi very much appreciated. Having someone like Aunt Viola by her side was wonderful when life was filled with one harsh reality after another.

Like the fact that her parents had sold her out to some prince when she'd been a toddler!

He seemed annoyed but held it in check and remained studiously polite, a man who fully knew the meaning of aristocratic restraint. Which she appreciated. He was overwhelming enough as it was.

"Look, we're both adults. We should be able to figure something out." There had to be something she could say to make him see how absolutely crazy this all was.

He watched her as if trying to see inside her. "The country needs our alliance," he stated simply.

His very presence demanded that she curtsy and say *Yes, Your Highness.* But in addition to her Valtrian heritage, she also had her indomitable American stepmother's spirit in her. She called on that.

"That's not up for negotiation." She did her best to remain calm and match his cool demeanor.

Her father had been a high-profile political figure, then her stepmother after him. They'd both been dragged through the mud. If there was one thing she'd known for sure at an early age, it was that she would never become a public figure when she grew up.

"If I can make the sacrifice, why is it that you cannot?" His masculine, sensuous lips flattened. "A true daughter of Lord Marezzi would never refuse her duty."

I would and I will—just watch me, Buster, she wanted to say but had a feeling that she would get better results by remaining civil and rational. She needed time. *Delay.* "I believe we really need to talk about this. I'm going to need time here. And a lot of questions need to be answered."

He watched her darkly for a long moment. "Agreed."

So he was willing to negotiate. It saved her from having to jump from a moving car and run for the hills. She felt a small sense of relief, the first since she'd gotten off the plane.

"You will consider the situation?" His face remained impassive, but his eyes betrayed that he wasn't too happy with her.

Not that she was all that thrilled with him, either. "Yes." The situation she would consider. Marriage to him, she would not.

Even if he wasn't that bad to look at: raven-wing black hair and dark slate eyes, a straight, aristocratic nose and a powerfully built soldier's body. Which, really, she should have been too angry to notice. It annoyed her to no end that she had. So he was handsome. So who cared?

He was archaic.

An arranged marriage. In this day and age? Who was he kidding?

Maybe he was crazy. Not a raving lunatic, but slightly off. Madness ran in the royal bloodlines of several European countries; she remembered that from history class. Just her luck. A whole, perfectly fine country, and the first person she ran into was their off-his-rocker prince.

They slowed for a sharp turn. She opened her mouth to talk some reason into the two men, but what happened next froze her. She watched the scene unfold, her body immobile from the terror she felt.

Two cars plowed through traffic and pulled to a screeching halt next to their motorcade. Two men got out. One pointed a grenade launcher at the limo behind them that was supposed to carry her entourage but was empty instead, save for the driver. The guy blew it to pieces.

Just blew it up without warning.

Fire shot to the sky.

Car parts rained to the pavement.

She might have screamed. She couldn't hear her own voice, deafened by the explosion.

The guy pointed the grenade launcher at their car next.

If she'd had command of her limbs, she would have been hiding under the seats by now.

The prince opened the door and got out with murder on his face to confront the armed men. He stood tall and straight, focused on the attackers. "This is not necessary. I will come of my own will and listen to your demands." His voice was clipped, betraying the restraint it took for him to just stand there.

He let himself be disarmed, but with enough tension radiating from him that she thought his control might break at any second and he would attack. She felt disconnected from the whole scene as if she were watching it on a movie screen. Her mind was numb with shock.

"No further violence is necessary." His voice was tempered steel.

And for a moment, she wasn't sure whether he was trying to convince the attackers or himself.

"I'll go with you. We leave them here," he stated.

"Everyone's coming." One guy kept his gun trained on the prince while another reached in and yanked Judi from the safety of the limo.

Faced with a grenade launcher, she didn't have it in her to resist. She went like a rag doll.

The chancellor scampered to the far end of the expansive seat and wedged himself in. They would have needed a crane to move the man. The attacker pointed the grenade launcher at him.

She caught the prince shift on his feet and get ready to make his move, so she prepared to duck, knowing all hell would break loose in a second. But then, unexpectedly, the ceremonial army guard opened fire. Bullets pinged off the pavement and the cars.

The kidnappers gave up on the chancellor, and Judi was unceremoniously shoved into the back of a van, along with His Highness. Then the van took off, the attackers returning fire, swerving all over the road so badly that she banged against the van's side.

She grabbed on to the one thing available for leverage—the prince. She could feel the flexing of an impressive amount of muscle under his military jacket, but there was no time to appreciate that now. The van swerved as bullets exploded all around it.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God."

She'd been wrong, she thought. The prince wasn't the only nut in the place. The whole country was insane.

She so should not have come here. She yelped as the gunfire intensified. She could see little in the dim van, the prince's wide chest pretty much filling her field of vision. She prayed that the bullets wouldn't break through the back door and hit them. She hung on even tighter as he put an arm around her and braced them with his feet to stop from bouncing. He held them both safe by sheer strength and will.

She was not impressed. All she could think of was that she should have gone with her first idea and celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday in Puerto Vallarta instead.

HIS HANDS WERE TIED behind his back and he was blindfolded, but his feet were free, so Miklos walked his prison to get a sense of it. When he bumped into something, he turned around to feel it. A chair. Which he catalogued as a possible makeshift weapon before he moved on.

"Where are we? It's freezing," Lady Judit asked from somewhere nearby.

"Up in the mountains." He had no idea beyond that. The van had had no windows, and the men had blindfolded them before taking them out of the vehicle and into a building. He figured about two or three hours had passed since their kidnapping.

"The country's security forces are out in full force looking for us. And probably most of the army. General Rossi would see to that," he said to reassure her. "Lady Judit—"

"For heaven's sake, can you at least call me Judi?" she snapped.

She really did have a difficult nature. "Judi. Please do not fear. I'm going to protect you." A prince remained valiant under all circumstances. A lesson drummed into the six Kerkay brothers from early childhood by the chancellor.

She snorted.

Which drew him up short. He didn't think a true princess would snort. Yet he couldn't deny that he kind of liked her irreverent, spirited nature. *Heaven help him.* He *would* have been able to appreciate—he corrected himself—an irreverent and spirited nature in about any other woman, but not his bride, who would be a princess of the kingdom.

He moved forward and bumped into a table, thought about Chancellor Hansen. Worry filled him for the old man. There'd been a gunfight after he and Judi had been thrust into the van. He wondered how the chancellor had fared.

"Why did they bring us here?" she was asking.

He wasn't sure he should tell her. But the fact was, she was here now, her life in jeopardy because of him. She deserved to know. He finally reached a wall and moved alongside it, turned his back to feel for a window with his tied hands.

"I was informed this morning that there's an assassination plot against my brother, the crown prince." As if Arpad hadn't had a rough-enough month already. His chopper had nearly gone down

two weeks before, due to malfunction. He'd been on his way to a ceremonial troop inspection. He was lucky he was still alive.

In hindsight, fresh suspicion arose that the accident could have been planned. But no, a special investigative team had gone over every last screw of the chopper after the incident. Miklos had read their report. Thoroughly.

"I'm in the army. Of the six princes, I'm the most involved with security. Could be whoever is behind the plot wants me out of the way so it'd be easier for him to get to Arpad."

A long silence followed his response. Then, "Why am I here?"

"You were in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said with regret.

"Funny, but I've had that feeling ever since the plane landed," she said in a droll tone.

The corner of his mouth twitched up. Her sense of humor was refreshing. And she stayed relatively composed under duress. She hadn't become hysterical at any point during the kidnapping —another trait that might come in handy for a future princess. Which she refused to consider, and for a split second he wondered if he could afford to let that whole issue drop. He hadn't really wanted a bride. He wanted a reluctant bride even less.

And she was nothing like the duty-bound daughters of the Valtrian aristocracy. Whoever he married wouldn't simply be his wife—she would be a princess of the country. She would have endless duties and responsibilities. And she would be expected to fulfill every last one of them. She would be expected to make sacrifices for the people.

If he were the only other person involved, he would have been willing to respect her explicitly worded wishes in the matter. But their union went beyond him; it involved the whole country. And despite some misgivings on his part, he couldn't give up his hopes for their grand peacemaking alliance. The country needed that.

"I'm truly sorry that your introduction to Valtria is like this. It's a wonderful country. I wish your arrival could have been different."

"You and me both," she groused, then asked, "Why do the people want the crown prince dead?"

"Not the people. Some people. Three businessmen in particular." The three men who led the so-called Freedom Council. "We have three major ethnic groups in the country: Italian, Hungarian and Austrian. There are some businessmen who would like to destroy the monarchy, divide the country along those ethnic lines and make their own republics." How little she knew about the country was truly disappointing.

"Which would be led by these powerful men?"

At least she was catching on quickly. "Right. Each would have a small republic. They could then rewrite the laws to suit their best interests, anything."

"Why?"

"More power. More money. When Arpad takes over, he's changing the country to a constitutional monarchy. Already, preparations are being made. The next step after that is joining the European Union. That will change everything. Not all EU regulations will be favorable for all current Valtrian business practices.

"The bottom line is, for the Freedom Council the time is now or never. It's easier to take out the royal family now and gain control of the country than try to take out a whole parliament once constitutional monarchy gets here."

"Don't the people understand that they're being manipulated?"

"There's a lot of propaganda out there right now to create tension along ethnic lines. That's all people see." He felt such regret over that, and wondered if, not having grown up in Valtria, Judi could understand.

"For as long as I can remember, we were simply Valtrian," he explained. "Now everyone is seeing themselves as Italian or Hungarian or Austrian, and centuryold grievances are being dredged up."

"The whole divide-and-conquer thing. And political instability brings economic instability, of course," she added.

So she did get it. He went on, encouraged. "The economy is suffering already. And the Freedom Council is doing its best to convince the people that it's because the upkeep of monarchy is too expensive."

"You've said Freedom Council more than once. What is it?"

"That's what the rebel leaders are calling themselves. Pretty ironic, actually. Under their mercenary government, the people would be anything but free."

She remained silent for minutes. "I wish I knew more about Valtria."

"How much were you told of our history?"

"My father used to talk to me about it. But he died and—I was too young to remember."

"And your aunt Viola?"

"For the most part, she just tried to convince me to move back here. Gently," she added. "She doesn't like to say things she knows I don't want to hear."

He rolled his eyes beneath the blindfold.

Then he turned his head toward the door when he heard it open.

Something clanged to the floor.

The door closed again.

"What do you think that was?" she asked.

"Food." He hoped.

And got a sudden idea just as she asked, "What are we going to do?"

"Escape," he answered. "But we'll have to get the blindfolds off first." He moved toward her. "Keep talking so I can figure out where exactly you are. Just say something. Anything."

"For my thirtieth birthday I decided to visit the country of my ancestors and discover my heritage. At the airport I was kidnapped by a deranged prince—"

"Greeted by an eager groom," he corrected as his head bumped into hers.

"Then I was kidnapped by other deranged men," she finished.

"What, that wasn't in the brochure?" He made an attempt to lighten the mood between them. "People pay extra for extreme vacations like that."

Then his lips were on her cheeks, her skin silky soft. And they both fell silent.

He ignored the heat that flashed through him and zipped straight to his groin. He moved his mouth up to the blindfold, grabbed the material with his teeth, breathing in her exotic flower scent. She held herself ramrod straight.

"Relax. I'm not trying to seduce you." And just for the hell of it, he added, "Yet."

But he could envision it in crystal-clear detail all of a sudden. Her tangled up in his sheets. Naked. Under him.

"I don't want you to confuse me with those women who throw themselves at the feet of handsome princes."

Disappointingly, her voice held no trace of passion. Instead, he got the distinct impression that she was mocking him.

"You're in no danger of that." He pulled the blindfold off all the way at last. "Your turn," he said, waiting impatiently to see again.

A moment passed before he could feel her velvety lips on his left cheek, an inch or two above his mouth, next to the blindfold. Her firm breasts pressed against his shoulder as she leaned into him. She moved her mouth. The blindfold moved next, a scant centimeter only before it slipped from her teeth. She had to fit her lips to his skin again.

He didn't mind the delay.

Then the blindfold was off at last, around his neck. She looked up, and they were nose to nose, her lavender eyes staring into his, her soft breath fanning his face.

"At least you think me handsome. That's a start, I suppose." Utterly ridiculous how pleased those words she'd let slip made him feel. A foothold, that was what they were. Something he could stand on while he fought to gain more ground. Courting a woman couldn't have been that much different from conducting a military campaign.

She blushed a brilliant red, right to the tip of her ears. The response was so charming, he couldn't help but smile at her. Maybe he was gaining ground already.

But she was gathering herself fast, her eyes narrowing, her mouth opening, no doubt with a snappy comeback. He couldn't let her spoil the moment. He couldn't give up the ground he'd gained; he wouldn't give up an inch. That was not the path to victory.

So he leaned forward and kissed her.

Her lips were even softer than her cheeks, although she immediately pressed them together and pulled back. He followed and dragged his mouth across hers.

Her instant rejection of him on her arrival had injured his masculine pride, whether or not he was ready to admit that, and some part of him pushed to prove something to her, although he couldn't have exactly said what that was.

All he knew was that he wanted her to look at him with something other than the ever-present disdain in those mesmerizing lavender eyes. Their arranged union was important. It had a purpose. They had roles to fulfill. He wanted her to consider that.

He was still intent on conquering when his eyes closed on their own. And in the next instant he was seduced by her softness and her scent. She was unlike any proper noblewoman he'd ever known. He had no idea what to do with her.

But a very clear and detailed image of what he *wanted* to do with her readily flashed into his mind. It would not have been the smartest thing at the given moment, nor in compliance with protocol.

All of a sudden, he felt as if he'd been starved for the taste of her for years, had been waiting for her. The meeting of their lips, the physical connection between them, was startling. He had expected to enjoy kissing her, but the sensations taking over his body went way beyond that.

Instant heat.

Instant need.

There was absolutely no way she could deny it, although he knew she would try. He didn't even mind. He was looking forward to going a couple of rounds with her before she gave in.

He had no doubt in his mind that she would see reason eventually. The draw was too strong between them. He was prepared to pursue her until she accepted him.

Too soon, she twisted away. Her face was flushed, her eyes deep lavender pools.

He eased out of his focused need, into a teasing smile. "Would being married to me be that terrible?" He was surprised to find that her response would matter quite a bit to him.

She dragged in air, her nostrils flaring. She didn't much look like the demure young ladies at court as she said in her toughest, meanest voice yet, "Don't you ever do that again."

He drew a slow breath, held it, then let it out as he considered.

"All right," he said brusquely, even as his body demanded more of her. "I won't kiss you again. You do, however," he added, and let the challenge stand between them, "have my permission to kiss me any time you wish."

Chapter Three

Kiss him?

He probably thought he was irresistible just because he was a handsome prince. *Insufferable* was a much better qualifier for him.

“Right after they make a ski resort in hell,” Judi snapped, pulling her bottom and feet through the loop of her arms so her hands would be in front. The man was driving her crazy. What had she done to deserve this?

He had the gall to grin at her, a slow and sexy grin that she supposed was meant to show her who was in control.

“Well, then,” he said. “Get your camera ready, princess, because the devil will be snowboarding before this is all over.”

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